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Author

Main, Katherine, Bryer, Fiona

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Experiences of Two Beginning Teachers in Multiage-Middle Phase Classrooms

Katherine Main & Fiona Bryer

Griffith University

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 combined multiage and middle school reforms. Each teacher was trained at a different university in Queensland and was employed in a different school. The main foci of this study were (a) how preservice training prepared each individual for this beginning experience and (b) what contextual differences helped or hindered their developing identity as teachers.

Beginning teachers

Beginning teachers develop their general conceptions of teaching and their specific ideas about what constitutes "good" instruction through a combination of theoretical experiences at university and practical experiences as student teachers. Individual teachers entering the profession use these experiences in order to forge an identity as a teacher and to form coping mechanisms. The realities of school culture and unanticipated role expectations may threaten and confuse this fledgling identity. The new workplace may place stress on a beginning teachers' confidence to cope with challenging students and challenging practice. If the beginning teachers' learned practices are not broad enough to meet the range of school contexts encountered in their initial postings (Hargreaves & Jacka, 1995), then the impact can be particularly strong.

Inconsistencies between expectations of the teaching experience and the realities of the actual experience may lead to frustration. When a beginning teachers' actual experience diverges greatly from anticipated experience, frustrations are greatest (Goddard & O'Brien, in press; McCann & Johannessen, 2004). Negative experiences in a first teaching position can taint an individual's overall view of teaching practice. Self-doubt and a perception that one is not a "bona fide" teacher may follow.

Beginning teachers leave the profession at an alarming rate (Goddard & O'Brien, 2004). Areas identified as greatest concern for beginning teachers, and those that have most impact on an individual's identity as a teacher, are (a) relationships with peers and students, (b) workload, (c) subject content knowledge, (d) assessment, and (e) a sense of control and autonomy (McCann & Johannessen, 2004). School practices that smooth the transition of a beginning teacher from one of "apprentice" to

"professional" are (a) support from a mutually agreed upon mentor, (b) support from administrative staff, (c) ongoing professional development, and (d) maintenance of a positive attitude (McCann & Johannessen, 2004).

Educational reforms

A plethora of educational reforms enable schools to offer many variations in class makeup, instructional models, school organisation, and staff configurations. The wide variety of educational opportunities offered by schools makes it difficult, if not impossible, to provide preservice experiences in all of the potential roles of beginning teachers. Beginning teachers, therefore, may lack practical skills necessary to feel successful in their new "professional" role. Furthermore, beginning teachers tend to internalise the ethos of their first teaching position as the "norm" (Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004) and try to make sense of, and transfer, the pedagogical tools gained in their preservice academic study and practicum settings to this new "setting specific" role.

Tensions raised by this mismatch can be productive if beginning teachers are able to make a "socially contextualised intellectual resolution" (Smagorinsky et al., 2004, p. 22) in which they recognise that (a) issues in this specific teaching situation should not be regarded as normative, (b) there are gaps in their training, and (c) different situations will develop different aspects of their teaching. However, the alternative position is that the beginning teacher who is entering this specific situation (e.g., a multiage-middle school classroom) applies a "relational accommodation" (Smagorinsky et al., 2004, p. 22) whereby they perceive that the difficulties encountered are due to personal gaps in their teaching. Such beginning teachers fail to recognise that there are areas for which their preservice training has not prepared them.

Multiaging

Multiaging reform developed from an organisational need to cope with situational imbalances in across-grade school enrolments into a cluster of philosophical principles. These principles are aimed to create a classroom community with strong teacher-student and student-student relationships, in which each student is viewed as an individual free of age/grade boundaries in more traditional settings (Wiles & Bondi, 2001). Within this principled view, multiaging involves a conscious decision to combine two or more year levels and to teach them as a heterogeneous group for the perceived educational and pedagogical benefits (Hoffman, 2002; Lloyd, 1999; Pratt, 1983; Mason & Burns, 1996).

Within this type of grouping, the youngest students may receive the most benefits. Positive effects reported for younger students in Years K-2 were not reported for older students in Years 5-6 (Veenman, 1996). In fact, a small negative effect was reported for older students, which may be attributed to the increased diversity within and between early adolescents (Keating, 2004). Differences in timing and onset of simultaneous changes in physical, intellectual, social, and emotional domains of development may increase the classroom heterogeneity of this age group between Years 5 to 9 (i.e., ages 10 to 14).

Teaching practices in multiage classrooms may increase workload (Miller, 1991), challenge traditional instructional methods (Mason & Burns, 1996), and contrast with

previous teacher training (Hoffman, 2003). Specific practices for multiage classes include across grade teaching and assessment, state mandated benchmarks to be met for each year level, student centred learning, cooperative learning, and collaborative teaching, and the development of strong teacher-student relationships (Miller, 1991; Hoffman, 2003; Lloyd, 1999). Increased curriculum preparation is needed to meet the diverse needs of a broader range of students, to handle increased classroom organisation, and deal with increased difficulty in reporting student outcomes across all domains.

The teaching skills to cater for a diverse group of students take time to develop. Surbeck (1992) concluded that teachers need at least 2 years' planning, observing, and working with various ages to be able to create the unique programs to meet the needs of students within multiage classes. This workload and its additional stress can adversely affect motivation and commitment to teaching (Veenman, 1996). Positive attitudes of teachers about the benefits of multiaging are directly related to their experience in this environment (Heins, Tichenor, Coggins, & Hutchinson, 2000). Student outcomes in a multiaged student grouping may be adversely affected by the relative inexperience of teachers.

Middle schooling

Introduction of a middle phase of schooling into western educational policy (Baer, 1999; Eccles, 2004) and to Australian policy specifically (McInerney, Simpson, & Dowson, 2003) has followed the empirical recognition of the mismatch between the developmental needs of young adolescents and traditional school settings. Schools need to offer a more developmentally appropriate educational experience for young adolescents that address the philosophical recognition of issues around alienation and underachievement. Australian policy acceptance of a middle phase of schooling "aims to change teaching and curriculum practices to better suit the needs and interests of young adolescents" (Chadbourne & Harslett, 1998, p. 2). Practices include 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, & Dellar, 2001; Braggett, 1997).

The middle phase of schooling in western societies crosses the traditional boundaries of secondary and primary education, but it cannot be assumed that teachers can work effectively in this new sector regardless of prior teacher training (Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 2002). According to the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (Reising, 2002), the success of middle schools requires specialised training of middle school teachers. Furthermore, the National Middle Schooling Association (2004) has warned that critical issues for staff development include "training in open-ended projects, compacting curriculum, performance-based assessment, differentiated assignments, and grading standards" (p. 1).

In Australia education, various models of middle schooling reform have arisen from the ad hoc, intuitive, and holistic way in which teachers have put policy into practice without either preservice training or knowledge of the overseas literature (Main & Bryer, 2003; O'Neill, 2001). Moreover, primary and secondary teachers have used their diverse

personal and sectorial understandings of middle schooling to generate practice to work to fill the context with appropriate practice and to fit practice into a middle school model. Traditional teacher training does not encompass many of the recommended practices for middle schooling such as collaborative practices (Chadbourne, 2004), integrated learning (curriculum correlation), and open-ended tasks for learning and assessment (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Aims of the study

This study focuses on 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. Middle schooling and multiaging are relatively new educational reforms in Queensland. The complex interrelationships between being "beginning teachers", "multiage teachers", and "middle school teachers" is explored.

Method

Two beginning teachers were interviewed after their initial 6 months in classrooms that combined multiage and middle school reforms. Each teacher was trained at a different university in Queensland and was employed in a different school. Both teachers were female, young, and competent in their academic and practicum record. 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.

Teacher A taught at a Brisbane metropolitan school that was running a "holistic reform model" middle school (see 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. 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 worked collaboratively.

Teacher B taught at an outer Brisbane school that has a school-wide multiage philosophy. This teacher went through an interview process. The school principal and her potential teaching partner interviewed her. Issues surrounding the workload and expectations of teachers working in a multiage classroom were discussed. 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 four days per week in the classroom and one day per week as a specialist in another part of the school. Teacher B and another teacher worked three days per week (two days each with the same teaching partner and one day together).

Results

Unstructured interviews of approximately 40 minutes duration were conducted separately with each participant. Interviews were conducted at the participants' homes. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Textual analysis involved

manual line-by-line coding of the word set for content themes and comments and automatic content analysis of word frequencies and co-occurrences using the Leximancer (Smith, 2004) software package. Both interviews focused on several issues but for different reasons. Analysis of data overlapping concerns for these teachers as "beginning teachers", "multiage teachers", and "middle school teachers." Data themes featured high workload, difficulties with age range and developmental variations among students, collaborative tasks, and difficulties with behaviour management.

Iterations = 1000

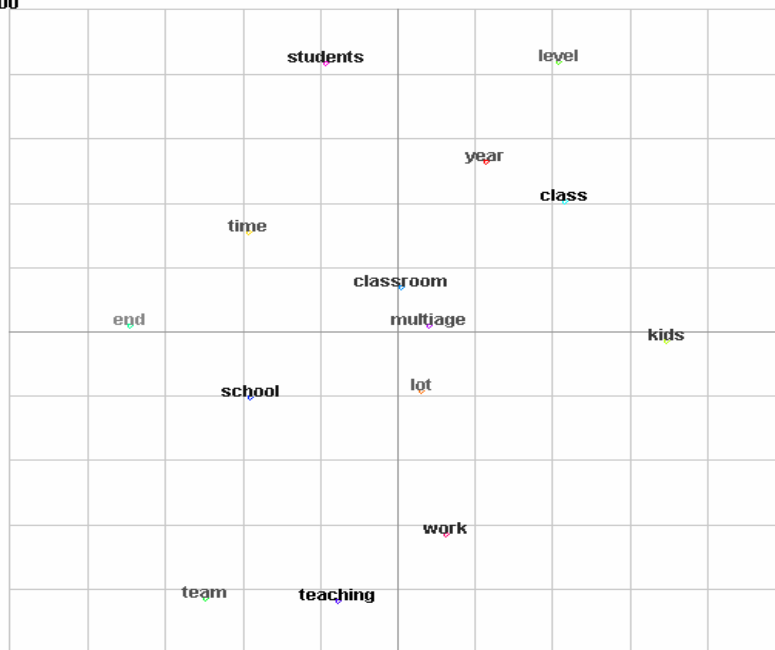


Figure 1
Combined word analysis from both interviews.

Individual content analysis for each teacher showed that, despite having the same number of students, the importance of issues for these teachers depended on the support networks available to them as they began their practice. 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. The core issue for both beginning teachers was the multiage classroom. The top left quadrant highlighted the issue of time; the top right quadrant highlighted the issue of the age or year level of students; the bottom left quadrant focused on the issue of teaming; and the bottom right quadrant reflected the work attitudes of the teachers (i.e., it was a lot of work).

As beginning teachers, both teachers felt 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. Teacher B furthered this view by saying 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 that "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 and considered that the experienced teachers in her teaching team were being "sucked dry" by the new teachers. To this end, she was reluctant to continually ask for help or guidance. Teacher B's experience was very different. Teacher B met her future teaching partner as part of an initial interview process. Teacher B was also assigned a mentor who was not her teaching partner that 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?' '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 stated that "it can be difficult to find learning experiences that are going to cater for all of those children all of the time." She added, "I probably put most of my planning time in the general day-to-day planning is in 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."

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 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 teachers acknowledged that there is also a wide range of abilities even in a single grade class but that the spread of 3 age levels made planning much more difficult.

Conclusion

Both teachers experienced most, if not all, of the stressors identified in the literature for beginning teachers. Their expectations were quite discrepant from the realities of their first teaching experience, in terms of workload and general preparedness for teaching full-time. A beginning teacher may expect high workload stress, but the diverse age range

arising from the multiage groupings exacerbated this workload. Entering a multiage/middle school class contribute to the difficulties experienced by these two beginning teachers. 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) create a greater feeling of being "out of control" for teacher A. These factors eroded her identity as a "bona fide" teacher. The difference in how these two teachers coped with the many stresses placed upon them in their first teaching assignment appears to be the collegial support offered by way of mentors and administrative staff.

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