

The Coalescence of Middle School and Multiage Philosophies

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Abstract

The experiences of teachers were examined during a year-long study into the formation and development of middle school teaching teams operating within purpose-built middle schools in Queensland. All schools in the study had adopted multiage classes within their middle schools. The study involved teaching staff from four middle school (Years 6-9) teaching teams. How these teachers coped with the complexities of multiage classroom practice and the specific pedagogical and curricula innovations involved in the organisational contexts of these newly formed middle schools has raised questions about teacher preparation, teacher induction, and support.

Introduction

In a reforming middle school model, the holistic changes model produces simultaneous changes to the physical structure or layout of the school, the program (including changes to pedagogy such as larger blocks of time, integrated curriculum, or teaching outside one's area of specialisation); and the complex mix of human relationships (i.e., interdisciplinary teams). Moreover, increasing use of multiage classes in middle schools has been reported by a number of researchers (Hoffman, 2002; Komer, 1999; Main, 2007; Main & Bryer, 2004; 2005). For teachers, theoretical experiences at university, their practical experiences in classrooms, and personal histories as a "student" have been used as the basis to form their individual philosophies of teaching and learning. However, for many teachers, the notions of middle schooling and multiage classes have been foreign to both their training and their personal experiences.

Main and Bryer (2004, 2005) noted that the underpinning philosophies of multiage education and middle schooling are very closely aligned (see Table 1). Both have aimed to teach all the developmental domains of the child by creating a synergy between the needs of the child and the curriculum offered. Where middle schools have incorporated multiage classes, there has been the expectation that this duality would enhance teachers' opportunities to cater for individual differences within their classrooms. However, many of the practices involved in teaching this age-group (young adolescents) and class configuration (multiage) have remained foreign to teachers' training.

Table 1

A comparison of multiage and middle school philosophies

(From "How Teachers Perceive Multiaging in a Middle School," by K Main & F. Bryer, F., 2005, *Journal of Multiage Education*, 1(2), p. 16.

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Multiage	Middle School
A classroom community in which deep relationships are formed between students, teachers, and parents	A classroom community in which deep relationships are formed between students, teachers, parents, and local communities
Teachers perceive each student as an individual and view themselves as facilitators.	Developmental differences in this age-group are catered for using appropriate pedagogy (teacher as facilitator), and negotiated curriculum (to meet students' individual needs).
Teachers facilitate positive group interaction, including designing and facilitating cooperative and collaborative group work.	Cooperative and collaborative learning are used extensively.
Students' interests are considered and integrated, and information is presented and skills are learned within meaningful contexts.	A negotiated curriculum is focused around real-life and life-like activities, making it meaningful for students.
Grouping can be done heterogeneously by age and other factors to promote cognitive and social growth and to reduce antisocial behaviour.	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).

Multiaging and middle schooling

Advocates for multiage classes have argued that "true" multiage classes are those classes formed through a conscious choice for the pedagogical benefits of multiaging including across-grade teaching and learning, student-centred classroom, collaborative teaching, and, development of strong teacher-student and student-student relationships (Miller, 1991; Hoffman, 2003; Lloyd, 1999). Furthermore, Gray and Feldman (2004) have recommended free age mixing between adolescents and younger children and argued that such interaction is crucial for physical, intellectual, and social/moral education of both younger children and adolescents. Therefore, it would seem reasonable that the use of multiage classes within middle schools would further enhance the educational experience for all students. However, Bryer and Main (2006) noted that in combination, multiaging and middle schooling are relatively new educational reforms in Queensland, and reforms that pose unique challenges to teachers' theoretical understandings and practical experiences.

In a case study on a purpose-built middle school, the intermingling of the philosophical innovations of multiage classes and middle schooling appeared to contribute to the difficulties and concerns experienced by some teachers (Main, 2003). Veenman (1996) reported positive effects for students in multiage classes for Years K-2, but not for older students (i.e., those in Years 5-6). Furthermore, although multiage classes were said to enhance students' affective domains, they were considered harder to teach and produced few academic benefits for young adolescents.

Challenges in teaching middle school and multiage classes

In a review of literature, Fletcher and Finger (2000) identified a number of advantages and disadvantages of multiage practices. Of the 18 advantages listed, only 4 reported positive effects for teachers (i.e., enhanced classroom organisation, improved classroom behaviour, promoted team teaching, and improved student/teacher relationships). However, of the 9 disadvantages listed, 8 were directly related to teachers (i.e., administrative problems, assessment difficulties, classroom organisation problems, individualised instruction difficulties, lack of resources, negative effects on teacher motivation, increased demands upon teachers, and increased preparation time). Teachers of multiage classes have reported their workload and stress to be greatly increased and, overall, to be less satisfied with their jobs than their counterparts in single-age classes (Mason & Burns, 1996; Veenman, 1996).

Lloyd (1997) reported that teaching within multiage

classes required the same teaching skills as those necessary for teaching single grade classes but to a greater degree. Specific skills in classroom organisation and routines, flexible pedagogy (i.e., use of a variety of group work configurations), and delivery of lessons (graded activities) were more acute in a multiage classes. Moreover, she argued that "teacher skill is crucial in the success of a composite class" (p. 251). However, Little (2001) reported that the knowledge required to work effectively within the multigrade reality appears to be "hidden", as it does not appear to be disseminated via the usual media (e.g., syllabus documents, textbooks on curriculum and teaching methods, and the content and pedagogy of teacher training available in universities). It should be noted that there is a distinct difference between multiage and composite classes. The impetus behind the creation of composite classes is a passive response to uneven class sizes across year levels whereas the creation of multiage classes is an active decision to combine year levels for the perceived pedagogical benefits.

The study

Data used in this paper have come from a year-long study into the formation and development of middle school teaching teams operating within purpose-built, middle schools in Queensland government schools. Those schools had implemented multiage classes within their middle schools for the perceived pedagogical benefits. The study involved teaching staff from four middle school (Years 6-9) teaching teams (N=24). Two teams were studied at one outer Brisbane high school and one team each from two P-12 schools. Participants were involved in a small group discussion at the beginning of the school year in 2005. A round of initial individual semi-structured interviews took place during Term 1 of 2005. The researcher was participant observer in pods at each school for one day each week for during Terms 1 and 3, 2005.

Their experience

Each school approached the implementation and operation of their multiage classes very differently. In Table 2 grade configurations and types of curriculum offered at each school are outlined.

All teachers working with multiage classes reported that their lack of experience and training in both multiage classes and middle schooling made working in this environment difficult. Teachers reported a lack of understanding and training in developing differentiated curriculum, open-ended tasks, and assessment. They also reported that performing these tasks either increased their workload or meant that they taught to the "middle." Teachers in Schools A and B reported a trial-and-error approach to curriculum development and classroom organisation. The naturally-occurring, developmental differences of young adolescents further

Table 2 Grade configuration and types of curriculum offered

Team	Grade Configuration	Type of curriculum	Streamed students	Team taught
School A, Team 1	7/8/9	New Basics / integrated	In literacy, numeracy, and science	No
School B, Team 1	8/9#	Integrated	No	Yes
School C, Team 1	7/8 and 9	Segmented/Parallel*	No	Yes
School C, Team 2	8 and 9	Segmented/Parallel	No	No

#The year following the study, School B reverted to single year-level classes within the middle school.

*In parallel curriculum, topics are aligned and taught in different subjects at the same time.

exacerbated the wider range of ages and abilities of students within multiage classes. exacerbated the wider range of ages and abilities of students within multiage classes. All teachers working with multiage classes reported that their lack of experience and training in both multiage classes and middle schooling made working in this environment difficult. Teachers reported a lack of understanding and training in developing differentiated curriculum, open-ended tasks, and assessment. They also reported that performing these tasks either increased their workload or meant that they taught to the "middle." Teachers in Schools A and B reported a trial-and-error approach to curriculum development and classroom organisation. The naturally-occurring, developmental differences of young adolescents further exacerbated the wider range of ages and abilities of students within multiage classes.

Teachers spoke about the benefits of working in middle years' teams but reported not being "trained" to work effectively in teams. Moreover, all teams experienced changes in core teaching staff throughout the year. The instability of staffing placed added pressure on existing staff to provide on-the-job training for new staff, again adding to their workload. All teams were observed to stagnate: Team members either were unable to manage conflict effectively or were required to form and reform their team throughout the year as team members changed. Teachers in all schools reported difficulties with behaviour management. Furthermore, external pressures such as preparing students for State mandated testing were seen to actively and continually "divide" classes into "year" levels.

The experiences of teachers in this study have raised questions about combining the philosophies of multiage classes and middle schooling. It has been argued that the benefits of multiage classes

diminish with older age groups (i.e., young adolescents). Thus, a question arises as to whether the affective benefits of multiage classes in middle schools outweigh the curricula and pedagogical challenges that have been reported for teachers working within these classes? Moreover, could the affective benefits of multiage classes be realised through the implementation of a middle schooling philosophy alone? Furthermore, when multiage classes are implemented in middle schools, then the nature of appropriate practices needs to be clarified. If multiage practice is mismatched with the middle school setting, then the nature of the mismatch needs to be identified. Before preservice and inservice training and ongoing administrative support can be addressed, these issues need to be clarified. ■

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