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Inside Scoop

Looping: Two Years With the Same Class

The term "looping" may be a fairly recent addition to the education lexicon, but the concept of looping harks back to the days of the little red schoolhouse. Common in European and Japanese schools, looping allows a teacher to remain with the same, single-grade class for two or more years. Experts estimate thousands of U.S. educators are currently "in the loop."

How does looping work?

At its most basic, two teachers or teams of teachers in contiguous grades create a partnership. This pairing permits, for example, a first grade teacher--or a seventh grade team--to progress with students to the next grade. Meanwhile, the partner moves back down a grade to begin a new cycle.

The process is different--and some say easier--than multi-age grouping because the entire class stays together for two years, giving the teacher responsibility for the content of one grade-level curriculum at a time.

Why is looping gaining in popularity?

"For years parents have said to teachers: 'I wish you were getting my child next year,'" says Jim Grant, founder of the Society for Developmental Education and a long-time

teacher in looped and multi-age classrooms.

Looping, he says, is a low-cost, easily implemented way to make that wish come true. Two willing teachers and an understanding principal are all that's needed to start.

Grant, who conducts looping workshops nationwide, cites support from parents and educators who recognize that it's unnatural to sever relationships between teachers and students every 36 weeks.

"As adults we value long-term relationships built on trust," says Grant. "We should allow our kids to do the same."

Is looping good for teachers?

"I just sit here and smile when I think about it," says Kathy Gebauer, who's moved to second grade with her students at Ben Franklin Elementary School in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin this year.

A veteran first grade teacher, Gebauer got her principal's approval to try looping as a way to counter a perennial professional frustration- too little time in the school year to get some of her students where she thought they could be. And there was some natural curiosity, especially when it came to her budding writers: "I always wanted to see how much further I could take them."

Gebauer's experience bears out the claim that looping can increase instructional time without lengthening the school day or year.

When her first looping class began second grade two years ago, she had planned an easy first day. But her students clamored to start their writing. "I scrapped all my plans for a light week and got right to work," says Gebauer. "It was as if summer vacation was just a long weekend."

The same held true for math. "I bypassed a lot of review," Gebauer notes. "I knew what had been covered and where we'd left off."

It was also smooth sailing in the non-academic areas. "I saved so much time. I didn't have the problem of building trust, and the children weren't anxious," says Gebauer.

What are the benefits for students?

"I felt the strong kids went further, pushing and pulling each

other," says Gebauer. "I let them work on projects I might not have if I hadn't had such a good handle on their capabilities."

"Kids love the adult connection," says Patricia Crosby, a communications/social studies teacher on a two-person team that loops with 50 students from seventh to eighth grade at Coelho Middle School in Attleboro, Massachusetts.

For children from unstable families, looping--mandated for grades 1-8 throughout the district--has special meaning.

"Kids trust teachers a lot more," says Crosby. "They'll say things to you they wouldn't say to anyone else."

"Attendance is much better," Crosby adds. "Since I only have 50 students--not 150--I'll call to follow up if someone's not in school. Teachers can more easily catch a drug or alcohol problem. We know our students' behavior better and can spot tell-tale changes."

Except for math, where some children may leave the team depending on their level, classes are heterogeneous and inclusive. "Because they're together for two years, I think my students become more tolerant of differences in abilities and personalities," says Crosby.

Can looping crack tough education problems?

Gebauer can vouch for experts who credit looping with a decline in retention rates, special education referrals, and discipline problems.

"I had questions about some students, but by the end of the second year they were all where they should have been," says Gebauer. "I think it's that extra time--really knowing their strengths and weaknesses. I didn't have to guess."

Looping can offer needed stability for those students with behavior problems. It takes patience to deal with the same challenging kids for two years, but Crosby calls the consistency good for students. "They know I mean what I say."

Any downside?

"If you have a kid with a behavior problem, sometimes by the second year you've gone through all your tricks," says Crosby. Her school has a support team and peer mediators to help. In most looping classrooms, teachers and parents have the option of transferring a student out--especially when

there are discipline problems or personality clashes.

For teachers, looping may require in-service or other training to prepare for a new phase of child development. Changing assignments could involve waivers or dual certifications. Moving up could mean a bigger class or losing a teaching assistant.

And there may be other details to deal with. Some union locals, for example, require the posting of a new job opening before a looping teacher can move up or down.

Is looping for everyone?

Experts recommend teachers be presented with looping as an option, not a requirement. When Attleboro, Massachusetts, became an all-looping district, a few teachers left or retired. But those who stayed must have liked their new looping arrangement—faculty absences dropped from an average of seven days per year to fewer than three.

Some teachers and parents worry the bond created by looping will be too difficult to break. It was hard, Gebauer acknowledges.

"I worried about them going to third grade," she says, "but they all did fine, even though they were broken up among five classes."

For More Information

- For information on workshops and an annual summer conference on looping, contact the Society for Developmental Education, 10 Sharon Rd., Peterborough, NH, 03458, 800/ 924-9621 or visit the Web at www.socdeved.com. To order *The Looping Handbook* (\$24.95) or *Looping Q&A* (\$12.95), call 800/321-0401.
- *Multiyear Assignment of Teachers to Students* provides a compilation of articles, studies, and book excerpts on looping. \$72 from the Educational Research Service, 2000 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201, 800/791-9308. E-mail: ers@ers.org.