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ACADEMIC LOOPING: PROBLEM OR SOLUTION?

Students in Waldorf schools stay with the same teacher for eight years, Italian preschoolers three, some German elementary students for as long as six. Yet looping, the practice of keeping students with the same teacher for multiple years, happens so infrequently in North America that it is still considered innovative.

Benefits

Those involved extol looping's many virtues. Teachers estimate they gain an entire month of instructional time because they don't have to redo classroom rules and 'getting to know you' activities at the start of the second year. The increased time together means more in-depth knowledge of learning styles, more time for students to master skills and, in one frequently cited study,[1] substantially higher scores on standardized tests in reading and math. Looping also seems to influence teacher behaviour. In a case study of eleven teachers who looped, McAllister found that they had higher professional expectations for themselves and higher academic expectations of their students.[2] Looping teachers may be more comfortable trying out new instructional strategies simply because they know their students or because they have time to experiment.

Relationships also benefit. Students, parents and teacher develop a sense of community and stability. Shy students have time to get comfortable. Difficult students have time to get used to consistent expectations. Teachers note an improvement in classroom discipline. Parents report having more confidence in their children's teachers and feeling more respected by the teachers.

Costs

Critics of looping almost always cite personality clashes as their biggest concern. Proponents dismiss this, saying there should always be an opportunity for students to transfer out of looped classrooms. Other criticisms, however, are more difficult to deflect. Looping is hard on newcomers and separation at the end of the cycle is hard on everyone. Even effective teachers have specific weaknesses, so students will always be missing out on something, whether another teacher's passion for music or a third's penchant for organization.

Recognizing that highly ineffective teachers shouldn't be in the classroom at all, we can only shudder at their impact on a single group of students over multiple years. Three years of a highly ineffective teacher means a cumulative achievement gain for a student of 29% as compared to an 83% gain for a student with three years of highly effective teachers.[3]

What's the right age?

Assuming a reasonably effective teacher and a flexible and responsive school system, looping seems to be a good thing, but for whom? Proponents argue that there are two times in a child's life when stability really matters. The first is the primary grades, and certainly anecdotal evidence would suggest that this is a time when teachers and parents see looping in a very positive light, even though a recent study suggested that it doesn't have either a positive or a negative effect in Grades 1 and 2.[4]

The second time period, far more contentious, is early adolescence, the developmental stage spanning grades 6 through 9. This is a time of significant transition in all aspects of life, not least of which involves moving buildings from Grade 8 to Grade 9, Grade 6 to Grade 7, or sometimes both. Would interbuilding looping help? Should teachers accompany their students, giving them support and stability during these often difficult times? Would our graduation rates be higher through this one small action?

Proponents say 'yes', but that it's only a small action if you haven't actually tried it. Remember the old joke about changing curriculum being like moving a cemetery? Until you try, you have no idea how many friends the dead have. Interbuilding looping, particularly from middle to high school, is a logistical nightmare, so much so that it fails before it ever gets off the drawing board.

Critics of looping argue that's as it should be; that looping at this critical time prevents students from forming the new social networks that are one of the prime benefits of high school, and that looping infantilizes teens just when they should be developing both independence and responsibility. Some critics go further, arguing that looping shouldn't happen in middle school at all because a protected, cozy environment at that time makes it even harder for students to adjust to high school.

Because looping happens infrequently, research on its effectiveness is both sparse and suspect, relying on personal evaluation by committed participants. Given looping's potential to influence student success, shouldn't we be finding out if it really does make a difference? ∎

Learn More about Academic Looping

Bafile, Cara (2006) "In the Loop: Students and Teachers Progressing Together" Education World Administrators Center. Available at http://www.educationworld/com/a_admin/admin/admin120.shtml

Burke, Daniel (1997) "Looping: Adding Time, Strengthening Relationships," *ERIC Digest*. Available at http://www.ericdigests.org/1998-2/looping.htm

Gaustad, Joan (1998) "Implementing Looping," *ERIC Digest* 123. Available at http://cepm.uoregon.edu/publications/digests/digest123.html

KAREN HUME IS CURRENTLY ON LEAVE FROM HER SCHOOL BOARD AND IS WRITING AND SPEAKING ABOUT EDUCATION. MORE INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE AT WWW.KARENHUME.CA

Notes

1 Daniel Burke, "Looping: Adding Time, Strengthening Relationships," *ERIC Digest*, Dec. 1997. Available at http://www.ericdigests.org/1998-2/looping.htm

2 Eileen McAllister, "A Case Study of Looping at the Elementary Level in Three Schools in Three Mid-Atlantic States," *Dissertation Abstract*, May 2001. Available at http://muse.widener.edu/~egrozyck/Dissertations/McAllisterB.html

3 Robert Marzano, *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action*. (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2003), 73.

4 Joe Savrock, "Little Impact Seen in Multiyear Teacher Assignments on Early Elementary Students," 2005. Available at www.ed.psu.edu/news/looping.asp