

# **OPENING THE DOOR ON BEST PRACTICE: CONTRASTING TEACHING STYLES IN THE MULTIGRADE CLASSROOM**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper examines two case studies of multigrade teachers, and focuses on the diverse styles of these different teachers. It questions what, given this diversity, are the critical issues in multigrade teaching, and whether it is possible to identify 'best practice' in the multigrade classroom. In addition this paper attempts to indicate the necessary skills which should be developed in preservice education for teaching in multigrade classrooms.

## **A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Number of multigrade classes**

The number of multigrade classes throughout Australia represents a large proportion of the education population. In 1990, 34% of Australia's 7,000 schools had student enrolments under 100, indicating the need for multigrade classrooms (Schools Council, 1992). Recent research has confirmed that a high incidence of multigrade classrooms exist. In a Queensland survey Marland *et al.*, (1994) reported that in 1019 Queensland schools there were 2349 multigrade classes. A report on primary schools in New South Wales (Department of Education, 1989) showed that, in July 1988, there were about 3,500 multigrade classrooms in public schools in that State.

### **Multigrade Teachers**

A small number of rural school studies have reported on the needs, problems and challenges facing teachers in such schools. Some of the findings refer to the multigrade classroom situations in which many rural teachers work. Cross (1987) reported that over half of the 70 rural school teachers contacted in a British Columbian survey perceived multigrade teaching as more difficult than teaching a single-grade. He further reported that the main factors seen as contributing to this perceived greater difficulty were '... (1) the amount of planning required; (2) planning science and social studies without repetition; (3) time for assisting individual children; (4) maintaining pupil interest- and (5) individual reading (p 42). Interviews with 32 of the same teachers revealed that most agreed that student teachers needed a practicum in a multigrade classroom. Other characteristics of multigrade classrooms for which they believed teachers needed preparation included "...curriculum for all grades; classroom scheduling and organisation; individualised instruction, and collecting a wide range of resources and materials' (Bandy, 1980, p 85).

Following a survey of all one- and two-teacher schools in New South Wales in 1984, Spindler (1995/6) reported that the major needs of these teachers were in the areas of programming (timetabling); planning learning experiences for, and appropriate management of, groups in the classroom, and evaluation of students, programs and themselves.

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## **Learning outcomes**

There is no evidence, from the research conducted, that learning outcomes are enhanced in the multigrade classroom. However, studies indicate that students become better equipped in terms of social skills and attitudes to schools and teachers, (Ford, 1977; Pratt, 1986; Roseth, 1989).

## **Teacher's knowledge and skills**

One study has been carried out which documents the implicit knowledge of twelve teachers identified as outstanding multigrade teachers (Phillips, Watson, & Wille, 1993). Six areas of teacher knowledge which this study identified were management, personalisation, class climate, teaching strategy, curriculum and teaching contexts. These teachers showed high levels of skill in these areas. They established classroom efficient routines, and used group work skilfully to cater for individual difference. They sometimes taught the same lesson content to the whole class but made different process demands suitable to different individuals and groups (pp 27-28). Much of the conventional wisdom on multigrade teaching focuses on scheduling or timetabling, organisation and management, teaching techniques including grouping methods, student assessment and curriculum. (Phillips, Watson and Wille, 1993).

## **Teacher Preparation**

Many of the new appointees to rural schools experience difficulty in adapting to the unfamiliar environment in terms of climate, socio-economics and community values and attitudes and the professional requirements linked with teaching in a small multi-grade setting. Cross et al states that the new teacher often is not sensitized to rural living and needs the opportunity to pursue this before taking a rural appointment. "Students preparing to teach in rural schools should receive professional preparation specifically designed for this challenging career. This specially designed segment of their teacher preparation program should include on campus and off campus experiences designed specifically to meet the challenges of teaching in a rural school" (Surwill, 1990, p7).

A number of government reports in the last ten years have highlighted the need to sensitize teachers to the culture and conditions associated with service in remote schools. "More should be done to prepare and assist teachers for teaching in these areas of the state, and in promoting the benefits of teaching in Western Queensland" (Board of Teacher Registration, 1988, p87). The most useful activity recommended is practical experience in a rural setting, providing background information for preservice teachers. Lake (1985, p118) states that preservice courses should attempt to "minimize the risk of professional and social estrangement and enable teachers to more effectively contribute to the Teaming experiences of rural children".

In 1987, the Commonwealth Schools Commission produced a report 'Schooling in Rural Australia'. This report recognized the need to encourage recognition of a rural culture and rural views on schooling by preservice teacher preparation courses. The report identifies the need for preservice teachers to experience and observe teaching strategies and processes appropriate to rural schools.

The 1994 report *Schooling in Rural Western Australia* also discussed preservice teacher preparation. The report recommended that preservice courses address specific professional and non-professional needs of rural teachers and that preservice teachers need to complete extended teaching practice in rural schools.

Many higher education institutions have started to recognize this need and have begun to incorporate some elements of preparation for rural teaching in preservice teacher preparation. Clarke (1990, p15) states "teacher graduates require at minimum it seems, an awareness of community, local expectations and the creative adaptation of resources".

King's recent study (1994) sought to investigate the perceptions of preservice teachers to teaching in a rural setting and to examine the appropriateness of practical experience in a rural setting. The

report states that practical experience in a rural setting is one stage in the development of positive attitudes to teaching in rural schools and assists in the sensitizing of teachers to the culture and conditions associated with service in remote schools. It is important to maintain these experiences within the full teacher preparation course to allow comparison and definition. Opportunities also need to be provided for preservice teachers to work in partnership with multigrade teachers.

Higgins in his monograph *Rural Difference: A Challenge for Beginning Teachers* supports many of the issues raised in this paper. He indicates a strong need for teachers anticipating rural postings to receive an appropriate preparation. This preparation must include preparation and practical experience in multigrade settings. "Given that many teachers do begin their careers in the rural context, much more attention should be paid to teaching in rural areas." (Higgins, 1993, p71)

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

The final stage of an investigation into multigrade teaching<sup>1</sup> involved six case studies of teachers who had been identified as experienced multigrade teachers. The equivalent of five half-hour interviews were conducted with each teacher over a period of one month and concept mapping strategies were included in the process to assist each teacher to uncover their particular skills and knowledge. Interviews were held on a one to one basis either at the school or by telephone.

Both teachers interviewed had considerable teaching experience in a multigrade setting and at the time of the interviews were each working in a two teacher school in south-east Queensland. One was a teaching Principal, the other a classroom teacher, and both were responsible for the years 1 to 3 age groups.

The schools were located in agricultural areas in small rural communities. Both teachers had ready access to a larger town, although one was over an hour's drive away. One teacher had the added facet of a high percentage (75%) of multicultural children in her class.

## **THE COMPARATIVE TEACHING STYLES OF TWO MULTIGRADE TEACHERS**

### **The role of the teacher/attributes**

Gay and Hannah (synonyms) brought different philosophies to their teaching role in the multigrade classroom. Gay believed the teacher was the centre of everything in the classroom, helping promote talking and discussion in which pupil involvement was encouraged. For Hannah, however, the students were the central focus in a multigrade classroom, with her role being that of facilitator, encouraging fluent thinkers and allowing the learner time for exploration and reflection.

Hannah concentrated on the 'big picture' and did not concern herself with minor details. She felt that personality type had a great bearing on the achievement of a successful learning activity in a multigrade classroom as the teachers needed to be transformative in their way of thinking, not autocratic or transactional. This provided a creative environment in which trust, choice and freedom thrived and allowed students room to question and demonstrate initiative. There was a need to look beyond the daily routine; the students should have ownership, take responsibility for consequences and demonstrate directed learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Marland, P., Gibson, I. Gibson, K., King, S., Lester, N. and Young, P. (1994)  
"Effective Multigrade Teaching: An Exploratory Study" *Knowledge and Competence for Beginning Teaching, Report of a policy development initiative*. Board of Teacher Registration, Qld.

Gay, on the other hand, rarely negotiated with the children. She believed children loved routine, and that in the multigrade classroom "structure is survival" for the teacher. She indicated the skills of time management, communication and organisation as crucial to the success of the teacher. Gay also believed that the more mature teacher coped better with multigrade teaching, bringing life experiences and self-reliance to what is usually an isolated situation. A positive attitude, combined with self reliance and multi-abilities, also contributed to success in the multigrade classroom.

Both teachers believed their teaching strategies were linked to their knowledge of the individual child and their intuitive understanding of student responses to any learning situation. Gay stated that an awareness of each student's ability was crucial for success in the multigrade classroom and it was important that she understood the capabilities of each child she dealt with. Hannah also believed that multigrade teachers had to focus very much more on the learning styles of each child than a single grade teacher, with consideration being taken of individual differences and prior experiences.

Hannah and Gay agreed that flexibility and adaptability were important teacher attributes in the multigrade classroom.

### **Planning and preparation**

Hannah and Gay both indicated that planning, along with prior knowledge of the curriculum and the children, was a vital component of effective multigrade teaching. However, their approach to planning was vastly different.

Planning and preparation were identified by Gay as being crucial for teaching in the multigrade classroom. It was important to be organised and have a written weekly plan, ensuring that all aspects of the curriculum were covered. Time was a main problem, as Gay planned each level separately, and whenever possible she integrated content for each year level. Her weekly timetable was colour coded, linking subjects with resources. She also used the timetable as a checklist, where activities or students who needed special attention were noted so that they could be attended to on a daily basis.

Hannah discussed the elements of planning from a different perspective. There was a need for all planning to reflect a learner-centred approach, utilising the teacher's knowledge of the students fully. The planning would include evidence of the prior knowledge of each individual, effective use of all resources and reflect local knowledge and requirements. Hannah commenced her planning by identifying the broad concepts to be covered, identifying generalisations which could be taught across all levels in the classroom. The next stage was to choose activities from each year level and identify the specific information that needed to be covered, which was then summarised on a term overview. Preparation of daily/weekly plans were then prepared from the term overview.

Both teachers discussed the need to review weekly/daily plans to incorporate specific events or occurrences and to make changes where appropriate.

One key to a successful multigrade classroom identified by Hannah was the need to make explicit connections belonging to knowledge, skills and processes. Awareness of prior knowledge, as well as the knowledge of the children's developmental stages, helped the teacher make the appropriate connections and therefore prepare a successful learning episode.

Both teachers avoided 'themes' in their classroom. Hannah believed that the teacher should choose an appropriate topic or subject as the vehicle for delivery, rather than the subject matter driving the learning activity. Gay felt that in the multigrade situation she could not do justice to all aspects of the curriculum if theme work was constantly used, as it was easy to lose sight of the basic objectives.

## Strategies and Management

Both Hannah and Gay discussed the need to encourage interaction and cooperation between all year levels. It was important to understand the power of group work and utilise strategies to facilitate learning in this way.

Gay particularly encouraged interaction between the different levels, and used the good role models in the upper years to reinforce the learning process. She acknowledged that she had students who progressed through the year levels quicker than they may have done in a single year situation, because they were challenged by concepts which they would not be exposed to in the single year classroom. In the multigrade situation Gay believed that each year level was influenced by the others, the younger students watching and learning from the older students. Her aim was to create a dynamic learning process whereby the three year levels interact with each other, each being stimulated and motivated by the wish to either 'catch up' on the upper year levels, or avoid being overtaken by younger students. Thus the impetus was created to keep up and overtake those ahead. Gay maintained that this competitive strategy made the children extremely motivated and also deflected potential management problems.

"...if they're not paying attention and going to miss what's going on then they're not going to be the ones going on to the next level ... the children are very aware of their position in class."

Hannah believed that a key factor in encouraging active learning in the multigrade setting was to prepare activities at the different levels of Bloom's taxonomy. By grouping children and encouraging them to participate students became active and involved and that was where the power of the dynamics of the group across those levels of thinking were really challenged. Shared learning had to be a collaborative effort, and the teacher had to understand the power of group work and how it could be used to advantage. Utilising peer tutoring and peer grouping as a strategy to aid accelerated learning were essential strategies for the multigrade teacher.

Both teachers encouraged the students to be independent. Hannah encouraged a co-operative learning environment whereby the teacher directed a situation where the students have ownership of responsibility and consequences. Independence was a trait which Gay strongly encouraged in the students, and the older students especially were relied upon to undertake various learning activities without supervision, releasing her to work with the less independent workers. Gay believed it was her job to prepare the students for their transition to the senior years; responsibility, reliability and independence all helped achieve this.

Hannah and Gay both tried to 'capture every moment' and be as flexible and creative as possible. Interruptions to the routine had to be catered for and advantage taken of any side issue which could be seized upon to enhance a learning situation.

## CRITICAL ISSUES IN MULTIGRADE TEACHING

### Is there a typical multigrade teacher?

While Gay conceded there were many excellent new teachers, she felt that maturity and experience were important attributes in the multigrade classroom. To be able to teach several year levels competently was an acquired knowledge, it "didn't come out of a book (and) you couldn't replace experience."

Gay indicated that multigrade teaching took more effort and required a dedication and desire for success. Multigrade teachers had to be 'Jacks of all trades' and exhibit

self reliance as there was little or no school infrastructure to assist; they had to utilise what was available and possess good organisational skills, especially when planning their time.

An intimate knowledge of students was also important and was directly linked to their choice of suitable strategies in the multigrade classroom. Other important attributes for multigrade teachers were good communication skills, flexibility and accountability.

Hannah supported this idea, believing that the teacher required a knowledge of the curriculum linked with a knowledge of the needs of the learner and the ability to make explicit connections in planning learning outcomes.

Hannah supported the belief that multigrade teachers needed to be creative in their approach to learning activities, flexible and responsive to children's needs.

"You need to be very fluent and logical and know how to manage to do all of those things on the run, as well as capture every moment."

From an examination of the discussions with these two effective multigrade teachers there appeared to be no 'typical' effective multigrade teacher other than a commitment and enthusiasm for the task and the need to meet the needs of each individual in the class.

### **What is 'best practice' in the multigrade classroom?**

Gay listed planning and preparation as a high priority in her professional practice, and the development of her timetable was closely linked to her knowledge of students. Her use of time was critical and she carefully utilised this both in and out of school hours (undertaking preparation and evaluation, writing up homework books, etc.).

Her multigrade classroom fostered and encouraged natural competitiveness between the year levels which motivated learning and diminished any management problems that may arise. Learning strategies were structured and a routine established that students were comfortable with; she used tactile 'hands on' learning situations wherever possible. A thorough knowledge of the curriculum was also critical to success in the multigrade classroom.

Hannah considered that all learning activities should be centred around the child being able to participate and achieve. Best practice in a multigrade setting revolved around this tenet, rather than a proposed level of achievement for a particular year. By working from the learner Hannah believed that the teacher was able to cater for individual differences and their prior experiences.

Hannah also believed that a strength of the multigrade classroom is the process of collaborative learning. For this to be achieved the teacher needed to consider various models and approaches to group work and to provide the skills and opportunities for collaborative decision making and social skilling. The multigrade teacher should understand the power of group work and how to use it advantageously. Utilising peer tutoring and peer grouping as a strategy to aid accelerated learning were essential strategies for the multigrade teacher. Therefore, best practice in the multigrade situation should allow many variations of group work.

### **Is there evidence to indicate that preservice preparation should include skills for teaching in a multigrade classroom?**

Both Gay and Hannah confirm the trends which emerge from the literature, indicating the need for a thorough knowledge of the curriculum and the individual learners in the classroom. Preservice teachers require skills to identify the developmental and competency levels of the children in their classroom, to recognise prior learning and acquire an awareness of curriculum across grades rather than separate packages of content knowledge.

It is clear that the skills to combine this knowledge into effective planning and learning activities need to be addressed in preservice courses. Preservice teachers must be presented with the opportunity to observe effective multigrade teachers and practice multigrade skills in an educational setting if they are to become effective multigrade teachers. Much of the literature reviewed supports the notion of providing opportunities for preservice teachers to observe, interact and participate in the professional activity of multigrade settings.

Preservice courses for teaching in multigrade situations should also include grouping techniques and information on the many variations and uses of grouping. The opportunity to practice and experiment in a practical setting with a multigrade group is highly desirable. Both Gay and Hannah indicated that the strengths of a multigrade teacher were experience, the opportunity to experiment and flexibility. If these skills and opportunities are built into a preservice course, teachers newly appointed to multigrade classrooms may have more initial success and confidence in their own ability and truly demonstrate the skills of an effective multigrade teacher.

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