

Looping: Moving Up with the Class

One school's adoption of a looping program, in which teachers stay with their classes for two years, results in increased confidence in students and improved parent-teacher relationships.

Last summer, Jean Eby, a teacher in Linden Elementary's looping program, was hard at work. After five years of teaching 3rd grade, Mrs. Eby carefully sifted through her teacher files and self-created materials, placed her personal belongings into deep storage bins, and hauled them down the corridor to the school's 4th grade complex.

I didn't have to move," admits Eby. "It was my choice." Although current research suggests that

the looping concept is being able to make choices: choices for students, parents, and teachers.

Linden Elementary School's looping endeavor began in 1996. During the school year, the principal led six interested teachers in a small study group. After reading literature about looping and discussing its pros and cons, the group decided that multiyear teaching should be an option for teachers and parents. Looping appealed to the group because it gives students time to learn at their own pace (Grant, Johnson, & Richardson, 1996). As Marilyn Thomas, a K-1 teacher explained,

Looping places less pressure on young students to learn all the curriculum objectives in one year. If students don't master a concept the first year, then they can receive help over the summer or even at the beginning of the second year.

The teachers also hoped that looping would help the students feel more at ease at the start of the new school year (Jacoby, 1994) and that they would spend less time teaching new rules and testing students to determine their strengths and weaknesses (Hanson, 1995). They also hoped that they might develop more positive relationships with students and parents (Baskwill, 1990).

Launching the Program

Once the six teachers committed themselves to beginning a looping program at Linden Elementary, the second step was to acquaint parents with the concept. The principal added informational tidbits about multiyear teaching to his weekly newsletter, and teachers shared their thoughts about looping with parents during conferences.

Over the summer, the principal, with teacher input, divided students into various classes. The school counselor reviewed student placement and made changes where appropriate. No mention was made that three classes would loop in the following year: one K-1 loop, one 1-2 loop, and one 3-4 loop. To prevent students, parents, and faculty from viewing looping classes as elitist, the principal took extra care to equally distribute students among classes on the basis of such factors as intelligence, reading levels, race, behavior, work habits, and socioeconomic status.

In April, the principal sent a letter to the parents of every student in the classes planning to loop. The letter stated that because the teacher enjoyed working with



Photo by Nannette Burton Dacus

Pat Petrie explains the Tattle Box—her creation to solve the tattling problem in her classroom. With looping, her solution will work for two years.

looping teachers do not need to change room location, "Personally, I did not agree with this," she explained. "As a teacher new to the 4th grade, I needed to be surrounded by veteran teachers to ask, 'What do I do now?'"

The quandaries of whether she should move or stay put, store her personal materials or leave them for her team teacher, contributed to Eby's apprehension about looping. Nevertheless, she realized that an advantage of



Photo by Michelle Pawel

Nannette Burton Dacus and her class are proud of the castle that they made during their two years together.

this group of students and parents, he or she had expressed an interest in continuing to teach the same class in the upcoming year. The letter also outlined the social and the academic benefits for students who were included in the program and suggested a resource for obtaining additional information about looping. Parents were able to choose whether they wanted their child to continue with the same teacher or to be assigned to a different one. When all letters were returned to the principal, only one parent in the three classes objected.

During the summer, most of the activities at the school revolved around looping. For many years, each grade level had been self-contained in a single complex with its own bathrooms, planning center, teacher assistant, and central location for equipment and supplies. The teachers who were changing grade levels decided to move

to the appropriate grade area. As team leaders squabbled over territorial issues—for example, what equipment and supplies could be taken from their complex—teachers sought additional storage space for the equipment that they would not need for their new grade levels.

Fortunately, the school year began smoothly. Gone was the student's apprehension about getting a new teacher. Gone were the lectures about daily procedures and classroom rules. Gone were the weeks of testing, trying to determine a student's reading level. The teachers and students started the year with a bang and ended further along than the teachers had anticipated. Marilyn Thomas describes it best:

I really didn't know what to expect at first. But by the end of the second year, I could see the change. My shy students were more confident; they had stronger peer relationships. As

Looping places less pressure on young students to learn all the curriculum objectives in one year.

for my struggling students, things began clicking. They just needed a little more time. . . . I feel more confident about sending these students on to the next grade level, simply because I know them. I know their different learning styles. And I know what they are capable of doing.

Lessons Learned

The next year, eight teachers decided to participate. The teachers met regularly with the principal to ensure a commitment to program goals, to discuss potential problems, and to learn what worked and what didn't during the first year. For example, only one new student had joined the 1st grade looping class. The student was in an uncomfortable situation where all rules and procedures were set and social circles established, and he felt as if he had moved to a new school. When the student's parents told the principal about the problems that their son was having, the principal arranged to have one of the student's friends from kindergarten moved into the room with him.

As the year progressed, the teachers and the principal made notes so that they would not make similar mistakes in the future. They soon discovered that moving teachers to keep like grade levels within the same complex every year was creating problems that some teachers could not adjust to. It was inefficient and placed too great a burden on

Parent-teacher relationships have improved so much that many parents have requested a third year with the same teacher.

the teachers and the custodians—not to mention the personnel who handled the inventory! The teachers who were teaching a new grade needed the support of a single grade-level complex; however, the downside of this support was the inconvenience of moving. As a result, each teacher had to choose whether to move or stay put.

The same rule applied for sharing materials. Teachers were encouraged but not required to share their personal resources. Program participants hoped that the paired teachers would trust each other and loan their collection for the year's duration.

During the second year, finding space for the teachers to file grade-level materials also became a problem. The filing cabinets were full, and the teachers were gathering materials for the new grade level that they had looped to. The school purchased new file cabinets for each looping teacher and initiated a color-coding system to distinguish between the different grade levels. In addition, a new inventory practice began: Items that stayed in the grade-level complex remained on the complex's inventory, but items that traveled with the teacher were placed on an individual inventory.

Despite these minor problems, looping was still popular. The principal with input from the faculty, made the decision that each grade level would have at least one looping teacher and two single-year teachers so that parents would have the choice of letting their child loop or not. This decision required many teachers to move into



As parents become more comfortable with their child's teacher, they are more likely to volunteer, like these two parents who are helping students create decorations for their school musical.

Photo by Nannette Burton Dacus

an unfamiliar grade. Jean Eby confided her reservations:

A main concern for me was the new curriculum: How would I be ready in such a short time to teach new skills using different textbooks and unfamiliar resources? . . . My biggest fear became, Would my students be at a disadvantage for having me two years in a row?

Looping teachers selected a mentor in their new grade levels to help ease their transition into the new curriculum. This practice drew more staff members into the looping program. The administration also altered the school schedule to provide time for each grade level to meet, as well as a time when each looping team could meet.

Fewer problems arose in the second year than in the first. Teachers and parents began to see positive changes in the students and in the quality of instruction. States David Neiding,

I think looping has made me a better teacher. I find myself approaching problems differently. [For example,] this year I had a couple of 3rd grade

girls picking on some other girls. I did what I normally do . . . only this time I was able to say, "Hey, we're going to be together a while, so work it out."

Pat Petrie pointed out that when a looping teacher "finds what works with her students, it works for two years!" Her invention, the Tattle Box (a box where students can submit their grievances against other classmates), has curbed the nonacademic interruptions in her 3rd and 4th grade classroom. "If the problem surfaces again, I will know what to do," she says.

Similarly Judy Huston, a 3rd and 4th grade looping teacher, believes that

having the same set of students to work with two years in a row is terrific. I no longer worry over the summer about what a new class will bring. Instead, I search for new ways to enrich the curriculum and tailor my lessons for my students' needs.

She also noted improved relationships with parents as one of looping's bonuses:

In the past, I have had a hard time getting to know my students' parents. Now I know them on a first-name basis. . . . They trust me completely.

"I'm a firm believer in the program," announced David Bell, the father of two students who opted to stay with their teachers for two years. "The continuity has made my kids much more stable socially and psychologically." In fact, parent-teacher relationships have improved so much that many parents have requested a third year with the same teacher. However, the looping

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study group decided that students should stay together for only two years.

The Road Ahead

Although Linden's looping endeavor has been successful to date, there is still a long road ahead. When asked about the future, teachers respond that they hope to collaborate more, to share more resources, and to plan more longitudinally. But this type of systemic change takes time. Schools evolve slowly. Even now, in what used to be the 1st grade complex, kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade classes exist. Projects Eby,

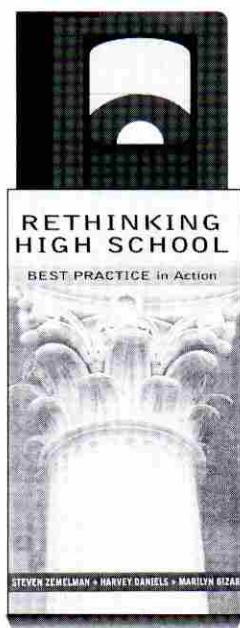
Eventually we will all have to stop changing classrooms. Every complex will contain one classroom of each grade K-4. When this occurs, there will be more opportunities for students of all ages to interact.

As for now, Linden is striving, one year at a time, to become a place where learning proceeds seamlessly from one grade to the next, and where teachers and parents have real choices about the education of their students. ■

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With *Best Practice*, the book, authors Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde highlight the consensus among the many recent national standards documents, offering ideas, strategies, and examples of exemplary programs. But Zemelman, Daniels, and their colleague Marilyn Bizar didn't stop there. They helped create a new inner-city high school that puts Best Practice into action. This video offers an insider's look at this new, complex, and emerging school.

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