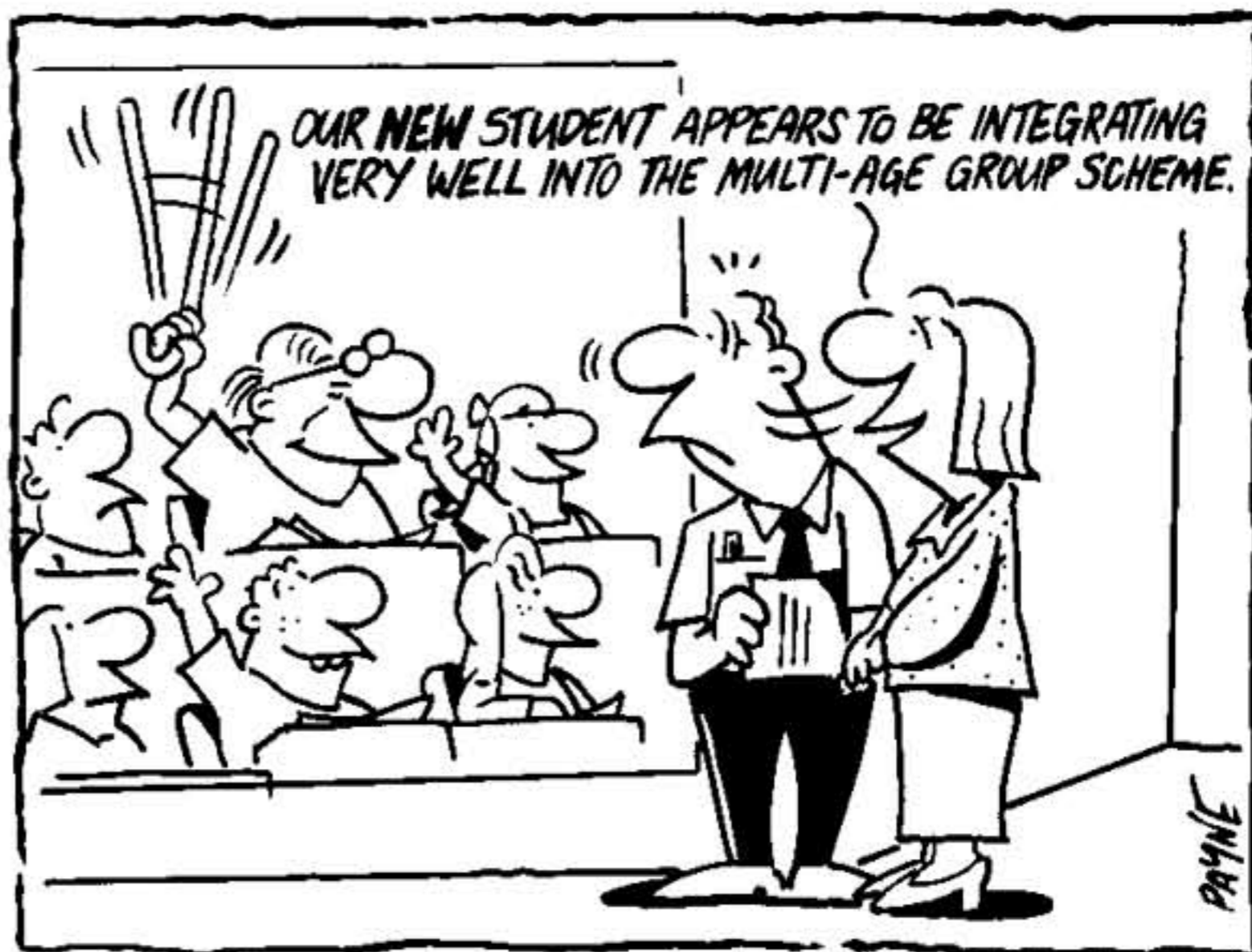


Multi-age Groups

Why Do We Need Them?

Queensland principals, **TERRY BALL** and **BRUCE JONES**, recommend that schools move away from 'batch processing' based on chronological age, and acknowledge that learning needs are not tied to specific age ranges.



AT THE BEGINNING of every school year, almost every child who will turn six years of age in that year, begins Year 1. Students then continue with a chronologically-alike group for a further twelve years. The educational offerings are designed around the needs of the majority of the age cohort for each of those twelve years, irrespective of different individuals' needs and abilities.

Queensland's recent Wiltshire Report recommends 'a move away from the 'lockstep' approach based on chronological age to a multi-level approach for years 1, 2 and 3. ... as a means to early-age prevention, identification and intervention relating to students experiencing difficulties with literacy and numeracy.'

The opportunity for teachers to adapt the curriculum to fit the student is there and should exist for all students, not just those in Years 1, 2 and 3. Many schools have had excellent

experiences in grouping students in three broad bands such as P-3, 4-5 and 6-7, or alternatively 1-3, 3-5, 5-7, or sometimes only two: 1 to 3 and 4-7.

A related practice is now also beginning to extend into secondary schools through vertical timetabling and unitised curriculum offerings.

What is a Multi-age Classroom?

Quite simply, a multi-age class is one in which the teacher is responsible for students in at least two consecutive year levels, with teachers teaching that class group over a period of several years. In a single year level class, the chronological age range can encompass almost two years.

Obviously, a multi-age class will extend this range considerably. In a single year level, just the spelling range of a typical class group will vary by as much as four years.

A multi-age class is formed as a deliberate educational strategy and differs

considerably in intent from a composite class, which is formed for administrative convenience (usually because there are insufficient student numbers to form single year level classes).

In a multi-age class, the teacher is responsible for students over a longer period of time. Again, this is unlike a composite class, which may be disbanded when the administrative need prompting its formation no longer exists.

A multi-age classroom is clearly an organisational system which is based upon a student-centred developmental philosophy of learning.

'Classroom management also benefits from the multi-age set-up. Discipline problems tend to be negated by the sharing, caring atmosphere of the classroom.'

It has continuity as its underpinning platform, and addresses such contemporary social justice issues as inclusivity, behaviour management in a supportive school environment, and many aspects of human relationships education.

What is the Philosophy Behind Multi-age Classrooms?

Conventional school organisation involving single year classes has had the student fit the curriculum offered. Multi-age classrooms, on the other hand, demand that teachers focus more on needs-based teaching, thus adapting the curriculum to fit the student. This, coupled with a more developmental approach to

(or longer) at the beginning of the year to re-establish classroom learning patterns and behaviours. At least half of the students return to the classroom each year, with the older students playing an active leadership role to induct new students into classroom routines.

One of the great advantages that multi-age classrooms enjoy is the opportunity for students to engage in peer tutoring practices as a natural, and not contrived, learning strategy. Children have a wide range of older, younger, quicker, slower other children with whom to practise their skills and share their learning, and on whom they can lean for support. The attitudes to learning, and to each other, are quite different.

Implications

As stated previously, there is an increased responsibility placed on teachers in multi-age classrooms. This extends to ensuring that an effective and continuous program is provided, ensuring that all students are learning from their instruction for the whole time they are under the teacher's care. **Strategic planning at all levels is important in multi-age classrooms, and this usually requires time and commitment.**

Since continuity of programming becomes more of the teacher's responsibility, there is less need at a school level to prescribe what is taught in each year level. **There is an increased responsibility, however, to focus on student outcomes, both individually and collectively, at a school level. Such outcomes need to be carefully monitored.** When the results of school level monitoring are provided to teachers, their class programs should be modified accordingly. So that students are not locked into a learning environment where they may not be learning effectively, **a need for regular 'placement reviews' exists. This is best done at the end of each semester, with the majority of changes occurring at year's end when other students are also moving from one class to another.**

Multi-age grouping, as an educational strategy, is becoming more common in schools in Queensland. As this system is somewhat different from the experiences that many parents may have had when they attended primary school, it is advisable to keep an open mind on the subject. If teachers are willing to 'give it a go', the support and education of parents is essential.

Advantages of Multi-age Classrooms

Multi-age classrooms offer advantages in many ways. **Teaching to difference (i.e., meeting the individual needs of students) is one big advantage.** As there is no fear of repeating a year, students can take an extra semester, sometimes two, to achieve their potential. There is also greater flexibility with enrolment changes and transient students. **In addition, a teacher's evaluation of a student's performance is geared towards achievement levels, and not a grade level.**

Continuity is another important benefit. Class stability can be maintained over a 400-600 day learning period, or longer. There are no end of year stops, then several weeks (or longer) to re-establish classroom learning patterns and behaviours. **The focus is on learning stages, which are developmental, rather than year level stages.**

Classroom management also benefits from the multi-age set-up. Discipline problems tend to be negated by the sharing, caring atmosphere of the classroom. Children become more tolerant of the abilities of others and there is a greater chance of developing a sharing, caring atmosphere in the classroom. In the upper primary school, the less desirable effects of the peer group are effectively negated. In the multi-age classroom, peer tutoring has more meaning and greater individualisation of learning occurs. There is a greater sharing of planning and resources amongst teachers, and better use of the physical resource offered by double teaching spaces.

Relationships tend to be strengthened by the multi-age classroom structure. There is no trauma on the first day back at school. Students and parents know where they are going, and all are welcomed by a familiar face. **There is greater opportunity for parent involvement as contact with individual teachers extends over a longer period of time.** Children at all levels are more accepting of their classmates, based on mutual admiration, rather than on age hierarchies. There is greater awareness by teachers and parents as to what education really entails, and how better to go about it. □

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teaching, ensures that students receive highly relevant instruction based on individual needs, all of the time.

How are Students Taught in a Multi-age Class?

A variety of organisational patterns is necessary for effective instruction in multi-age classes. Groupings may include ability groups in such skill areas as language and maths, friendship groups for activities like art, or mixed ability groups where a variety of roles is required.

The type of grouping is determined by the nature of each activity, and can be negotiated by both students and teacher. A wider repertoire of teaching strategies is also essential in order to fully meet the needs of students.

Specialist teachers, Religious Education personnel and other 'visitors' who interact with the class also need to focus on the needs of the class group, rather than an offering which is delivered to a year level. A yearly rotation over two or more years assists in the effective provision of such programs.

Making Teaching More Effective

The intimate knowledge about students' abilities and needs that a teacher accumulates is not lost so easily in a multi-age classroom. **This is because the student returns to the teacher for a second or third year. There are no end-of-year stops, then several weeks**

Contributions Invited

The next issue of 'Prime Focus' is on 'SMART STRUCTURES'. What structural changes to curriculum delivery and learning have you made at your school?

Please share your experiences with primary colleagues across Australia. Ideas, both grand and humble, can be faxed to the Executive Editor on 03 9 888 2744.

Contributions to 'Prime Focus' range from 250 word snippets to 1,500 full length articles.