Social and Academic Benefits of Looping Primary Grade Students

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Abstract

There is an increasing interest in the practice of teachers staying with a group of students for more than one year. This is referred to as looping in educational practice. The problem of constant uncertainty or change of a new teacher year to year, creates less academic time and student anxiety. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of looping, to strengthen the relationship between the student and teacher in order to create less student anxiety and more academic time in the beginning of the school year.

A review of the literature reveals that students in a looped classroom have a closer relationship with their teacher and as a result, feel like their classroom is a home away from home. In a looped classroom, there is an increase in student attendance, decrease in discipline problems, and there is a greater opportunity to observe children, determine their needs and adjust instruction according to the individual needs of the children Due to the close student/teacher relationship, the teacher is able to teach to each student's needs.

Although there has been little research on looping, we do know that the Waldorf schooling method has been around since the early 1900s. More research on looped classroom needs to be done to help support the idea that looping is socially and academically beneficial to students in the primary grades.

In addition to reviewing the literature, I also conducted a questionnaire which assessed students' perspective on being in a looped classroom. This voluntary questionnaire gave me a better understanding of the benefits of this educational term referred to as 'looping'.   The questions were designed to discover a child's feelings towards their teacher and their classmates in a looped classroom.. I gathered data in order to confirm or reject the research information that I retrieved.   Results indicate that

there are many social and academic benefits for students in a classroom with the same

teacher and classmates for two consecutive years.   Published research and the gathered

data prove that students are less anxious about the upcoming school year and create a

strong bond not with the teacher and their peers when they are in a looped classroom.

Introduction

A strong bond is formed between the teacher and students. A teacher begins to remember the names of their future students as he or she writes name tags, makes class lists, and assigns each child a notebook and journal during the weeks before the start of the upcoming school year.   As the summer days dwindle, the teacher reviews the placement cards complete with strengths, weaknesses, and special needs of each individual in their classroom.   The bond is already forming.

On a warm, early morning in late August, the familiar sound of a school bell rings and echoes in the jammed packed halls of a school. The teacher slowly opens the classroom door and is greeted by unfamiliar children complete in their new clothes and spotless new shoes. They are smiling, but on the inside they are unsure and nervous about a new teacher. Will he or she be nice? Will the days schedule be written on the board? What will the rules be like? How is the classroom set up and who will I be sitting by? Every year, these small, little bodies endure this sense of nervousness on the first day of school.   This cycle is completed at the end of a school year and is restarted at the beginning of the new school year.

We as educators get to really know students by the time the end of the school year rolls around.   I get to know and thoroughly understand each individual's academic strengths, weaknesses, and the areas that they need to improve on. I know their mannerisms, their "blueprint." I know everything about them. I feel as if I can teach to their specific needs in a way that makes them feel comfortable and willing to take risks compared to any other student in a different class. I really feel like I can connect with

them on a different individual basis. I know how to treat each child differently based on their makeup. As the year ends you get a whole new group and you have to start all over, building that relationship once again.

I have always asked myself if there was an easier way to say good-bye to a group of students, who of which all grew together and became a close knit family. Some of my students have referred to me, accidentally of course, as mom. I can wave to them in the halls and watch them learn from another colleague, but will that ever be enough?

Taking a deeper look at the strong relationship that is created between a teacher and their students from the beginning of the school year until the end, I wanted to explore the educational term referred to as looping. In a looped classroom, the teacher follows his or her students to the next grade level. For example, a 2nd grade teacher teaches his or her same students in 3rd grade too. The same classmates and teacher strengthen their already created bond. I want to look at the social and academic benefits of having the same students and teacher in the same classroom for two consecutive years.

Statement of the Problem

The beginning of a new school year can bring uncertainty, stress, and anxiety to young students in the primary grades.   Every year a new teacher has to learn each individual student's learning style and teach accordingly. This process can take months or a whole school year to master. A child's learning disability can possibly go unseen, but a teacher's observations and directly teaching to the needs of each individual in the classroom, can be beneficial and create a sense of reassurance among the students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the student/ teacher relationship and see how a looped classroom helps lower student anxiety in order to show academic and social growth. For the purpose of this study, the educational practice is referred to as looping. Teachers who have their same group of students for more than one year get to have one more month for academic teaching.

Research Question

What are the social and academic benefits of looping primary age students? Secondly, does a strong teacher/student relationship create less anxiety for students in a looped classroom?

Theoretical Rationale

Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian-born philosopher, opened the first Waldorf School in 1913 (Carroll, 2005).. Steiner believed that children progressed through three stages during development. In the first stage, children were just becoming familiar with their surroundings. The second stage suggested that children were in an imagination or fantasy world. During the final stage, each child learned more about their physical body which leads to puberty. With this in mind, Steiner created a school in which students and teachers formed a deep connection or relationship. The teacher would follow their same group throughout these developmental phases of their childhood, allowing students to feel safe in his or her surroundings.

In addition to Steiner' schooling philosophy, Dr. Jane Healy focuses in on the "readiness" of a child's brain (Healy, 2001). Healy understands that individuals develop at different times and that educators, parents, and all adults need to challenge students in

order for them to develop strong connections in life as opposed to sitting back and being

fed information.

Assumptions

Being a teacher in a looped classroom, I have already experienced, first-hand, the

many social and academic benefits of teaching students for more than one year. My

students know what is expected of them and they also know and understand my teaching

style. I have many students with learning disabilities, so I offer many learning strategies

to each and every student in my classroom. I have seen my students grow so much in

two years and become more comfortable with learning. They are more willing to take a

risk; by reading aloud, answering questions, or working with different partners. I assume

that the research will only support my experiences as well as offer suggestions to help

educators realize the importance of developing strong relationships with each and every

student.

Background and Need

As Lewis (2001) points out, "Now over 800 Rudolf Steiner (or Waldorf) schools

exist around the world" (p.1). Educators must believe something is working within these

school communities for these types of schools to be still operating today. These statistics

demonstrate that this idea of "looping' is an effective teaching practice. The

teacher/student relationship creates a safe learning environment and allows for students to

progress through the developmental stages with less anxiety.

Review of the Literature

A review of the research shows that a strong teacher/student relationship in the

classroom leads to a better understanding of each individual's needs. The teacher teaches

the same group of students for more than one year, creating less anxiety and emotional stress for the children.

In addition to the positive emotional effects looping has on the students, it is true that there are social and academic benefits as well. Grant, Richardson, and Johnson further explore some of these benefits. According to Rappa, Superintendent of the Attleboro School District in Massachusetts , "Students who have the same teacher for two years tend to enjoy school more, have fewer discipline problems, fewer absences, are referred to special education placement less often, and are less apt to be retained in a grade for lack of achievement" (as cited in Forsten, Grant, Johnson, and Richardson, 1997, p.13).   Reports support the idea that there are benefits to students in a looped classroom.

Emotional Stress/Anxiety for Students

Grossniklaus, Smith, and Wood (2001) explore Piaget's four stages of Cognitive Development as a series of stages that children go through in which they demonstrate new intellectual abilities and more complex understandings of their surrounding world. According to the researchers children never skip a stage, but rather enter the next stages at different times, based upon the environment and background of each individual. Children grow physically, mentally, emotionally at different ages. A teacher who knows his or her students well enough, can address topics when students are developmentally ready for them.

Bhattacharya and Han (2001) take a closer look at Piaget's Assimilation, Accommodation, and Equilibrium theory.   Piaget saw that children use what they know from experiences to help them expand their intellectual growth. The link between the

internal cognitive structure and external reality depends on a child assimilating the information they already know and accommodating it, or linking it to external reality, or the real world. The balance between the use of prior experiences and applying it to the real world is known as equilibrium, according to Piaget. "When external reality does not match up with the logical internal mental structures, equilibration occurs as an effort to bring balance between assimilation and accommodation as the person adapts more sophisticated internal mental structures (Bhattacharya & Han, 2001 p.2). Children use what they already know or understand about their surrounding world in order to help them make sense of uncertainties.   A bond is created between teacher and student if they are together for more than one year. This bond assists the teacher in tapping into a student's prior experiences to introduce new material.   The subject matter becomes more real to each and every student since the teacher can teach to the different needs of the children.

Dr. Jane Healy refers to children's ability to make sense of their surroundings as "meaningful learning". According to Healy (1991), this meaningful learning will help children face uncertain challenges in the future. Her study on brain-based education explores the importance of understanding a child's brain and knowing when they are "ready" to learn. She takes a step away from school curriculum, and focuses more on the intellectual language, listening skills, and ability to reason. "Deficits in these fundamental "habits of mind" cause not only academic but also social problems" (Healy, 1991, p.3). Children need adult models to help them shape their brains in order to function not only academically, but socially as well. Teachers who really know their

students well, know their individual "blueprints" in order to shape their minds to understand academic and social language.

Constant change leads to anxiety and stress on these individuals as they venture out and explore their surroundings. Consistency with the teacher and strong relationships allows for the child to take risks and feel comfortable during this uncertain stage. Gaustad (1998) and Cassidy and Hedge (citation)   see this idea of consistency as a way of reducing student anxiety for the upcoming year, increasing stability, and building a sense of community between the classmates.

Piaget and Healy are not the only theorists behind children's developmental stages. Rudolf Steiner founded the Waldorf Schools in order to meet the individual needs of the developing child. "The Waldorf philosophy views education as an art, so each subject, is presented in a living way that speaks to the child's developmental stage" (Mays & Nordwall, 2004-6, p.3).   Steiner believed that the teacher's focus was to draw upon children's strengths and create an environment in which the students would be filled with interest, curiosity, and enthusiasm. He thought the best way to achieve this goal was to have the teacher follow his or her students from grades one through eight. Mays and Norwall suggest that Waldorf schools involve the students in order to build the subject matter based upon their individual experiences. This helps students gain verbal skills, imagination, memory and develop active listening, which refers back to Healy's notion of helping children develop the 'habits of mind'. Teachers have the same students year after year and as a result, the teachers are able to help each student shape their brain. The teacher is able to draw upon the student's abilities in order to shape and challenge their minds, in effect letting them understand the real world.

Social Benefits

   The special bond between teacher and student in a looped classroom also creates social benefits for students. Children tend to be stress-free around people they already know. As Chaika (2005) and Burke (1997) point out, children in looped classrooms have support for those who may need stabilizing influences in their lives and creates increased opportunities for shy students as well as others to develop self-confidence. Trejos (2001) discusses a teacher's first hand experience of the closeness she feels with her students. Stewart states, "My batch of shy first graders last year could only spell and read so many words. Now there is no stopping them from running up to her with questions. They often volunteer to read out loud to their classmates" (Stewart and Trejos, 2001 p.1). Students feel comfortable with their classmates with whom they have a close bond with. They are more willing to take a risk in a safe environment.

   Bafile (2004) and Mays and Nordwall (2004-2006) express that a looped classroom is like a home away from home. This close unit learns so much about one another, themselves, and their teacher. They all learn how to work well with one another and the teacher acts as a parent. Forsten et al. (1997) says that discipline is much better in a looped classroom. "The children know the classroom routines and trust that they are in a consistent, stable environment" (Forsten, Grant, Johnson & Richardson, 1997, p.14). These children create a special bond with their peers and tend to protect and help one another. Forsten et al. (1997) also focuses on the fact that attendance rises in a looped classroom. Students actually are excited and want to come to school because they because of the strong friendships they have created. Burke (1997) says that there is increased support for students who view school as a 'safety net'. He goes on to say that

students in a looped classroom feel a more sense of community as opposed to students in a regular classroom.

Academic Benefits

Teachers in a looped classroom can avoid the beginning of the year 'getting-to-know-you' month. Instead, teachers can pick up from where they left off the year before. Students get one more month of direct instruction being in a looped classroom (Burke 1995 & 1996). The transition from one grade level to the next is virtually unnecessary. (Chaika 2005) According to Krogmann and Van Sant (2000), "Of the 3,200 minutes spent in the classroom during the first two weeks of school, an average of 390 minutes were spent on developing rules, routines, and relationships" (p.13) In a looped classroom most rules, routines, and relationships are already formed, although they may need fine tuning. Krogmann and Van Sant (2000) also note that teachers feel it takes up to three months before they can comfortably say they understand the individual students learning abilities and styles. At the beginning of the school year, looped teachers already have a sense of their students learning abilities and styles and can teach to their individuals needs accordingly, right from the start.

Test scores can also be evidence of academic progress and growth. Krogmann and Van Sant (2000) did a study in which they compared Curriculum Based Monitoring reading fluency tests between a looped and a non-looped classroom. The median reading score in the looped class at the end of first grade was 50 and the non-looped class's median was 47. The non-looped class went to a new teacher in the second grade, while the teacher of the looped class advanced to the second grade with her same group of

students. By the end of second grade the looped class had a median class score of 67 and

the non-looped class score was 64.5.

Burke explored the findings in a study created by Bond, Hampton, and Mumford

(1997). They researched a multi-year primary program component called FAST. The

research showed that students in looped classroom showed higher reading and math

achievement scores on standardized test as opposed to students in a tradition classroom,

even when both groups were instructed by the same teacher.

Students who struggle academically, also gain confidence in knowing that they

will have the same teacher who already knows them. Individualized Education Plans

(IEPs) are designed to help students who have a difficult time learning or struggling with

new concepts.   The classroom teacher, resource teacher, and administrators meet to

discuss how children with special needs can receive services in and out of the classroom

to get them closer to grade level standards. Teachers who follow these particular students

are already familiar with their learning adjustments or helpful hints. According to

Forsten et al. (1997), students with special needs can benefit from the close-knit

classroom. Special needs students have difficulties with acceptance, but in a looped

classroom, the close friends often are more willing to assist their peers, regardless of their

academic disability.   Forsten et al. goes on to explain that the teachers will also have

more insight to the strengths and weaknesses of students who need more academic

assistance.

Importance of a Positive Student/Teacher Relationship

Gaustad (1998) believes that staying with a class for several years allows teachers

to gather a more in depth knowledge of students' personalities, learning styles and

weaknesses. The teacher then is able to take what they know in order to teach to the

unique learning styles of each individual student in their class. "Teacher knowledge

about a child's intellectual strengths and weaknesses increases in way that is impossible

to achieve in a single year" (Brown University, 1997, p.10). During the second year, the

'looped' teacher is already a step ahead of the game. They are already aware of each

child's abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. Using what the teacher already knows about

the students, helps them create more effective teaching strategies to get through to each

child.

The Osgood File (2001) conducted a radio interview with Dennis Gragnolati, a

principal at South Elementary School in Windsor Locks CT. Principal Gragnolati

discusses the importance of teacher/student bond.   Gragnolati believes that the idea of

looping is to avoid student anonymity by creating long-term relationships between

teacher and students. This later allows for a stable learning environment and a teacher

who adjusts his or her instruction based on the students learning style and needs. Trust

and support drive the student/teacher relationship.

When looking at Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development, Grossniklau, Wood,

and Smith (2001) had suggestions on how a teacher could assist in the stages. A

teacher's role is to facilitate learning by providing a variety of experiences. Looped

teachers who really understand their students, can create the opportunity for their students

to explore and experiment, which can encourage students to challenge and accept new

material.

Not only do teachers know their students, but the students also understand what

their teachers expect from them. A real sense of community is built within a looped

classroom. This looped classroom is a place where students trust one another and feel safe. Students are more willing to speak up, ask questions, volunteer to read out loud, and find it less stressful to make a mistake. Trejos sums it up when she talks with Jim Grant, a New Hampshire-based co-author of three books on looping. He states that, "We don't change dentists or doctors every 36 weeks. In schools, we build trust and reliability and then server it every 36 weeks" (2001, 1). There is a better sense of trust and reassurance, lowering the anxiety and stress, when a long-term relationship is formed.

<center>Methods or Procedures</center>

Sample and Site

  For my research project, I chose to have students voluntarily participate in a questionnaire. I completed a questionnaire sheet which lists seven questions for the students to answer. The questions are directed towards their feelings about being in a classroom in which they had the same teacher for two consecutive years and the same classmates. The participating students filled out the questionnaires anonymously on a computer.   A teacher took the students to the computer lab, went over the directions, explained that they did not have to participate in the research study, and watched them complete the questionnaires on the computer. She then instructed them to save their answers in a folder on the school server. I was able to collect the answers, forward them to my laptop. This was an unbiased, purposive sample group since they are in a looped classroom. They were given the option not to answer the questions. These students are in a third grade classroom at a suburban elementary school in the San Francisco Bay area.

Access and Permission

       I completed my IRB form and received consent from the school principal. . The

children did not experience any risk since they voluntarily participated in the

questionnaire and their answers were anonymous.

Data Gathering Strategies

       The information I gathered is qualitative.   The collected data is focused on

discussions of trends or common themes which are based on the answers from the

questionnaires.   A teacher at the school site administered and monitored the

questionnaires the students took on the computer, and then had the students save them to

a folder on the school server. I read through the children's responses and started

collecting the qualitative data they chose to share in their answers. I was able to place

their responses into categories.   I took the data I collected and applied it to prior research

I discovered through my review of the literature.

Data Analysis Approach

       Once the data was collected, I began the grounded theory approach. This

inductive method of analysis looks for theories in behavior. I used the students'

responses to the questionnaire, and compared it with the data I found within the review of

the literature. I also used the collected data to form theories about children's behavior

about being in a looped classroom.

Ethical Standards

       This study adheres to Ethical Standards in Human Subjects Research of the

American Psychological Association (Publication Manual of the American Psychological

Association, 200?). Additionally, the project was reviewed and approved by the

Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board, approval number 5067.

Findings

After reading through students responses to the questionnaires, I was quickly able

to see some patterns. Based upon the responses, I saw that students were scared and

nervous about having a new teacher at the beginning of the year. Many of them listed

specific words, such as scared, unsure, worried, and nervous. As the prior research

shows, students are very anxious about the start of a new school year with a new teacher.

They are unsure about the class routines, the teacher's teaching style and are worried

about the changes that are awaiting them. With a new teacher, the first few months is

dedicated to getting to know one another and understanding classroom rules and routines.

In a looped classroom, the students already understand the rules and routines, they

know what is expected of them, and they know the teacher's habits and teaching style.

Student stress levels decreased when they walked up to the office and saw their name on

a class roster, realizing that they had the same teacher for a second consecutive year. The

second question on the questionnaire asked how the students felt about having the same

teacher again. Some said they were relieved because they knew that the teacher was nice

and funny. Others said they were happy because they were sad to leave their teacher at

the end of the prior school year.

Research shows that students in a looped classroom have fewer discipline

problems, fewer student absences, and more of a feeling of a home away from home than

students who are assigned to a new teacher each year. The teacher actually switched

classrooms and moved into a new wing so the students felt like they were in a different

grade, but still with the same teacher. The teacher created a new home away from home

for the class. The classroom setup was a bit different, but all adjusted well.

The students and teacher were quickly able to jump into the new school year, with

a quick refresher on classroom rules and routines. The teacher was able to bypass the

'getting to know you' month at the start of a new school year. This gave the teacher the

opportunity to see what the students remembered from last year and see where I needed

to pick up from in the curriculum.

In reading the questionnaire responses, I saw that the risk in looping children was

a great service to them.   In addition to studying the research, I also had the opportunity to

get feedback from students who were currently in a looped classroom. After reading the

questionnaire responses and comparing my findings to the published research, it was

clear to me that looping not only was a great experience for the students, but for the

teacher as well.

Overall students felt happy to have the same teacher, participated in class more

because they knew their classmates would not make fun of them, and were excited to

come to school each and every day. Their stress level increases when they think about

the upcoming year and who their teacher will be. Students in the looped class felt a real

bond with their classmates. They said that they felt more comfortable raising their hand

and taking a risk because they knew that their friends would not put them down than they

would have in a new class, assigned to a new teacher. The students did not cringe when

they had to work with a certain partner, but seemed to get along well with everyone.

There is a real sense of community in a looped classroom and that is due to the closeness

everyone is experiencing. They feel that they learned the same as they would with a

different teacher, but their test scores compared with a non-looped classroom are

amazing. I feel that this is a direct affect of the fact that they were more willing to take a

risk because their peers already knew them and their abilities.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. How did you feel when you found out that you were going to have the same teacher for a second year?	- Happy - Excited - Relieved
2. How did you feel, not knowing who your teacher was going to be?	- Nervous - Scared - Worried
3. What are some things you liked about having the same teacher for 2 years in a row?	- She's Funny - She's Nice - She teaches us a lot - We do fun projects
4. What are some things you did not like about having the same teacher for 2 years in a row?	- Sometimes she gets mad - I wanted to see what other teachers were like
5. Was your learning affected at all by having the same teacher for 2 years? If so, how?	- No, I still learned a lot - I knew a lot from last year
6. How do you feel about having the same students in your class?	- Good – they're my friends - I liked working with partners - Safe, knew they wouldn't put me down
7. How are you feeling about changing teachers next year?	- Sad – I want to stay with same teacher - Nervous - Scared - Not going to be fun - I want to flunk to stay here

Discussion

The summary of the major findings shows the social and academic benefits of a teacher instructing the same group of students for more than one year.   The students receive one more month of instruction material as opposed to the regular classroom which has to determine class routines, rules, assessments, and create a sense of community. Teachers also know each and every individual's unique learning style. They know how to present instruction material based on specific learning needs. The student also has a clear understanding of what is expected of them. The teacher knows how to push each student to perform to the best of their ability, and the student has a responsibility to uphold.

In a looped classroom, the students form a strong bond between the teacher and peers. This consistent, safe environment allows the students to take more academic risks, meaning they are less anxious to read out loud or make an incorrect answer. Students tend to have more self confidence and seem excited about school. Research shows that there are less disciplinary problems, an increase in classroom attendance, and students who are more willing to work together in a looped classroom.

Some of the gaps or limitations in the research come from the fact that looped classrooms are not a typical option. Where this practice exists, only a few teachers are involved. Not enough research has been formed on the topic of looping. The Waldorf schools were created by Steiner in 1913 and the first U.S. Waldorf school opened in New York in 1928 (Carroll, 2005). Chaika (2005) acknowledges that European schools have had successful experiences, but "looping is uncommon enough in the United States to be

considered innovative" (p.1).   Little is known about looping here in the U.S., therefore little research has been generated.

Waldorf teachers remain with their students throughout grades 1-8. The practice of looping can have a teacher remain with their students for 2 years, 3 years, or throughout grades 1-8. Forsten, Grant, Johnson, & Richardson (1997) believe that students benefit enormously from two years with the same teacher and probably from three years, but beyond that can bring about negative issues. Some of these negative ideas according to Forsten et.al. include students missing out on new friendships, the teacher's strengths and weaknesses are magnified, and leaving the teacher and classroom can become difficult.   There is not enough research done on the different extremes of looping.

Finally, more statistical research needs to be conducted on the effect of looping on student academic performance. Michele Kurtz looked at the quality of research available on looping in a 1998 Charlotte News-Observer story called, "Teachers plot to give students a Loop"   (Chaika, 2005).   Kurtz found that looping is not used on a wide-spread basis in most school systems and furthermore, only a small number of teachers are involved in this educational practice.

Recent studies are based primarily on personal evaluation. Many studies are based on observations and not necessarily include data on test scores in the areas of reading and math.   Teachers, parents, and students who experience looping, are surveyed and hard evidence is based on feelings towards looping.   More hardcore, factual data needs to be evident in looping research in order to support theories or personal experiences.

The overall significance of the literature reveals that there is evidence of social and academic benefits for primary aged students who are in a looped classroom.   First, children who are with the same teacher for more than one year experience less anxiety than a child entering a new grade with a new teacher. Students in a looped classroom consider the classroom as a safe learning environment and experience a sense of community among their classmates. There is a better attitude towards school so much so that looped classrooms report an increase in attendance and students have a better attitude towards school.

In addition to the strong peer bond, there is also a strengthen relationship between teacher and student. Over two years, the teacher has a strong understanding of each individual's learning style and needs. The teachers know how to get through to their students and as a result, may produce higher test scores compared with a regular classroom. The lack of uncertainty between teachers and students allows for one extra month of direct teaching instruction, resulting in more student progress. The overall effect of a strong relationship shows positive results for students both socially and academically.

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