

# The impacts of composite classes on the teaching and learning process

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*Composite classes (also known as multigrades) are beneficial in several ways but have challenges for teaching and learning. This study aimed to explore participants' views concerning their experiences in teaching and learning within a composite classroom setting in Samoa. Specifically, the study sought to determine composite classes' impacts on teachers' instructions and students' learning. Using a qualitative approach, ten teachers and ten students from two rural primary schools were purposively selected to participate in this study. Findings showed that composite class structuring benefited students by promoting academic and social skills but also presented significant challenges. Many students and teachers found it highly distracting, making effective learning nearly impossible. With respect to teacher instructions and classroom management, teachers found it challenging to manage a mixed-ability classroom, as they needed to differentiate instruction to ensure that all students received an equal opportunity to learn. Findings have implications for policymakers and teacher training. For example, the Samoan Ministry of Education must find effective ways to make this class composition work. Similarly, the Samoan teacher training institution must provide teachers with the tools to effectively work in a composite classroom.*

*Keywords: composite classes; Samoa education; teaching; learning; teacher education*

## INTRODUCTION

Composite classes, also known as multilevel or multigrade classes (Little, 1995), are used worldwide, predominantly at the primary school level. In this arrangement, class structuring may involve combining grades, such as 1 and 2 or 4 and 5 within the same class. This structure is often implemented to address teacher shortages, uneven student enrolments, and resource constraints and to provide a flexible solution for managing diverse educational needs within a single classroom. The United States has a long history of composite classrooms, and it has continued to use such classes as a method of child instruction even after the practice of graded schools became the norm (Anderson, & Pavan, 1992). This type of class composition is also found in Africa, Europe, and Pacific Islands countries, including Samoa. According to Little (2003, citing Berry, 2001; Little, 1995, 2001; Mason and Burns, 1997; Pratt, 1986; Rowley, 1992; Thomas & Shaw, 1992; Veenman, 1995), the impacts of multi-graded and mono-graded teaching on student achievement in both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth countries, is

inconclusiveness. Given this inconclusiveness and, in particular, a lack of research information on the impact of composite classes on student learning in Samoa, this study examined the views of participants (teachers and students) concerning their experiences of teaching and learning within a composite classroom environment in Samoa.

The study focus aligns with the broader theme of ‘Quality Education for Sustainable Futures: Comparative Dialogue’. By investigating the effectiveness and challenges of composite classes in Samoa, we contribute to a comparative dialogue on how different educational structures can support or hinder the goal of providing quality education. Composite classes, with their unique structuring and demand for innovative teaching strategies, offer insights into sustainable educational practices that can adapt to various contexts. Understanding these experiences from a local perspective enhances the global conversation on sustainable futures in education, emphasising that quality education must be adaptable, inclusive and sensitive to the specific needs of different communities.

This dialogue is crucial as it highlights the importance of localised educational research in informing global practices and policies aimed at achieving sustainable futures. By examining composite classes in Samoa, we not only shed light on the specific challenges and successes in this context but also provide valuable lessons that can inform educational strategies worldwide.

## **STUDY CONTEXT**

The Government of Samoa’s Strategy for the Development of Samoa 2016–2020 (SDS) highlights priorities, including quality education and training improvement. It stresses increasing and broadening educational access to ensure everyone in Samoa is educated and productively engaged. The SDS advocates for improved quality of teaching and learning, as stated in the Education Sector Plan 2013-2018, which aims to enhance the quality of education and training for all learners through effective teaching and curriculum. However, the Samoan education system faces unique challenges, particularly in rural areas. Despite a national literacy rate of 97% (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC), 2020), the quality of education varies significantly. Rural areas often struggle with limited resources and facilities.

In contrast, urban schools usually have better infrastructure and access to educational materials. Composite classes, where students of different ages and grades learn together in the same classroom, are common in rural areas. This approach helps to address issues like teacher shortages and uneven student enrolments. However, it can also lead to overcrowding, making it difficult for teachers to provide individualised attention and effectively manage classroom dynamics (MESC, 2020).

The prevalence of composite classes in Samoa highlights broader issues of educational inequality and resource allocation. Overcrowded classrooms can strain teachers and students, leading to potential declines in educational quality (MESC, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to improve infrastructures, provide adequate teacher training, and ensure all students have access to quality education regardless of location. This involves enhancing physical resources and developing strategies to support teachers in managing composite classes effectively.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This review examines definitions and rationale for composite classes as well as the benefits and challenges associated with this educational structure.

### **Problem with definition**

The many definitions of composite classes have been a cause of confusion for many scholars in this area. Multi-age classes are any mixed-grade class formed by choice (Rasmussen University, 2023). Multigrade is a mixed-grade class formed out of necessity (Litte, 2004) Thomas (2012) defines a multigrade class as ‘the combination class, in which students from two adjacent grades are grouped within one classroom under one teacher’ (p. 1). In Commonwealth countries, various terms are used to describe multigrade settings, for example, combination class, vertical grouping, family grouping, composite class, mixed year class, split class, double-graded class and unitary schools (Little, 2003). As noted, these many definitions can be very problematic; however, the rationale (Little, 2003) for creating composite classes is worth discussing further.

### **Rationale for composite classes creation**

According to Cornish (2010), the rationale for creating multigrade classes varies. In many instances, multi-grade classes are implemented for administrative purposes, such as when there are fewer teachers than grade levels or uneven enrolments. The establishment of multigrade classes, therefore, allows administrators to more efficiently utilise their resources, as only one teacher is needed to teach multiple grade levels. Little (2003) reported that multigrade classes arise from demographic necessity rather than pedagogical choice in many countries. Small, uneven intakes and financial constraints impede the allocation of one teacher to every grade in every school. Consequently, education administrators sometimes combine single-grade classes from traditional education (conventional type education) with multi-age or non-graded classrooms for pedagogical or philosophical reasons.

Multigrade classes are generally found in rural and remote areas with low enrolments, and one teacher is responsible for teaching multiple grade levels (Little, 2003). For many countries, multigrade teaching occurs in economically underprivileged and geographically remote rural contexts. Similarly, Thackray (2023) found that composite classes are common in small rural or outback schools, attributing the initiative and self-reliance seen in rural students to this style of schooling.

Overall, the rationale for establishing composite or multigrade classes is typically based on total school enrolment, individual grade level enrolments, the number of available teachers and the effective use of resources (Cornish, 2010; Lindstrom & Lindahl, 2011; Saqlain, 2015). While the economic underpinnings of this classroom structure are evident, the question of its effectiveness and implications for students’ academic achievement remains debatable.

### **Composite classes: benefits**

Generally, the effects of composite classes range from broader positives to narrower negatives. These impacts are connected to students, teachers, classroom instructions and the curriculum.

#### **Impact on students’ academic development**

Studies indicate composite classes can boost student attainment, particularly in their early years. For example, research from the University of Strathclyde (Gehrsitz, 2021) found that younger students (Year 1) in mixed year groups (Year 1 and Year 2) improved performance in numeracy and literacy. This improvement in academic learning can be attributed to the support offered to younger learners by their more able peers. Similarly, at-risk students can be positively influenced by their higher-achieving peers (Thomas, 2012). Thomas (2012) noted that having

multiple-level students in the same classroom benefits lower-level students because they receive guidance and support from their higher-level peers, which can bridge knowledge gaps and motivate them to work harder. There is also the possibility that high achievers emulate each other within the composite class setting. For instance, Kuzmina and Ivanova (2018) discovered that students who learn alongside high-achieving classmates tend to observe and mimic their behavioural styles, problem-solving strategies, learning goals and motivation. Their study supports the idea that students comparing their academic performance to slightly better-performing peers are more likely to improve their results.

### **Impact on students' social and emotional development**

Studies also show composite classes can foster cooperation and understanding across age groups. For example, Proehl et al. (2013) showed that multigrade settings can foster a sense of community and shared responsibility among students. As such, older students often develop leadership skills, while younger students benefit from peer learning. Several Scottish studies presented the positive impacts of composite classes on the cognitive and social development of students (Welsh, 2018). Chen's (2006) study conducted in mixed-grade classes noted a positive impact on social-emotional development and social variables such as 'liking school', which can be attributed to students' increased opportunity to interact with different age groups, helping them develop better social skills.

The diverse experiences and backgrounds in composite classes foster better student understanding and relationships. Moreover, composite classes offer opportunities for students to develop social-emotional skills, such as nurturing and leadership. Quail and Smyth (2014) suggest that older students who combine with younger ones tend to behave more responsibly, understanding the importance of being good role models. This often leads to the older students acquiring leadership abilities and the younger students gaining confidence from working with older peers.

### **Benefits for teachers**

Teaching composite classes can offer several benefits for teachers. One significant advantage is professional growth because managing diverse age and ability levels enhance teachers' skills in differentiated instruction and classroom management. This experience makes them more versatile educators (Brisbane Kids, 2024). According to Smith (2023), composite classes allow teachers to tailor their instruction to meet the diverse needs of students, promoting individualised learning plans and differentiated instructions. Teachers can group students based on skill levels rather than age, allowing for more flexible and effective teaching strategies. Additionally, composite classes encourage the adoption of innovative teaching strategies to engage students of varying abilities, leading to more dynamic and effective teaching practices (University of Technology Sydney, 2023). These environments foster collaboration, with teachers working closely with colleagues to plan lessons and share strategies, creating a supportive teaching community (Brisbane Kids, 2024).

## **Challenges of composite classes**

### **Challenges to student learning**

Despite the positive impact of composite classes on student learning, studies have highlighted the negative impacts of this type of class composition on students' progress (Perry, 2017). For instance, mixing students from different levels of skills can lead to confusion and frustration for some students (Nyoni & Nyoni, 2012).

### **Impact on teachers**

While teaching composite classes has some advantages, studies also reveal that teachers perceive teaching these classes as more stressful than teaching single classes. Mulryan-Kyne (2004) noted that, given the choice, many teachers prefer single-grade classrooms because of the more straightforward curriculum and classroom management. A negative correlation between emotional exhaustion (a sub-dimension of burnout) and teachers in composite classes has been found. Taols (2014) found that many teachers in multi-graded classrooms feel isolated and unsure about their teaching strategies, contributing to their stress. Teachers often need to cover multiple topics in a single class, making managing challenging, especially when some topics are more advanced than others.

### **Curriculum challenges**

Little (2003) noted that teachers of multigrade classes face challenges in organizing the simultaneous delivery of graded curricula to two or more grades. Teachers struggle to deliver a national curriculum designed for monograde schools. One significant disadvantage of composite classes is the lack of individualised attention and instruction because teachers must cater to students with varying knowledge and skill levels. Cornish (2012) argued that it is more challenging to teach composite classes compared to single-grade classes with students at the same level. Larger class sizes pose additional challenges for teachers, such as setting and enforcing behavioural expectations, monitoring students and providing individual attention.

### **Pedagogical strategies**

According to Cornish (2006), many teachers in combined classes employ conventional pedagogical strategies, including whole-class instruction and teaching each grade independently. However, the effectiveness of these techniques in all types of small schools remains uncertain. The effectiveness of composite classes largely depends on the teaching strategies employed and the support provided to students.

### **Teacher quality and training**

Effective teachers can create an environment where all students can learn despite age differences. Studies (Wilson, 2003) show that composite classrooms require more materials, time and organisation, and teachers with specialised training in instructing mixed-age groups. Teachers must devote more time to composite teaching, which requires additional planning, programming and documentation. Different teacher preparation initiatives, instructional materials and evaluation techniques are needed to implement composite- compared to single-class structures (Cronin, 2019).

There is an assumption that in multi-grade classes, teachers can provide more individualised instruction because teachers can tailor the lessons to the specific students in the class. However, this view is unrealistic because it is challenging for teachers to address each student's needs within one level, let alone within a mixed level. Composite classes have different needs from single classes, including more teacher preparation, classroom materials, and thorough teacher evaluation. These classes require more coordination and collaboration among teachers, and more support for students with special needs.

Given the added complexity and responsibilities, it would be irrational for a principal to assign composite classes to the least qualified teachers. Composite classes need teachers who are well-trained and qualified to teach (Watson et al., 2006). Little's (2003) statement that teacher training rarely addresses the needs of multigrade classes resonates with our teacher training

program. To achieve successful outcomes, teachers must be well-trained and supported by sympathetic policymakers, administrators, school principals and parents. An issue identified in Scottish studies is that parents often do not trust their children to be in composite classes (Welsh, 2018).

### **NEED FOR RESEARCH**

The literature reviewed highlighted the benefits and challenges of composite and mixed-grade classes. In Samoa, research on composite classes is non-existent. Hence, the impetus for this study is to explore the experiences of teachers and students concerning composite classes.

The questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the participants' views concerning the rationale for creating composite classes?
2. What are teachers' views concerning their teaching experiences in a composite class?
3. What are students' views concerning their learning experiences in a composite class?

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework used in this study is underpinned by Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), which suggests the importance of support and guidance offered for the less-able learner from a knowledgeable individual through social interaction. In composite (multigrade) classes, learners of different ages and abilities learn together, and the more capable learner (one with more knowledge) can assist the learner who needs more assistance within their ZPD (called peer learning). Differentiated instruction, where teachers tailor their support to meet each student's ZPD, can provide appropriate challenges and scaffolding. Collaborative learning, which occurs in group activities, can encourage students to work together and promote social interactions and cognitive development, which are important considerations in this education model.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study to gain detailed insights into participants' thoughts and experiences concerning composite classes (Rahman, 2016). This approach aligns well with Vygotsky's ZPD theory because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how social interactions and scaffolding impact teaching and learning. For instance, we were interested in participants' views on how composite classes affect teachers' classroom instructions and student learning.

From an ontological perspective, this study assumes a constructivist stance, recognising that reality is socially constructed and understood through individuals' experiences (Bryman, 2016). Epistemologically, this aligns with interpretivism, where knowledge is gained through understanding the meanings and contexts of participants' lived experiences (Crotty, 1998).

A qualitative methodology is particularly suited to understanding the nuances of educational practices in composite classes, where peer learning, differentiated instruction and collaborative activities play critical roles. As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Flick (2014) suggest, the researcher plays a crucial role as a data gatherer, analyst and interpreter of participants' experiences. This aligns with Vygotsky's emphasis on the importance of social interaction and support in learning, making qualitative research an ideal approach for this study.

Open-ended questions in a questionnaire document were used to collect the data. In this manner, the participant's voice can be heard and coordinated with descriptive data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). According to Hyman and Sierra (2016), questionnaires should be designed in a format that participants can easily understand and respond to. Open-ended questions offer respondents an opportunity to provide a wide range of answers.

Two sets of questionnaires were developed and distributed to the participants—one for 10 teachers and another for 10 students—the 20 study participants. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. Rai and Thapa (2015) describe purposeful sampling as a non-probability method where researchers choose participants based on specific criteria, including specialised knowledge of the research topic. The participants in this study were chosen based on their experiences and how they connect to the indicated purpose of the research; they were from two primary schools located in rural areas that implement composite classes.

### **Data analysis: Thematic and content analysis**

In our research, we employed thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and content analysis (Enago Academy, 2024) to analyse qualitative data collected through the open-ended questionnaire.

#### **Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was our primary tool for identifying and interpreting patterns within the data. This approach allowed us to delve deeply into the participants' experiences and perspectives. We followed the following steps in this process:

1. Familiarisation with the data: We first read and reread the data to familiarise ourselves with it.
2. Generating initial codes: Next, we identified and labelled significant data features because this helped us organise the data into meaningful groups.
3. Searching for themes: We then grouped codes into potential themes, recognising patterns and relationships within the data.
4. Reviewing themes: We refined themes to ensure they accurately represent the data.
5. Defining and naming themes: At this stage, we focused on naming each theme, which we presented as findings in the final report. We also used participants' insights to support various aspects of the findings.

#### **Content analysis**

We also employed the content analysis technique (Enago Academy, 2024) to complement the thematic analysis by quantifying certain elements within the data. This method provided us with a structured way to interpret qualitative findings. We followed these steps:

1. Coding for frequency: We identified the frequency of specific themes or codes within the data and highlighted patterns and trends.
2. Contextual analysis: At this stage, we examined the context in which these themes appeared, providing deeper insights into the data nuances.

### **Ensuring validity and reliability**

To enhance the validity and reliability of our analysis, we employed the inter-rater reliability strategy. This is where we, as researchers, coded the data to ensure consistency. We also discussed any discrepancies in the data and worked together to resolve emerging issues (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011)

## **FINDINGS**

The study examined participants' views of teaching and learning experiences within a composite classroom setting. Three major themes emerged from the data analysis (related to the research questions): the rationale for composite classes, the benefits and challenges of composite classes for students and the benefits and challenges for teachers.

### **Rationale for establishing composite classes**

The question concerning the rationale for composite classes was directed at teacher participants. Most teachers highlighted the issue of teacher shortages and low school enrolments as a rationale for establishing composite classes. For example, one teacher reported that only five teachers were posted to their school of eight levels; hence, certain class levels had to be combined:

The reason for combined classes is due to shortage of staff. We have six teachers including the principal (Teacher 1)

### **Benefits (for students)**

Composite classes were viewed by teachers as beneficial for students because of the academic support provided by older peers and positive interactions among students. For example, two teachers said:

Students from lower level is able to learn from the student at the higher level which is advantageous for the student at the lower level (Teacher 6).

In composite class setting the younger students in year 2 gets the opportunity to learn from older students in level 3 (Teacher 7).

Students also added their voices regarding the benefit of composite classes in connection to academic skills:

I can learn from an older students from another class especially when we do shared reading or a pair activity (Student 3)

I like working with students from other class because they help me with my spelling (Student 4)

Concerning composite class benefits in association with social and peer interaction, an example of a comment from one of the teachers was:

Composite class is good in that students will have good interaction and learning from each other (Teacher 3)

A few students indicated their opinions concerning social interactions. For example, one student said:



It is fun to learn in a combined class, I enjoy group activities with student of the other level because I learn new ideas from them at the same time we are able to develop a friendship (Student 1)

### **Challenges (for students)**

According to the majority of teachers, some of the challenges of this type of class composition for many students are connected to learning disruption:

Composite class is annoying and too noisy (Teacher 8)

It can be very frustrating teaching in a small classroom with more students (Teacher 3)

The view was also shared by the majority of students, who indicated they do not like composite classes as they disrupt their learning:

Most of the time this type of class makes me insecure and sick because of the loud noise students make. I lose concentration on a topic and sometimes I do not hear what the teacher says because of too much noise (Student 7)

Moreover, some students expressed annoyance at older level students taking charge of the classroom, particularly in the teacher's absence. The issue of bullying (amongst students) is a prevailing issue in education systems worldwide, which seriously affect students learning:

What I dislike most about this type of combined class is because sometimes I am bullied by older students without the teacher's knowledge (Students 4)

The observation from some students is that teachers seem to be struggling with how to teach in the combined class structure, which seems to have affected their ability to study. This student stated:

Combining with another class is not good because there are too many of us in the same room and the teacher seems to be having a hard time teaching us . . . sometimes it is hard to hear the teacher (Student 4).

### **Challenges (for teachers)**

Findings also highlighted challenges faced by teachers in combined classes. For example, when teachers were asked how combined classes affected their teaching role, the most frequently cited reasons were connected to the following aspects: classroom management, differentiated instruction for multiple levels, managing class assessment and teacher well-being. Teachers view challenges of classroom management as a grim chore. The majority of teachers indicated having difficulty managing students within this context:

The issue with combining classes affects my class management for how can I plan a lesson to suit two different levels? It can be very frustrating teaching in a small classroom with more students (Teacher 3)

Additionally, teachers indicated they had issues differentiating instructions for multiple levels. Additionally, teachers noted the issue of trying to differentiate instructions for varied abilities within each level:

There is a whole lot to plan and teach . . . you have to teach two different levels, e.g., I teach year 2 and year 3 so it involves a lot of work trying to plan for 26 students altogether (Teacher 7)

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Concerns about lesson preparation and classroom management are other difficulties teachers highlighted when responding about instructing in composite classrooms. For example, each level is to be assessed based on separate curriculum content, which can become laborious for teachers:

It is hard because you will have a big class with different levels so you have to be flexible with your lesson planning and teaching and various ways to assess students given their different abilities (Teacher 6)

Integrating curriculum content is another challenge for teachers. The underlying principle for integrating the curriculum is reducing the required time for differentiated instruction for each level. However, this idea appears idealistic and may not be practical:

Lesson planning and trying to manage resources to use for different levels within a composite class can be very disheartening for me (Teacher 4)

Teaching within a composite class was also viewed as affecting a teacher's wellbeing, as noted by this teacher:

Teaching in a composite classes is very challenging . . . it causes me to have high blood pressure which is very frustrating (Teacher 5)

### **Benefits (for teachers)**

While there are teacher-related challenges, one of the benefits, according to some teachers, is connected to the academic support that students from lower levels receive from upper-level students. This was perceived as an additional help for the teachers when students support each other in their academic skills and thus reduce the teacher's workload:

The positive interaction between the different age groups is a positive thing . . . I can also see an advancement in the learning of my students who are in lower levels (Teacher 3)

Overall, combined classes have some benefits but can be challenging. This type of class composition is both challenging and beneficial for students, while for teachers, the challenges seem to outweigh the benefits.

## **DISCUSSION**

We now discuss the study's findings on the experiences of teachers and learners about composite classes. The discussions focus on the rationale for establishing composite classes and the perceived impacts of this type of class composition on students and teachers.

### **Rationale for composite creation**

The study findings align with the reviewed literature. A low student enrolment is often the economic rationale for creating a composite class. However, multigrade classes (Murphy, 2018) may also be formed by choice because of their perceived benefits.

In the Samoan situation, the rationale for composite classes is mainly economically driven. For example, teacher shortage and cost efficiencies are the underlying drivers for creating composite classes in the Samoan context (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Wilson's (2003) research notes that administrative and economic considerations tend to lead to the formation of composite classes. He noted that composite classes are created for one of two reasons: either because it is an economic or administrative necessity to deal with shrinking enrolments or small

enrolments in sparsely populated areas or because the creators believe that giving children a ‘developmentally appropriate’ education will have positive effects. Findings are consistent with the idea that a limited number of students are normally enrolled in certain schools in rural areas; hence, for convenience purposes, the Samoan Ministry of Education would post a limited number of teachers in these schools, resulting in combined and mixed-level classes.

### **Impact of composite classes on students**

In alignment with the reviewed literature, this study finds that the benefits of composite classes for students are connected to peer learning, where younger students learn from older learners. Vygotsky (1978) theorised that the value of interaction between older and younger learners results in developing younger learners’ social and academic skills. In this study, several students, especially those at lower levels, noted the academic value of learning from higher-level students. Some students liked composite classes because of the assistance they received from older peers on their spelling and reading.

This finding supports the results of a study conducted in Norway (Angrist et al., 2019), which revealed an increase in the reading and writing skills of younger learners. Younger students may be inspired and encouraged to learn by interacting with classmates who have already mastered reading and writing. Younger students usually look up to older students and are influenced by them, whether it is by their behaviours or their academic learning.

However, students also may have to deal with different behaviours of their peers, such as bullying, which can be detrimental to their learning. For example, although younger students acknowledged the value of learning with upper-level students in the same classroom, they expressed their discomfort about learning in overcrowded, noisy classrooms where older students sometimes bully them. Students working in a threatening and noisy environment will likely lose their desire to learn. While it is true that students may face various behavioural challenges from their peers, it is important to note that these issues can be effectively addressed through proper classroom management techniques and interventions.

### **Impact of composite classes on teachers**

This study shows that managing a composite class can be challenging for teachers. For example, teachers highlighted the challenge of managing a class with varied behaviours given the different levels of students. These findings align with those of Ronksley-Pavia et al. (2019), whose research in Australia revealed that teachers struggled to maintain the quality of content material in composite classes. The behavioural issues that arise from a crowded classroom cause management difficulties.

Teachers in this study also voiced their frustration over differentiating instructions for each level, such as creating lesson plans that would suit the needs of every student in the classroom. This issue aligns with the findings of a study conducted in Scotland, which showed that due to the vast diversity of students in a composite class and the amount of effort, organisation and preparations involved, teachers preferred teaching single grades. Similarly, Mulryan-Kyne (2004) argued that many teachers find multigrade teaching more difficult and less satisfying than single-grade settings due to the complexity of managing different curricula and student needs simultaneously. Doing continuous assessment while trying to adapt instructions to the varying levels of students can be daunting for teachers.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored participants' views on the impacts of composite classes on their teaching and learning. The study noted that there are benefits and challenges for students and teachers. Benefits are connected to the value of peer learning, which is where younger learners learn from older peers. However, composite classes can also be stressful because of bullying by older students and classroom noise.

Although some teachers found peer learning was a positive aspect of composite classes, they pointed to challenges associated with differentiating class instructions to meet individual student's needs. An additional challenge is managing a class with different types of behaviours, which can be attributed to students' differences in level and age. It is clear from the findings that while there are benefits, students and teachers seem to be struggling with this type of class composition.

The study results indicate that the Samoan Ministry of Education and those involved in the teaching and learning process should re-examine the effectiveness of composite class organisation if quality learning is to occur. The literature matches effective learning to quality teaching, including teachers' knowledge gained from professional development and training and school infrastructure, such as the classroom environment. As the study has indicated, if teachers and students struggle in the learning setting of a composite class, the likelihood of effective learning occurring is uncertain.

Hence, Little's (2003) observation that because multigrade schools will likely remain a key feature in many Commonwealth countries for an extended period because they are the most effective method to achieve universal primary education, teachers and students in multigrade settings must receive enhanced support from those who create national curricula and design teacher education programs.

## **Recommendations**

While indicative, the study has uncovered several nuanced challenges about the Samoan composite class structure. Because these challenges have immediate implications for the Ministry of Education and the national teacher training institution, the following recommendations are offered for consideration:

- The Samoan Ministry of Education reassesses the policy, practicality and effectiveness of the composite class.
- The Ministry of Education considers how the Samoan curriculum can be structured to better support teaching and learning in the Samoan composite class.
- The Ministry of Education conducts appropriate in-service training for teachers to support their needs in composite classes.
- The Ministry of Education recruits more teachers to address the issue of teacher shortage as this impacts class composition and class sizes and learning.
- The Faculty of Education of the National University of Samoa to ensure that teachers are effectively trained to teach in composite classes.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study. First, the study sample is too small to be representative of the entire Samoan composite class population. As such, an evaluation study involving more schools and personnel involved in composite classes, such as those from the Ministry of Education and teacher educators, is recommended. A future evaluation study could focus on the effectiveness of composite class composition based on students' academic achievement.

Second, the instrument used in this study, an open questionnaire form, does not provide as rich data as open-ended interviews. Future research might consider individual in-depth interviews to gauge participants' views more comprehensively.

Finally, further research is needed to examine how the curriculum in composite classroom is structured. This should include factors such as class sizes, the age and academic levels of students, available resources, and the skill levels of teachers because all these aspects significantly affect the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

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