Three Year Levels, One Room

Escuela Rural Cucao • Chonchi, Chiloé, Chile

Cucao sits at the western edge of Chiloé island, a long way from anywhere with a resource centre or specialist support team on call. Escuela Rural Cucao is a small school in this remote corner of southern Chile, and its teachers faced a challenge familiar to rural educators everywhere: children arrived with wildly different starting points.

Some had attended preschool. Some hadn't. According to Langford's account, certain children entering Year 1 needed to learn how to listen, concentrate, wait, and follow instructions before they could tackle reading, writing, or calculation. Those weren't deficits. They were capabilities that hadn't yet had a chance to develop.

The multigrade reality

During the period described, Years 1, 2, and 3 shared a single classroom. Same room, same teacher, different abilities, different academic needs.

The practical puzzle was constant: while one group needed a demonstration, another needed to keep working on their own. Some children required more time. Others were ready to move on. If every child depended on individual adult instruction for every step, the teacher couldn't reach anyone properly.

That's what made independence so valuable. Children who could follow a familiar sequence and attempt an activity with guidance built into the material freed up the teacher to work directly with those who needed the most help. Independence didn't mean learning alone. It meant being able to continue purposeful work while the teacher was with someone else.

The tools they used

The school adopted Bamboo mental calculation and First Waves, an earlier version of the early-childhood program now called Shaka. Both were structured activities designed to make instructions, demonstrations, and practice more accessible without requiring an adult to explain every step.

The teacher didn't become optional. She was still observing, adjusting the level of challenge, and offering individual support. But a shared, predictable routine meant children could start work and keep practising with greater independence. In a multigrade classroom, that kind of structure carries a lot of weight.

What the director saw

Lautaro Vera, the school's director, described the work as rewarding. He reported seeing improvements in students' concentration, self-control, memory, and speed when solving exercises. He also mentioned a practical detail that matters: the school ran these activities during the first minutes of class each morning. They were part of daily routine, not an occasional event.

These are his personal observations, not measured outcomes. But they come from someone watching the same children every day.

Learning to wait

Teacher Marcela Cárcamo highlighted something that gets overlooked in discussions about educational programs. She felt the method helped her reinforce values and habits she was already working on through the curriculum.

"Children were learning to wait calmly for their classmates to finish their work."

- Marcela Cárcamo, teacher (translated from Spanish)

In a multigrade classroom, that's not a small thing. Some children finish fast. Others need more time to understand, attempt, and complete an activity. Learning to respect those differences helps the whole room function. For Marcela, building classroom habits and supporting academic practice were the same work.

Freeing up support where it counts

The Cucao experience raises a practical question. When one group can follow a clear activity with growing independence, the classroom teacher and the support teacher can give more attention to the children who need modelling, feedback, or individual guidance. Structured materials don't replace specialist support. They help organise the room so adult attention goes where it's most needed, while other children keep practising instead of waiting.

What this experience suggests

Cucao's small enrolment didn't simplify the teaching problems. If anything, the multigrade arrangement made them more visible. How do you help a child who hasn't yet developed classroom routines? What happens when one learner needs more time while another is ready to move on? How do several groups learn in one room?

The school's response was to use clear routines and organised practice so children could participate with greater independence while adults stayed available to guide them. Lautaro Vera reported improvements in concentration and self-control. Marcela Cárcamo watched children learning to respect each other's pace. These are qualitative accounts, not formal measures of individual progress. Their value is in showing how educators used structured activities to respond to real classroom challenges in a place with limited outside support.

Source: Based on Sylvia Langford's account of the Cucao implementation and testimonies from director Lautaro Vera and teacher Marcela Cárcamo. Quotations translated from Spanish.