



# Port Vila International School

## New Class Structures in the Primary School at PVIS in 2020

Over the past two years of the establishment of the Australian Curriculum in our classrooms, our teachers have been working towards achieving more differentiated and individualised learning opportunities for our children. Our team of Primary Team Leaders, after reviewing and evaluating a range of factors around classrooms and learning success, put together a proposal to the Board that was endorsed for rollout in 2020.

All teachers at PVIS are caring and committed educators and PVIS strives to ensure that all students are provided with a high-quality education. From 2020, Primary school classes will include two-year levels within one class. Foundation will remain as a single year level class. The other classes in the school will be combined with Year 1 and 2, Year 3 and 4, and Year 5 and 6 within the same class group. The Australian Curriculum recognises that combined year level teaching, regardless of straight year group or composite classes, is designed to allow for flexibility to meet the learners' needs.

Moving to

combined year level classes at PVIS does not change the quality of Australian Curriculum being delivered or the standard of learning in our classrooms, in fact we believe it will improve it. With a mix of formal and informal instruction in literacy and numeracy alongside a strong emphasis on engaging children with opportunities for personalised learning, self-expression, exploration and creativity which integrates within and between the key learning and achievement areas of the Australian Curriculum.

### Why the move to combined year level classes at PVIS makes sense:

#### 1. Differentiated teaching and individualised learning is already happening

The approach to teaching at PVIS is about being responsive and meeting the needs of the individual regardless of age or age level curriculum. This is backed up by the theory of teaching by 'stages, not ages'. Students can work to their own developmental level, rather than grade expectations which in the PVIS contexts allows more opportunities for us to cater for the wide and diverse needs of the primary students. As many students join from a range of educational contexts, socio-economic backgrounds and are culturally and linguistically diverse, it is often that there is differentiated and personalised learning at all levels.

#### 2. Social Flexibility

Combined year level classes will allow for greater social flexibility. At times, it can be difficult for some students being in the same social group/class every year. For some students this can lead to a lack of strong friendships within the classroom and a feeling of isolation. Combined year level classes mean that even in a small school, students are not necessarily in the same class with the same students every year.

#### 3. Consistency

Our fantastic team of teachers in the primary school seek to work in a collaborative environment where they can share ideas, planning and assessment as well as being able to build consistency and momentum around what learning looks like in the primary section of the school. PVIS acknowledges that some of our staff are only here for the short term, which is part of the realities of life in Vanuatu. By having two teachers at each level there is a greater likelihood of continuity and for there to be a teacher to guide and support the new teachers as they transition to PVIS.

### Some questions you may have might be ...

#### Will my child be disadvantaged being in a composite class? Will they fall behind?

The most common fear for parents having a child in a combined year level class is that they will fall behind – that the teacher's attention will be split between the two years and they'll get less overall learning time with their teacher. The

research, however, doesn't agree. Multiple studies conclude it makes no difference to performance whether students are in a straight year group or in a multi-age class. Experts agree the most important factor in determining how well a student does is the quality of the teacher and their teaching.

Additionally, it seems combined classes can actually enhance development; students become more confident and assertive and learn to operate as part of a group while bolstering independent learning skills.

### **Is it better to be the older year or the younger year in a composite?**

Combined classes have been shown to provide benefits to both the older and younger students in the class. Older students often take on a mentoring role, and benefit from helping younger students in co-operative learning situations, while younger students have the opportunity of enhanced learning experiences when they are ready for it.

### **What are the other benefits of combined classes?**

In a combined year level class, older students can practice and reinforce their own skills as they teach them to younger students. Older students provide a model of appropriate behaviour for the younger students – this also means less behaviour problems in the classroom because younger students integrate quickly into established class routines as modelled by the older students. Younger students can seek help from a wider range of people rather than relying on the teacher to help them all the time. Changing the focus of learning from achieving a certain 'grade' to individual personal best alters the nature of the learning experience to lead children to value learning and the learning process.

Students

develop a greater respect for individual differences across the board.

### **How do teachers manage the workload across age groups?**

In any single year level class, there are most often at least four years difference between the highest achieving students and those who still need support to achieve age level curriculum and learning. Our teachers at PVIS plan for individualised learning for all children within one-year level, this does not change when combining classes.

### **What are the advantages of combined year level classes?**

- Children in combined year level classes will become more confident making friends across age groups – an important life skill they will need after school when they are employed.
- Over time, students become proficient at problem-solving skills and independent learning. Problem solving is one of the key skills kids will need in the future for both employment opportunities but also resilience in a changing society.
- Younger students within a combined year level class generally look up to their older peers and aspire to learn out of admiration rather than extrinsic rewards.
- Older students learn leadership skills and enjoy the mentoring opportunity and sense of guidance that they can provide to their younger peers.
- The younger students have the opportunity for enhanced learning experiences when they are ready for it.
- Combined year level classrooms can also help bring the school community closer as students get to know children of various ages.

### **How do staff determine class groupings? What factors are considered?**

There are clear guidelines to assist the decision-making process whilst the allocation of children to various classes is ultimately the responsibility of the principal, a collaborative process with the leadership team, teachers and team leaders will be used. Our goal is to form well-balanced classes of children.

Consideration is given to,

- The social, emotional, educational and physical needs of each child
- The number of years of school an individual has had
- Ensuring there is a gender mix and balance across each class