

January 2000

Features

In the Loop

Proponents find much to like about the practice of keeping a teacher with the same students for two or more years

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Imagine you had to begin each school year with a brand new staff. Every year, every professional and every support specialist working in your school had begun his or her first year there. Every principal, teacher, custodian and food service worker wouldn't know the routines, the curriculum or the procedures you expected them to follow. There would be no building upon last year's successes.

In addition, the personalities of individual staff members and their impact on the culture of the school would be unknown to everyone as they started the year. As an administrator, you wouldn't anticipate high productivity until staff members learned what was expected of them and how to work together to benefit the students.

For most administrators, the idea of 100 percent staff turnover is an unpleasant one to consider. Successful schools (and districts) depend on continuity of staff, curricula and programs from one year to the next in order to continually improve.

Some educators are discovering that this continuity on which schools rely also can work in the classroom. Instead of starting each school year with a completely new group of students, some teachers are staying with their students for a second year at the next grade level, a practice that is known as "looping."

### **Early Roots**

While attention being given to this classroom practice in educational publications has increased in recent years, the idea of a teacher staying with the same group of students for more than one academic year is far from new. Looping, also known in places as "teacher cycling," "teacher rotation" or "persistence teams," has a long history.

A 1913 memo from the U.S. Department of the Interior (back in the days when there was no federal agency responsible for public education) touted looping as one of the most important issues facing urban schools: "Shall teachers in graded 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, or shall teachers be required to remain year after year in the same grade while the children, promoted from grade to grade, are taught by a different teacher every year? This I believe to be one of the most important questions of city school administration."

In the national network of Waldorf schools, which are based on the theories of Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, students stay with the same teacher from 1<sup>st</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. In smaller rural schools, small student populations often require that students have the same teacher for more than one school year.

Since the 1950s and '60s when smaller schools began getting consolidated into larger ones, the idea of a separate teacher for each grade level has become an expectation for many parents and students. A teacher for each grade level has become so common that often teachers are defined by the grade level they teach: "She's a 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade teacher;" "He's a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher." Because many elementary school teachers spend all or most of their careers assigned to one grade level, they tend to be thought of as specialists in that grade level rather than as specialists of teaching children.

### **Potential Gains**

With the idea of a different teacher for each grade level so ingrained in public consciousness, why have some educators decided to keep their students together for a second or even a third year?

Looping has several potential benefits. The word "potential" is key here because with looping, as with any other educational reform, the benefits must be realized by what the teacher does with students in the classroom rather than from the structure itself. Looping makes it easier for certain positive outcomes to happen, but looping doesn't cause them to happen.

Schools that have effectively implemented the looping structure point to the following benefits: improved relationships among students and between teachers and students, more efficient instruction, higher attendance rates, reduced student retentions, fewer referrals of students to special education programs and improved student discipline.

Perhaps the most important reason for deciding to keep students and teachers together for a second year is to continue the relationship built during the first year. Many experts are citing the importance of significant relationships in young people's lives. As James P. Comer, who runs the School Development Program at Yale University, puts it: "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship." One of the core beliefs of the School Development Program, which has succeeded with inner-city and at-risk youth, is that children's most meaningful learning occurs through positive and supportive relationships with caring and nurturing adults.

Texas educator Ruby Payne, noted for her work with students of poverty, stresses how important teachers and administrators are as role models and recommends that "schools establish schedules and instructional arrangements that allow students to stay with the same teachers for three or more years." Adds Ronald D. Stephens, director of the National School Safety Center: "Despite all the fancy hardware, the single most effective violence-prevention strategy is the physical presence of a caring adult."

The notion of finding a new dentist or physician each year for every child seems absurd. We want children to know their doctors and to feel comfortable with them. It is important for physicians to know their patients as they grow and develop. Yet for many of these same children,

their schools assign them to a new teacher and require they learn a new set of classroom routines and adult expectations every year.

Toward the end of the school year, many teachers have the feeling that "if I could just have more time with these students, I could teach them what they need to learn." After spending eight months with a group, a teacher has learned each child's academic and emotional needs--just when the educational opportunity is ending. Looping allows the relationships between teachers and students to blossom and deepen over a two- or three-year period.

In addition to expanding student/teacher relationships, a teacher who keeps his or her students for a second year will extend relationships with the students' families. The parents of some students have had negative school experiences and are reluctant who participate in school activities and engage their child's teacher. Looping enables reluctant parents to participate in school activities with a consistent school contact, and it allows the teacher two full years to engage families and help them support their children and their education.

### **Summer Learning**

With students staying with a teacher for a second year, the instructional time in the classroom is used differently than in a one-year classroom. At the end of the first year of looping, a teacher can spend more time on academic instruction instead of putting closure on a class experience. The end of the school year isn't characterized as the ending of a class, but instead as the beginning of a longer break.

When teachers and students know they will be gathering again the next school year, many looping teachers turn the customary "free from academics" summer break into instructional time by providing summer assignments and learning activities. While it is possible to assign summer academic work to students who aren't looping, there is a great benefit to having the work assigned and assessed by the same teacher. The students also know they will be held accountable for accomplishing the work when they return to class after the break.

At the beginning of the school year, most teachers spend time on establishing classroom routines and norms, and rightly so. Routines and procedures help students to learn and help the classroom to run efficiently. Teachers looping with their students can begin the second year with a minimal review of classroom routines. Most of the students already will have spent a full school year within this classroom environment and will know the teacher and the routines. The few students who are assigned to the class during the summer or who are switching to the classroom can learn the routines from peers instead of waiting to learn them from the teacher.

In looping classes, the teacher spends a full academic year learning about each individual student's strengths and weaknesses, as well as which teaching strategies are most effective. The early part of the school year is spent reviewing the work accomplished during the summer and picking up academic instruction where it left off the previous spring. The looping teacher doesn't have to spend the same amount of time assessing student academic needs to get started with appropriate and effective instruction as does a single-year teacher who is teaching students for the first time.

While some reforms spend valuable resources and can be difficult concepts to implement, looping is cost-effective. A two-year looping cycle requires only two teachers from consecutive grade levels to exchange grade levels every year. Aside from the teacher's learning the curriculum for a new grade level and possibly minimal additional funds needed for supplementary materials for each teacher at the new grade level, looping doesn't require additional training or staffing. The classroom furnishings and the instructional materials purchased for each classroom remain identical for looping and non-looping structures.

### **Research Backing**

The recent renewed interest in looping has brought about an ever-increasing number of studies examining the effectiveness of structure. Much of the research is qualitative and documents the positive experiences parents, students and teachers have had with looping. A National Middle Schools Association study of looping at a school in Gainesville, Fla., by Paul George and colleagues found approximately 70 percent of the teachers reported that teaching the same students for three years allowed them to use more positive approaches to classroom management. In addition, 84 percent of the teachers reported more positive relationships with parents.

The Attleboro, Mass., School District uses looping for students in 1<sup>st</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades. Research over a seven-year period by district officials found the following:

- Student attendance in grades 2 through 8 increased from 92 percent average daily attendance to 97 percent;
- Retention rates decreased by more than 43 percent in those same grades;
- Discipline and suspensions, especially at the middle schools, declined significantly;
- Special education referrals decreased by more than 55 percent; and
- Staff attendance improved markedly from an average of seven days absent per staff member per year to fewer than three.

At the Albany Upper Elementary School in Alexander, La., Principal Flo Hill worked with a professor at Southeastern Louisiana University to investigate the effectiveness of the school's looping classrooms. Their initial results show that in these looping classrooms, when compared to the school's unit-grade classrooms, the median national percentiles are higher, parents attend open houses at a higher rate, parental involvement in general is higher, and the average daily attendance is higher.

### **Concerns and Obstacles**

Looping is a concept that makes intuitive sense--by allowing teachers to teach a class of students for a longer period of time and by capitalizing on the teacher's increased knowledge of students and their academic needs, as well as on an increased amount of learning time resulting from fewer transitions.

To implement looping well, however, requires an effective teacher, plus support from the administration, the teachers' union and parents of the students enrolled in the looping classroom.

Many parents and administrators express concern about having students with the same teacher for two years. These concerns center around the possibility that their child will be assigned to an ineffective teacher for two years or the inability of the teacher to successfully organize and teach

a second year with the same students without resorting to the same sensitivities and lessons.

Interestingly, the 1913 document from the Department of the Interior raises these concerns and offers a response: "The answer to both objections is easy and evident. The inefficient teacher should be eliminated. The man or woman who is unable to teach a group of children through more than one year should not be permitted to waste their money, time and opportunity through a single year."

For looping to work, two teachers must have the desire and freedom to leave one grade level, proceed with the students to the next grade, and then return to their initial grade level to repeat the looping cycle. In states or districts where seniority is determined by grade-level assignment, it is unlikely that teachers will leave the grade level at which they have seniority to teach at a new grade level at which they would have the least seniority, thus risking the loss of their teaching position. In schools where teaching assignments have become ossified over the years, a teacher hoping to loop would be unable to do so unless he or she could convince another teacher from the next grade level to switch grade levels every other year.

### **Blossoming Relationships**

Now that we have arrived at the year 2000, we need to search for effective school practices that help students achieve high standards. In this new millennium, we would do well to look back at an idea first written about nearly a century ago: the idea of keeping students and teachers together for more than just one year.

While being mindful of noted education researcher John Goodlad's caution that "no administrative or organizational decision by itself solves any instructional problem," we can be confident that looping, when done well and supported by teachers, parents and administrators, will raise student achievement and allow relationships between teachers and students to blossom.