E R I C D I G E S T

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Implementing Looping

by Joan Gaustad

Looping is the practice of advancing a teacher from one grade level to the next along with his or her class. At the end of a "loop" of two or more years, the teacher begins the cycle again with a new group of students.

Neither startlingly new nor complex to implement, this form of classroom organization was described in 1913 by the U.S. Department of Education under the name *teacher rotation* (Jim Grant and others 1996). Other terms for it include *family-style learning* (Joseph B. Rappa 1993), *two-cycle teaching, student-teacher progression,* and *multiyear instruction.* Forms of looping have long been used in the private Waldorf Schools and in other nations, including Germany and Japan (Dana Simel 1998).

What Are the Benefits of Looping?

Teachers and students in looping classes need not start from scratch every fall, learning new sets of names and personalities, establishing classroom rules and expectations. Most teachers find that students remain on task far longer at the end of the first year; accordingly, teachers estimate that they gain a month of learning time at the start of the second year (Grant and others).

Spending several years with a class enables teachers to accumulate more indepth knowledge of students' personalities, learning styles, strengths, and weaknesses. This longer contact reduces time spent on diagnosis and facilitates more effective instruction. It also helps teachers build better relationships with parents (Paul S. George and others 1996, Simel, Robert D. Lincoln 1998).

For students, having the same teacher and classmates for two or more years provides stability and builds a sense of community. Looping reduces anxiety and increases confidence for many children, enabling them to blossom both socially and as learners.

Looping appears to have positive effects on behavior and attitudes. The Attleboro, Massachusetts, school district, which mandates looping from first through eighth grades, reports improved attendance and test results, fewer discipline problems and special education referrals, and reduced retention (Rappa, Julia Steiny 1997). A Tolland, Connecticut, pilot program found that "there were fewer infractions for the looped eighth graders than for the non-looped control group, despite the fact that the looped students had incurred more behavioral infractions in the seventh grade" (Lincoln).

In the Cleveland-based Project F.A.S.T, students in looping classes scored substantially higher on standardized tests of reading and mathematics than did students in regular classes, "even when both groups were taught *by the same teacher*," reports Daniel L. Burke (1997, emphasis in original). A nationwide survey conducted in 1996 by researcher Paul S. George found positive attitudes toward looping among participating teachers, students, and parents (Linda Jacobson 1997).

Is Looping Compatible With Other Practices?

Looping is compatible with a wide range of traditional and innovative practices. It particularly facilitates instructional strategies that depend on indepth student knowledge, such as authentic assessment and whole language, or that require considerable investment of time in their early stages, such as cooperative learning (Barbara J. Hanson 1995). The emotionally supportive environment and extra instruction time help to make inclusion successful. The longer time-frame promotes a developmental perspective on learning and encourages teachers to try promising innovations (Grant and others, George and others).

Team teaching, parent and mentor involvement, summer bridge programs, and year-round schooling are other compatible practices. Looping can also be a transitional step to multiage instruction, which adds a wider age range to the multiyear time-frame (Char Forsten and others 1997).

Looping can flourish on any scale, from two interested teachers in self-contained classrooms to an entire school system. *Interbuilding looping* can ease the transition from primary to middle school. An increasing number of schools offer parents the choice of looping, multiage, and single-grade classes (Forsten and others).

For What Age Levels Is Looping Appropriate?

Looping can be used from kindergarten through high school, but in the U.S. it is most common at the primary and middle-school levels. In the Attleboro School District all teachers loop in grades 1-8, mostly in two-year loops, and some have done so in kindergarten and high school (Rappa). Each Waldorf School teacher remains with one class throughout grades 1-8.

Opinions differ regarding when the advantages of variety outweigh the benefits of stability and indepth relationships. Primary teacher Jan Jubert believes the single-year pattern is particularly stressful for younger children and that they ben-

efit most from looping (Grant and others). But Lincoln argues that stability "may be more important in the middle school years than at any other time" in a student's career.

Attleboro teacher Glen Killough supports looping at the elementary level but believes middle-schoolers need variety to counteract their tendency to form cliques (Grant and others). Some Fort Wayne, Indiana, Community School teachers believed that overfamiliarity was a drawback for children older than fourth grade (Simel). The point at which the balance tips may depend on the characteristics of a school's students, staff, and community.

What Problems Are Encountered with Looping?

Longer contact can amplify the negative as well as the positive aspects of relationships. The greatest concern of parents is that their child might spend two years with an ineffective teacher. Time can also exacerbate problems with student-teacher personality clashes, unreasonably demanding parents, problematic mixtures of students, and specific weaknesses of a generally good teacher.

Simel reports that joining a looping class is hard on newcomers, and that introducing five or more new students in the second year can be disruptive enough to reduce the benefits of looping for the original students. Some students and teachers also experience emotional difficulty leaving their classes at the end of a loop.

Looping's longer time-frame increases motivation to resolve problems that might have been ridden out for one year. Seventy percent of Lincoln teachers, who loop for three years, said they made a greater effort to build relationships with parents and that parents were more open (George and others). Difficult students—and parents—may shape up when they face a second year of consistent expectations (Steiny).

It is crucial to create procedures to resolve resistant problems. Grant and others recommend automatically reviewing all student placements at the end of each school year, as well as allowing teachers and parents to request midyear transfers.

Teaming can resolve or reduce many problems. Teachers with different teaching styles and personalities may connect better with particular students or parents; teachers with varied strengths can balance each other's weaker areas (Grant and others). Teaming teachers strong in complementary content areas is particularly common above the elementary level.

Simel advises against involving new teachers in looping until they are secure in teaching one grade level. Attleboro administrators try to match new or weaker teachers with stronger ones from whom they can learn, and school officials regularly evaluate and reassign team members (Grant and others).

What Are Some Tips for Implementation?

Looping is easier and less expensive to implement than most education reforms, but extra resources are still needed to ensure success (Simel). Some staff development is desirable, and it may be essential if grade levels involved have specific curriculum requirements. When Attleboro mandated looping, it encountered resistance from middle-school teachers who had taught classes with specialized content for many years. The district provided summer workshops in new content areas and in team-building to ease the transition (Grant and others). Simel suggests providing looping teachers with extra materials and planning time.

Special care should be taken with class composition. Grant and others warn against the temptation to overload looping classes with special-needs students who might benefit from the supportive atmosphere. Looping classes should have no more than their fair share of such students.

Parents should be informed in advance and ideally offered a choice among looping, standard, and perhaps multiage configurations. Attleboro encourages parents to "shop" among looping teams for the best match for their child at the start of each two-year cycle, and the district tries to accommodate requests (Steiny).

Teachers also deserve choice. While acknowledging Attleboro's success, Forsten and others advise against mandating looping. Successful pilot programs begun by enthusiastic volunteers typically stimulate interest among other teachers and parents in subsequent years, but some teachers may still prefer not to loop.

Providing several options on an ongoing basis does create greater administrative complexity (Forsten and others). However, if it results in improved learning and happier students, parents, and teachers, it is worth the effort.

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