

# ARTS EDUCATION IN COMBINED PRIMARY CLASSES IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

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## Abstract

The work in combined classrooms is very specific and demanding for primary education teachers because one teacher simultaneously performs lessons for more than one class. According to the official data from the Ministry of Education in Croatia, there are 148,233 students in the first four classes, wherein 9,879 (6,7%) students in composite classrooms classes. In combined, i.e. split-year classes, students are heterogeneous with regard to their age and abilities. Due to the nature of instruction that is complex, teachers need to be creative in the teaching methodology as well as in organizing overall lessons. Artistic subjects (music and visual arts) represent specific educational fields, and they are taught by class teachers in the first four grades of primary school. The goal of this work was to examine how primary education teachers conduct combined instruction in the artistic fields of music and visual arts with regard to age-diverse class composition. Besides, the advantages and drawbacks of such work and challenges teachers are faced with were also investigated. The research was conducted in 2023. Teachers working in two-, three- and four-year combinations participated in the study. The qualitative research method was applied, i.e. participants were interviewed in order to gain specific information, that is, a more in-depth insight into the work in combined classrooms within artistic fields. In their interview, female teachers underlined the beauty and challenge of such work with regard to peer mentoring, tolerance and mutual appreciation. The drawbacks of working in combined classes are connected to the organisation of teaching (planned and effective time use).

**Keywords:** *Combined classrooms, music, primary education, visual arts.*

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## 1. Introduction

The combined classroom is an educational model in which students of different generations or classes are taught in the same class (Wachtel & Smyth, 2014; Nawab & Baig, 2011; Berry & Little, 2006; Lučić & Matijević, 2004; Pool et al., 2000). Recent research shows that the number of this form of instruction is increasing on a global scale, accounting for about one-third of all classes worldwide (Barbetta et al., 2018) and steadily rising (Khazaei et al., 2016). This teaching model is often used in smaller schools or in schools in rural areas where there are not enough students to form a class for each grade. The reason for such organization is the lack of favorable social and economic conditions. Numerous advantages, but also disadvantages can be seen in it (Varga & Sabljak, 2020).

Many authors emphasize the various advantages of teaching in combined classes. Research has shown that teachers in combined classes find a better connection between younger and older students, and that older students help younger students master subject matter. Younger students have access to broader content that older students learn, while older students often repeat what they have learned. Teachers can more easily see if some students are having difficulty mastering the material and intervene in time to eliminate or alleviate it. In general, students at all grade levels in a combined class become more independent through parallel instruction (Fagan, 2009; Mulryan-Kyne, 2004). Lopez (2018) states that some of the benefits of working in combined classes include flexibility, the ability to tailor curriculum to individual students, improving social skills and fostering collaboration among students of different ages, and increased opportunities to socialize and make friends.

There are two basic characteristics of the combined class - heterogeneity and simultaneity. Heterogeneity refers to the different ages and abilities of students, which requires differentiation and an individualized approach by teachers (Hyry-Beihaimmer & Haschter, 2015). Simultaneity refers to the simultaneous development of two or more different activities for which the teacher must spend time (Berry, 2002). Simultaneous delivery of different instructional content is almost always accompanied by

time constraints, which is why this is one of the main disadvantages of working in combined departments. The disadvantages are also reflected in the insufficient time for planning and implementing instructional activities, which requires more organization and planning by teachers who do not feel competent enough to work in this way (Lopez, 2018; Maulkeen & Higgins, 2009).

Working in combined classes has its advantages and disadvantages, which are examined in this paper with special reference to the artistic subjects. The teaching of artistic subjects at the primary level (music and visual arts) has its own peculiarities, because it differs from other subjects in terms of the character of the content, the creative processes, the relationships between students and teachers, and the evaluation of the results of the work. The main features of music and art classes are hands-on activities and creative expression. Therefore, teachers are expected to have a creative methodological approach based on knowledge of the peculiarities of music and visual arts. Special material conditions (instruments, audiovisual technology, various accessories and materials) are required for teaching in the field of arts, where the rationalization of time plays an important role in the quality of the teaching process. In such situations, the teacher combines indirect and direct forms of work, which allows him to perform the program tasks more efficiently. Correlation of teaching content and interdisciplinary connection are also important (Šuvar, 2011).

## **2. Research problem and aim**

In the school system, teaching can be combined. The reason for this kind of teaching organization is often the smaller number of children in a larger geographical area. The aim of the work is to explore the way of conducting artistic subjects (music and visual arts) in combined classes of Croatian elementary schools. The secondary objective is to investigate the teachers' opinion about the advantages and disadvantages of conducting art classes in heterogeneous groups.

### **2.1. Sample**

The research was conducted in 2023 in the Republic of Croatia. 13 primary school teachers working in combined departments participated. 11 of them teach in a two-grade combination, one in a three-grade combination, and one in a four-grade combination. Three teachers have been working in the combined classroom for up to 7 years, four of them between 12 and 20 years, two between 25 and 29 years, and three teachers have between 30 and 39 years of experience in combined classes. The total number of children they work with in the class at one time varies from four to eleven students.

## **3. Method and instrument of data collection**

A qualitative research approach was used. A structured interview with a well-defined scheme was used, in which all respondents were asked the same questions. The interview collected objective data related to years of service, working in departments with combined classes, current class combination in which they work, and number of students. The interview questions were open-ended (Mejovšek, 2005; Halmi, 2003). In terms of content, they referred to the teachers' views and opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of working in combined classes and on their personal way of teaching artistic subjects (music and visual arts). The participants received the interview questions via e-mail, which allowed for quick and detailed access to information (Creswell, 2002). The data obtained from the interview will be presented descriptively.

## **4. Analysis of the interviews and discussion**

The data obtained from the interviews are presented in terms of advantages and disadvantages. A more detailed and comprehensive description of the learning and teaching methods used by teachers in art classes is presented. The combined class is characterized by a smaller number of children compared to the single class section. Most teachers highlight the smaller number of children as an advantage of working in a combined class. In addition, they consider collaboration and peer mentoring as the most important advantage. Some other researches have shown that collaboration and peer mentoring is the best part of working in combined classes (Blašković, 2020; Lopez, 2018). This is related to the fact that students are more independent, disciplined and show more initiative (Šuvar, 2011), which is also highlighted as an advantage by participants.

The educational process requires a creative teacher who skilfully solves organizational and didactic situations. This is reflected in teacher ability to choose and apply different strategies and working methods. In the survey, teachers see this as an advantage of working in combined classes, while the possibility of rationalizing time through forms of indirect and direct work with students is somewhat less important for them. According to research by Šuvar (2011), younger students require more direct work

compared to students in higher grades who successfully complete their tasks in indirect ways. Teachers also see a great advantage in the possibility to choose strategies and learning and teaching methods. The usual system of teaching by the hour is partially abandoned, which is considered by teachers as one of the positive aspects because of the time distribution of the lesson content. This refers to the length of the lesson, which is flexible, and the teachers themselves determine the duration and schedule of the content in the day. Thus, it is an efficient ratio of lesson content and time.

The most important shortcomings of working with combined classes mentioned by the participants are the simultaneous processing of different contents in the class and the motivation of students, as well as the problem of attention of all students in following the contents of the class. Teachers working in small regional schools also state that they do not have adequate material conditions and they lack the didactic equipment necessary for simultaneous teaching of content. They consider the combination of different types of work, the maintenance of discipline, and the psychophysical differences between students as minor disadvantages. Lopez (2018) and Song et al. (2009) cite as disadvantages the greater burden placed on teachers to carry out the instructional process, the possibility that students in older classes may fall behind in mastering the material, and the possibility that students may not receive adequate support during instruction.

The last section of the study contains a description of the learning and teaching methods which are used by teachers during music and visual art lessons. Responses to questions related to the performance of artistic subjects were first categorized into content-independent units, which were then combined into content sets or categories. Results are presented descriptively using the following categories: lesson process, simultaneous instruction of music and/or visual arts for all ages in the combined classes, use of various teaching and learning methods. Of the 13 teachers, one teacher did not answer this set of questions, and one teacher does not teach music in the classroom, but is taught by the subject teacher (specialist in music).

All teachers divide the design of the lesson into three basic phases: introduction, main part and conclusion. In the introductory part of music lesson, teachers usually sing and repeat familiar songs that students have learned in previous music lessons. The main part includes learning a new song with various motivation (talking about the content of the new song), demonstrating the song by playing the recording, rarely by performing it themselves, reading the lyrics, followed by singing the song. When students are listening to music, they analyze it by determining the atmosphere, tempo, performer, often with the help of textbooks. The last part of the lesson consists of creative expression of the students (singing with movement, musical games, artistic reaction to music), for which, according to the two teachers, there is often no time. The visual arts lessons follow the similar pattern: an introductory part, in which the working material is prepared and artistic techniques are demonstrated, is followed by a motivational part of the lesson, in which the methodological approach depending on the motif and visual arts problem is determined. The central part of the lesson is students' artistic activity. The final assessment is done through the analysis of the students' artwork, talking about the understanding of visual arts problems and its implementation in artworks (learning outcome). Teachers in combined classes usually do not have enough time for this part of the lesson.

Regarding the possibility of teaching music or visual arts simultaneously to all classes in a combined department, respondents' answers differ depending on whether they work in a two-, three-, or four-class combination. Teachers in a two-class combination teach music and visual arts simultaneously, using specific forms of direct and indirect work with students. There is a description of a teacher leading a 3rd and 4th grade combination: "In music class, some students sing or listen to a song while others do quiet work with various tasks." Teachers who have a combination of 1st and 3rd or 1st and 4th grade in the music classes, the introductory and the final part of the lesson work together for all students, while learning new material is done first with the students of one class, then with the other class. The example of a teacher teaching a combination of 1st and 3rd graders shows how she repeats familiar songs with all students at the beginning of the lesson (the older ones know the song, but they sing together with the first and second grade), then they learn a new song, first with the first grade. While the third grade learns a new song, the first and second grades illustrate song that they've been learning. One teacher of a three-class combination of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd graders describes her music class as follows: "We repeat the songs we have previously learned, and then everyone sings all the songs together for all the classes. Then we listen to new songs for each class. While some listen, the others read the lyrics. They memorize the words and the melody and sing. Often, all students are singing all songs regardless to the class. As well, they dance together regardless of which class the songs are assigned to. Everyone listens to music and analyzes what they hear". Visual arts classes in the combination of the two classes are held simultaneously, with the older students often helping the younger ones prepare work materials. The teachers demonstrate the artistic technique to the younger students, while the older ones simply repeat the work with the technique. Motivation is done separately for each grade, as is the announcement of the

assignment. In classes with two grades, teachers usually provide a common motif for all students. The teacher who teaches a combination of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades conducts the introductory part equally; the higher the grade is, the task is more complex, so it is done separately for each grade; at the end, students evaluate art work together; she mainly tries to match all grades thematically. One teacher in the study has a four-class combination and her method of teaching music and visual arts is as follows, "Since I have a four-class combination, it is extremely difficult to run a music class with all classes at the same time. A major disadvantage of conducting classes with all classes is maintaining student attention and the difficulty of using didactic tools in all classes at the same time. To make it easier for the students and to allow the teachers to have an even engagement, this lesson is taught in combination with the visual arts lesson. Thus, two classes have music lessons and two classes have visual arts lessons".

Table 1. An example of parallel implementation of music and visual arts lessons in a quadruple combination.

<b>INTRODUCTION PART OF THE LESSON</b>	
<i>Students repeat previously learned songs through musical games.</i>	<i>Students prepare the necessary art technique for the work.</i>
<b>MAIN PART OF THE LESSON</b>	
<i>Students solve worksheets, create (draw, craft), or play games related to the new lesson.</i>	<i>I show the students how to work with the given art technique by describing how to do it. If they already know it, we repeat the working method orally. Using visuals, I explain the given art terms, and students actively participate in the conversation about the given topic. I describe and announce the task. The students repeat the same so that I can see if they have understood what is required of them.</i>
<i>In conversation, I announce to the students the song they will learn.</i>	
<i>This is followed by a demonstration of the song by playing the recording. After listening to the song, students express their impressions of it. With the help of the chase or echo game, students remember the lyrics of the song, the melody and the rhythm. Then we sing the learned song with the help of children's instruments (percussion/triangle/rattles made by the students).</i>	
<i>The students quietly put away the children's instruments.</i>	
<i>Then we listen to a piece by one of the famous composers. We determine the tempo, mood, and structure of the piece using the mind maps from the textbook.</i>	<i>I take time for students to see the progress of the artwork and guide them to achieve their goals.</i>
<b>FINAL PART OF THE LESSON</b>	
<i>Students perform musical games they have learned (e.g., musical chairs, hot and cold game), repeat counts through body percussion, and take care not to be too loud so as not to disturb the analysis of other students' work.</i>	<i>After the finished artwork, which I post on the board, we analyze it. I ask students to briefly review the content we have been dealing with. Review and connect concepts. I ask students to reflect on their activities and evaluate their satisfaction and effort.</i>

When teaching music and visual arts, teachers use different learning and teaching methods. In music lessons all teachers teach songs by ear, most of them often make singing and music didactic games (Guess the song, Who called?, Musical chairs, Hot-cold game...). Sometimes they also do analytical listening to music and play instruments (children's percussions). Two teachers sometimes do music dictation, the others rarely. In visual arts classes all teachers demonstrate artistic techniques, they often use the method of demonstration, the method of analytical observation and to a lesser extent the method of artistic-aesthetic communication.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of the study were obtained on a non-representative sample and cannot be generalized, but they show all the complexity of work in combined classes, especially the specificity of art teaching, which requires not only psychological-pedagogical and artistic competences, but also adequate spatial and material working conditions and didactic equipment of the classroom. The teachers (participants of the study) described their way of teaching in combined classes in a mutually similar way. They start the teaching process by first attracting the attention of the students, and after motivation they proceed to individual tasks for the students and thematic units, each related to one class. The problem of heterogeneity and simultaneity in combined classes can be reduced by good planning of the instructional process, use of a variety of teaching and learning strategies and methods, rationalization of time through special forms of indirect and direct work with students, flexible duration of instruction, and a classroom climate that fosters students' creativity, sense of discovery, and problem-solving approach to learning.

Recommendations for further research relate to the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (method triangulation) of research on a larger sample, as well as the study of participants' attitudes and opinions regarding their ability to work in combined departments.

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