

LOOPING

In support of *This We Believe* characteristic:

- Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning

The complexity and magnitude of changes young adolescents experience during the middle school years are profound. Providing them with a learning environment that fosters the development of meaningful relationships is imperative to help them navigate successfully through this time. The educational practice of teachers and young adolescents remaining together for two or more years, known as looping, provides a stable learning environment that supports students' developmental changes and responds to their individual needs. Researchers posit that using looping in the middle school environment provides an opportunity *to support meaningful relationships and learning* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; George & Lounsbury, 2000; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2003; Nichols & Nichols, 2002; Simel, 1998; Westerfield, 2009) because it enables teachers and students to develop long-term relationships where both parties are deeply invested in overall student achievement and growth.

As an educational practice, looping has existed for several centuries in Germany, Japan, and Italy (Simel, 1998). Although the structure varied, the practice of keeping students and teachers together for several academic years was, and still is, intentional. In these countries, looping is implemented in both elementary and secondary schools. However, it was not until Dewey and his colleagues introduced the idea of a "community of learners" in the early 1900s that the essence of looping was popularized in the United States. Prior to this time, teachers and students looped, but for pragmatic reasons—not to build relationships or enhance practice (Grant, Johnson, & Richardson, 1996; Simel).

Following *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and the Back to Basics Movement in the 1980s, renewed interest in innovative school organizational models emerged. As one of these models, looping gained popularity in elementary schools. The practice of looping slowly spilled over into a small number of middle schools. Looping has not been widely employed in middle schools; nonetheless, when it has been used, teachers and students have benefitted (e.g., Franz, Thompson, Fuller, Hare, & Miller, in press; George & Lounsbury, 2000; Nichols & Nichols, 2002; Pratt, 2009; Simel, 1998). By the mid-1990s and into the early 2000s, it was estimated that several hundred middle schools had adopted looping in some form (George & Lounsbury, 2000).

Advantages of Looping

The advantages of looping are intertwined for teachers, students, and families. These can be categorized in three broad areas: (1) time, (2) relationships, and (3) student support and engagement. By its very nature, looping provides additional time, which, in turn, enhances instruction and assessment. Relationships—teacher/team-to-student, student-to-student, teacher/team-to-parent—benefit from the stability afforded by looping. Finally, engagement among teachers, students, and parents increases and fosters the social development of students due to the multiyear investment.

Time

In many stages of the looping process, time is saved. Teachers' knowledge of students' strengths and weaknesses enables them to begin instruction immediately in the second year of a looping cycle (Crosby, 1998; Elliot & Capp, 2003; Simel, 1998); teachers and students do not have to engage in the "getting to know you" process again. Therefore, the first day of the second year of school is similar to returning from a long vacation rather than starting a totally new school year (Forsten, Grant, Johnson, & Richardson, 1997; Pratt, 2009; Simel, 1998). Summer can be viewed as an opportunity to bridge instructional activities from one year to the next. Looping teachers can provide purposeful learning activities for the summer months and hold students accountable for that learning, thereby adding extra time to the academic experience (Crosby, 1998; Forsten, Grant, & Richardson, 1999). In addition, teachers are able to prepare more effectively for the upcoming year based on their extensive knowledge of students (Cistone & Shneyderman, 2004; Elliot & Capp; Simel). As a result, teachers estimate that at least a month of instructional time is gained in the second year of looping (Gaustad, 1998). In a similar fashion, looping supports the assessment of students. Teachers are able to maximize their knowledge of students' abilities, thus, optimizing student growth. Additional time from looping gives teachers the opportunity to assess student achievement and diagnose potential academic problems (George & Lounsbury, 2000). Students are less likely to be retained, given that they have more time to learn basic skills (Burke, 1997; Cistone & Shneyderman). Furthermore, looping students are also less likely to be referred for special education services (Forsten



National Middle School Association

4151 Executive Parkway, Suite 300
Westerville, Ohio 43081

1-800-528-NMSA fax: 614-895-4750

www.nmsa.org

et al., 1997). Assessment of students is also positively impacted by the extra time provided by looping.

Relationships

The sense of community and belonging established during the looping years enables teachers, students, and their families alike to engage fully in the overall learning process. Relationships developed in a looping classroom encourage students to connect in more meaningful ways—students learn to construct knowledge together, problem solve together, and take risks with their learning together (Northeast and Islands Regional Education Laboratory at Brown University, 1997; Westerfield, 2009). The emotional climate created in the looping environment cultivates students' social competence. In addition, special education students and second language learners tend to perform better in looping classrooms because of the relationships and strong sense of belonging (Northeast and Islands Regional Education Laboratory at Brown University). Essentially, the relationships created during the first year of the looping cycle cause the second year of the loop to flow in a smoother fashion, thus, supporting the notion that significant relationships have a direct impact on learning (Cistone & Shneyderman, 2004; Comer, 2001; Pratt, 2009).

George and Lounsbury (2000) and George and Shewey (1997) found that participants invested in long-term teacher-student relationships (i.e., looping) agreed that a greater sense of community developed as a result. Teacher-student rapport is recognized as a vital component of an effective classroom (Montalvo, Mansfield, & Miller, 2007; Westerfield, 2009). Better rapport between parents and teachers can result in more active parent involvement and therefore higher levels of student achievement. The context of looping results in improved relationships among teachers, students and parents, and an increase in satisfaction is experienced by most participants (Cistone & Shneyderman; Elliot & Capp, 2003; Forsten, Grant, & Richardson, 1999; Simel, 1998).

Student Support and Engagement

The stability of a looping classroom affords all students the opportunity to grow and bond with their teachers and peers, enabling them to engage more deeply in the educational process. The looping classroom can be particularly beneficial for students with academic or social challenges (Forsten, et al., 1997; Pratt, 2009; Westerfield, 2009). Rapid growth, change, and development in young adolescents can make this period in their lives particularly troublesome. Looping may help to alleviate some young adolescents' frustrations. Students may be less apprehensive about the start of a new school year when returning to a looping classroom. McAteer (2001) found that looping students were happier in the fall of the second year of school than their non-looping peers. Looping students were not required to adjust to a new teacher or a new set of classmates. By looping, a transition

is avoided, creating greater stability and consistency for students. Teachers remain an integral part of students' lives in the looping environment; as such, teachers are able to foster their students' social, emotional, and academic competence. Typically, students in a looping classroom are highly engaged in the learning process. In addition to increased academic achievement (Franz, et al., 2009; Pratt, 2009; Rodriguez & Arenz, 2007), looping students have higher rates of attendance and reduced numbers of behavioral incidences (Arhar, 1997; Cistone & Shneyderman, 2004; Forsten et al., 1997; George & Lounsbury, 2000). Looping students and teachers become highly invested in the entire education experience.

In summary, the overall structure as well as academic and social support afforded to students and families involved in looping ought to lead to increased involvement and familiarity with school systems. Not only do students and families benefit from looping, teachers and administrators benefit as well. Teachers and administrators are better able to meet students and families where they are and propel them forward when capitalizing on knowledge of students' abilities. This in-depth knowledge is gained over time—a luxury of the looping classroom. The investment of time, cultivation of relationships, and prolonged engagement associated with looping, promote an academic environment in which most people flourish.

Potential Concerns Regarding Looping

While there are many benefits to looping, disadvantages do exist. Teachers are responsible for providing engaging instruction for two academic years to the same group of students; in the middle school this could mean two completely different courses (e.g., earth science and physical science). Preparing for two separate content areas can be a challenge. In addition, teachers face exhausting their pedagogical skills and using all of their "tricks" in the first year of the loop. Classroom management strategies, too, could be affected by the looping cycle, especially for new teachers or teachers with limited management skills (Simel, 1998). Teachers must understand the looping process and be committed to it (Elliot & Capp, 2003; Pratt, 2009). Likewise, administrators must guard against over-placement of struggling students into a looping classroom. Administrators should not consider looping classrooms as an intervention to meet the needs of students with disabilities or those of second language learners (Forsten, et al., 1997; McAteer, 2001).

Concerns regarding looping for each of the stakeholders vary. Disadvantages for students focus on students who enter the looping classroom after "membership" has been established. Entering a looping classroom during the second year (or later) of the loop can negatively affect classroom cohesiveness and possibly cause the new student to feel left out (Hegde & Cassidy, 2004; Simel, 1998). Parental concerns about looping center on the teacher's expertise—parents



do not want their child to be placed in a classroom with an ineffective teacher for two or more years. Teachers have similar concerns regarding difficult students and parents (Cistone & Shneyderman, 2004). Finally, personality conflicts bother all involved—most teachers, students, and parents prefer classrooms void of conflict (Nichols & Nichols, 2002; Simel).

Implications for Middle Schools

Looping has many advantages for middle schools and middle grades education, in general. Increased student achievement, student and family participation in the educational process, better school attendance, and reduced disciplinary issues are all advantages that can be attributed to the long-term teacher-student relationship developed during the looping years. While disadvantages exist, careful planning can reduce the negative effects discussed previously. Young adolescents are at a time in their lives when cultivating consistent relationships is essential. Looping provides a structure that fosters the development of these relationships. Although the literature on middle school looping is limited, the anecdotal information documents that looping, if implemented correctly, can be positive. Since research is lacking, specific benefits cannot be solely attributed to looping but to the relationships that are formed within the looping environment as well.

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Westerfield, T. (2009). The effect of looping and teaming on rural black middle school students'sense of belonging. Ph.D. dissertation, Mississippi State University, United States–Mississippi. Retrieved September 11, 2009, from Dissertations & Theses: Full Text. (Publication No. AAT 3366253).

ANNOTATED REFERENCES

George, P., & Lounsbury, J. (2000). *Making big schools feel small: Multiage grouping, looping, and schools-within-a-school*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

George and Lounsbury's seminal work, *Making Big Schools Feel Small*, presents three structures for building long-term relationships between school faculty and students—multiage grouping, looping, and schools-within-a-school. These middle school organizational structures encourage the development of positive relationships between teachers and students and families. Further, the long-term relationships fostered by looping, have the potential to increase academic achievement, student participation and attendance and decrease disciplinary issues. Supporting young adolescent development by community building is the overarching idea presented by George and Lounsbury. Multiage grouping, looping, and schools-within-a-school are thoroughly explained, and examples of successful programs are discussed. The authors provide a review of research that examines the effect of these structures on the academic and social success of young adolescents. Finally, George and Lounsbury discuss the results of their national survey of 19 guidelines for successful implementation of any structure designed to cultivate long-term relationships among school faculty, middle school students, and families.

Grant, J., Richardson, I., & Johnson, B. (1996). *The looping handbook: Teachers and students progressing together*. Peterborough, NH: Crystal Springs Books.

In this handbook, Grant, Johnson, and Richardson outline a practical process to follow when implementing or considering the implementation of looping in a single class or an entire school. The history and benefits of looping are discussed in detail. Information needed to determine if looping is "right" for a teacher or school is shared as well as practical considerations to make the transition to looping easier, including: (a) strategies for using looping with a variety of learners; (b) ideas for building relationships with parents/guardians; (c) the impact of long-term relationships on teachers, students, and parents; and (d) ideas to promote summer learning. Finally, potential concerns regarding looping are examined. This handbook includes several reproducible learning activities, surveys, examples of curricula, and a plethora of practical advice. Although published 13 years ago, the information within this handbook is still applicable to administrators and teachers today who are considering looping.

Nichols, J. D., & Nichols, G. W. (2002). The impact of looping classroom environments on parental attitudes. *Preventing School Failure*, 47(1), 18–25.

Looping, an organizational structure that keeps students and teachers together for two or more consecutive years, has been supported primarily through qualitative research, particularly case study. In an effort to generate quantitative data about looping, Nichols and Nichols administered a survey to 455 parents from seven elementary school locations to examine parental attitudes toward looping in the classroom. Four major categories were explored: parent attitudes toward the teacher and school, student behavior, student motivation, and student attitudes toward teachers and school. Findings provide quantitative support for the idea that the relationships between teachers and students have positive effects on student achievement and the relational aspects of looping foster the development of these relationships.



ANNOTATED REFERENCES (continued)

Simel, D. (1998). Education for 'Bildung': Teacher attitudes toward looping. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 7(4), 330–37.

Simel sets the stage for the implementation of looping in the Fort Wayne, Indiana, Community Schools (FWCS) by tracing the historical development of education (e.g., the common school, Dewey's Laboratory Schools, etc.), looping in the United States, and, finally, compares the evolution of looping in the United States to its implementation in Japan and Germany. Simel conducted focus group interviews with 18 teachers from the FWCS who looped with their students to document teachers' attitudes about looping. Resulting themes focused on positive aspects of looping, such as: the implementation process, increased instructional time, benefits to parent-teacher relationships, improved parental interaction, family-like environment, and teacher investment in student progress. Negative themes were also shared, such as the challenges of teaching the same children for an extended period of time (i.e., increased need for varied instructional practices, increased need for additional management techniques), new students entering the looping classroom (i.e., being "outsiders"), and difficult separation at the end of the loop. The author concludes the article by providing a list of nine recommendations for administrators and teachers.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Forsten, C., Grant, J., Johnson, B., & Richardson, I. (1997). *Looping Q&A: 72 practical answers to your most pressing questions*. Peterborough, NH: Crystal Springs Books.

Forsten, C., Grant, J., & Richardson, I. (1999). *The looping evaluation handbook*. Peterborough NH: Crystal Springs Books.

George, P., & Lounsbury, J. (2000). *Making big schools feel small: Multiage grouping, looping, and schools-within-a-school*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

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AUTHOR BIOS

Nicole L. Thompson is assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education at Mississippi State University. She coordinates the middle level block in elementary education. Her scholarly interests include middle level teacher preparation, developing middle level preservice teachers' understanding of diversity among students, and American Indian education.

Dana Pomykal Franz is associate professor in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education at Mississippi State University. She is the coordinator of the secondary mathematics education program. Her research interests include middle level preparation for mathematics teachers and developing content literacy in math classrooms.

Nicole C. Miller, a former middle school teacher, is a doctoral student in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education at Mississippi State University. Her research focuses on a variety of middle level education issues including teacher preparation and the use of technology tools by middle level teachers.

