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Looping : an old idea revisited

Steven J. Koester
University of Northern Iowa

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Looping : an old idea revisited

Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to examine the existing literature and research available on the topic of looping, and to synthesize the information into a comprehensive report. This paper includes the historical background of looping, an explanation of the basics of looping, the examination of the teacher-student relationship, and the advantages and disadvantages of looping.

LOOPING: AN OLD IDEA REVISITED

A Graduate Literature Review

Submitted to the Division of Middle Level Education

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

By
Steven J. Koester
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Titled: Looping: An Old Idea Revisited

Has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the
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8/25/00
Date Approved

Donna Schumacher-Douglas
Graduate Faculty Reader

8.25.00
Date Approved

Barry J. Wilson
Graduate Faculty Reader

8/25/2000
Date Approved

Rick Traw
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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The purpose of this paper was to examine the existing literature and research available on the topic of looping, and to synthesize the information into a comprehensive report. This paper includes the historical background of looping, an explanation of the basics of looping, the examination of the teacher-student relationship, and the advantages and disadvantages of looping.

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Looping: An Old Idea Revisited

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Problem

Looping is an older concept that is gaining new ground in education today as educators and society are recognizing the need for schools to provide stable social structure as well as increase individual knowledge. Children in today's American society find it difficult to establish and maintain long-term close relationships. We are a society of divorce, single-parent family structure, latchkey kids, and dual-income families. Proponents of looping find that "it is increasingly vital to the countless children whose lives are riddled with change—change of residence, change in family structure, change of economic status" (Hanson, 1995, p. 43).

Looping, or multiyear teaching, promotes a long-term relationship between students and teachers. Looping is a simple concept in which a teacher remains with the same class of children for two or more successive years before looping back to repeat the process with a new class.

The psychological and sociological ideologies supporting looping are discussed in the George, Spreul, and Moorefield (1987) publication "Long-Term Teacher-Student Relationships: A Middle School Case Study." The authors state that "most human beings spend long periods in their lives in continuous close relationships" (p. 4). Furthermore, "recent research confirms the rule that human productivity is tied to the quality and the

length of the human relationships at the heart of the effort” (p. 4). George et al. (1987) note that the “promise of permanence” (p. 5) has been so altered in many areas of American life that some might conclude that close relationships are antiquated and even impossible to achieve. Yet more and more research in the corporate sphere, sociology, and psychology point to the centrality of long-term positive personal relationships in any formula for improved satisfaction and productivity (George et al., 1987).

Student success is determined, in part, by the teachers’ knowledge and understanding of the student learner. The longer the teacher-student relationship continues, the more effectively the teacher can evaluate the learner (Lincoln, 1997). With looping, the teacher has more time to try different strategies to improve the student’s performance (Bracey, 1999). Looping holds these principles at its core and seeks to improve not only a student’s academic performance but also his/her mental and emotional well being.

Multiyear teacher-student relationships are meant to make sure that every child has the time to connect with the classroom, feel a part of all that goes on, and have the time it takes to succeed in school (Burke, 1996). The study of long-term close relationships in education is an area deserving increased attention as American schools have adopted an assembly line mentality in educating our children. Relationships do matter. Caring and committed relationships are a major key to school effectiveness (George & Alexander, 1993). “As adults, we value long-term relationships built on trust. We should allow our kids to do the same” (NEA Today, 1998, p. 1). The essence of looping is the promotion of strong, extended, meaningful, positive interpersonal

relationships between teachers and students that foster increased student motivation, and in turn, stimulate improved learning outcomes for students (Burke, 1997).

Chapter 2

Methodology

In choosing literature to use as resources for this paper, I spoke to educators who had described a previous interest in looping and who had materials on the topic. Dr. Chuck Scott, Tom Meissner, Barbara Collins, and Dr. Dave Black in the Council Bluffs, Iowa area were very helpful in providing the initial articles and information on looping.

Loess Hills Area Education Area XIII conducted a literature search on the World Wide Web that supplemented my own search for looping, multiyear teaching, multiyear placement, teacher-student progression, and the 20-month classroom. I retrieved some literature materials from the Web and found others at the University of Nebraska at Omaha library. I then used the reference lists from these articles to obtain more literature relating to the topic of looping.

To ensure that the sources I used were valid, I only used published works that I found in reputable education journals on the web, journal articles and books at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and books written by Jim Grant, the foremost authority on the subject of looping.

After reading and taking extensive notes from the various sources, I organized the book and journal information into a table format using the Excel program. I began the writing process with an outline and then filled in the appropriate information from the table. This was extremely timesaving, as I did not have to flip through each article to find the information I wanted. A limitation to my sources is that there is not a large body of published material on looping.

The Lewis Central School District in Council Bluffs, Iowa, currently is implementing looping classrooms for the seventh and eighth grades in the 2000-2001 school year. There will be two teams of teachers per grade, one team from each grade will loop. The other teams will remain with traditional grouping. A six-item questionnaire for the superintendent, the middle school principal, and the District's Improvement Specialist was developed to inquire about their knowledge and opinions regarding looping since these educators made the decision to loop. The questionnaire is found in Appendix A.

Chapter 3

Review of Literature

Education is filled with trends and innovations, some of which, upon closer inspection, turn out to be recycled and/or renamed concepts. Looping is a concept receiving new attention lately, although it is not new. The concept of looping, discussed as “teacher rotation,” is referred to in a 1913 Department of Education memo (Grant, Johnson, Richardson, & Fredenburg, 1996). The advantages noted in the memo are largely the same as those cited in the literature today.

What is looping? Looping is a fairly simple concept in which a teacher remains with the same class of children for two or more successive years before looping back to repeat the process with a new class. It is sometimes called multiyear teaching, multiyear placement, teacher-student progression, or the 20-month classroom (Communicator, 1996; Grant et al., 1996). All that is needed for looping are two willing teachers and a supportive principal.

The History of Looping

The concept of looping was evident in Stuttgart, Germany in the early 1900s. Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian educator and philosopher founded the Waldorf Schools in which one teacher stayed with a group of students from first through eighth grade. Steiner felt that the teacher should follow the class throughout the elementary grades much like a “third parent” (Hanson, 1995, p. 42). The precepts founded by Steiner are still utilized in Germany today (Grant et al., 1996). Looping continues to be successful in German middle schools where teams of 6-8 teachers work with the same students from grades 5-10 (Koppich, 1988). In addition to German schooling, the practice of looping is quite

common in European and Japanese schools and the idea that students fare better when they have teachers who stay with them more than one year is well established (USA Today, 1996; Communicator, 1996).

Looping is not a new concept. Some would argue that looping in the United States has been around since the one-room schoolhouse (Grant et al., 1996; Vann, 1997). Looping is receiving attention today in the American education system as more and more schools embrace the idea. No one really knows how many schools nationwide are using looping, but the National Alliance of Multiage Educators states that attendance at its yearly conferences on looping is increasing as more educators become interested (Checkley, 1995). The concept of looping first appeared in New York in 1974. Deborah Meier, an award-winning educator, considered the practice an essential component in her ideal school because it enabled children and teachers to get to know one another well (Hanson, 1995). There are numerous anecdotal reports of the advantages and successes of looping, but relatively little quantitative research on its effects. Despite enthusiastic practitioners, the experience of European school systems, and initial favorable research, looping is still uncommon enough in the United States to be considered innovative (Burke, 1997).

The Basics of Looping

Looping is a two or more year placement for the teacher as well as the students. The students have the same teacher for two or more successive years. Looping involves a partnership of at least two teachers, who teach two different grade levels, but in alternate years. Looping will work with any two contiguous grades. It can be started with any two grades where two teachers are willing to get together and give it a try (Grant et al., 1996).

For example, in the initial year, Teacher A teaches seventh grade and Teacher B teaches eighth grade. At the end of the year, both Teacher A and the seventh graders are advanced to eighth grade. Teacher A and her students are together for the second year but this time as an eighth grade. At the end of the second year Teacher A's students move on to ninth grade, and the following fall, Teacher A will begin the cycle again with a new class of seventh graders. Meanwhile, at the end of the first year Teacher B's eighth graders move on to ninth grade, and at the beginning of the second year, Teacher B welcomes a new class of seventh graders. At the end of the second year Teacher B is advanced to eighth grade and continues with the same class the next year (Grant et al., 1996). Many experts on the subject of looping caution that it should be an option for teachers and students rather than mandatory policy.

Advantages and Benefits of Looping

“Looping is not a serious change,” says Jim Grant, who popularized the term in the U.S. “It doesn't cost anything, require more room, or lots of training. Nor will it put a principal's career at risk or spook the school board” (Communicator, 1996, p. 1).

Therefore, fear of cost or increased resource use should not be a barrier.

Lincoln Middle School in Gainesville, Florida has been looping its sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students since 1982. Their program is call Student-Teacher Progression or STP. Teachers at Lincoln were strongly positive in their evaluation of the effects of looping. The teachers identified at least ten possible advantages of the long-term close relationships encouraged by the looping process (George et al., 1987).

1. *Classroom management* was more effective and required less disciplinary action.

2. Teachers function as an *advisor/advocate* as well as an instructor. Long-term relationships facilitated knowledge and understanding of the students and built trust.
3. *Group involvement* increased because the students knew the teacher and one another well and felt comfortable. A sense of unity emerged and students felt an ownership of their classroom experience.
4. *Teacher investment* increased as the long-term relationships stimulated a more intense level of commitment to the students and their progress.
5. *Individualized perception*-- Few educators would quarrel with the idea that the more teachers are able to view their students as individuals the more likely they are to be successful in educating them. With looping, teachers spend more time with the same group of students and get to know them as individuals. Lincoln teachers saw themselves as more able to discover and build upon the personal strengths of individual students.
6. *Diagnosis*-- At Lincoln, a team of teachers worked with the same common group of students for the same period of time. This allowed for an almost daily exchange of information about the students on the team. The teachers believed this increased the ability to recognize and diagnose more accurately any special needs individual students might have.
7. *Instruction*—Teachers felt they were able to use their time more efficiently and effectively. Looping allowed teachers to avoid duplication of instruction from previous years. Looping also encouraged teachers to become more

innovative in their teaching strategies to avoid boredom or complacency of the students.

8. *Achievement*—The teachers at Lincoln believed that the looping program led to increased achievement due to the teachers' increased ability to identify and prescribe for the needs of the students. With looping the teacher has more time to analyze and observe the children and more time to try different strategies (George et al., 1987).
9. *Teacher-Parent Relationships*—The existence of long-term relationships with students carries with it an equally long relationship with the parents. Lincoln teachers believed that they and parents tended to be more mutually self-disclosing when they were involved in a long-term effort.
10. *Teacher-Teacher Relationships*—Because the teachers tended to remain in their looping teams from year to year they formed highly cohesive and effective collaborative teams.

Other teachers who have participated in looping identified additional advantages of looping. Social advantages include:

- Reduced apprehension about the new school year and the new teacher after the first year (Hanson, 1995; Checkley, 1995);
- Stronger benefits from the time spent on developing social skills and cooperative group strategies in the subsequent years (Hanson, 1995)
- Increased student self-confidence (Checkley, 1995) and a chance to overcome shyness (Mazzuchi & Brooks, 1992);

- A stronger sense of community and of family among parents, students, and teachers (Checkley, 1995); and
- Greater support for children who look to school as a stabilizing influence in their lives (Hanson, 1995).

Numerous academic benefits have been identified as well. Benefits include:

- A gain of almost a month of teaching time, since time for getting acquainted is eliminated and less review is needed (Hanson, 1995; Mazzuchi & Brooks, 1992);
- An increase in teacher knowledge about children's intellectual strengths and weaknesses in a way that is impossible in a single year (Vann, 1997);
- An increase in the number of chances that are available to make connections during learning and over time (Zahorik & Dichanz, 1994); and
- More opportunities available to tailor the curriculum to individual student needs (Checkley, 1995).

Additional benefits include :

- Increased teacher and student attendance (Burke, 1997).
- Increased job satisfaction (Burke, 1997).
- Increased teacher retention (Burke, 1997).
- Declining student retention rates (Grant et al., 1996).
- Fewer referrals to special education (Grant et al., 1996).

A summary list of benefits as identified by the authors of "The Looping Handbook" (Grant et al., 1996) can be found in Appendix B.

Disadvantages of Looping

It would be unfair and unrealistic to suggest that looping has no problems.

Some of the commonly identified pitfalls are discussed below.

- *Student/Teacher Personality Clashes*--This very real problem may occur; however, a review of the anecdotal literature reveals that this occurs infrequently. All attempts should be made to resolve the situation before deciding to place the child in a different classroom. The child should not get the idea that all situations can be resolved by "changing the scenery" rather than working through them, but if all interventions fail then the student should be moved to a new class (George et al., 1987; Grant et al., 1996; Burke, 1996; Grant & Johnson, 1995; Lincoln, 1997).
- *A Marginal or Poor Performing Teacher*-- One of the biggest concerns that parents have in regards to looping is "What if my child gets a bad teacher for two years?"(Burke, 1996; George et al., 1987). Experts say weak teachers do not usually volunteer to participate in a looping program because it is too much work (Communicator, 1996). Nevertheless, all parents and children should be given the last resort option to "get out of the loop" at the end of the year. The responsibility must also rest on the school administration. Where a principal or superintendent has the choice of assigning a teacher to a single year or looping classroom, they must protect the students from poor teachers and assign only willing and capable teachers to the looping classrooms (Grant et al., 1996). The teacher must have the initiative and strength to master curriculum for two grades (USA Today, 1996).
- *Too Many High Needs or Special Needs Students in One Class*-- This can overwhelm the teacher, students, and parents. Care must be taken when making the composite for

looping classes. Yes, the looping classroom is ideal for high needs students, but a balance in the abilities and personalities of the students must be achieved if the looping classroom is to succeed (Grant et al., 1996). Refer to Appendix C for guidelines to consider when placing high needs students in a looping setting.

- *The Dysfunctional Class*-- There will be times when a class seems to be totally dysfunctional. Whether there are too many “summer born” young boys, too many dominant personalities, or too many high need students; some classes just do not gel and work cohesively. Everything possible should be tried to ascertain the cause or root of the dysfunction and every intervention tried before dismantling the class. Breaking up a class is very serious and may be traumatic for the students involved. Every alternative should be tried before disbanding a class (Grant et al., 1996).
- *Continued Parent/Teacher Conflict*-- Long-term exposure to difficult and/or hateful parents is extremely stressful to even the most experienced teacher. The most important question to ask is “how is this conflict affecting the child?” If the child is having a positive experience in the looping class, then all efforts should be made to keep the child in the class and keep the conflict between the parent and the teacher without trapping the child in the middle. Mediation with a third party may be necessary. If it is obvious that the conflict is negatively impacting the child, or if the situation is unresolvable or intolerable, then transferring the child to another class may be necessary (Grant et al., 1996; NEA Today, 1998).
- *A Learning Disability May Be Masked*-- The ability of a looping teacher to delay a decision on retention may prevent him or her from doing the kind of ongoing assessment and evaluation of students that would catch a potential learning disability.

A two-year delay could be disastrous for a child who really needs special services. Also the halo effect, where a teacher is more forgiving of a student's academic shortcomings due to the close relationship that is developed, can impede a teacher from seeing potential long-term learning problems (Grant et al., 1996).

- *Will the Bond Become Too Close?*-- Will students become too attached to their teacher and fellow classmates? At the end of the loop, students have to say goodbye to their teacher of two or more years, and possibly their classmates. Strategies should be developed to ease the transition of students (Grant et al., 1996; Hanson, 1995).

Also addressed by teachers and educators in regards to looping include being extra sensitive to making new students feel part of the class. Some teachers expressed anxiety over the fact that their job performance over two or more years might be assessed based only on their students' performance on standardized tests (Hanson, 1995; Lincoln, 1997). Vann (1997) cautions that looping is a *grouping* strategy, and its success or failure has not been shown to be dependent on its environment, be it structured or unstructured, teacher-centered or child-centered. Attempts to unite looping to a particular learning environment should be discouraged, because this may limit the number of available teacher, as well as the ability of principals to match student learning styles with teaching styles.

Perceptions about the Success of Looping

There is not much published research on looping, however the research available is favorable (Burke, 1996). In East Cleveland Schools in Ohio, students exhibited substantially higher reading and math achievement scores on standardized tests than did students in the traditional grade organization, even when the same teacher taught both

groups. The teachers at East Cleveland reported an increased sense of ownership for positive and negative student outcomes, and a heightened sense of efficacy. Parents reported feeling more respected by their children's teachers, having more confidence in the teachers and administrators, and being more likely to seek the school's assistance with their children (Burke, 1997).

Skowhegan Middle School in Skowhegan, Maine reported that 92% of the teaching staff agreed that looping results in students receiving a better education. Ninety-six percent agreed that looping resulted in the teaching team having a better understanding of the individual student, and 96% agreed that looping resulted in better parent communication and cooperation. Finally, 91% agreed that instituting looping made the students more enthusiastic about learning (George & Alexander, 1993).

Seventy percent of the teachers at Lincoln Middle School in Gainesville, Florida reported that looping allowed them to use more positive approaches to classroom management. Ninety-two percent said that they knew more about their students, and 69% described their students as more willing to participate voluntarily in class. Eighty-five percent of the teachers reported that their students were better able to see themselves as important members of a group, to feel pride in that group, and to feel pride in the school as a whole. Eighty-four percent of the teachers reported more positive relationships with parents and 75% reported increased empathy with colleagues (George et al., 1987; George & Alexander, 1993). The reactions of students in the study also were favorable, and their responses grew more positive with each successive grade level. Parents responded positively as well. Ninety-nine percent of parents requested the same teacher

to whom their child had been assigned during the previous years (George et al., 1987; George & Alexander, 1993; Burke, 1996).

In the Attleboro School System in Attleboro, Massachusetts, grades 1-8 has 100% staff participation in looping and will begin phasing in a similar arrangement for grades 9-12. Attleboro Superintendent Joseph Rappa reports that since implementing looping student attendance in grades two through eight increased from 92% average daily attendance to 97.2%. Retention rates decreased by over 43% in those same grades. Discipline and suspensions, especially at the middle school level (grades 5-8) have declined significantly, and special education referrals decreased by 55%. Staff attendance improved from an average of seven days absent per staff member per year to less than three (Grant et al., 1996; Burke, 1996).

Experienced educators see looping as a way of making large schools less anonymous, of meeting the needs of the changing American family, of creating more continuity, and fostering social constructivism in learning. High quality research is needed to determine whether, as many educators contend, looping programs have a profound impact both socially and instructionally (The MAGnet Newsletter, 1995).

Chapter 4

Results

As a result of writing this review of literature on looping I am feeling much more positive and informed about implementing looping with my seventh grade at Lewis Central Middle School. I discovered the following key ideas:

- Stronger and more effective teacher-student relationships
- Fewer transitions resulting in more time for instruction and increased sense of stability for students
- Improved student and teacher attendance
- Increased parent involvement
- Fewer discipline problems
- Fewer special needs referrals
- Fewer grade retentions

The Lewis Central School District's superintendent, middle school principal, and improvement specialist answered the six items of my questionnaire (Appendix A) similarly, and many of their answers matched those existing in the current looping literature. All responded that they had read articles and reports on the benefits of looping. The advantages identified by the three were: strengthened teacher/student relationships; a gain in time at the beginning of the school year; decreased discipline problems; increased student and staff attendance; and the creation of a stable, nurturing learning environment. Disadvantages identified were: conflicts between students and

teachers, parents and teachers; less exposure to different instructional strategies; and the lack of teacher familiarity with the curriculum.

The expectations identified by administrators and teachers for the Lewis Central Middle School were: increased student achievement, stronger relationships for students and teachers, less transition for students and teachers, decreased discipline problems, and increased options for students, parents, and teachers. The district plans to evaluate the results of looping through surveys of the students, parents, and staff; attendance records; discipline referrals; special education referral; academic achievement tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and performance assessments; and retentions and/or failures. The district stresses that looping is intended to be a long-term implementation that will be studied for trends. The superintendent indicated that even if achievement scores remain the same, the district would continue looping if the students, parents, and teachers indicate satisfaction. Jim Grant concurs with this thinking, stating that “looping by itself will not cause student achievement scores to skyrocket, looping is not a cure-all and it may not be for everyone. It is a means rather than an end” (Rasmussen, 1998, p. 5).

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Looping is an older concept that is gaining new ground in education today.

Support for looping is growing as more schools implement looping classrooms and more is written about its effects. Research on these effects must be conducted, however, to ascertain the credibility of the positive claims being made about looping. With valid and reliable research data available, advocates will be better able to support the practice of looping. It is encouraging that American educators are realizing that schools are not only in existence to increase individual knowledge, but that individual mental and emotional well being is important as well. Looping cannot be expected to cure all the social ills of American society, but it can provide a safe and nurturing environment for children to learn the basic skills of life. The social interaction among adults and students are not simply a means to some other end; rather “they are education itself” (Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993).

I recommend the following practices for educators implementing looping:

- Looping should be voluntary. Provide a comprehensive inservice on the topic of looping and allow the teachers to provide feedback. Choose teachers who are willing to try looping. Research shows that looping is not successful with unwilling teachers. Provide extensive support to looping teachers and encourage creativity.
- Educate parents regarding looping, either through a public forum or with written material. Address their questions and concerns. Inform them that they are able to opt out of looping at the end of the first year.

- Implement looping gradually. Begin with two grades/classes initially. Let the success of looping in these classes be your testimonial for implementing looping in more grades/classes.
- Gather data about looping and its effects at your school and then PUBLISH that data. Much more information about the effectiveness of looping needs to be available to other educators.

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Appendix A
Looping Questionnaire

Looping Questionnaire

Name:

Position:

How did you hear about looping?

What sources did you find that discussed/described/examined looping?

What advantages of looping did you identify?

What disadvantages/barriers did you identify?

What are the expectations for looping at Lewis Central Middle School?

How will looping be evaluated at Lewis Central Middle School?

Please return to Steve Koester at the Middle School by Monday, March 13. Thank You!!!

Appendix B

Multiple Year Classroom Benefits

Multiple Year Classroom Benefits (Grant et al., 1996).

- There are fewer student-teacher transitions
- Multiyear relationships create a cohesive family atmosphere
- There is an increased cooperative spirit between students and between students and teacher(s)
- There is an increased sense of stability for students as a result of classroom routine and consistency
- There is an increase in mental health benefits for the students
- There is less pressure and stress on the classroom teacher
- Teachers report a higher level of discipline
- Principals report improved student attendance
- There are fewer new parents for the classroom teacher to get to know every other year
- Principals and teachers report an increase in parent involvement
- There are fewer new students for the teacher to get to know every other year
- The teacher has increased student observation time
- Teachers are not pressured to make high stakes decisions and may postpone these important decisions until they have more observation and instructional time with the students
- There tends to be a decrease in special needs referrals
- Educators report fewer grade level retentions
- Multiple year classrooms are more time efficient instructionally

Appendix C

Guidelines to Balancing the Multiyear Classroom

Guidelines to Balancing the Multiyear Classroom (Grant et al., 1996).

- Equal number of boys and girls

- Racially/culturally/linguistically balanced

- Socio-economically balanced

- Equal range of ability levels

- The percent of special needs students is the same as other conventional classrooms