



Improving
Life
through
Learning

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Introduction

Between January and March 2013, a review took place of the policy for the Organisation of Classes (composite classes) operating in Stirling Schools, Learning and Education. The review reconsidered the relevant existing policies, considered national requirements and advice, and included a consultation with primary headteachers. Information from this review informed the formulation of the Organisation of Classes Policy.

In January 2017 the policy was revised to reflect the new service structure. Several updates were made to the 2013 policy, however the core principles within the policy remain.

Background

National Requirements and Advice

In general terms, the Standards in Scottish Schools Act 2000 places a responsibility on councils to deliver education to support children and young people to develop their fullest potential. The national curriculum, *Curriculum for Excellence* 3-18, recognises the importance of children having opportunities to demonstrate and develop capacities for learning. It aims to focus learning and teaching around four capacities in particular, enabling all young people to be:

- Successful learners
- Confident individuals
- Responsible citizens
- Effective contributors

Curriculum for Excellence and the associated Assessment is for Learning programme, provide an effective framework for child-centred learning and support. In every learning environment or classroom, teachers plan for individual, group and whole class needs. The planning and organisation of learning throughout Curriculum for Excellence is designed to provide challenge and enjoyment, breadth and depth, relevance and coherence, personalisation and choice for the learner, as well as ensuring progression.

Turning specifically to the organisation of learning and formation of composite classes, the Scottish Government advises that within the overall context of delivering education in accordance with children's needs, other than adhering to the statutorily regulated maximum number of 25 pupils in a composite class it is up to each local authority to create its own policy on composite classes in the best interests of children and maximising resources. The Scottish Government advised that further, professional advice could be obtained from Education Scotland, the key national body supporting quality and improvement in Scottish education.

Education Scotland recommends that irrespective of whatever class a child is in, composite or non-composite, teachers have a duty to meet the needs of individual children under Curriculum for Excellence. The quality of the teacher, and specifically of teaching and learning, are the key points. If undertaken properly, composite classes are neither better nor worse than non-composite classes. The key issue is the management of learning and the learning experience of the child rather than the children being of the same age and having similar levels of academic ability.

Education Scotland also states that if children receive appropriate individualised teaching, the individual ability of one child as compared to another, or their relative maturity in relation to each other, educational outcomes will not be affected by whether the children are in a composite class.

Historical Position

Historically in Scotland, the organisation of learning into multi age groups was standard practice. The introduction of single age groups came about as a method of organising mass public education where a significant number of children of the same age were expected to start school every year, most of whom would continue their education within the same establishment. The pattern of multi age group class organisation continues, however, to be standard practice in most rural schools in Scotland and is increasing in urban schools as Councils continue to develop approaches that support effective and efficient learning and teaching approaches and arrangements. As stated at 2.1, if children receive appropriate individualised teaching, educational outcomes are unlikely to be affected by whether the children are in a composite class or in a single age class.

The Context for Stirling

Across Schools, Learning and Education, teachers deliver a wide range of opportunities for children to learn independently and in small or large groups, based on a growing understanding of children as independent learners and the importance of collaborative as well as peer learning. In planning and organising children into classes and groups, careful consideration is given to the following, in order to support effective learning and teaching of children as individuals and within groups:

- the quality and range of learning and teaching methods and relevance of the curriculum;
- the organisation of learning areas and spaces including classrooms, shared areas, halls and outdoor spaces;
- learning and teaching resources, including new ways of learning, such as e-learning.

Across Schools, Learning and Education, schools plan, implement, monitor and review annually the national priorities for education in response to local needs. Annual preparation of school improvement plans, monitored and evaluated by the Service, ensures that objectives for the school are set and delivered upon. Normally, this includes a review of the planning and organisation of learning, taking account of:

- the numbers and age cohorts of children in the school;
- the curriculum and learning priorities, including the outcomes of internal and national assessments and the success of individual programmes of learning;
- the resources available, including teaching and support staff.

The headteacher, who is responsible for the management and organisation of learning in the school and the implementation of the improvement plan objectives, will make the decision on how best to do this, taking into consideration all of the above.

At present, the majority of schools in Stirling organise learning in multi age groups at some stage in the school. Moving to and from multi age groups to single age groups is common.

Given that changes in and to the learning environment can impact upon the feelings of those involved, when there is a move from a single age group to a multi age group, it is important that clear and consistent criteria are applied, to support the effective management of change, including the feelings of children, parents and staff as well as the learning needs of children.

Perceptions of Multi-Age (Composite) Learning

Research indicates that there is no detriment to children's academic performance or learning outcomes in moving from a multi age group to a single age group or vice versa. However, some parents have reservations and, in some instances, hold strong views about the perceived impact.

Children may also have anxieties about changes to the organisation of learning, for example around how friendships will continue to be recognised, supported and valued. It is important that parents and staff are able to share with children how the organisation of learning provides opportunities to mix as learners, form new friendships and maintain existing ones.

All of the above make it necessary to continue to have clear criteria and guidance on changes to the organisation of learning in relation to class organisation.

Consultation with headteachers in relation to Multi-Aged Group (Composite) Classes

In 2013, Primary school headteachers throughout Stirling were asked about their experiences of creating composite classes and implementing policy. They were also asked what criteria should be used when deciding to form a composite class in the first place, and what criteria should be used to populate composite classes once a decision has been taken to form them.

Key themes emerging from the consultation were that:

- consistency and clarity of policy were important, but headteachers should be able to exercise an element of flexibility as long as this did not undermine the policy;
- the initial decision to form a composite class should be driven by staffing ratios, however, headteachers should also have flexibility to create composite classes for educational reasons.

In terms of how to populate a composite class once the original decision was taken to form the class:

- A majority of respondents across both areas agreed that criteria should include date of birth although some stated that the criterion should not be the sole criterion.
- A large majority agreed that the criteria should include gender balance where it is possible to achieve gender balance.
- A large majority agreed that the criteria should include additional support needs, but this should be a discretionary criterion and only applied where there was a high level of additional support need.
- A very large majority agreed that parental and children's choices should not be criteria for forming classes. Including such criteria would be fraught with difficulties, impossible to manage, and lead to decisions being taken on subjective rather than sound educational grounds.

Policy for the Organisation of Learning within Schools, Learning and Education

Decisions to form Composite Classes

Populating the class will require careful and effective planning including consideration around cohorts of children. In reaching an initial decision to form a composite class, headteachers will apply the following criteria:

- Full Staffing Entitlement in relation to total projected school roll.
- Creation of a multi-age composite group class (or classes) is in the best interests of all children in the school. Examples are: alternative curriculum, additional support for learning demands, and reasonably predictable impact on learning from social/environmental factors. Some reasons, or the detail around them, may require to be kept confidential to the school.

In deciding how to populate composite classes, headteachers will apply the following criteria:

- each composite class shall have a maximum of 25 pupils as per national requirements;
- the lead factor in determining the population of the class shall be the date of birth of the child. This criterion shall be used because it is unambiguous and unchangeable. The actual age of a child in relation to other children in the cohort has no particular relevance;
- where possible, a reasonable balance in terms of gender;
- on an exceptionality basis and relating to sound educational reasons, the additional support needs of particular children. These needs should be significant and evidenced in terms of the educational benefit likely to be derived from the child or children being placed, or not placed, in a particular cohort.

Engagement with Parents

It is advised that through opportunities for collective parental engagement, headteachers keep parents apprised of anticipated changes to the school population or other matters as appropriate that may lead to the formation of composite classes.

There are many forms of parental engagement. In addition to working through Parent Councils, schools may choose to communicate via newsletters, informal chat-sessions, drop-in surgeries, and other opportunities for communicating information and responding to enquiries.

Parents Information Evenings may include (among other items that evening) presentations about changes or likely changes to the organisation of learning, the context to such changes and how they will be delivered in the school. It may also be helpful to deliver such presentations to the Parent Council. An example of a presentation that has been delivered very successfully to parents and obviated concerns will be accessed on the Source, <http://source.stirling.gov.uk/pages/publications-and-forms> and adapted for individual schools.

When engaging with parents, either collectively or individually, head teachers should make it clear that they are not consulting parents on the formation or population of the composite class. They are informing parents about the educational and management basis for the decision, and seeking to reassure parents if they have anxieties in relation to their own children or on a wider basis.

As soon as feasible, parents of children affected by the creation of composite classes should be informed in writing of:

- the reasons for the formation of the class;
- the rationale upon which the actual class composition is based;
- the class in which their child(ren) will be placed;
- organisation, monitoring and evaluation procedures to ensure continued pupil attainment;
- any additional support mechanisms that have been set up;
- the procedure for dealing with individual concerns.

It is recognised that pupil numbers are fluid and whilst headteachers may distribute a class structure, changes in numbers can inevitably lead to a requirement to change the class structures at short notice.

If parents raise concerns about their child being placed in a particular cohort, the headteachers or senior staff within their school where the matter has been delegated, should meet and discuss with the parents how their child's individualised learning will be undertaken, monitored and evaluated. Staff should also listen to parents' concerns about specific matters, for example their children's friendships within previous and the prospective new cohorts, and how this will be managed and monitored within new arrangements.

Information and Transition Arrangements for Children

Where feasible, headteachers should put in place appropriate transition arrangements to ensure that children have the opportunity to prepare for the change. Children should be:

- informed of the arrangements and reasons for them – where feasible, on the same day that individual letters are being issued to parents;
- reminded of the school's pupil support procedures;
- be given an opportunity to ask questions or discuss matters that concern them;
- given access to a copy of the 'Changing Classes' information leaflet, <http://my.stirling.gov.uk/services/education-and-learning/schools/how-learning-is-organised-in-schools>.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Headteachers should ensure that, following the creation of composite classes, careful and regular monitoring takes place of the progress of all children including appropriate comparison between stages, to ensure equality of opportunity.

Review of Organisation of Classes Policy

	Date	Lead Officers(s)
Produced	2016	Joan Hutchison
Updated	January 2017	Sally Kennedy TL
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