

Looping

Discovering the Benefits of Multiyear Teaching

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On the first day of school, the 2nd graders in Stephanie Jones's class run eagerly into the room to greet their teacher and one another. They quickly put away their lunches, jackets, and school supplies. As the bell rings, Jones invites the students to sit in a circle. They compare what they have written in their journals over the summer and then get started right away on a new writing assignment.

Students in Jones's class are able to start learning on the first day of school because they were all 1st graders in Jones's class the previous year. "Last year on the first day of school, the kids were crying and wouldn't let go of Mom and Dad," she relates. "I spent the morning learning the students' names and teaching them how to introduce themselves to one another. The second half of the day we spent going over bus schedules and procedures."

Buying Time

Jones is one of four teachers at Maple Dale Elementary School (Cincinnati, Ohio) who are involved in looping.

Looping—which is sometimes called multiyear teaching or multiyear placement—occurs when a teacher is promoted with her students to the next grade level and stays with the same group of children for two or three years.

"After a year with my students, I felt like I was just beginning to know them," Jones explains. She first learned about looping three years ago from an article in *Education Update*. "It seemed that there was no down time in looping, so I would have more time for teaching."

"September 1 of the second year of looping is the 181st day of school for those in the class," says Jim Grant, who directs the Society for Developmental Education and codirects the National Alliance of Multiage Educators. Teachers who loop have fewer transitions to make at the beginning of the school year and can introduce curriculum topics right away at the start of the second year, he explains.

"Looping places kids in a developmental continuum," says Carol Cummings, staff development coordinator for the Raising Healthy Children Project at the University of Washington (Edmonds, Wash.). "It can take from three to six weeks at the beginning of the school year to establish classroom routines and expectations." By allowing students and teachers to remain together, says Grant, "looping literally buys time."

A Richer Curriculum

More time for teaching translates into a richer curriculum, say teachers. Since she began looping, Jones says, the most significant way her curriculum has changed is the addition of more social learning at the beginning of the 1st grade. Because she knows she'll have extra time in the second year, Jones spends the first several weeks building a sense of community. Once students have the skills to cooperate and communicate, she says, "you reap the benefits in the second year."

With their extra time in the second year, Jones and her students pursued topics they were interested in. During a heritage unit, the class studied quilts. Their fascination with tessellation led them to an in-depth study of math, science, and the work of Dutch artist M.C. Escher. Using a computer, students created their own designs and made quilts out of paper.

Sara Oldham, a 1st and 2nd grade teacher at Shelton Elementary School in Golden, Colo., appreciates that looping, in addition to giving her more teaching time, permits her to address topics when children show they are ready for them.

Oldham discovered looping when she and two other teachers at her school decided to investigate multiage configurations for their school. "The more I learned, I found I liked some aspects of multiage," she says. "But I didn't want such an age span in my class. In a single grade I think you have enough of a developmental span in the class."

Oldham views the 2nd grade curriculum as an extension of what happens in 1st grade. "Students read and write in 1st grade everyday, and they do in 2nd, too, only it's more sophisticated."

Although Oldham is responsible for covering 1st and 2nd grade curriculums, she can address topics when she thinks students are ready for them. For example, math standards for place value and money are in the 1st grade curriculum, says Oldham. But "I've taught 1st grade long enough to know that money is a hard concept for 1st graders to understand."

At the end of 1st grade, Oldham introduces money to her students and then asks parents and children to practice using money over the summer. She resumes studying it in the 2nd grade, by which time most of the students have practiced exchanging money and getting change.

Because looping allows teachers to decide when to introduce curriculum topics, Oldham suggests that teachers who loop keep records of what they have taught during the first year so they don't repeat themselves. "Sometimes I'll pull out a book and a child will say, 'We read that last year.'"

Meeting the Needs of Each Student

Another benefit of looping cited by teachers is the opportunity to get to know students over two years. After a year, Oldham says, she has learned a lot about each student's skills and strengths. During the summer, "I think about certain children who are having behavior or academic problems and ask myself, 'What can I do to help this child?'" With looping, "you don't have to start from scratch with each child."

Grant believes that building a bond between teachers and students is at the heart of looping: "Teachers have tried everything and now they are getting back to the basics, which is that strong student, parent, and teacher relationships are important."

These strong relationships help all students, but are especially important to students with special needs, say experts. In her class, Oldham has a child who is paraplegic, three ESL students, and two hearing-impaired students. The parents of the wheelchair-bound and hearing-impaired students chose the looping program because they believed the teacher should know a lot about their children's needs, says Oldham.

"This helps both the students and the teacher because the teacher can get used to having the child's aide in the room and students get used to seeing their friend in a wheelchair or brace." By being together for two years, the students feel more comfortable with their peers and will take risks, she explains.

Postponing High-Stakes Decisions

At the same time that looping helps teachers meet special needs of students, it also allows them time to consider the best interests of the children. "Looping allows teachers to postpone high-stakes decisions," says Grant. "If a teacher thinks a child may need a special education referral or an ADD diagnosis—decisions that could dramatically affect the life of the child—they can put it off for a year until they can better observe the child."

Jones remembers a child in her 1st grade class who was having social and academic problems and was physically small for his age. Although she thought repeating 1st grade might give him a chance to mature, she worried that he would feel punished. "On the first day of 2nd grade, I started with him where he'd left off the previous year. That year he took off." He passed all proficiency tests and began to interact more comfortably with his peers, she says. "He skyrocketed and was at grade level by the end of 2nd grade."

Young children are not the only students who benefit from the strong teacher-student relationships and individual attention provided by looping, say experts. Patricia Crosby, a 7th and 8th grade language arts and social studies teacher at Robert J. Coelho Middle School in Attleboro, Mass., cites many of the same benefits of looping as her colleagues in elementary schools. In addition to those benefits, Crosby states that the trust a student has in a teacher can become even more important as children become adolescents. "They ask you questions they don't always think they can ask their parents," she says. "And because you know them so well you can observe any changes in behavior that might indicate problems, such as drug or alcohol abuse."

"Looping is a K-8 thing right now," says Grant, "but it could work at the high school level. Think how great it would be. Adolescence is a tough time. Many young people's lives have been saved because they found a mentor in high school and were able to form a bond with a teacher through having him or her as a teacher for more than one class."

Helping At-Risk Students Succeed

Jan Jubert, a 1st and 2nd grade teacher at Lac du Flambeau Public School in Lac du Flambeau, Wisc., agrees with Grant that looping provides opportunities for students who might otherwise fall through the cracks of the education system. Of her 15 students, most come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and have been identified as at-risk. Additionally, one child in Jubert's class is deaf and requires an interpreter, and the students' ability levels range from learning disabled to gifted and talented. Jubert believes that equal opportunity, which requires equal education, will enable the children to set and reach their life goals.

"Children today join gangs because they want to feel they are a part of a group and feel accepted," says Jubert.

"Looping makes children feel secure. At-risk kids are starving for this." Because many parents work two jobs or are single parents, she explains, students need to feel a bond with one another and with adults. "It takes the entire first year to build a level of trust," she says.

By staying with a teacher who really knows them and whom they trust, students are given time and high-quality instruction to succeed, says Jubert. Because she has more time to teach and to consider the needs of each child, Jubert says, she covers more material, offers more hands-on activities to her students, and designs activities using multiple intelligences theories that will help children learn the way they learn best.

Jubert believes that looping has helped her reach her goal to make a difference for her students. She cites high attendance, increased test scores, improved self-esteem, and a love of learning as the results. "The children love to be at school. They come in at 6 a.m. and stay as long as they can or until the bus leaves."

Parent Involvement

Not only do students who loop enjoy school more, but teachers say that parents of those students feel more comfortable talking to teachers. "Increased parent involvement is a nice by-product of looping," says Grant. Because families get to know teachers, parents relax in the second year, Oldham says. Some parents feel uncomfortable in schools or may not have had a positive education experience themselves, explains Oldham. "For those parents who tend to be a little more reserved, looping helps them because they know the teacher and communication can take place on a deeper level. Especially if a child is struggling, the teacher and parents can work closely together."

"Knowing that parents and I will be in a partnership for two years changes our ideas about what our relationship will be," says Jones. To lay a foundation for parent-teacher communication, Jones routinely invites parents to visit the class and calls parents with positive remarks and reports about their child during the first year of the loop. By the second year, "the parents know your expectations for their child," she says. "Sometimes, the parents have different expectations than you, and the parents speak more frankly in the second year."

Fostering a good relationship between parents and the teacher benefits the child in the end, says Jones. "Because parents are comfortable with the teacher, the teacher learns how to help parents and parents learn how to help the teacher."

Making Smooth Transitions

For students, leaving a looping class can be scary, says Oldham. To help prepare them, students in grades 1-3 work on projects together throughout the year so the children can meet other students and teachers. In December, for example, they decorated cookies and took them to local nursing homes.

As the end of the school year approached last year, Jones knew that the children in her class would be divided into six 3rd grade classes. With another 2nd grade teacher she held writing workshops during the last month of school so the students could get to know one another. Still, this wasn't enough, she says, because she would see her former students clinging together on the playground during recess this year. In response, she and her colleagues have instituted "Fabulous 1st Graders" assemblies once a month so students can interact.

Despite its benefits for students, teachers, and parents, Grant concedes that looping isn't for everyone. "The entire school shouldn't adopt looping. One teaching model won't work for everyone."

He warns that looping by itself will not cause student achievement scores to skyrocket. Jubert agrees, saying, "Looping is not a cure-all and it may not be for everyone. It is a means rather than an end."

Nevertheless, Jubert calls looping "the most rewarding opportunity to help children I've ever engaged in." For her, looping has allowed her to "see the children be the best they can be—to see them read, cooperate and work together, and to see joy in them as they learn."

Addressing Parent and Teacher Concerns

Parents considering placing their child in a looping class usually voice three concerns, says Jim Grant of the Society for Developmental Education and the National Alliance of Multiage Educators. And teachers interested in looping often ask the same questions as parents, he says. In his own words, Grant lists and responds to these concerns:

1. **What if there is a personality conflict between a child and teacher?**

The answer is to move the child to another class. This is what is done in traditional, non-looping classrooms, too. The goal is always to facilitate student learning.

2. **What if my child has a bad teacher and has to stay with him or her for two years?**

It is the school administrator's job to make sure that no inadequate teacher teaches in the school, let alone loops, for more than one year. Besides, it's the best teachers who are looking for new challenges who usually volunteer to loop. Because it's a lot of work, the best teachers usually end up looping.

3. **What if the class is dysfunctional?**

Sometimes a class may have too many high-needs kids or be top-heavy with kids with summer birthdays. Most schools try to balance each class by gender, abilities, needs, culture, race, and linguistic ability. This should be the same for looping classes.