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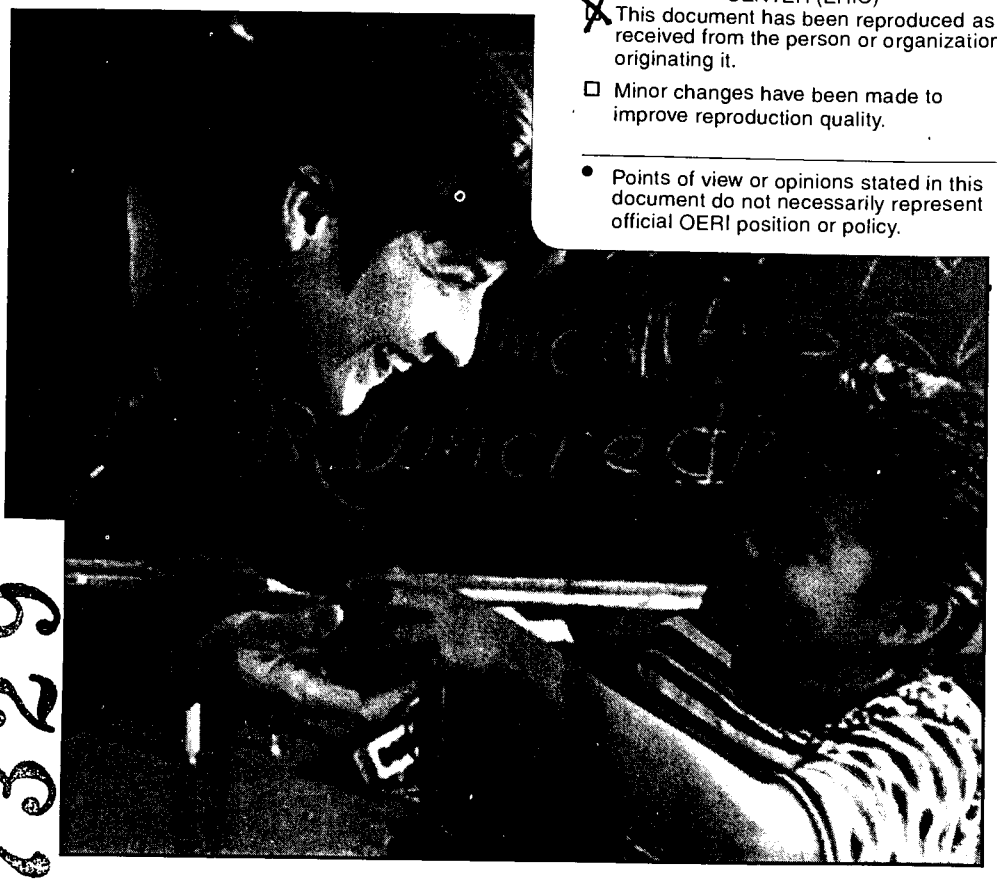
ABSTRACT

Looping refers to the increasingly common practice of keeping groups of students together for two or more years with the same teacher. This booklet, first in a series of "Themes in Education" provides information on the educational practice of looping and includes selected current references on the topic. The booklet outlines the history of this practice, delineates its operating principles, differentiates looping from multi-age placement, and describes the academic and social benefits of the practice. Using a question and answer format, the booklet also answers questions commonly asked by parents, students, teachers, and administrators about looping. The booklet concludes with a description of the responsibilities and mission of the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University. Contains 32 references. (KB)

Looping:

Supporting Student Learning Through Long-Term Relationships



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Looping

NOVEMBER 1997

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About This Series

This is the first in a series of "Themes in Education" booklets produced by the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University. The topics addressed by these pamphlets are generated in response to requests for information from practitioners, parents, and others. Each booklet presents a balanced view of the topic and a glimpse at places where the activity is in operation. Some topics may lend themselves to a state-by-state summary or a vignette illustrating the activity. Other topics are more global in nature, and the report will cite a few illustrations within the region or nationally.

The goal of the series is to provide resources containing useful information on education-related topics of interest. Connections to other relevant resources, selected current references, and ways to obtain more information are found in each booklet.

Comments on Looping . . .

- *My original fears about changing to a new grade quickly disappeared as I moved from a curriculum-centered to a student-centered classroom.*
  — Barbara Hanson, teacher at the Willett School in Attleboro, Massachusetts (Hanson, 1995).

- *This September our looped classes started without anxiety.*
  — Lynn Babcock, principal of Grant Elementary School in Livonia, Michigan (National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 1996).

- *It's so much easier for me to establish academic expectations.*
  — April Schilb, second grade teacher at Hillcrest Elementary School in East Moline, Illinois (Checkley, 1995a).

- *A looping schedule gives children the time to build relationships, time they wouldn't have in a typical nine month schedule.*
  — Sue Bredekamp, director of staff development for the National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC] (Checkley, 1995a).

- *I have had some of my most rewarding teaching and learning experiences with these children.*
  — Deborah Jacoby, teacher in Chicago, Illinois (Jacoby, 1994).

- *Best of all, learning began on Day One for the kids this year.*
  — Mel Chafetz, principal of the Spaulding School in Suffield, Connecticut (NAESP, 1996).

These comments from teachers and principals around the United States reflect the positive experiences most educators and students have had when looping has been implemented in their schools. Through looping, large schools become less anonymous and small schools become an integral part of the community.

INTRODUCTION

A quiet hum is heard in the second grade class as one group gathers to listen to a peer's new fiction piece; another group discusses the details of a science project; and others are reading comfortably while sitting or lying on the floor. The teacher and a student are conferencing. Quiet laughter is heard occasionally as they discuss an assignment.

In the middle school, the science teacher is mapping out the semester's science units with the class. They soon break into small, self-organized groups and begin the work of deciding who does what within the working cluster. The teacher makes the rounds and clarifies a few important points.

Is it December? Is it March? Such smooth classroom organization and close working relationships often take months to foster. One might never guess it is the second week of school—in two classrooms that have been looped.

What Is Looping?

You may already have heard of looping under another name such as "continuous learning," "continuous progress," "persisting groups," "multi-year grouping," "teacher/student progression," or a number of other terms. Looping, a term coined by Jim Grant, author of "The Looping Handbook," refers to the not-so-new but increasingly common practice of keeping groups of students together for two or more years with the *same* teacher.

The History of Looping

Looping has been around for a while in various forms. Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian educator and philosopher living in Germany in the early 1900s, founded the Waldorf Schools. These schools educated the children of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory workers. Steiner believed that a long-term relationship with the teacher was beneficial to children. Waldorf teachers stayed with their students from grades one through eight. Today in Germany, students and teachers stay together from grades one through four.

"Shall teachers in graded city schools be advanced from grade to grade with their pupils through a series of two, three, four, or more years, so that they may come to know the children they teach and be able to build the work of the latter years on that of the earlier years...?" This question was posed in a memo by the U.S. Department of Education in 1913. The memo went on to discuss the advantages of such a class structure, outlining some of the same advantages of looping that teachers today are noticing. (Grant, Johnson, & Richardson, 1996).

Deborah Meier, an award-winning New York City educator and the author of *The Power of Their Ideas*, began using multi-year assignments in her school in 1974. She considers looping essential because it allows the teachers and students to get to know one another well.

Today, many teachers, administrators, and superintendents are "rediscovering" the logic behind multi-year placements.

Operating Principles

(WYNNE & WALBERG, 1975; GRANT, ET AL., 1996)

- Schools keep groups of students together over long periods of time. The size of the groups is not as important as the continuity from year to year.
- The teacher is "promoted" along with the students to the next grade.
- The period of time students and teachers stay together is determined by the school personnel. Groups in some districts have stayed together for anywhere from two to five years, although two years seems to be the term most frequently recommended and employed.
- Preparing the teachers adequately for their "new" curriculum yields the best results.

What Looping Is Not...

Looping, also known as multi-year placement, is not the same as multi-*age* placement. Looping involves keeping discrete groups of similarly-aged students together for a period of several years with the same teacher. In multi-age placements, students of various ages are together in the same classroom. Many schools considering a multi-age program view looping as a solid first step. With looping, a teacher can implement a more coherent instructional plan appropriate to the child's development. (Grant, et al., 1996).

It Sounds So Simple! Does Looping Really Work?

Looping *is* simple. It usually costs the school very little and it is easy to implement. More common in Europe, where looping was endorsed by Austrian educator Rudolf Steiner, it has been implemented successfully for years in Germany, most notably by Anne Ratzki of the Koln-Holweide School. Looping is also becoming more common in Japanese, Israeli, and Montessori Schools.

Although not much quantitative research exists on the benefits of looping, qualitative research supports the process and indicates that looping has several advantages for both students and teachers.

ACADEMIC BENEFITS

- Teachers gain extra teaching time. "Getting-to-know-you" time becomes virtually unnecessary during the second year.

  We don't lose several weeks each September learning a new set of names, teaching the basic rules to a new set of students, figuring out exactly what they learned the previous year; and we don't lose weeks at the end of the year packing students back up. (Ratzki, 1988).

- Teacher knowledge about a child's intellectual strengths and weaknesses increases in a way that is impossible to achieve in a single year.

  I had watched my students' skills emerge and solidify. I was able to reinforce those skills in a style that was consistent over two years. (Jacoby, 1994).

- "Long term teacher/student relationships improve... student performance." (George, 1987).

  Standardized test scores have gone up since the school opened six years ago. While these results can't be linked to

one particular program, certainly program consistency is one contributing factor. — Joe Belmonte, principal, in *Multi-Year Education: Reaping the Benefits of Looping.* (Checkley, 1995b).

- "Long term teacher/student relationships improve job satisfaction for teachers." (George & Oldaker, 1985).

  According to Maryann Pour Previti, principal of Worcester (MA) Central Catholic Elementary School, the teachers spending two years with the same students are "the happiest people in my building." (Burke, 1996).

- Multi-year teaching offers tremendous possibilities for summertime learning, such as summer reading lists, mini-projects, and field trips.

  The thought of being able to 'keep the ball rolling' during the summer recess seemed a logical and educationally sound idea. (Killough, 1996).

SOCIAL ADVANTAGES

- Students have reduced apprehension about the new school year and the new teacher after the first year. (Hanson, 1995; Checkley, 1995a).

  This is the best first day of school. I can be with my teacher from last year. I can see my friends. I like school. — Larry, a fourth grader (Hanson, 1995).

- Students reap benefits from time spent on developing social skills and cooperative group strategies in subsequent years. (Hanson, 1995).

  After being together for two years, some of the kids I didn't know as well, or get along with as well, I get along with better now than I did before. —Jason, an eighth grader (Grant, et al., 1996).

- Looping permits students to get to know one another well, facilitating social construction of knowledge. (Zahorik and Dichanz, 1994).

  Students are better able to resolve conflicts and they are more skillful in working as team members to solve problems. (Hanson, 1995).

- Long term relationships result in an emotional and intellectual climate that encourages thinking, risk-taking, and involvement. (Marzano, 1992; Zahorik/Dichanz, 1994).

  The students have learned to take risks because they trust each other. — April Schilb, teacher (Checkley, 1995).

- English language learners adjust to their new school and become comfortable with their teacher, developing confidence in their newly acquired language. (Haslinger, Kelly & O'Lare, 1996).

  They [the students] begin to share stories and customs from their countries, resulting in global understanding and respect among all the students. (Haslinger, Kelly & O'Lare, 1996).

- Looping encourages a stronger sense of community and family among parents, students, and teachers. (Checkley, 1995).

  It's a big school, and having the same parents for two years makes it easier to think of the school as a neighborhood school, because you get to know the families that much more. —Phyllis Sisson, teacher (Grant, et al., 1996).

- Parents embrace looping once they understand its benefits.

  It was a very pleasant experience. I just hope the rest of our school years can be as nice as this one has been. — Sheila Green, parent (Grant, et al., 1996).

Commonly Asked Questions

Nothing is perfect. Looping is a simple concept, however, and there are not many things that can go wrong. Nonetheless, there are a few legitimate questions about looping.

PARENT QUESTIONS:

Q. What if my child draws a weak teacher? Will my child be stuck for two years?

Q. Can a placement be changed if my child has a personality conflict with the teacher?

A. Beginning a looping program in schools on a voluntary basis allows for low-key and low-impact implementation. However, the burden is still on the administration to assign only willing and capable teachers to multi-year programs. Once successes become evident in the school and teachers see the benefits, more and more teachers will volunteer.

Additionally, multi-year teaming may actually improve teaching. The administration can balance teams based on teacher strengths, team a novice teacher with a more experienced teacher, or create a team where a less able teacher is paired with one or two more effective teachers. If all else fails, and a parent, teacher, or student is still dissatisfied, the option always exists to move that student to another placement the following year, depending on school policies.

STUDENT QUESTION:

Q. What if I get a teacher I really cannot work with?

A. Multi-year assignments are an incentive for teachers to try harder to reach kids. With the one-year placements

common in many schools, it is easy to say, "I have this child only for a few more months....I can hang on that long." In a multi-year assignment, dealing with personality clashes immediately and with total commitment is a priority.

This can mean a variety of strategies, some of which are outlined in *The Looping Handbook.* A teacher can sit down with the student and discuss the problems he or she is having. Conferencing about successful approaches with teachers who have worked with the child in the past is another possibility. Including parents in the dialogue also helps. Long-term conflict is to be avoided. Finally, when implementing looping, administrators and teachers can include the policy that all placements should be reviewed at the conclusion of the school year.

TEACHER QUESTIONS:

Q. What if I have too many students with special needs?

A. Teaching has changed dramatically over the last 20 years. Educators encounter a host of complex problems in their student populations which impact their classrooms and schools. There are students who are homeless, who have families in crisis, who have been or are being emotionally or physically abused, who are learning disabled and require a variety of special services, who have untreated health problems, or who are stressed by living in an increasingly fast-paced society.

The school traditionally has been a place of support and nurturing, and the multi-year classroom strengthens this tradition. The temptation exists to place many of the children with special needs in the looped classrooms.

This can overwhelm the teacher. With thoughtful implementation of a multi-year placement program, these issues can be discussed beforehand, and appropriate guidelines can be established.

Q. Will there be enough time for me to learn two curriculums?

A. In the beginning, teachers will invest more time learning the second-year curriculum, one with which they may not be familiar. This time is compensated for during the second year, as orientation to the new students takes just a few minutes rather than a month or more.

ADMINISTRATOR QUESTION:

In many schools that have employed looping, attendance has improved. "Student attendance in grades two through eight has increased from 92% daily attendance (ADA) to 97.2% ADA," states Joseph Rappa, Superintendent of schools in Attleboro, Massachusetts (Rappa, 1993). In Anne Ratzki's Koln-Holweide School, only 1% of the students drop out.

Q. In our district, many students move into or out of the district in a given year. Will looping work in this context?

A. When students are entering a new school for the first time, whether they move frequently or not, it is important that students and parents know that schools care about them. While focusing on long-term relationships, looping also allows for a close relationship between students, teachers, and curriculum. All students, whether they remain in the same school or move to another, benefit from their relationship with the teacher. Looping is about many things, but mostly it is about long-term relationships between teachers, students, and parents, and about an intimate relationship with the curriculum.

Conclusion

Looping has existed for many centuries. In the days of the one-room schoolhouse, when only one teacher was available, all students were taught by that teacher over a period of several years. More formally, looping has been working in German Waldorf Schools since the early part of this century. Closer to home, the United States Department of Education considered looping in 1913. As did Deborah Meier in the 1970s and Anne Ratzki in the 1980s, thousands of schools all over the country are now looping successfully.

How Do I Get More Information?

For more information about looping or other publications like this one, contact the LAB at Brown University Information Center by calling Eileen Ferrance at (401) 274-9548 x256; or by sending email to <*LABinfo@brown.edu*>.

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Acknowledgment

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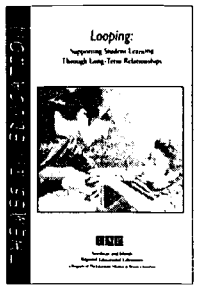

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