

Collaboration in a multi-age school

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Introduction

This is a case study of a unique school setting where learning groups are comprised of students Years K-6. Teachers are employed on the basis of a shared philosophy of teaching and learning. The school's mission statement highlights the collaborative nature of learning; a 'sense of belonging' and community.

The project involves UWS Nepean students enrolled in English 1, English staff at UWS Nepean, students and staff at Trinity Catholic School. Data is collected using a variety of methods including in depth case studies of fourteen students, interviews with teachers and students, collection of work samples and guided observations.

Multiage classes

Multiage classes are composed of children of different ages. These groupings may also be known as non-graded, mixed-age, inter-age, split level, multi-level, family, vertical, ungraded. Nye (1993) defines multiage as follows:

... the practice of grouping more than one age and ability level (usually three age levels) together with a goal of maximising teaching practices involving interaction, experiential learning, and fluid flexible small group participation among children so that they experience a continuous progression of learning (cognitive and social) in keeping with their individual rate of knowledge and skill acquisition within an environment which prohibits artificial and arbitrary points which benchmark failure such as retention during the primary years. (p.3)

Marshak (1994) suggests that multiage is not just restructuring but a reinvention of schooling. The structuring of schools into multiage classes is built on the understandings of how children learn. The individual interests and needs of children, and not their ages, are at the basis of this group formation. Politano and Davies (1994) state such a structure "supports the task of schooling, encouraging children to fulfil their potential as active, independent, self-regulating individuals" (p.3)

With technological changes impinging on pedagogy, the rationale for maintaining traditional school structures needs to be questioned. Ure (1994) maintains that age and year level are not appropriate criteria for learning expectations of children as they develop at different rates. Ure suggests that children be guided to the learning experiences that are appropriate to their stage of development. Harste (cited in Politano and Davies, 1994) concurs:

The traditional structure of grades assumes that students are more similar than different, that curriculum can be packaged into discrete chunks, and that each chunk is substantively different. In responding to diversity we have come to realise that the structure of grades may be countering our efforts to meet the range of educational needs among children. It is important, therefore, that we seek new structures that will assist us in planning for children's unique talents and abilities. (p.2)

The Carrick Committee Report (1989) to the NSW Government states, "Chronological structures do not always relate well to the capacities of students nor to the different rates of learning: nor do such

structures allow sufficient flexibility for advanced or slower students." Technological advances make it possible to instigate different ways of meeting the individual needs of students. Connell (1993) contends that individualised instruction is part of multiage classroom and Stone (1994) develops the idea further by suggesting that the multiage approach emphasises learning rather than the imparting of content.

The role of the teacher is vital to the success of multiage structure. Collegiate support, particularly in the area of planning makes for more effective teaching. Pavan, cited in Anderson (1993), suggests that nongradedness is most likely to thrive when teachers work in teams with multiaged aggregations of children. Marshak (1994) notes that a philosophical commitment to multiage learning brings renewed focus and purpose to the professional life of teachers. Higgins (1993) writes, "You must organise for natural co-ownership to create the natural climate for co-planning, co-operating (teaching) and co-evaluation." (p.49)

The literature certainly supports the view that changes to teaching strategies are essential in the multiage setting. Elmes (1990) states that, "It involves the individualisation of learning programs, and the flexible arrangement of small groups to cater for individual needs."(p.3) The teacher needs to organise and manage a variety of groups, often simultaneously. In order to facilitate learning; routines need to be established and maintained. Murdoch (1994) suggests that within the multiage classroom the teacher's organisational skills need to be well refined. "It is within a structured and organised framework that teachers can best respond to the unpredictable and spontaneous 'teachable moments' that occur throughout the day. ... activities are open-ended although they will often be very structured; they may work towards a single goal but allow a range of pathways towards it." (p.27).

In order for multiage grouping to be effective the teacher must be

skilful in organisation, clear in setting goals, willing and able to work as part of a team, flexible in approach to curriculum and knowledgeable about each child's interests, learning style and developmental stage. This means that the teacher must be able to assess each child and encourage as well as facilitate each child's progress and development.

On-going and meaningful relationships between parents and teachers are significant in the multiage school. The practice of teachers continuing, for two or three years, to teach the same children in a multiage class facilitates such relationships. The parent can feel confident that the teacher really knows and understands each child's strengths and weaknesses. Marshak (1994) reporting on teachers' perspectives of multiage classes found that, "A key benefit of multiage classrooms is the development of stronger and more productive relationships with the parents."

The multiage class mirrors family interaction and societal structures. Therefore interdependence, co-operation and nurturing relationships lead to independent learners and positive self-esteem. One aspect of the multiage structure is the continuing relationship with the teacher who teaches the same students for at least two, if not three years. This allows for continuity and less transition throughout the primary school. Students entering school at Kindergarten level settle quickly into school through observation and emulation of the older children in the class. School and home settings are similar and therefore provide security for the child. Marshak (1994) states:

A multiage classroom generates more profound relationships between teacher and students, among students, and between teacher and parents teachers used the metaphor of family to characterise the social qualities of their classrooms. (p.4)

Collaboration is in essence the driving force in multiage structures. Multiage classrooms provide children with greater opportunities for a wider range of relationships and social experiences and therefore promote development of their social skills and co-operative behaviours.

Mycock cited in Cohen and Manion (1983) states that the practice of multiage grouping provides a secure and stable community, facilitates maximum individual growth and the development of balanced personalities. Cohen and Manion (1983) state:

It meets the need for a holistic view of child development which will foster attitudes, qualities and abilities that will enable a child to live a happy, well-adjusted life in a complex and changing social environment. (p.122)

The site: Trinity Catholic School

Trinity Catholic School is located in Western Sydney. It has an enrolment of approximately 250 and a staff of thirteen. A conscious and deliberate effort was made to establish the school's strong philosophical base. Parents, teachers, Catholic Education Office, administrators and students worked collaboratively to formulate a school policy which reflects the beliefs, attitudes and expectations of all stakeholders. This philosophy base is reflected in a range of documents including the school's mission statement and icons such as the school's motto and logo.

According to the Statement of Learning: "At Trinity we believe successful learning occurs when: children experience a sense of belonging and are cared for ..." The grouping of children into learning groups enhances the social nature of learning where age is not seen as a barrier. According to the School's statement about multiage grouping:

Grouping children into learning groups and using their age as the only criteria does not take into account other essential factors. We believe that children's social development, cultural background, gender, preferred learning style, readiness and ability for learning are essential criteria that must also be considered when grouping children for learning. At Trinity learning groups are structured to take into account all of the above so as to maximise the potential for learning.

The motivation to restructure classes on a multiage basis resulted from staff attending a number of staff development days. As the Principal explains,

We came away from the conference with the following question in mind. "How can we continue to group children in classes just on their age and not take into account their vastly different stages of development, their different learning styles and rates of learning?" In other words, each child's uniqueness! (April 26, 1994)

The staff and parents were united in their beliefs that multiage structures had the potential to

- challenge children to learn at their pace
- create a community of learners
- discourage stigma of learning difficulties
- create high self-esteem
- avoid labelling of classes
- encourage co-operative learning
- encourage broader social interaction
- assist in the community of learning experiences

create greater opportunities for accelerated learning
encourage peer tutoring and modelling
assist in the children taking responsibility for their own learning

Following a number of parent workshops on learning it was decided to use the following criteria for grouping children in 1995:

balance of learning styles
social development and maturity
cultural mix
gender balance
developmental stage of learning
a three year age range
siblings together if parents request

To support the multiage structure, it was decided to establish a Learning and Resource Centre, housed within the library and co-ordinated by a full-time teacher. Eight children from each class was able to use the centre for individual or group assignments that were negotiated based on thematic class units or personal interest. Attendance was on the basis of one hour per day. At any one time 16 children, 8 from two learning groups, could have access to the Learning Centre.

Methodology

This study draws on the input of teachers and students at Trinity Catholic school, UWS Nepean students enrolled in English 1 and English staff at UWS Nepean.

First year teacher education students enrolled in the subject English 1 were given the option of completing a major assessment task. at Trinity Catholic School. Students were required to observe and describe the physical context, observe teacher-student interactions, complete a teacher interview and an indepth case study of one learner. Fourteen students elected to do undertake the assignment and most students elected to do more than the compulsory ten hours observation time in the school setting. UWS Nepean staff acted as mentors instructing students in the practical applications of data collecting and reporting. Students kept detailed field notes, transcribed interviews, collected samples of students' work and relevant artefacts such as school policies. Students also completed an exam question relating specifically to the learning environment of their case study classes. The exam was designed to be a culminating activity in which students linked all their data in effort to articulate what they believed were factors contributing to learning and literacy success.

In addition, lecturers interviewed the staff. The Principal and teachers completed member checks on the case studies and report. The project extended over twelve months.

Findings of the Study

The factors that contribute to the collaborative nature of this unique learning environment are outlined below. Basically, the factors can be categorised according to three broad groupings that relate to pedagogy, curriculum, resources and environment.

1. Pedagogy

Beliefs about teaching

The student-teachers' observations describe much about teaching and learning practice and the ideology that underpins it. The teachers at Trinity share a philosophy of teaching and learning which is evident in the way classrooms are organised; teaching style; teaching activities; interactions and relationships with each other and students.

At Trinity learning is regarded as preparation for life. A UWS Nepean student explains:

The attitude in the Supervising Teacher's classroom is that learning takes place for the outside world, not for a single exam or mark. When a project is due or a piece of work is being handed out the Supervising Teacher will take time to tell the students where it fits into the years work.

Another teacher explains that "values which are evident in society are reflected in the classroom. These include justice, tolerance, co-operation and leadership." Teachers expect students to succeed and conduct their classes on the premise that everyone can do so.

The expectation of the teacher with regard to the students was very high... the students are expected to succeed, to find information, to make decisions and to work co-operatively together and they do.

(student observation)

Teachers make explicit their beliefs in student-centred teaching as opposed to grade-based expectations and teaching.

Reflections by a UWS Nepean student indicates his insights into the school's teaching philosophy: "Teachers believe they are preparing students for a world outside the classroom and foster the abilities they see will prepare them. As part of this, teachers believe students should become independent learners."

After observing in Trinity classrooms, UWS Nepean students began to formulate their philosophies of teaching and learning.

Observing Sarah has also shown me that an important ingredient of learning is to have students mix with each other as much as possible. Seeing Sarah observe older students doing things which may have been a little too difficult for her to attempt alone showed me the value of peer teaching. The opportunities for students to develop leadership skills and provide role models was emphasised in this learning group. Younger students were attempting tasks that in a more traditional setting may not even have been proposed by the teacher.

Community of Learners

Consistently throughout the case studies and field notes, UWS Nepean students referred to the notion of community of learners. Students and teachers at Trinity form a community of learners. Everyone in the community is treated as an equal with something valuable to contribute. Students and teachers learn from each other. (Student observation)

Throughout lessons and discussions, the teacher will be involved not as a teacher but as a fellow student. Throughout the day, teachers share jokes with the children and both parties seem to be at ease with one another and generally relaxed. (Student observation)
Members of the community share the roles of leader, co-worker, teacher and learner. (teacher interview)

The notion of community includes teachers who, like the students, are supported in their efforts to develop as effective learners and teachers.

I would like to comment on the environment and its total acceptance of allowing you, as a professional the freedom to explore and go to extremes and lengths that you wouldn't dream of in other schools where the traditional timetable and ways of doing things really limit you. I have found such freedom to be a professional, where I know where I'm going and what my aims are, is just wonderful. There is never a shortage of supportive people around me who like to swap ideas, give me other ideas, and support me. (teacher interview)

People don't say to you that they don't think that your idea will work? (teacher interview)

Teachers are encouraged to explore ideas and experiment in their teaching. As explained, teachers are supported by a network of teachers, who offer both encouragement and guidance.

One student described how it was evident that children were treated as co-learners because "they are not controlled by orders, shouts or

demands - they are spoken to like respected human beings and respond in that way." Another UWS Nepean student explained how her case study student was able to shape her own learning because of the special relationship that existed with her teacher.

During discussion with Emily it became clear that she liked her relationship with her teacher. Emily often instigates discussion with Karyn (teacher) if she feels she is not being extended enough or if the extension she has been given is not appropriate. All students at Trinity are on a first name basis with their teacher. Emily shows warmth and sincerity when using her teacher's name.

Students also have the opportunity to extend their support network beyond their immediate learning group and draw on the resources of others.

I think the kids don't see themselves as being isolated into one class. They don't see that their teacher is a specific person of authority. Different kids see different teachers about specific issues that they feel that teacher could provide the most information on. The kids are moving around the whole school which makes their environment more of a learning community and subsequently, much wider than a set class.

The co-operative learning structures present in the classrooms enable students to share their opinions and build on their own understandings through discussion with peers and adults.

...by conferencing with peers, teachers and parents, they were able to not only use their reading and writing activities as a source of entertainment, information etc, but they were able to learn through other people's opinions and comments...(student observation)

Co-operative learning

Events within the classroom are based on co operation. According to the teachers interviewed co operation serves as a springboard; "The children provide suggestions, ideas and guidance for each other". The following description of a collaborative learning situation shows the teacher's belief being put into practice.

Something I do a lot with a subject is read it. After reading it we come together and discuss the difficulties each other is having and brainstorm for ideas to help one another out. They are supporting each other with the ideas for their writing as well. Having a look at this means the idea is there but they might need help deciding what to write

about next. The kids will ask what the others have already written about and give ideas for further writing. This means that they are beginning to talk about ideas for writing and not just the mechanics of writing.

Co-operative learning structures were described to not only foster conceptual understandings through discussion with peers, but also to assist in the development of communicative and social skills for the students involved.

I think you see that a lot when you get together for buddy reading and an older child puts his arm around a younger reader and encourages him/her to continue. The kids who aren't really confident with reading take a look at the pictures, and because they are with somebody else that they are building a relationship and their confidence levels build. Some children are great leaders in this situation where in their own little group within the class environment they may not be.

In the multiage setting students work along side students who work at different stages. A teacher stated that: "It is beneficial for a Stage One child to actually see a Stage Two or Three child working in the upper end and join them if they are able." Teachers describe with enthusiasm specific examples highlighting the direct benefits of co operation:

I think one of the reasons the kids are writing so much, even the little tiny ones who have just come in, is because they see Amanda's kids writing. They see the kids in their own group writing and they realise that a picture can have print-symbol correlations. It comes to them a little faster. I find that the Kindy kids that I have in my learning group have actually picked up a lot quicker.

UWS Nepean students observed how the overall classroom operation supported co-operative learning.

The teacher managed the classroom by incorporating many classroom environments, which included peer tutoring, partner activities, individual activities and whole-class activities...Children were grouped according to the nature and purpose of the activity or lesson.

The students define themselves in terms of a community in which they help one another.

In small group or paired activities the students have a strong support network to help them overcome any difficulties. (Teacher)

If he (Jason) does not know how to do something, first he asks his

peers, if they cannot help him, he then asks Lee-Anne (teacher). (Student observation)

A sense of celebration

The responsibility for learning is a shared responsibility owned by members of the learning community. Praise, encouragement and feedback is given freely by both students and teachers alike.

Praise and encouragement were considered to be important for all students, regardless of their ability level. (student observation)
Praise and reinforcement were based on individual potential rather than a grade-based comparison.
(student observation)

Celebration of student achievement is discussed frequently by the teachers. The responsibility for learning and celebration is shared amongst the learning community.

I think what follows from all of this is celebration. You celebrate the time when all of a sudden something clicks and the child looks around the room, sees the word and copies it as they are writing their own story. The child then identifies this as a safety net. Then there are process maps where someone discovers a multiplication concept and they say, 'Oh now I know this!' and suddenly you've got something that you can celebrate and share. I think you must always keep in mind the celebration. (teacher interview)

The child typed the letter out and I sent it up to Chris. It was only a sentence but there was real celebration in it. Everybody in the room was excited about it. (teacher interview)

Encouraging independence

UWS Nepean students frequently commented on their observations of students' high level of independence:
Children learn to help themselves, rather than depending on the teacher to help them. (student observation)
So, it can be seen that this classroom is very independent. The children rely first of all on themselves, and then on their peers and then, if all else fails, they go to Peta (teacher). Peta is just there basically to supervise, give guidance, assess, evaluate and only help if necessary. (student observation)
To find answers in the classroom, the student has to find it for his/herself.
Thus books and the computer are constantly being used by the students

in seeking
answers. (student observation)

The teachers at Trinity invited students to take responsibility for
their own learning in
various ways.

Students collaboratively decided which texts would be studied or read

to the class, they negotiated themes and topics to be studied and had
choice regarding
what books they would read independently and the tasks they would
complete after
reading. (student observation)

A book is studied by the class, then a contract with a
list of activities is chosen by the students according to their
preferred learning
style. So comprehension has been elevated from a boring task to a
student-centred
activity. (student observation)

During the negotiation process students would be involved in decisions
which they themselves had a large responsibility for, so they were in
fact
responsible for their own learning in many ways. (student observation)

Being a risk taker was valued in these classrooms. As explained by two
teachers risk taking is expected in this learning culture. "I suppose
they have got to be able to realise that they can take a risk and not
worry about making a mistake, It is not the end of the world but
rather, it is all
part of the learning experience." Teachers also relate this to their
own experiences. One teacher explained how he was not a competent
cricketer. "I think making mistakes helps if the kids see us doing
that too."

UWS Nepean students record:

There are reminders, constant reminders to be a risk-taker, such as the
sign - "Give it a go". (student observation)

Students are encouraged and feel able to experiment and try new ideas.
The students are actively encouraged to give it a go and the students
encourage each other. (student observation).

In Flora's learning environment, her teacher emphasised taking risks
and
having a go. This I believe, provided a safe learning climate in which

Flora could feel free to make mistakes without fear of reprimand. Further to this, because the teacher's expectations were clear in this area of risk taking, as well as constantly being reinforced and repeated to the children, the children could be as creative as they liked and were given scope for making decisions and choices about their work.

One teacher explains her concern for the lack of risk taking in the traditional classroom:

It is really depressing when you look at the other more traditional model of Kindergarten teaching where in fact, the kids seem to become more and more silent, less and less inquisitive and more and more physically restricted to the places they stay and the places they go. It is almost sad to think of places like that.

By comparison, another teacher describes the benefits:

...when motivation becomes their decision to take on a task and they have decided themselves that they can achieve it, it makes it all worthwhile.

Providing positive role models

The enthusiasm demonstrated by the teachers at Trinity is evident across all sources of data.

A critical teacher behaviour, present in this class, that promotes language

and literacy is the teacher enthusiasm. When presenting written texts she is keen

and enthusiastic. (student observation)

I also noted through my observation the importance of the teacher being a

role model as a literacy user. The excitement that Flora's teacher showed towards

books, her enthusiasm for poetry and creative writing, all contributed to Flora's

positive development as both a reader and a writer... Flora's teacher played a

significant role in shaping not only Flora's attitude to reading and writing, but in

fact the entire class. (student observation)

Most teachers describe the contagious nature of enthusiasm. One teacher stated: "I think they learn if they are enthusiastic and if they're in an environment where people around them are enthusiastic, that sort of thing flows and enthusiasm spills onto their learning."

Monitoring and catering for individual needs

Negotiated curriculum and catering for the needs of individuals is a reality at Trinity.

Teachers at Trinity look at students as individuals who achieve to their potential, rather than according to a grade norm. At a teacher interview it was explained that: "In the multiaged classroom you can take the kids from where they are because there is a lot more opportunity for this to happen". Another teacher concurs:

...Multi-age grouping promotes language and literacy learning at Trinity, as this structure enables children to experiment with language, together as a whole, with no grade expectations or competitions. Language learning is approached as a natural process in which children progress when they are ready.

At the interview with teachers, it was explained:

Teachers promote student centred education not only by encouraging students to work at their own levels but by also providing instruction, demonstration and feedback on a -need to know basis.

It is also apparent that teachers recognise, cater for and monitor to meet the individual needs of all students:

The teacher suggests that a way to cater for a student like Victoria is to give

as much feedback as possible and as much monitoring as possible.

(student observation)

The class teacher says she frequently has to give William specific directions

and demonstrations to ensure he understands what he is doing. (student observation)

From the teacher's point of view we need to ensure that a variety of learning

experiences that we cover meet all their educational needs and that their visual,

auditory and kinaesthetic language requirements are all treated.

(teacher interview)

It is also important, when you are looking at programming, to negotiate with the children and you might draw up web diagram while negotiating with them. They might have certain givens that you would hope to achieve in your outcomes. You have to look at where the kids are at and what they're interested in because that is what will keep them motivated. Teacher interview)

Interaction between the teacher and students is highly valued in this learning context.

She frequently assessed their progress through interview sessions with them. (student observation)

The UWS Nepean students began to form their own opinions of what should be valued in terms of meeting individual needs:

I have also been able to see how important it is to cater to individual needs,

mostly through such strategies as negotiation. Seeing contracts negotiated ,

students discussing themes for future units and how the corresponding activities

would take place not only helps make the learning more interesting and thus help

to increase motivation but also gives students responsibility for their own learning.

Teachers expressed their commitment to planning for their students and also recognised the needs to allow sufficient flexibility to meet the needs of children and circumstances as they arise.

I think that we all go in wondering what will happen and whether your pre-set plan will be anything more than a guideline. You need to have that plan because children are very aware of how much you're going to do and whether you are organised or care enough to have things prepared for them.

Students at Trinity were given many choices of activities enabling them to work in their preferred learning style. Many examples similar to the following are recorded:

Jason has special needs in that he is a verbal learner whatever the KLA. For Jason thinking is speaking. He is allowed to speak. He is encouraged to listen... (teacher comments)

2. Curriculum

Providing authentic learning experiences

Students are encouraged to make decisions and see real purposes in the learning that occurs. "The tasks that we give children have to be realistic, achievable and that they have to experience success with what they are doing." (teacher interview).

Students make phone calls seeking information, they prepare real invitations asking for guests to attend functions, they seek information through the internet rather than play computer games. A teacher cites an example:

This afternoon there was a gentleman from the college walking around

the office

looking for Paul and there were some children in the office making a telephone call.

He looked at them and they told him that they were making a call to the Power

House Museum.

Authentic learning experiences and time to pursue interests through literacy is of prime importance in Trinity classrooms. Reading activities revolve around a range of real literature. Reading activities include: Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (U.S.S.R.); partner reading; teacher reading; independent reading for research; student readings of own writing to Principal or another teacher; reading logs; reading diaries containing reflections; reading plays, reading along with cassette tapes and reading contracts. Students are encouraged to practice all aspects of reading, reading aloud with correct intonation and pitch as well as reading for meaning. Students are encouraged to reflect on their opinion of a set text in their diary and expand their understanding through discussion with others.

Writing is an integral part of all curriculum areas and is used freely by the students through out the days activities. In addition, students set aside specific time for free writing. Students are encouraged to write in their journal frequently.

Students are provided with genuine audiences for their writing. Twice a week students wrote to a teacher or parent who replies. The children all love their journal writing and especially the replies. (student observation)

The students were not only aware of their intended audience but of the purpose of the task they were completing.

Emily was involved in making a video with a group of students. Emily constructed a list of interview questions . The interviews were on Australian Airlines and submarines. (student observation)

On each wall there were instructions detailing work previously completed and work to be completed for the day. The students were encouraged to use their reading skills in finding out what instructions were required for the day. (student observation)

These types of reading and writing activities were meaningful to the students because they have a real purpose or function for them. (student observation)

Some of the activities he was observed doing are writing letters to the teacher, book reviews, information record for project and taking part in the classroom composition of a song about their excursion. (student

observation)

An integrated approach

Language and literacy are seen as the key to learning at Trinity. UWS Nepean student frequently observe literacy occurring across all curriculum areas.

...literacy continues throughout all lessons, not solely in English.

Children are

continuously speaking, writing, reading and listening.

Writing, reading, listening and talking feature within all activities, no matter of

which K.L.A. they may fall into.

The teacher incorporates all of the K.L.A.s together, which she subsequently

does not have set times for each K.L.A.

As one teacher explains: "This classroom adopts a truly integrated approach. Every aspect of the curriculum has a firm foundation in language." Fieldnotes often refer to students completing literacy tasks in other KLAS.

During Maths, Emily wrote a report of an experiment that was conducted in

the classroom. In Religious Education Emily wrote a prayer about the war in

Bosnia... (student observation)

Promoting thinking and learning through talk

The emphasis on interaction, negotiation and discussion is apparent in classrooms. Teachers explain the value of encouraging talk as a means for students to explore ideas and develop understandings.

The class teacher believes very much in the holistic nature of language as it

relates to the curriculum, which is demonstrated in her many approaches. She

organises a great deal of group work and interaction amongst the students on all

activities. (student observation)

Questioning is used a lot in the classroom as well. Almost half of an introduction to a group activity is questioning, where the students are encouraged to talk and discuss as a group. (student observation)

The teacher asked a lot of why questions to elicit more information from the students. This was at times to gain more general information, encourage reflective and critical thinking and to establish background knowledge. Asking questions also focussed students on aspects of the inquiry encouraged talk, thinking and participation. (student

observation)

She included questioning and talk as an integral introduction to every lesson I observed. Talk was valued as a learning tool. (student observation)

The children expect to get their thinking going by talking and listening. It becomes the culture. (teacher interview).

3.Resources

Well equipped classrooms provide the essential support for independent learning valued in these classrooms. Classrooms are stocked with extensive supply of literature.

...there was a wide range of literature to choose from and resources in this classroom were readily available in an attempt to make available different text types to cater for the interests of each individual child.

...there was a wide variety of text types readily accessible for the children; poetry books, picture books, fairy tales, factual texts.

When teachers describe the literary resources found at the school, they do so using two descriptors: "enthusiasm" and "always being used". The following teacher reflects the thoughts of many:

The books are not standing neatly in a row. ...The books are not all covered in dust ... they are loved objects.

Teachers discuss how they strive to create "a love of books and we want

our students to be excited about literature. One UWS Nepean student observes: " The teachers' enthusiasm and promotion of literature was obviously successful as the books were in constant use."

The students were not only immersed in a broad range of literature, both factual and fiction, and of varying mediums, such as newspapers, magazines, books and computer programs, but they also had reasons to engage with this material. In the following quote, made by student-teacher Fiona, she discusses how the resources also acted as models which the students referred to when writing their poems.

I noted that because of the wealth of books in the classroom on sharks and

sea creatures etc, that Flora had no trouble in thinking of descriptive words based

on the amount of reading she had done on the topic, and later, on the advice of the

teacher, she was directed to look through books in order to find more words that

could be used for her poem... Flora also knows to go to the computer to find

further information once she has finished looking through books.

Another student records:

As Jason was researching for information on rockets, he told me that he had used the computer to find the information. He was also hoping to use the telephone to ring Parkes Space Station for information.

Students at Trinity were fully aware of the resource options available to them.

Teachers view the technological resources available at Trinity Catholic Primary School as an integral component of school life, as captured in the following statement;

I think the special thing about technology here is that it is not special. The kids who come from a school where technology is not as prevalent, dive onto the computers. Whereas, with our school it is just another thing that they have been learning. Some go to the books, some go to the computers and some go to other resources. It has become part of the scene.

Students at Trinity were described by their teachers as fluent and effective users of computers. One teacher recalled: Some high school students were helping the primary students with their computer work. Some of the high school children, when they started were about 50% slower than the little ones, and there was a real role reversal because they hadn't had the hands-on experience from an early age. Another teacher described how the primary students perceived the computer as more than just a source of entertainment. It is interpreted as a learning tool...they understand that it has its function which they expect to work for them when they are researching things.

According to the teachers, students utilised the computers competently, and as a result

were publishing work that was: "looking really good and having them reading to a greater degree". The teachers believed that the students were acquiring a "different sort of literacy extending far beyond literacy that involves the book as medium."

Teachers at Trinity Catholic Primary School embraced technology of all forms, as

indicated by one teacher's comment:

There is more than just computers connected with technology and I think it is important to include such things as video, stereo, writing and taping which are all necessary components. Students are encouraged to utilise the available technological resources freely.

4.Environment

Classroom Climate and Environment

The positive classroom environment and climate that encourages students to actively pursue learning is attributed to the physical setting and the atmosphere created in the classrooms. Space is provided in the centre of each room for discussion; the classrooms are spacious and allow plenty of room for students to move around. Resources are accessible. Students' work is stored or displayed. The rooms are stocked with technological resources and a range of literature. The UWS Nepean students refer to the comfortable, non threatening atmosphere. Print is displayed and used frequently by the students.

The layout is well planned and spacious. The classrooms are bright and airy. (student observation)

Students' work samples are displayed around the room and are used as models and

reference material by other students. (student observation)

The classroom walls and siding are adorned with language. (student observation)

The classroom environment provided much stimulation. The students engaged with the

books, posters, wall-charts and technology because they had real purposes for doing so. (student observation)

Many factors were identified as contributing to the positive atmosphere at Trinity.

multi-age classes facilitated an atmosphere of non-competitiveness; students were rewarded for taking risks and experimenting; teachers were relaxed, enthusiastic and expected all students to succeed. (student observation)

I have been quite surprised not only by the ability of the students but also from the enthusiasm shown by the group as a whole. (student observation)

The underlying atmosphere of the classroom was one of respect and support. (student observation)

Teacher behaviours such as, enthusiasm, praise and expectations, were documented as

playing a major role in the positive classroom tone.

The teachers own enthusiasm for learning, her modelling of reading, her demonstrations of spoken language, reading skills and computer skills all helped in some way to promote learning in the class. (student observation)

Conclusion

The perspectives of all participants working together in this multiage context have been documented. Fourteen case studies and interviews with teachers reveal a sense of optimism for learning often non existant in todays schools. Students at Trinity Catholic School are valued contributors in the education process and share with their teachers a genuine enthusiasm for learning. Collaboration is built on a strong base of trust and respect. Teachers feel that their contributions count and that their professionalism is recognised by stakeholders. There exist a strong match between the philosophy held by the teachers and how this philosophy is enacted in the classroom. Learning is regarded as a celebration and all learning is significant.

Students from UWS Nepean were enrolled in the contagious nature of this collaborative process and many continue their involvement with Trinity Primary School. The students stopped defining thier own learning according to predetermined boundaries and bought into the model where they too gained a sense of what it means to celebrate learning.

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