The Compounding Challenges of Middle School and Multiage Classes for Beginning Teachers

Fiona Bryer and Katherine Main
Griffith University, Queensland, Australia
Centre for Learning Research

Multiaging and middle schooling are two separate educational reforms directed to better meet the individual needs of students. Teachers working within these classes share overlapping and interdependent role expectations as well as some separate and independent ones associated with traditional teacher tasks. The experiences of two beginning teachers were examined after their initial 6 months in classrooms that combine multiage and middle school reforms. Training and collegial support were critical issues. Preservice training did not adequately prepare each individual for this beginning experience. Contextual differences in the schools’ induction procedures affected their developing identities as teachers, helping one and hindering the other.

Beginning teachers
As beginning teachers make the transition from student teacher to "real" teacher, their first teaching experience is critical in shaping their general conceptions of the teaching profession. Multiaging and middle schooling are relatively new educational reforms in Queensland, and starting to teach in these alternative educational settings needs to be examined in relation to actual experiences as a beginning teacher. Given that traditional teacher training has fostered initial expectations about teaching, alternative classroom settings could be very challenging for new teachers.

Student teachers use their theoretical experiences at university and their practicum experiences in classrooms to begin to develop their own identity as a teacher and to learn coping mechanisms able to sustain them through their new career. Specific ideas about what constitutes "good" teaching help to develop and support this emerging identity. The beginning teacher's new workplace may cause stress when traditional coursework and practical experiences are not broad enough to meet the range of school contexts encountered in an initial posting (Hargreaves & Jacka, 1995). The realities of traditional school culture may challenge initial confidence to cope with demanding practice and demanding students to the point where they question their suitability and capability to work in the teaching profession. Unanticipated role expectations placed on beginning teachers in their first workplace may further threaten this fledgling identity.

A teacher's sense of efficacy as a teacher and sense of how well prepared they felt
when they entered the profession has been shown to be directly related to their confidence about their ability to reach teaching goals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002) and to their view of teaching as an occupation (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Moreover, a teacher's view of self-efficacy appears to be established fairly early in their career and to be relatively difficult to change (Tschanne-Moran, Woolf-M-Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Thus, Tschanne-Moran et al. (1998) argued that knowledge and skills need to be developed early in areas identified as having the greatest impact on the beginning teacher's sense of efficacy. Teachers whose early perception of themselves as a teacher was low were more likely to report that they are less likely to stay in teaching. Other research has indicated that teachers in their first year of teaching develop very high rates of burnout and leave the profession at an alarming rate (Goddard & O'Brien, 2003; Melnychuk & Melnychuk, 2002).

Feelings of underpreparedness expressed by beginning teachers have contributed to the perception that external factors such as peers and a student's home environment had a greater influence on a student's ability to learn than did the teacher (Darling Hammond et al., 2002; Goddard & O'Brien, 2003; McCann & Johannessen, 2004). Those teachers who felt underprepared for their new teaching assignment were found to be significantly more likely to feel unsure of "how" to teach some of their students. Teachers who felt better prepared were found to be significantly more likely to believe they could reach all of their students, handle the demands of the classroom and associated problems, assist students in achieving considerable success, and, overall, provide a positive influence in students' lives.

A negative experience in an initial posting can be damaging to a beginnings teacher's confidence and perception of themselves as a "bona fide" teacher. Areas of greatest concern identified by new teachers included relationships with students, colleagues, parents and administration; workload; assessment; discipline; and isolation (McCann & Johannessen, 2004; Melnychuk & Melnychuk, 2002). School practices that smooth the transition of the beginning teacher from "apprentice" to "professional" were (a) support from a mutually agreed upon mentor as well as support from administrative staff, (b) ongoing professional development, and (c) maintenance of a positive attitude. Melnychuk and Melnychuk (2002) also noted that teaming them with more experienced peers and limiting the involvement of beginning teachers on school committees and enabled them to become familiar with the professional life and work of a teacher and, thus, foster their identity as a teacher.

Educational reforms

It would seem reasonable, then, to assume that beginning teachers may lack some of the practical skills necessary to feel successful in their new "professional" role. When the classroom requires skills and knowledge outside their preparation, it is likely that even the well-prepared new teacher will need support. "A plethora of educational reforms enable schools to offer many variations in class makeup, instructional models, school organisation, and staff configurations" (Main & Bryer, 2004, p. 239). Structure, staffing, and student mix have altered traditional school programs. Efforts to meet local needs also produced many differences in programs offered in some schools.

New teachers attempt to make sense of, and transfer, pedagogical tools gained in
Informing practice; improving research

their preservice academic study and practicum settings to this new "setting specific" role. Student teachers have been exposed to their future work culture during practicum while they are still able to draw on the support of their familiar university culture (Turner, Jones, Davies, & Ramsay, 2004). It is difficult, if not impossible, for universities to provide student teachers with experiences in all of the variations of classroom make up to prepare them adequately for their potential roles as beginning teachers.

Furthermore, Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, and Fry (2004) noted that beginning teachers tend to internalise the ethos of their first teaching position as the "norm." Hence, a combination of factors can create problems for the new teacher. First, failure of traditional practice to transfer easily into the new setting can disrupt their developing identity as a teacher. Second and related to the first factor, lack of recognition that the alternative practices expected in a new setting is a difference in site specific programs rather than a personal deficit problem can affect how beginning teachers interpret their performance difficulties.

Multiaging

Teaching practices in multiage classrooms differ from those in monograde classes. Multiaging reflects an active commitment to remove what Lortie (2002) described as the "egg-crates", age/grade boundaries found in traditional settings. Previous teacher training often fails to prepare teachers for this type of student grouping (Hoffman, 2003), in which traditional teacher-centred instructional methods are challenged (Mason & Burns, 1996). The underpinning philosophies of multiage classes require simultaneous across grade teaching and assessment, achievement of state mandated benchmarks for each year level, a student centred classroom that includes cooperative peer learning, collaborative teaching, and the development of strong teacher-student and student-student relationships (Miller, 1991; Hoffman, 2003; Lloyd, 1999).

Multiaging is more than an organisational strategy to cope with situational imbalances in across-grade school enrolments. Pedagogical benefits of this way of grouping students (Berry, 2001; Veenman, 1995) are thought to derive from the mixing of ages, the related reorganization of teaching and learning programs, and the flexible milieu (Gump, 1980). Within multiaged classes, two or more year levels are grouped and taught as a heterogeneous unit. By transforming the social ecology of traditional age-grade learning, increased diversity is expected to enrich the interactions of students. The range of diversity already existing within early adolescence appears to add further diversity. "Differences in timing and onset of simultaneous changes in physical, intellectual, social, and emotional domains of the development may increase the classroom heterogeneity of this age group between Years 5 to 9 (i.e., ages 10 to 14)" (Main & Bryer, 2004, p. 239). Some research has suggested that it is the youngest students within this type of student grouping who receive the greatest benefit. Veenman (1996) reported positive effects for students in Years K-2 but not for older students (i.e., those in Years 5-6).

Little (2001) argued that the knowledge required to work effectively within the multigrade reality appears to be "invisible", as it does not appear be disseminated via the usual media (e.g., syllabi, teacher's guides, textbooks on curriculum and teaching methods, and the content and pedagogy of teacher training available in universities). It has been argued that the diverse needs of a broader range of students within these
classrooms have increased workloads (Miller, 1991). Increased curriculum preparation, better classroom organisation, and more efficient and organised administrative skills to adequately report student outcomes across all domains may be very challenging for the beginning teacher with traditional expectations about teacher work.

**Middle schooling**

The middle phase of schooling (approximately Years 5 to 9) has blurred the traditional boundaries of secondary and primary education (Bryer & Main, 2005). Empirical recognition of the mismatch between the developmental needs of young adolescents and traditional school settings (Baer, 1999; Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2005; Eccles, 2004; Keating, 2004) fostered expansion of a middle phase of schooling into western educational policy. Much research has been focused on understanding the pedagogical and curriculum practices that offer a more developmentally appropriate educational experience for young adolescents and that address the philosophical recognition of issues around alienation and underachievement (Braggett, 1997; Chadbourne, 2001; Education Queensland, 2003; Luke et al., 2003).

However, US experience has shown that it cannot be assumed that traditionally trained primary or secondary teachers can work effectively in this new sector (Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 2002). Moreover, it has been argued that the success of middle schools is dependent upon the specialised training and commitment of middle school teachers (Reising, 2002). Critical elements of this specialised training include training in open-ended projects, compacting curriculum, performance-based assessment, differentiated assignments, and grading standards (National Middle Schooling Association, 2004).

Acceptance of middle schooling into Australian educational policy has gained momentum in recent years. Within Australia, many and varied models of middle schooling reform have arisen. The empty or emerging policies of individual states relating to the middle phase of schooling (Luke et al., 2003) have allowed a variety of models (Aspland & Nicholson, 2003). The ad hoc, intuitive, and holistic way in which school leaders and teachers have put policy into practice without either preservice training or knowledge of the overseas literature have allowed many variants in single site reforms (Main & Bryer, 2003; O’Neill, 2001).

This new phase of schooling has been staffed with a combination of traditionally trained primary and secondary teachers who have used their diverse personal and sectorial understandings of middle schooling to generate practice to fit within a middle school model. Staff have selected and adapted practice, in an unsystematic way, from a range of recommendations such as interdisciplinary teams, curriculum correlation (integration), block scheduling, authentic assessment practices, formation of strong relationships with students, and advisory programs of pastoral care (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1997; Boland, Cavanagh, & Deller, 2001; Braggett, 1997). Traditional training, however, has not prepared teachers for many recommended practices for middle schooling such as collaborative practices (Chadbourne, 2004), correlation and integration of curriculum (Wallace, Venville, & Rennie, 2004), and open-ended tasks for learning and assessment (Jackson & Davis, 2002; Wyatt-Smith, Cumming, & Elkins, 2004).
Multiaged middle school settings in Queensland education

In Queensland, a multiage philosophy of grouping has often been assimilated into middle schooling reforms without conscious consideration of the effects of combining two kinds of reforms. Main and Bryer (2005b) compared the principles of multiaging and middle schooling and showed considerable overlap (see Table 1). Because grade-level barriers have been associated with traditional practice in the current two-tier system, some schools engaged in middle schooling innovation appear to have adopted and adapted composite classes in an intuitive outreach to related innovations in educational practice that are, however, not essential aspects of middle school practice. A scattering of some middle schooling and some multiage schooling has been present in Queensland education for many years. In 1999, the Queensland state government aligned the general notion of a seamless curriculum with the building of several Preparatory-to-Year 12 schools and permitted these schools to trial a variety of middle school innovations. In many cases, the blending of multiage philosophy of grouping into middle schooling reforms has occurred with little conscious attention to their combined impact on teacher work.

Table 1

A comparison of multiage and middle school philosophies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MULTIAGE</th>
<th>MIDDLE SCHOOL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A classroom community in which deep relationships are formed between students, teachers, and parents</td>
<td>A classroom community in which deep relationships are formed between students, teachers, parents, and local communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers perceive each student as an individual and view themselves as facilitators.</td>
<td>Developmental differences in this age-group are catered for using appropriate pedagogy (teacher as facilitator), and negotiated curriculum (to meet students’ individual needs).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers facilitate positive group interaction, including designing and facilitating cooperative and collaborative group work.</td>
<td>Cooperative and collaborative learning are used extensively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ interests are considered and integrated, and information is presented and skills are learned within meaningful contexts.</td>
<td>A negotiated curriculum is focused around real-life and life-like activities, making it meaningful for students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grouping can be done heterogeneously by age and other factors to promote cognitive and social growth and to reduce antisocial behaviour.</td>
<td>Classes are grouped together to form small communities to promote cognitive growth (through increased student motivation) and social growth (through age appropriate pedagogy that also results in reduced antisocial behaviour).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


For example, Main and Bryer (2005b) found a gap between teachers’ acceptance of multiaging in a middle school classes (Years 6-7 and 8-9) and their training in how to implement practice. These teachers with 1-4 years’ experience in middle school of a new P-12 school came from either primary or secondary schools. Teacher with more years in the middle school were more likely to comment about self-directed students, consistent with other positive reports from more experienced teachers (Hoffman, 2002). Despite agreeing that multiage classes enhanced students’ affective domains, multiage student
groupings were considered harder to teach and produced few academic benefits to early adolescent students. The intermingling of these two philosophical innovations, especially the rotation of half the students into and out of a classroom each year, appeared to contribute to the difficulties and concerns experienced by some teachers, especially secondary teachers and teachers of the older classes (i.e., Years 8-9).

Training for alternative teacher practice
When educational reform in the workplace has not prompted complementary change in traditional preservice programs, therefore, tensions may arise for beginning teachers. These tensions can be productive if beginning teachers recognise that the tensions they are experiencing may reflect a combination of localised context and gaps in their teacher training. Then, they can acknowledge that different settings will develop different aspects and skills in their teaching (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). However, beginning teachers who enter a specific situation (e.g., a multiage-middle school classroom) and fail to recognise that their preservice training did not prepare them for every situation may apply a "relational accommodation" (i.e., perceive that the difficulties they are encountering may be due to personal gaps in their ability to be a teacher).

Teacher training for multiage classes
Southern Queensland and northern New South Wales have some history of multiage schooling, distinguished by (a) active choice, (b) teacher continuity, (c) team teaching, and (d) usually school-wide multiaged classes from either transient composite classes in large or growing schools and from small rural multigrade schools (Linley, 1999). Advocacy for multiage schooling by some principals and teachers has been focused on sharing practice rather than on research on practice. Multiage advocates have recognised that conventionally trained teachers may be unable to capitalise on multiage groupings to support improved learning. Committed and experienced multiage teachers working in an established multiage school have developed a stable belief system of personal transformation and practice innovation (Standen, 2005). Little (2001) argued that, for students to learn effectively in multigrade classes, teachers need to be well-trained and to hold positive attitudes to multigrade teaching.

However, many teachers in multigrade environments are untrained in multigrade environments, the practices are foreign to their training, and the instruction is challenging. The skills required by teachers to cater for such a diverse group of students take time to develop. Surbeck (1992) concluded that teachers needed at least 2 years to plan, observe, and gain experience with various ages, in order to be able to create the unique programs necessary to meet the needs of students within multiage classes. Similarly, Standen (2004) showed that a teacher experienced in traditional schools took two years in a multiage school to shift practice towards cooperative learning and to alter prior beliefs about the importance of graded content knowledge. When beginning to teach in a multiage classroom, teachers need to negotiate a set of role expectations specifically associated with multiage classes (Hoffman, 2003; Mason & Burns, 1996). In particular, practice has to be adapted to provide for across-grade teaching and assessment; state mandated benchmarks for each year level; student centred learning, cooperative learning, and collaborative teaching; and strong teacher-student relationships.
Informing practice; improving research

Teachers have recognised that teaching in a multiage classroom can be more difficult than teaching in a monograde class. Teachers committed to multiage classes have also observed the increased workload for individual teachers (Miller, 1991). The work requires more curriculum preparation to teach different ages and abilities and, consequently, different curricula, more classroom organisation tasks, and increased difficulty in reporting student outcomes. This additional stress on teachers can become a negative factor in teachers' motivation and commitment to teaching multiage classes (Mason & Burns, 1996; Veenman, 1996).

Teacher training for middle phase classes
To date, the middle schooling phase in Australia has been sustained by teacher enthusiasm, some student-centred values, and relatively little research support or specific teacher training (Main & Bryer, 2004; Main & Bryer, in press; Main & Bryer, 2005a). Several universities have designed teacher training programs or specific courses to prepare teachers for middle school practice. However, Luke et al. (2003) expressed concern that these newly trained middle school teachers will find it difficult to get placements within middle schools until middle school places become available and until specific training is seen as important. Furthermore, traditionally trained beginning teachers placed in middle phase classrooms have not acquired many valuable skills to cope in this new environment. For example, Main and Bryer (2004) found considerable differences among teaching teams in the quality of team relationships.

Induction and mentoring in reformed practice
For many beginning teachers, the transition from being an "expert" teacher in the university setting to that of a "rank amateur" in the real world is daunting. The new work place can be complex, confusing, and unpredictable for beginning teachers. Lack of support is one of the main reasons more than 30 percent of beginning teachers leave the profession within the first 3 years of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Furthermore, "research suggests that it takes between three to five years for teachers to become proficient, thus beginning teachers must be retained to ensure a proficient teacher force" (Andrews & Quinn, 2005, p. 113).

Thus, mentoring by more experienced staff is a vitally important aspect of support for new teachers. The role of a mentor is to help the beginning teacher develop the confidence, skills, and coping mechanisms for them to successfully negotiate the transition from "graduate" to "teacher" and formulate positive attitudes about the profession and themselves as professionals. Andrews and Quinn (2005) demonstrated that mentoring programs for beginning teachers served to overcome their sense of isolation and lack of support. Support through mentoring provided twofold benefits: (a) increasing the possibilities of retaining qualified staff and (b) reducing the time necessary for beginning teachers to become effective professionals.

Aims of the study
This study aimed to explore how beginning teachers perceive that their traditional training had prepared them to cope with the demands of being not only "beginning teachers" but also "multiage teachers" and "middle school teachers." This study explores
the experiences of two primary-trained teachers who began their teaching experience in a Queensland state school in a multiage classroom that was in the middle years of schooling. Each new teacher was well-prepared in that they were outstanding graduates enthusiastic about entering their new profession.

Method
Two beginning teachers were interviewed after their initial 6 months in classrooms that combined multiage and middle school reforms. Both were employed in schools with multiage philosophies in the later primary years. Class size for both teachers was similar in terms of number of teachers per number of students. Both classes had a 3-year age range of students (i.e., teacher A taught a Years 4-6 multiage class, and teacher B taught a Years 5-7 multiage class). Each teacher was employed in a different school.

There were many pre-existing similarities between the two teachers. Both teachers were female, young, and highly competent in their academic and practicum records. Each teacher had completed a Bachelor of Education (primary). Their undergraduate programs were similar, although each was trained at a different university in Brisbane, Queensland. Although both were positive about their initial posting, neither has prior experience with these reforms in either coursework or practicum placements.

Teacher A taught at a Brisbane metropolitan school that was running a "holistic reform model" middle school (Aspland & Nicholson, 2003). Teacher A was externally assigned to her teaching post after the Week 3 audit showed increased student numbers. This P-12 school with a school-wide multiage philosophy for Years 1–9 constructed classes comprising Years 1-3, 4-6, and 7-9. This school implemented the New Basics suite of rich tasks (i.e., integrated curriculum). Classes were set up in "pods" of four classrooms with four teachers and approximately 120 students. The teachers in each pod formed a "team" and were expected to work collaboratively. During the first 6 months of the year, there was a high turnover of staff within this team. Because only one of the five original teachers remained at the end of the first 6 months, the collaborative partnerships were being continually reconstructed. This continual reconstruction of relationships made it difficult for team members to meet collaborative expectations about appropriate practice in this school.

Teacher B taught at an outer Brisbane school that has a school-wide multiage philosophy. This teacher went through an interview process before the first term. During the interview, the school principal and teacher B's potential teaching partner discussed issues surrounding the workload and expectations of teachers working in a multiage classroom. Teacher B was co-teaching with two other teachers in a 5/6/7 multiage class. The double classroom contained approximately 60 students, with the three teachers together one day of the week. The teaching partner of teacher B worked 4 days per week in the classroom and spent the fifth day each week as a specialist in another part of the school. Teacher B and another teacher worked 3 days per week (2 days each with the same teaching partner and the third day together). These teaching partnerships were stable, and relationships between pre-existing teachers had been built up over several years.

Semi-structured interviews of approximately 40 minutes duration were conducted separately with each participant, half way through the school year. Questions were
framed so as to elicit interviewees' opinions without bias from the interviewer (i.e., How did your preservice training prepare you to teach in a multiage classroom? What level of professional support are you receiving?) Interviews were conducted at the participants' homes. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Textual analysis involved manual line-by-line coding of the word set for content themes and comments. An automatic content analysis of word frequencies and co-occurrences was then applied to the same data set using Leximancer (Smith, 2004) software package. Leximancer is a data-mining tool that visually displays the extracted information on a conceptual map. The main concepts and how they are related to other concepts within the text are displayed spatially. The more central a concept, the closer it is positioned to the centre of the map; the more closely related concepts, are the more closely positioned they are on the map. "Leximancer provides a means of both quantifying and displaying the concept structure of a document set" (Smith, 2004, p. 4).

Both teachers were supplied with a copy of the written "results" from the data set and asked to comment. Follow-up phone calls were made to both participants. Teacher B commented that the results were a "good" reflection of her experience. Teacher A also confirmed her satisfaction with how the results were represented. Twelve months after these initial interviews, teacher A was still only prepared to do relief days and short-term contracts and recently stated that the pressure of full-time teaching is too great. Teacher B renewed her initial 12-month contract for a further 6 months but took leave to travel and teach in Japan, where she continues to work.

Results and discussion
Analysis of data revealed overlapping concerns for these teachers as "beginning teachers", "multiage teachers", and "middle school teachers." Data themes featured high workload, collaborative tasks, and difficulties with age range and developmental variations among students and related difficulties with behaviour management. Data analysis was strengthened by the results of the automatic Leximancer coding and of manual coding. That is, both analyses supported the data interpretation that multiage classes were central to the new work and that the work of a beginning teacher was hard and that the middle school diversity among students was also hard.

Both interviews focused on these themes but for somewhat different reasons. Each teacher had the same number of students but expressed different views. Individual content analysis for each teacher showed that the support networks available to them as they began their practice determined the relative importance of issues. For teacher A, the interview emphasised the demands of the open class and issues of practice. For teacher B, the focus was more on the teamwork and support available to work in the setting.

Figure 1 shows the combined data from both interviews. This map shows all concepts, with thematic size at 78%. When the theme size was set larger than 78%, one large theme encompassed the map, with school in the centre and other concepts clustered around. The three overlapping themes in Figure 1 tend to be aligned along the vertical axis, with school and "lot" high frequency concepts aligned with the horizontal axis and with "student" and "work" high-frequency concepts aligned with the vertical axis. The themes of work and students, which addresses concepts related to middle
schooling (viz., "year", "grade", and "level") came into proximity at the concept of "range." That is, the year level of students and their age added to the range and diversity within the class. The theme of school was strongly based on "multiage" and "classroom" concepts. The themes of school showed good overlap with the work theme, with the concept of "experience" in the middle revealing the co-occurring relations between work experiences in "team" and "teaching" with the "multi-age" emphasis in the school theme.

The issue of experience in a multiage classroom was based on text linking teaching in a multiage classroom with the need for practicum experiences in a multiage class. The issue of teaming and teaching was also associated with text about time and workload (e.g., teacher A's comment that "It was a lot of work" and teacher B's comment that "It was really tough...I never really felt like I knew what I was doing").

Figure 1.
Combined word analysis from both interviews.
As beginning teachers, both teachers felt that there were areas for which their training and student-teacher experiences had not prepared them. Teacher A made the comment that the university only "paid lip service" to training preservice teachers how to work collaboratively with a teaching partner or as part of a team. A professional development session on collaborative practices was "more of an evaluation than training." Teacher A also perceived that she was a "drain" on the other members of the team. "I felt that I was draining on them because I hadn't received any training and everything was so new. I didn't want to take too much of their time." Teacher B also felt that there were gaps in her training. She said that "in [my] preservice education, team teaching was never really discussed and how that, how to [sic] make that work. It is hard to know how to try and share the workload equally and have that autonomy so that you feel like you have your own responsibilities when working within that team and then being able to communicate that and keep the flow there where you are taking responsibility for different things." Teacher B also commented, "I am lucky to have such a supportive and experienced teaching partner."

The support offered to each teacher varied. Teacher A felt unsupported by the school's administration. She felt that the experienced teachers in her teaching team were expected to "support you and give you what training you needed along the way." She then said that she felt that the experienced teachers in her teaching team were being "sucked dry" by the new teachers. Consequently, she was reluctant to continually ask for help or guidance. Teacher B's experience was very different. Teacher B met her future teaching partner during an initial interview process. Teacher B was also assigned a mentor who was not her teaching partner and who she was able to approach about any concerns. Teacher B also found the administration at the school very supportive: "They are always questioning us, 'What do you feel you need?' and 'What other professional development opportunities can we be offering you?'"

As multiage teachers, both teachers commented on the difficulty of the workload required to plan adequately for the diverse age and ability levels of the students in their classes. Teacher A felt that planning was "consuming" her life and that she "never felt in control." Teacher B also stated that working collaboratively lessened the workload to some extent but that the overall time to "collaborate" exceeded the time that otherwise would have been spent doing the other required tasks. She added, "I probably put most of my planning time in the general day-to-day planning into maths. We are trying to cater for so many things, and they only need to have missed out on a couple of skills, and it makes it difficult to teach the new one."

A lack of knowledge of or experience in multiage classrooms also appeared to create stress for both teachers. Teacher A stated that they were continually "trialling another way [of teaching or organising the students and activities] to see what would work. A lot of it was experimentation." Teacher A also stated that "I want to...see a good multiage classroom. I was expected to have a well functioning multiage classroom...but I never saw one." Teacher B stated that "having prac experiences in a multiage environment [was important]. I actually felt a bit 'thrown in the deep end' but being in a team teaching situation made that easier." Teacher B further stated that "it can be difficult to find learning experiences that are going to cater for all of those children all of the time."
As middle phase teachers, however, both teachers felt inexperienced in knowing where the "average" student should be in each class level. Both teachers had completed a child development course as part of their university training. Both felt that they needed a starting point to give direction to their programming, although the main aim of multiage classes was to break down the normal age-grade barriers and, thus, to allow students to work at their own pace. Teacher A commented, "I was so new and so inexperienced. I was trying to work out where the average kid in each class was. It was too hard." This issue became more apparent when state benchmark testing was to be conducted in these classes. Both classes contained students from Years 5 and 7 who needed to be "prepared" for the benchmark state-mandated performance testing, as this type of testing was foreign to their everyday learning experiences. Both teachers acknowledged that there is also a wide range of abilities even in a single grade class but considered that the spread of 3 age levels made planning much more difficult.

In terms of support, Teacher A found that her perceived lack of support was having an adverse affect on her confidence as a teacher. "I don't think I could sustain this type of teaching for any period of time. I need to feel like I can be successful as a teacher. I think there were only 3 days out of the whole time I was there that I actually came home and said 'Yeah, I actually made a difference to those students.'" Teacher B was more philosophical about the discrepancies between her expectations and the realities of the classroom. She stated, "You have all these grand plans when you are at university…but it is more about prioritizing…giving them the skills in terms of the thinking skills and practical skills that will help them later on." She closed her comments by saying that "the sustainability of teaching in this context is totally dependent on your teaching partner."

**Conclusion**

Both teachers experienced most, if not all, of the stressors identified in the literature for beginning teachers. A beginning teacher in a traditional classroom may expect high workload stress, but it appeared that the diverse age range arising from the multiage groupings exacerbated this workload. Two or more factors that normally might be expected to complement each other and to help the beginning teacher (i.e., collaborative teams and open classrooms) created a greater feeling of being "out of control" for teacher A. These factors eroded her identity as a "bona fide" teacher and increased the likelihood of her leaving the profession early. Teacher A resigned from her 12-month contract shortly after being interviewed for this study and began to work as an occasional supply teacher.

The collegial support offered by way of mentors and administrative staff appeared to make a difference in how these two teachers coped with the many stresses placed upon them in their first teaching assignment. Whereas Teacher A felt she was a drain on teachers within her team and that administrative staff were unsupportive, Teacher B felt that her teaching partner was very supportive and that administrative staff were eager to offer professional development where needed. The resulting effect on these two teachers is that Teacher A is still only prepared to take on short-term contracts or relief teaching days as she feels "not capable of being responsible for everything in a classroom." However Teacher B renewed her 12-month contract and, after another 6 months in the classroom, took a teaching appointment overseas.
References


