

# Principles for Classroom Composition

A Non-Categorical Approach



## The purpose of the following document:

The purpose of the following document is to give learning teams (administrators, learning services teachers, and classroom teachers) a tool to guide discussions and decision making when working to complete student placement processes.

Given the complexity of the work in doing so, it is important for professionals to look first at the documents that provide guidance and direction from the Ministry of Education. These documents outline what is expected of districts and schools in terms of teaching with developmentally appropriate practices, that focus on the whole child as an individual, from a strength based perspective. These documents also support educators by providing examples of strategies and structures to use in a play based, exploratory learning environment.

The local school district context must be also taken into consideration. School District No. 48's Education Plan states that the district will create safe, purposeful and powerful learning environments in order that all children can think critically, create, collaborate, contribute, and learn. This goal frames a strength based, holistic, and balanced way of approaching teaching and learning with the individual child in mind.

At the school level, protocols and procedures are needed to help facilitate conversation in a practical way ensuring the rights of the child are honored. *The Guiding Principles for School Based Discussion and Decision Making* section has been designed to help school teams build their school based structures (Learning Teams of Teachers who Co-Plan, Co-Teach, and Co-Assess; Collaborative Models of Support; etc.) before looking at the needs of individual students. This will allow schools to be prepared to support the goal of diversity with flexibility and purpose, as opposed to reacting later on.

All children are unique. In the early learning and adolescent years, in particular, there is considerable variation in each child's development in the five key areas of child development. It can also be helpful to keep in mind three significant principles of learning which hold universal learning truths: children learn in a variety of ways and at a variety of rates; they learn as individual and in groups; they learn best when active in the participation of their learning.



# The Principles of Class Composition for School District No. 48

*A Non-Categorical Approach*

BC Ministry of Education Resources

Full Day Kindergarten Guide

The Primary Program: A Framework for Teaching  
([www.bced.gov.bc.ca/primary\\_program/](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/primary_program/))

British Columbia Early Learning Framework  
([www.bced.gov.bc.ca/early-learning/early\\_learning\\_framework.htm](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/early-learning/early_learning_framework.htm))

Shared Learnings: Integrating B.C. Aboriginal content K-10  
([www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/childcare\\_and\\_early\\_learning/early\\_learning\\_framework.pdf](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/childcare_and_early_learning/early_learning_framework/early_learning_framework.pdf))

Responsibility of the Teacher, British Columbia School Act,  
Section 17

School District No.48 Education Plan

*"We will create safe, purposeful and powerful learning environments in order that all students can think critically, create, collaborate, contribute and learn."*

Other Resources

1. Learning in Safe Schools: Creating classrooms where all students belong, Faye Brownlie, Judith King, 2011
2. Authentic Childhood: Experiencing Reggio Emilia in the classroom, Susan Fraser, 2006
3. High Scope  
([www.highscope.org/file/NewsandInformation/ReSourceReprints/Fall2008/HS\\_element\\_classroom.pdf](http://www.highscope.org/file/NewsandInformation/ReSourceReprints/Fall2008/HS_element_classroom.pdf))

## Principles of Learning



Learning requires the active participation of the student.

Students learn in a variety of ways and at different rates.

Learning is both an individual and a group process.



## Guiding Principles for School Based Decision Making

Honoring Diversity: Some differences in our students may be visible (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, age, size, ability, energy levels) and some may be invisible (e.g. culture, ancestry, language, sexual orientation, grade level, socioeconomic background, interests and motivations). Honoring diversity is based on the principle that if these differences are acknowledged and utilized in a positive way, it is a benefit to the quality of the teaching and learning environment for everyone (*The Primary Program: A Guide for Teaching*). The creation of safe, purposeful, and powerful learning environments begins with Teacher Learning Teams creating group compositions rich in diversity.

Collaborative Decision Making: It should be noted that under Section 5 of the School Act the principal of a school is responsible for the placement and programming of students in the school, as well as the timetables of teachers. School District No.48 values collaborative decision making, therefore, large group composition and individual student placement within a group is best done collaboratively. Teacher Learning Teams (classroom teachers) with the support of a Collaborative Model of Support (Learning Specialist Teachers and Teacher Learning Team) and school administrators take into consideration all aspects of diversity, including the five areas of research based child development: (1) aesthetic and artistic development, (2) emotional and social development, (3) intellectual, (4) physical development and well-being, and (5) the development of social responsibility. The particular voice and choice of a student, the group dynamics, the size of the group, and the confidence of the teachers are among other important considerations when creating group composition.

Strength Based Professional Dialogue: All discussions related to children and their placement into our school configurations must be professional and positive in nature. The confidentiality of a child is paramount. The discourse should start from a position of understanding the principles of learning. All children have strengths and bring a unique opportunity to a group.

### Relevant Structures and Strategies

Multi Age Groupings: Multi-age groupings facilitate a developmentally appropriate and research supported learning environment, allowing all students to approach their learning from a place of strength and proceed at their own pace. Multi-age groupings support a modern approach to competency development. Children who have been in mixed-age classes continue to exhibit less aggression and more pro social behaviors in subsequent years etc. (*The Primary Program: A Guide for Teaching*).



Looping: Looping is a term used to describe the practice in which students stay with the same teacher for two or more successive years. Teachers with multi-age classes often make this arrangement to keep their younger group for two or more years while the older children move on (*The Primary Program: A Guide for Teaching*).

## **Pedagogical Considerations**

Flexible groupings and teacher learning teams: Teachers sometimes choose smaller groupings for instruction. When arranging different student groups for learning, teachers consider the needs of both individuals and the group. They choose a grouping strategy appropriate to the purpose of the activity. Flexible groupings allow the teacher to support children in ways that address both interests and learning needs. Flexible groupings allow children to move from group to group as opposed to becoming stuck in a fixed group. Long term fixed ability grouping has been shown to have detrimental effects on student self-esteem and academic progress. Grouping students by ability increases the risk faced by low achieving students and actually widens the gap between less able and more able learners.

Co-planning, co-teaching, co-assessing: Learning teams and collaborative teaching partnerships with other school based and district based personnel allow for flexible groupings and increased opportunities for student voice and choice. Inherent in this approach is job-embedded, personalized professional learning.

Assessment: Teams should consider using triangulated data from a variety of sources; class profiles, class maps, co-planning, co-teaching, co-assessing observation notes, student self-assessment, peer assessment, rubrics etc., to support a non-categorical approach to decision making and conversation content. Discussions should be guided by student centered, developmentally appropriate language as opposed to special education designations or other labels.

The above information gives considerable attention to the notion of looking at all children from a strength based perspective. Schools must be responsive to each individual child and be prepared to see rapid changes in some areas and slower progress in others. For practitioners in the classroom the challenge is to create an environment where this can occur, without sorting or categorizing children, and while also having structure. The environment needs to be play-based and flexible enough to allow for diverse learning experiences, while also having the structure to facilitate predictability, balance, and order.



## Procedures For Creating Class Composition

The following steps will assist your school teams in creating balanced, diverse classrooms. If any teacher or teacher learning team may be requesting support through Article 75, documentation must be kept for each of the following steps and then collated by the school based team for future reference.

1. Engage in initial planning discussions for the school configuration and the composition of each class. Include the School Based Team, Teacher Learning Teams, Learning Services Staff, and School Administration. Initial conversations should begin by reviewing the previously mentioned Guiding Principles for School Based Decision Making portion of this document. In addition, your team will gather the data previously created in the spring regarding students' strengths and functional needs. This helps teams build the foundation to support all learners.
2. Meet as a School Based Team to complete a school wide Class Review process in September (Learning in Safe Schools) to review initial plans created in the spring. School Based Teams, with help from each teacher learning team, will begin by reviewing any changes to the school configuration, individual student plans, new students and teachers to the school, and any other changes.
3. Begin with the end in mind: teams now use a strength based approach to intentionally create diverse groupings of students for each classroom composition. The focus on strengths and functional needs, rather than student labels, will assist the team in creating effective balance, including making changes to composition, and will provide the specific information related to students' needs. This will inform the provision of appropriate supports for the students and/or teacher(s), if needed.
4. Once the classroom composition has been completed, each teacher or teacher learning team will complete a classroom mapping process in order to better understand the strengths of their students and the overall composition of their classroom. The teachers will build an instructional plan for their class including a schedule and process for invisible interventions with the help of the Collaborative Model of Support Team. *Consideration should be given to the CMOS team assisting the teacher with all students writing individual student learning plans as part of their Career and Life Education focus on identity.*



5. If any additional supports, beyond that available through the Learning Services CMOS approach are being considered, use the following guidelines (as per Article 75) to discuss circumstances and options for support:
  - a. The educational, medical and physical needs of all students including students with special needs.
  - b. The proposed program for each student including the provision of the necessary curricular material(s)
  - c. The regular class size and composition
  - d. The professional opinions, support and receptiveness of the teachers directly affected
  - e. The professional training of the teachers involved and the available funds for appropriate in-service and ongoing support.

If it is determined that further support is required, complete the Article 75 Request for Support Form and submit to the Director of Learning Services.

6. Once approved by the Director of Learning Services, a Collaborative Support Teacher provided under Article 75 will provide in-class support through co-planning, co-teaching and co-assessing.
7. Teachers and/or Teacher Learning Teams, with the support of the School Based Team, review tier three support and interventions in 6 week cycles, or at a minimum, each term.
8. School Based Teams complete a school wide class review process 2-3 times a year (term or semester) as an ongoing scan and support strategy.

It should be noted that by the end of October all existing Individual Education Plans (IEP) will be reviewed and updated. Additionally any new IEPs will be written. *Consideration should be given to using the Multi Action Planning System (MAPS) process in planning for individual students (Learning in Safe Schools). MAPS is a process that looks at the whole student (classroom, school, home and community).*



## Professional Learning Considerations

The documents and books cited emphasize the importance of looking at the whole child at the center of all programming and offer practical strategies and structures for classroom teachers such as teacher learning teams and collaborative models of support. Professional learning support is likely needed as the teachers come to a deeper understanding of the shift in practice from a didactic model to a structured play based model. An in depth study for school based learning teams using the Full Day Kindergarten Guide (FDK Guide) and Authentic Childhood by Susan Fraser would be an appropriate place to start to build staff confidence in play based learning and curriculum design, for primary teams. A deeper understanding of early childhood development and the role of schools in facilitating student centered learning would be helpful to the conversation and decision making process in regards to class composition at this age level.

This learning would also help planning with a holistic, student centered approach while being neither laissez-faire nor prescriptive. The FDK Guide explains that research shows learning is most effective when a consistent framework, including defined time periods throughout the day, and a balance of individual and group work using both student directed and teacher directed learning activities, amongst other things are used. The National Middle School Association offers many useful resources to support student groupings and instructional approaches in the adolescent years.

In addition, for primary teams, it would be helpful for teachers to have professional learning with the High Scope planning tool for children. Students use the Plan-Do-Review sequence to make personal choices about what they plan to do, how they plan to carry out their ideas, and how to reflect upon their activities with adults and other children. This planning tool for children has not been widely introduced, although it is recommended in the Primary Program as a vehicle for children to plan their own learning. The Spirals of Inquiry (Halbert and Kaiser, 2007) offers great insight into effective instructional approaches to support voice and choice and is based on the principles of learning. Our own SD48 Pathways to Learning offers six key considerations for planning and curriculum design which affords flexibility through optimal emotion and motivation of the learners.