

PROVIDING
CHALLENGING
LEARNING
ENVIRONMENTS

A paper presented by

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at the

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Conference**

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Profile - Jane Hogben

Jane Hogben is an early childhood teacher at Glenelg Junior Primary School in Adelaide, South Australia, and is currently teaching a multi-age class of five and six-year-olds.

She trained as a junior primary teacher and later did preschool training. Although she has spent the major part of her career in schools she has also worked in an advisory role as a preschool adviser and preparing resource materials for teachers. She is a co-author of the South Australian Education Department's curriculum resource *Learning in Early Childhood--What Does it Mean in Practice?* In June this year she and a colleague were invited to work in an advisory capacity in Western Australia with teachers in schools involved in the Flexibility in Schooling: Multi-age Grouping project being run by the Western Australia Education Department (see *Every Child*, Spring 1994).

Multi-age grouping is already well-established in many schools in South Australia and Jane has been teaching in multi-age classrooms since she first began teaching. 'It just happened that the schools that I've taught in all provided for multi-age groups. Consequently I've taught a multi-age group in every teaching situation I've ever been in. I later opted for that structure because I really enjoyed working that way.'

Jane believes the advantages for children, parents, teachers and schools are many. 'New children enter an already cohesive group of children who are familiar with class expectations and routine. The already settled children are excellent models for the beginners, both socially and in all other areas. There is continuity of learning and teachers can build positive and strong relationships with children and families over a two- or three-year period.'

Multi-age grouping enables teachers to focus on individuals and to encourage children to work at their own level. Many children can work in groups or independently, and children of different ages can learn from each other. In doing so they develop tolerance and understanding from each other as learners. The strategy is also beneficial for the school with regard to placement of children. 'It can help with the provision of more equitable class sizes says Jane. 'You don't have one class with 30-odd and another class with 20.'

Multiage - Why and How?

- Section 1 -

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will provide an insight into multiage grouping. I will look at the learning principles which underpin good practice. I will identify the features of an effective multiage program. I will look at the role of the teacher in multiage settings and I will present some current practices in South Australia with regard to multiage grouping. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of some challenges facing early childhood educators.

DEFINITION

It may be useful to state my definition for multiage grouping.

Multiage grouping is an organisational structure where children of differing ages are grouped together in classes.

In junior primary schools and primary schools, names used to describe these class arrangements are - multiage groups, composite classes, vertical groups, and family groups.

I use the term "multiage group" to refer to any of the above.

ADVANTAGES OF MULTIAGE GROUPING

Multiage grouping provides opportunities for children of differing ages to work together and to learn from each other. This helps develop tolerance and understanding of each other as learners. It provides opportunities for children to work at their

own rate, experience success and acknowledge the success of others. New entrants have the advantage of entering an already cohesive group of children who are familiar with class expectations and routines. These settled children provide excellent role models for the beginners both socially and in all areas of learning and classroom organisation.

Multiage grouping helps build long term relationships between teacher, children and parents when the children stay with the same class and the same teacher for several years. Teachers have the advantage of watching children develop over several years. At the start of a new school year the teacher continues on with the program for a large group of children. There is no time lost in getting to know children and this helps to provide continuity of learning.

The range of skills and abilities in a multiage class enables the teacher to work easily with individuals or small groups as there are already children who can work independently and with others. This structure encourages the teacher to focus on individuals and to support children in working at their own level.

This organisational strategy helps school management by enabling a wider option of classes so that placement of individual children and teachers can be matched, thus minimising and sharing behaviour management problems. In addition, this strategy enables equitable class sizes and a more equitable distribution of boys and girls across classes. It also supports the integration of children with identified needs through catering for children at all stages of development.

Issues and Challenges

- Section 6 -

Finally, I'd like to highlight some issues and challenges facing early childhood educators in general, and those in multiage classes in particular.

I believe there are many issues facing early childhood educators today. These include issues such as providing programs which will improve the educational outcomes for a wide range of groups within an early childhood setting, including children with disabilities and children with high intellectual potential. (In 1996, all South Australia schools will be expected to implement a new policy for students with high intellectual potential, including the possibility of early entry for some 4 year olds.)

We need to provide programs for children who are recognised as benefiting least from schooling, particularly children living in poverty and Aboriginal children.

Ensuring practice is inclusive of all groups and individuals will be a continuing challenge.

Using the nationally developed curriculum Statements and Profiles will require teachers to think about appropriate curriculum provision in early childhood and what a broad and balanced program might look like.

Teachers working in multiage settings will need to continue to question and examine practices, ensuring that the wide age range of children is really catered for and that curriculum offerings are not compromised. We will need to ensure that a child's class placements are "tracked" over time so that a child does not spend every year as the youngest or oldest in a class, or does not spend 3 years with a teacher who finds teaching in a multiage structure difficult.

We will have to cope with issues of Performance Management, accountability, improving methods of monitoring achievement, the impact of

technology in schools and South Australia now has a Quality Assurance Unit which is developing a Quality Assurance Framework to assist schools with this.

There will be issues related to ensuring continuity between settings so that we can make it possible for children to have the smoothest possible "ride" through the system.

It will be important that, as teachers, we are able to identify the things worth keeping in early childhood education, as well as accepting new challenges. We will need to be able to articulate a well-reasoned philosophy of early childhood education and be advocates for the needs of young children. We will need to be aware of current early childhood research and how to incorporate changes in our practice into programs.

We talk about excellence in early childhood education. Maybe our greatest challenge will be in determining what excellence looks like and then providing programs which ensure it occurs.

I think we will have plenty to keep us occupied!

REFERENCES:

Education Department of South Australia. (1991) *Multiage Groups - A Teaching/Learning Perspective*. Windows on Practice Publication.

Education Department of South Australia. (1991) *The First Years of School*, Brochure.

Hogben, J. & Wasley, D. (1989) *Learning in Early Childhood - What does it mean in practice?* Education Department of South Australia.

Learning

- Section 2 -

Placing children in a multiage setting does not ensure that they will be in a challenging learning environment. Underpinning good practice in multiage classrooms are beliefs about learning, or learning principles, which influence the type of program provided in the multiage setting. In fact, underpinning any classroom practice is a set of beliefs about learning.

I believe understanding how children learn is fundamental to our practice. What we

believe about how children learn will be indicated by what happens in our program. It is useful to regularly revisit and rethink our beliefs about learning and how these are translated into practice, as this provides the basis upon which any program develops.

I'd like to look now at the learning principles set out in the South Australia curriculum guide, *"Learning in Early Childhood - What does it mean in practice?"*.

◆ Children learn *through their senses*. Children develop concepts through many multisensory experiences.

◆ *Self-esteem* influences learning. Acknowledging children's diversity of experiences and abilities is important. A positive self-image enables children to feel confident in new situations.

◆ *Language* is important to learning. By thinking and talking, children make sense of their experiences and incorporate new ideas with existing knowledge.

◆ *Motivation* affects learning. Motivation derives from a sense of purpose. Children are more likely to learn and remember when they are interested and the experience is relevant.

◆ *Self-discovery* benefits learning. Exploration of materials and a variety of media allows children to discover properties and relationships through trial and error.

◆ Children need to experience *success*. Success will be more likely if children can

participate at their own level of ability, in challenging learning situations.

◆ *Evaluation by self and others* contributes to learning. Children better understand their learning processes and experience satisfaction when they evaluate their achievements. Children respond to encouragement and recognition from peers and adults.

◆ *Cooperation* assists learning. Children learn from each other. When cooperative interactions are encouraged, children refine their language and thinking and develop positive relationships.

◆ *Learning styles* influence learning. Children learn in different ways due to personal preference and the nature of the task. The styles may range from independent to dependent, impulsive to reflective, cautious to adventurous, individual to group.

◆ Learning is influenced by the *quality of the interactive role of the adult*.

Hogben, J. & Wasley, D. (1989, p.20)

Each of these principles has implications for our practice. What will our practice look like if these principles are taken into consideration?

Let's move one step further to a little more detail. In what ways does our practice enhance children's learning?

Are children given time and opportunity to:

- ◆ develop skills in situations which have meaning and purpose
- ◆ talk with others about their thinking and about what they are doing
- ◆ find answers to their own questions and pursue their own interests
- ◆ build on what they already know or can do
- ◆ resolve problems, defeats and frustrations
- ◆ develop in an environment which positively reinforces their learning

- ◆ have direct experiences, using their senses
- ◆ learn from others who have different experiences and knowledge
- ◆ be supported by caring adults with realistic expectations who value what the children are doing
- ◆ make decisions, have real choices and put them into effect
- ◆ take risks and make errors which are accepted as essential to learning
- ◆ have access to developmentally appropriate resources
- ◆ observe, discover, experiment, practise, discuss, complete and share
- ◆ be challenged by experiences which are new and varied
- ◆ successfully achieve, repeat and make associations
- ◆ talk about how they learn?

Hogben, J. & Wasley, D. (1989, p.21)

The learning principles and the ways children learn best are taken into account when planning a program.

Transition programs from preschool to school may include:

- ◆ pre-entry visits of preschools to school
- ◆ exchange visits by groups of children
- ◆ home visits by teachers
- ◆ exchange of teaching staff
- ◆ children contacting and welcoming new children
- ◆ liaison with parents
- ◆ principal liaison with feeder preschools

With regard to progression, children may be in a variety of class structures while in junior primary and primary school. They may have the same teacher for 2 or 3 years or a different one each year. They may move from a multiage group to a single age group class. Years 2/3 teachers generally plan transition activities to ensure smooth transition from junior primary to primary situations. (Year 3 classes will always have a wide age range.)

Current Practices in South Australia

- Section 5 -

Before I conclude I would like to outline briefly current multiage practices in South Australia in order to explain the context in which I operate.

In South Australia, as in the rest of Australia, children are not required to start formal schooling until age 6, when it is compulsory. Many children attend preschool as a 4 year old, mostly in half-day sessions. (Almost every child in the state attends preschool.) At age 5, children may attend school. The admission policy varies from school to school, but there **must be at least four entry times per year**, i.e. at least once per term. Children starting school at age 5 will have between 10 - 13 terms in junior primary school, depending on their entry time.

In practice, admission procedures may look like this:

- ◆ children may enter on their fifth birthday, or on the first Monday following their fifth birthday or at the beginning of each month;

OR

- ◆ children may enter twice per term, e.g. Week 1 and Week 6, or they may enter at the beginning of each term, 4 times per year (this is the minimum).

It is important to note that the terms Reception, Year 1, Year 2 do not necessarily refer to the level of work or stage of development of a child, but to the length of time the child has been at school.

To cater for children entering school at different times during the year, various class structures operate in the schools. These may include:

- ◆ single reception classes of 5 year olds
- ◆ reception/year 1 classes (5 - 6 year olds)
- ◆ reception/year 1/year 2 classes (5, 6, 7, 8 year olds)
- ◆ years 1 and 2 classes
- ◆ years 2 and 3 classes

as well as single year level classes.

In some schools, classes start small and build up during the year as the "receptions" enter. Children may stay with the same teacher for 1, 2 or 3 years. Many schools provide a range of class structures within a school to satisfy needs of children, parents and teachers.

The class structures in a school may be influenced by:

- ◆ educational philosophy
- ◆ teacher skill
- ◆ teacher request (not all teachers like working with multiage groups)
- ◆ parent request
- ◆ numbers of children

All schools develop policies with regard to **transition and progression**.

Features of an Effective Program

- Section 3 -

I'd like to look now at the features of an effective program which are promoted in *Learning in Early Childhood - What does it mean in practice?*. These features should be present in a multiage classroom:

FEATURES OF AN EFFECTIVE PROGRAM

Good relationships
The child is important
Content - knowledge, skills and attitudes
Family involvement
Equity
A well-planned environment
Real-life experiences
Child participation
Play
Balance
Choice
Flexibility
Challenge

Hogben, J. & Wasley, D. (1989)

(1) *Good relationships*

Sound interpersonal relationships are essential to the success of any program. The relationship which develops between teacher, child and parent is a crucial factor in determining a child's success at school.

When this feature is evident we will see adults who relate to each other and to children with genuine care and understanding and who positively influence the attitudes and feelings of everyone involved in the program. Plenty of occasions will be provided for children and adults to talk with and to each other and in small groups. The contributions of the

participants in the program will be appreciated and their ideas will be sought and used. Children will be making friends, talking, sharing materials and ideas, and showing consideration towards others. A "buddy" system may operate where older children can support the younger ones. Individuals and groups will be receiving constructive feedback about their learning.

Multiage grouping promotes and supports the development of good relationships through continuity for the teacher, children and parents. Parents and teachers can build effective long term partnerships which support children's learning.

(2) *The child is important*

The focus of early childhood education is the child within the learning program. The child is central to what is being planned, implemented and evaluated.

If we believe this, then we will not expect the child to fit into the school, but rather that the school will get ready for the child. The structure of multiage grouping assists us to do this.

When this feature is evident we will see recognition by the teacher of the particular capabilities and prior knowledge which a child brings with them to school. Children will be exploring, investigating, thinking and communicating. The teacher will be finding out what a child knows, can do and understands and will be using this information to inform planning.

Teachers will be acknowledging children as individuals rather than as belonging to particular year level groups. They will be supporting the integration of children with learning difficulties, non-English speaking children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with disabilities, and children with gifts and talents, through catering for children at all stages of development.

Children will be showing independence, self discipline and responsibility for their learning. They will be setting goals and working towards achieving them. They will be encouraged to achieve their personal best, rather than being compared with the achievement of their age peers.

The classroom will reflect and value the diversity of children's abilities, as shown in their displayed paintings, drawings, writing, models, etc. Copies of identical art work will not be seen. There will be dates on all children's work samples so that progress can be evaluated over time. There will be records, including actual work samples, which show the child's progress, achievements and participation in activities.

Each child will feel important and worthwhile.

(3) Content - knowledge, skills and attitudes

Teachers expect children to gain specific knowledge, skills and attitudes through their participation in the program. The knowledge, skills and attitudes which are the basis for future learning are acquired through the balanced content of activities and the quality of the interactions.

When this feature is evident we will see teachers using in depth curriculum

knowledge to plan learning activities for children. Children will be discussing ideas and reflecting on experiences and situations. They will be practising skills in relevant situations such as quiet reading. Open-ended tasks which encourage children to maximise their knowledge and skills will be in use.

Explicit teaching, including explanations, modelling, demonstrations and expectations, will guide children, e.g. in how to work in groups, or in how to use a recount in writing.

There will be a written program which details program ideas and anticipated learning outcomes. In other words, there will be evidence of purpose in program planning. In South Australia at present we would expect teachers to be programming, using the nationally developed Statements and Profiles in all areas of study.

(4) Family involvement

The family is the immediate and continuing source of security, identity, stability and learning for young children. An effective program offers a variety of ways in which parents can share and gain information about their child, and support their child's education.

When this feature is evident we will see teacher and parent communicating with each other, in a variety of ways, about the child's development and progress. They will share newsletters about the class program, two-way communication books, videos of the class in action, classroom visiting, "Take Home" or "Year" Books, and parent, teacher, child discussions (perhaps rather than parent interviews).

Role of the Teacher

- Section 4 -

The person who takes responsibility for the program, taking the learning principles into account and developing the features of an effective program is the teacher. Let's look at the role of the teacher in a multiage setting, keeping in mind that this is not really exclusive to multiage settings.

Quality education is the outcome of sound teaching practice where teachers:

- ◆ view learning as a lifelong (continuous) process
- ◆ have an indepth knowledge and understanding of child development and curriculum
- ◆ recognise that the quality of the teacher - student relationship is paramount to effective learning
- ◆ acknowledge parents as partners in the education of their children and value their opinions and skills
- ◆ focus on the learning of the individual child, identifying children's abilities and catering for individual differences and learning styles
- ◆ employ teaching methods that are child centred and based on children's experiences and interests
- ◆ take into account children's gender, capabilities and disabilities, social, economic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds in planning the classroom program
- ◆ challenge children to achieve their personal best
- ◆ continually monitor children's progress and involve both parents and children in the process
- ◆ promote an environment that respects the rights of all; is happy, secure and supportive; is challenging, interesting and enjoyable; encourages risk taking, independence, exploration and reflection

Windows on Practice: Multiage Group Pack, SA (1991, OHT No 1)

The teacher is critical to the success of the classroom. Every child deserves a teacher who is professional, aware, knowledgeable, up-to-date, organised, critical of his or her practice, able to monitor, modify and change practice, a decision maker, a reflector - a learner.

(13) Challenge

The program provides for various levels of achievement. Teachers recognise the competencies of children and present opportunities in which they can use and develop their knowledge and abilities.

When this feature is evident we will see children solving problems using different strategies. There will be open-ended tasks which challenge the range of children across year levels and provide for various levels of achievement.

Children will be confident and enthusiastic, willing to "have a go" in new situations,

showing initiative, working things out for themselves and understanding that learning involves experimenting and making errors. They will be working to achieve their personal best.

Teachers will be challenging children's perceptions and current understandings so that they keep progressing in their learning.

We've looked at learning and what that may look like in practice, through the features of an effective program. This is a very useful training and development activity for both whole school groups and individual classroom teachers.

Opportunities, through activities such as parent surveys and getting to know you meetings, will be provided for parents to share information about the child which might otherwise be unavailable to the teacher.

Communication between parents and teachers will be sensitive, responding to the range of family structures and child rearing practices and traditions which occur in various socio-economic and cultural groups in the school community.

There will be parents working in the classroom with individuals and small groups, e.g. helping with a cooking or computer activity, with PE-based games, with technology skills-based activities such as box construction, or with puppet making.

Parents will be given information about the class and school program in ways which encourages family participation.

(5) Equity

An effective program does not exclude any individual from full participation.

When this feature is evident we will see a wide range of multi-cultural, non-stereotyping materials and activities available in the classroom.

Girls and boys will be given equal access to materials, resources and activities, including teacher time and attention. Participation records and equitable structures will be in use to keep track of girls' and boys' involvement in activities. Both girls and boys will participate in activities which traditionally tend to be aligned to one gender or the other, e.g. boys will be using the Home Corner and girls will be constructing with blocks. Children's

stories and topics for study will value women's and girls' experiences.

Teachers will challenge the power relations in the classroom and will encourage children to do so as well.

There will be structures in the classroom which detail acceptable ways of behaving for all children, e.g. behaviour management and anti-harassment procedures.

(6) A well planned environment

The organisation of the learning environment takes into account what is known about how young children learn.

When this feature is evident we will see arrangement of learning areas to support the breadth of the program. There will be interesting things to touch, look at, hear and do. Children will be moving freely, selecting activities and using a variety of materials.

Displays, materials and equipment will be placed so that they are accessible and organised to encourage children to be independent and responsible. There will be a wide range of multi-purpose materials which can be used in a range of learning situations.

Children will be familiar with teacher expectations, classroom routines and organisation.

(7) Real life experiences

Children learn through all their senses. First hand experiences in real situations and with materials are far more appropriate than substitutions, improvisations, abstract representations or adult descriptions.

When this feature is evident we will see planned excursions or visits to a range of places (not always the zoo!). There will be visitors coming to the classroom or school. Parents or grandparents will share an interest or skill.

There will be plenty of "hands on activities" across all areas of study. Animals in the classroom, plants growing, and interesting school grounds will enrich the learning opportunities for children.

(8) Child participation

Patterns of interaction between adults and children, the type of work displayed, the accessibility of materials to children and the nature and range of on-going activities indicate the extent of child participation in the program.

When this feature is evident we will see children taking part in planning class rules and consequences, planning activities and planning aspects of the learning environment. Class meetings will give children the opportunity to offer opinions, make comments, recommendations and decisions. They will also give children the chance to experience various roles - chairperson, reporter, observer.

There will be displays of children's original work.

Children will be doing things for themselves - changing books, returning materials, reading the roll, cleaning the wet area, putting issues on the class agenda sheet. They will be taking responsibility for the care of resources and the care of the classroom. Every child will have a class job each week. Children will be taking leadership roles in collaborative activities and groups, as recorder, time keeper,

reporter or chairperson. Cross-age tutoring will be occurring where children have opportunities to be tutors and learners.

(9) Play

Play is one of the ways children learn. They may also learn through manipulating, exploring, investigating, practising, and so on.

When this feature is present we will see activities provided, perhaps in an Activity Time, where children can play with blocks, sand, shops, home corner, dress-ups, Lego, or puppets. There will be time for children to become involved in activities and develop their ideas. Limited time discourages children from becoming really engaged in an activity.

Teachers will be challenging children's behaviours, such as stereotyping of roles, which may restrict learning.

(10) Balance

The program supports the interdependence of all aspects of development and must be both comprehensive and balanced in its provision for the physical, emotional, social, intellectual and creative development of each child.

When this feature is present we will see timetabling which assures a balance of curriculum offerings from all areas of study, viz: English, Mathematics, Science, Technology, The Arts, Health and Physical Education, Society and Environment, and LOTE. In South Australia teachers are programming using the nationally developed Statements and Profiles to provide a broad and balanced curriculum.

There will be a variety of teaching strategies in use to promote learning. These will include brainstorming, resource-based learning, collaboration, problem solving, modelling, explicit teaching, discussions, share circles, concept mapping and using identified structures like Thinkers' Keys, Bloom's Taxonomy, and de Bono's Thinking Hats, to promote thinking skills.

A variety of grouping structures will be in use, including small and large groups and gender, interest, ability and friendship groups.

Planning structures will include yearly plans, term overviews, weekly and daily plans.

(11) Choice

Children choose activities with and without guidance in a planned environment. To become more skilled at selecting and deciding, children need many opportunities to practise choosing. Through this they learn to consider possible alternatives and the results of their decisions and behaviour.

When this feature is evident we will see a wide selection of materials and activities from which children can choose. Teachers will monitor choices made to ensure that children **do use all** available resources. They will help those children who seem reluctant to make choices across the whole range of materials available, i.e. monitoring that girls as well as boys are choosing the computer, for example.

Children will be motivated to pursue tasks to a satisfactory completion, especially when they understand the purpose. They will choose where and with whom to work, as well as how to work and for how long. In addition, they will be choosing class jobs which promote the smooth running of the classroom.

There will be a range of choices for parent participation.

(12) Flexibility

An effective program offers stability with flexibility. The organisation of the program should be sufficiently consistent to offer stability and include flexible time allocations so that learning can be pursued by individuals or groups.

When this feature is evident we will see time-tabling in blocks of time to allow children to pursue activities and complete tasks. Routines and structures will exist, which provide stability but not rigidity in the program. These routines and structures will encourage children to take responsibility and develop independence.

Teachers will be taking into account individual differences in children's interests, motivation and development.