

Teachers' and Students' Perception of Looping during the Middle School Years

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Abstract: The perceived lack of academic achievement among students in the public education system in the U.S. is a recurring topic of debate in the media and among educators, school administrators, politicians, and parents. Much research show that a close stable relationship between students and teachers is vital for effective education. However, the traditional educational structure in the U.S. of changing students' teachers at every grade level does not easily allow for such relationships to blossom. One promising structural change that emerged fairly recently in the U.S. is multi-age classrooms, including "looping," defined as a classroom program in which students and their teacher stay together for at least two years. With looping, the emphasis is to foster long-term relationships that meet the academic and social needs of children. The looping concept is well known world-wide, but it is still uncommon enough in the U.S. to be considered innovative. Looping is a concept that makes intuitive sense--by allowing teachers to teach a class of students for a longer period of time and by capitalizing on the teacher's increased knowledge of students and their academic needs, as well as by increasing learning time resulting from fewer transitions. Many educators are now acknowledging the benefits of keeping the same students and teacher together for an extended period. This is especially critical during the middle schools years. Adolescence has often been characterized as a period of psychosocial turmoil. Often middle school students feel lost in a large school environment, and alienation from school may result. The purpose of this study was to identify teachers' and students' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of looping. A qualitative design incorporating separate focus groups with looped seventh and eighth grade students and teachers of looped classrooms was utilized.

Keywords: Looping, Middle School, Teachers' and Students' Perception of Looping

Introduction

THE VALUE OF strong relationships between teachers and students has long been recognized. Thought to be neutral sites where social and academic learning occurs, the social context of a classroom affects the learning that occurs in that classroom (Young & Smith, 1997). One social factor in a classroom is the relationship between teachers and students. If this relationship is a caring relationship, students academically and socially benefit (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1997; Crosnoe, Johnson & Elder, 2004). Research also shows that many elements of learning are based on relationships and social and emotional stability (Elias et al., 1997). Students are less likely to "fall through the cracks" in schools with a strong sense of community.

As more and more emphasis is placed on finding ways to improve student learning, one approach offering potential is looping. The available literature on looping is replete with its benefits as looping provides children with additional time to build the relationships upon which much of their learning is dependent. A large body of research is now establishing a link between looping and student teacher relationships citing benefits such as enhanced

academic performance, behavior modification and improved attitudes toward school (Baran, 2008; Checkley, 1995; Haslinger, Kelly, & O'Lare, 1996). However, the most cited benefit that looping provides is personal development and enhanced self esteem. Looping is defined as a classroom program in which students and their teacher stay together for at least two years (*The Communicator*, 2004). With looping, the emphasis is to foster long-term relationships that meet the academic and social needs of children. Looping provides time for teachers to build strong relationships with students and for students to build meaningful and accepting relationships with one another. Long-term relationships result in an emotional and intellectual climate that encourages thinking, risk-taking, and involvement (Marzano, 1992; Zahorik & Dichanz, 1994). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore teachers' and students' perception of looping during the middle school years.

Review of the Literature

A review of the literature confirms that several school districts in the U.S. have experienced success with their looping models. All have found that looping enhances the school climate for both teachers and students and ultimately enhances academic achievement. It appears that when schools focus on allowing teachers and students more time together, trust and strengthened relationships are built. For students, having the same teacher and classmates for two or more years provides stability and builds a sense of community. Looping reduces anxiety and increases confidence for many children, enabling them to blossom both socially and as learners (Gaustad, 1998). Research suggests that looping might be especially useful for those struggling academically. In a review of research related to the academic achievement of middle school students, the U.S. National Middle School Association (2001) concluded that students' academic achievement is enhanced in schools that support personal and sustained connections between students and adults in the school setting (Tosolt, 2009).

Looping provides teachers with more time to analyze and observe students and more time to try different strategies. Bracey (1999) posited that because of the longer available time-frame to work with students, teachers can defer promotion/retention decisions until numerous observations of any particular child have taken place. By spending several years with a class, teachers can accumulate more in-depth knowledge of students' personalities, learning styles, strengths, and weaknesses. This longer contact reduces time spent on diagnosis and facilitates more effective instruction. In addition, it creates more opportunities to tailor the curriculum to individual students as teachers can target acceleration or remediation based on individual needs (Checkley, 1995; Crosby, 1998; Rasmussen, 1998).

Burke (1997), a leading advocate of looping, stated, "Looping classrooms tend to form a strong social unit that translates into a true community of learners" (p. 3). Gaustad (1998) wrote that teachers and students in looped classrooms need not start from scratch every fall, learning new sets of names and personalities. Barnes (1980) believed that in a world that tends to undermine every human permanence, the strong student-teacher relationship during the vital middle years of childhood builds confidence in the human capacity to undertake, sustain, and deepen human relationships altogether. Adolescence has often been characterized as a period of psychosocial turmoil (Bradley, 1998). The literature review revealed that students' frustration levels increased during their middle school years as students may feel a need for, or lack of, autonomy. During this time, students' abilities to make choices are growing, but the opportunities to do so may not be available to them. Even though adolescents

will incorporate many aspects of their identities from parents, peers, and culture, their identities must allow them to have a self that is capable of making choices that diverge from those made by parents and peers. Adolescents must be able to view themselves as autonomous agents.

Positive relationships with teachers are important tools for promoting the success of adolescent students in and out of school. In addition, the structure or organization of a school community can impact the way students' feel about the time they spend at school. An emotionally and socially positive school climate contributes to the development of students' self-confidence and an atmosphere of cordiality in student-teacher relationships.

Transition Elementary to Middle Schools

Middle level education in the United States typically encompasses grades seven through nine. During the 1960's and 1970's the shift started toward moving the public school system to include middle school organization. This organization included grades K-5 at the elementary level, grades 6-8 at the middle school level and grades 9-12 at the high school level. The objective of this grade organization was to provide a better transition for students from elementary to high school through the process by offering a more consistent education at the middle level.

Middle school transitions can be challenging for a variety of reasons. Often schools develop or establish a "disconnect" between students' developmental needs and the school environment or procedures (Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, MacIver, & Feldlaufer, 1993). This "disconnect" with developmental needs and school environment is compounded with the onset of adolescence (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983). Often middle school students feel lost in a large middle school environment, and alienation from school may result.

Students' academic motivation may decline and become more negative as the years progress. Blyth et al.(1983) found a marked decline in some early adolescents' grades as they moved into middle level education. The reason behind this decline in motivation can be linked to multiple sources: fewer decision-making opportunities, teacher control and discipline factors, teacher-student relations, teachers' sense of efficacy and ability-grouping. (Eccles et al, 1993)

In addition, school transitions have been documented to lead to a decline in young adolescents' self-esteem (Blyth et al., 1983; Eccles, Wigfield, Reuman, & Mac Iver, 1987). Finger and Silverman (1966), for instance, studied some 489 young adolescents during the transition to middle level schools. The researchers found a decline in achievement for a majority of students, which appeared highly related to academic motivation (as cited in Mullins & Irvin, 2000). Petersen and Crockett (1985) examined school records of 335 young adolescents. Their data indicated a significant drop in academic performance at seventh grade, which was the transition year for the students in the study, in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Blyth et al., (1983) found a general decline in grade-point average (GPA) for students across grades 6 through 10. The most dramatic drop in GPA, however, was for students who experienced a school transition between grades six and seven. In addition, researchers documented declines in the following areas: school satisfaction, attitudes towards academic and non-academic subjects, and reactions to teachers (Haladyna & Thomas, 1979; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987).

Researchers have attempted to explain why so many middle schools are not meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents. Young adolescents possess an increasing desire for autonomy, a growing orientation to peers, a concern about social acceptance, an increased need to resolve identity issues, and an increased tendency for an egocentric orientation. These attributes are at odds with traditional middle school settings of larger and less personable schools; less positive teacher/ student relationships; stricter assessment measures; more competitive and controlled environments; fewer opportunities for decision-making, choice, and self-management; and more social/ability comparison (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994).

Academic transitions can be a difficult time for students, resulting in a decrease in academic achievement and social development. (Rice, 1991) Middle school is a time when students transition not only from elementary school to middle school but also from childhood to adolescence, dealing with a transition physically and emotionally. Adolescence is a critical stage in a student's life. They have to deal with raging hormones, social-cultural identification, quest for independence, self esteem issues and all the while trying to define themselves. (Young & Smith, 1997). In 2001, Potter, Schlisky, Stevenson, and Drawdy identified that during adolescence, youth experience a wide range of physical, intellectual, emotional and social changes. In addition students have a variety of needs. Some are poor attendees, live in poverty, or have behavior problems while others have low skills and have low grade point averages.

Looping provides teachers with insights into each student's interests and academic needs, possibly enabling them to better motivate those students. By most accounts, teachers play a particularly prominent role in adolescents' lives. For example, teachers affect students' achievement, their involvement in school, and their motivation for learning (Wentzel, 1998). Motivation is highly related to both academic achievement and the learning environment (Cheng, 1994; Uguroglu & Walberg, 1986). Looping offers both continuity in relationships and learning that are essential components of a positive learning environment. Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan (1996) found that middle school students who perceived a supportive relationship with their teacher felt more connected to and had positive affect for school. Students tended to feel more competent and be more task focused in their pursuit of academic goals, and at the end of the year they tended to have higher GPAs.

It is imperative that educators find ways to make middle school more effective in meeting the unique needs of these young adolescents. Leaving these needs unmet often results in alienation from school, loss of general self-esteem and sense of belonging, and destructive methods of coping, including delinquency and drugs (Felner, Kasak, Mulhall, & Flowers, 1997)

Perceptions of Teacher Caring

Students benefit, both academically and emotionally, when they perceive that their teachers care about them (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1997; Murdock & Miller, 2003; Shann, 1999). According to Noddings (2005), care is not an individual trait or virtue, but the state of a relationship. "A caring relationship is, in its most basic form, a connection or encounter between two human beings--a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for" (p. 15). Noddings (1992) argued that education must attend to children's fundamental need to be cared for. According to Noddings (1995): "We should want more from our educational efforts than adequate

achievement, and we will not achieve even that meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others” (p. 26). She further stated that children become more competent learners in nurturing environments which provide compassion and the presence of adults who represent constancy.

Encouraging students and teachers to stay together for more than one year helps ensure this type of environment, resulting in students who feel a sense of belonging (Jankoski, 1996). Vann (1997) noted that “for the many children coming to school from fragile homes, looping teachers provide familiar and welcome ‘significant others’ in their lives, giving them an extra sense of security” (p. 41). Consistency with the same adults and peers helps provide a safe, stable haven for everyone. For some students, the classroom is the only place they can find unconditional caring (Crosby, 1998).

Several other researchers have contributed to this body of knowledge supporting the belief that strong teacher- student relationships, a by-product of looping, does enhance academic and social achievement. Rogers (1994) revealed that students valued teachers who demonstrated their care through concern for students' academic, social, and physical well-being. Howard (2001) found that some students felt that caring teachers were those who pushed their students to higher academic achievement by expressing high expectations or being strict about students doing their work. Wentzel (1997) discovered that students felt teachers cared about them when they taught in an interesting way or asked if students needed help with academic work. Similarly, Ruggiero (2005) revealed that students felt teachers cared about them when they had high expectations for all students, made learning fun, and assisted students with achievement and understanding. In addition, the author found that students felt teachers cared about them when they gave positive feedback, helped students stay out of trouble, were aware of and sensitive to students' emotions, and provided safety for students.

These researchers and others posit that for students in the middle years, positive and productive teacher-student relationships are the core of effective teaching, providing the foundation for improved student learning and enhanced feelings of self-worth for both students and their teachers. Any investment of time in connectivity between teachers and students, which is the foundation for a looping program, can provide educators with enhanced relationships with their students which again results in enhanced academic and social benefits for the students.

Perceived Drawbacks of Looping

Despite the many advantages of looping, this research uncovered some disadvantages for students, teachers, and parents. Simel (1998) reported the concerns of looping teachers as new students entered their looped classrooms. One teacher explained that getting new students upset the balance. They were unfamiliar with the routines and what the teachers expected, and they felt lost. She expressed frustration with having to stop and explain herself to the new students while the veteran students waited. Another teacher, in the same study, expressed a similar concern that new students felt left out much of the time. The effects on new students and on the class increased the later the new students entered into the classroom's looping process. In the same study, Simel (1998) further noted that one principal felt that that new students could be adversely affected by the liberties many looping teachers took in changing the curriculum.

Some looping teachers have been persuaded by proponents to view the curriculum as a two-year course of instruction, rather than two one-year programs taught in succession. This approach could have negative outcomes for students who leave the loop and for children placed in the class the second year. The scope and sequence of instruction for them would have serious gaps if the looping teacher omitted certain concepts from the customary grade-level curriculum the first year, in the expectation of teaching them the second year (Vann, 1997).

One way to eliminate this problem is to avoid placing new students into a looped classroom. By design, looped classes generally start out larger than traditional classes, leaving regular third- and fourth-grade classes smaller and better able to absorb newcomers (Strachan, 2000). Grant, Johnson, & Richardson (1996b) recommend automatically reviewing all student placements at the end of each school year, as well as allowing teachers and parents to request midyear transfers.

Teachers who are beginning to loop would have to assume the responsibility for coordinating the district and state curricula, materials and resources, state and national testing requirements, and child-driven interests for another entire year (Forsten, Grant, Johnson, & Richardson, 1997). Because teachers are so accustomed to teaching the same grade level year after year, many do not want to change and are unwilling to learn another grade's curriculum. In addition, some teachers decide not to loop because it would mean leaving a grade-level team where teachers work well together (Milion, 1996).

Because a looped classroom is such a supportive environment for high-needs students, the temptation exists to place many of the children with special needs into this situation. This can overwhelm the teacher and actually reduce the effectiveness of the program design (Grant et al., 1996b). Teachers already teaching in a looping program may fear that their classrooms become dumping grounds. Strachan (2000) noted that teachers might be concerned about a problem child being in their class for an extended period. One third grade teacher noted that, although many disruptive students benefit from the stability of looping, if there are ongoing concerns, "I confer with the parents and principal and give specific reasons why it's not in the child's best interest to stay in my classroom. Before each third grade loop ends, every child's continued placement is discussed at a spring conference and resolved in the child's favor" (Strachan, 2000, para. 11).

Many parents initially express concern about having students with the same teacher for two years. Grant, Johnson, & Richardson (1996a) noted that parents are usually concerned about three things when it comes to looping and teachers often have the same concerns:

1. What if there is a personality conflict between a child and teacher?
2. What if my child has a bad teacher and has to stay with him or her for two years?
3. What if the class is dysfunctional?

Saying good-bye to close relationships that have existed between teacher and child and among classmates in a looping design is difficult (Forsten et al., 1997). It is a concern equally expressed by teachers, students, and parents. Separation does seem more stressful at the end of two years compared to the single-grade, single-year classroom (Hanson, 1995; Higuchi, 1994). A teacher, Jacoby, (1994) ending a two year looping relationship stated, "This year will be the most difficult to say goodbye" (p. 59).

Methodology and Procedures

This qualitative case study aimed to identify teachers' and students' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of a looping program serving 7th and 8th grade middle school students. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What do teachers see as advantages and drawbacks of looping?
2. What do students see as advantages and drawbacks of looping?

The research institution was a middle school located in Midwestern United States serving grades seven and eight. The school was organized into a total of ten houses--five seventh grade houses and five eighth grade houses. Two of the houses, one seventh-grade house and one eighth-grade house, participated in this research study because they were looped classes. A total of eight teachers taught in the looping houses, working together as a team. The remaining eight houses consisted of traditional classrooms with the exception of one-seventh-grade house. This house had been converted to a looping house at the beginning of the school year. However, since this house was in the first year of the looping cycle, it was not included in this research study.

Seventh and eighth grade looped students and five of eight teachers who were involved in the looping program are the subjects of this study. Students were first and second year looping students. Over 98% of students were proficient in English and 7% were eligible for subsidized lunch.

Four focus groups were conducted with a randomly selected sample of looped seventh and eighth grade students. The all-male and all-female student focus groups were conducted to provide insights about their perceptions of looping. Males and females were separated because young adolescents are often self-conscious and may worry about what others might think of them. It was felt that students might talk more freely if they did not have to take gender issues into consideration. A total of 11 females and 10 males from the seventh grade and a total of 12 females and 8 males from the eighth grade participated. Five teachers in looping classrooms participated in a separate focus group.

Appropriate clarifying probes were used when needed to ensure that the participants had elaborated their answers fully. Audio recordings of the focus group sessions were transcribed in a word document and coded by raters to identify thematic trends. Initial codes were reviewed by auditors in order to ensure rater objectivity.

Findings and Discussion

Teachers: The results show that teachers in general were positive to the looping experience at the school. The following summarizes their responses to research question one: What do teachers see as advantages and drawbacks of looping? The teachers received the research questions in advance so that the interview remained focused. The meeting lasted one hour and 45 minutes and the discussion centered on the following five research questions:

1. How has looping affected your relationship with your students and their parents?
2. Do you find that the relationships with your students are different in a looped classroom versus a regular classroom? If so, in what ways?

3. With looping, have you noticed a change in your students’ motivation to do school work and attitude towards school?
4. If you could choose your environment, would you prefer to teach a looped or a regular classroom, and why?
5. With looping, what weaknesses have you experiences with students, parents, and administrators, if any?

Prior to the discussion, the teachers completed a demographic questionnaire. Table 1 below summarizes the results. The reasons for their involvement in looping varied; however, the majority volunteered while one was assigned to a looping classroom. All teachers had taught conventional classrooms prior to teaching looping. The least experienced teachers had taught for six years while the most experienced had been teaching for nine years. The teachers worked as a team consisting of three teachers per grade level who stayed with the students through seventh and eighth grades.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Looping Teachers

Participant	Age	Gender	Racial & Ethnic Background	Years of Education	Years Teaching	Years Teaching Looping	Assigned or Volunteered to Loop	Preparation for Looping
1	25-30	Female	European American	20+	6	2	Volunteered	None
2	31-35	Female	European American	18	9	2	Volunteered	Very Little
3	25-30	Female	European American	20+	6	2	Assigned	None
4	31-35	Female	European American	20+	9	2	Volunteered	None
5	25-30	Female	European American	18+	8	3	Volunteered	Individual Research

Teachers, overall, were positive to the looping experience and felt that looping had a positive influence on their relationships with students and their parents. Four themes emerged from the interviews:

1. Looping helps to build strong relationships between students and teachers and teachers and parents.
2. A sense of family is created between students, teachers, and parents in a looping classroom and also between the looping team members.

3. Looping enhances instruction and learning
4. Student academic needs are addressed more effectively in a looping classroom.

During the first year of the looping cycle, the teachers expressed that they tried hard to make the relationships work and to resolve conflicts because they were going to be with the students for two years. During year two, students and teachers also started to know each other on a personal level, which strengthened their relationships. During year two, teachers also started to see that the parents became more relaxed around them and that their relationships became a little more casual as the parents started to communicate more with them, often through phone messages or emails.

Each of the teachers interviewed stated that a sense of family was created between students, teachers, and parents in a looping classroom and also between the looping team members. The teachers further contended that since many students' home situations were unstable, the only positive feedback students may receive in their lives could be from their teachers. Furthermore, the teachers stated that since they knew so much about their students' lives, they were increasingly able to help the students with their work. Looping also helped bring the students closer together. Students established strong bonds with each other and showed inclusiveness. Interestingly, they commented that looping had brought the teachers working on the same looping team closer together, as well. They stressed that the team dynamics were important and that they trusted each other and had great confidence in each other's abilities.

The third theme that developed was that looping enhanced instruction and learning. The teachers stressed that one of the benefits of looping was that the second school year started as if it was day 181. Instead of spending time getting to know the students, they were able to start instruction immediately. They could also cover material more quickly since they knew where students had left off the previous year. Teachers also had knowledge about each student's academic strengths and weaknesses and could alter the material to fit each student's learning needs.

Finally, teachers felt that students' academic needs were addressed more effectively in a looping classroom. Because they had already spent a whole year learning about each child's learning needs, they could start year two addressing these needs, closely tailoring their instruction if necessary

A limited number of drawbacks emerged from the teacher focus group as follows:

1. Too deep an immersion in the lives of the students and their families
2. Increased "emotional" stress and increased committee work
3. Diminished relationships with non-looping teachers
4. Difficult separation

The teachers felt that because of their strong relationships with their students and parents, they sometimes knew too much about their home situation, which made them uncomfortable. They also felt that because of looping, some parents were more comfortable putting the responsibility of their child's learning solely on their teachers.

Teachers felt that because looping teachers often are the types that "go the extra mile," they sometimes felt like they were being punished for doing their jobs well. For example, several of the looping teachers had been asked to serve on committees and to perform addi-

tional activities for the school. The looping teachers also wished that they would receive additional training to further prepare them for the looping task. Currently, their only knowledge of looping was the research they conducted on their own time. They expressed a desire for more formal training to prepare them for looping and to communicate and create a network with other successful looping teacher. Teachers also worried about the dynamics of their school, which increased their stress level.

In the past, several non-looping teachers had felt that their looping colleagues received preferential treatment. Although this dynamic had been greatly diminished, some conventional teachers still held these preconceived notions of the looping teachers.

Finally, all teachers expressed the emotional difficulty of separating at the end of the looping cycle. One teacher, looping for the first time, questioned if she was ever going to be able to loop again as she exclaimed that she felt that the idea of separation was too emotionally draining.

Students: The results show that students in general were positive to the looping experience at the school. The following summarizes their responses to research question two: What do students see as advantages and drawbacks of looping?

Looping students were randomly selected to participate in focus groups. A total of four separate interview sessions were held. The students were separated by grade level and gender. All students were white and between the ages of 13 -14. Each focus group consisted of a convenient sample of between eight and twelve participants. The students were asked to discuss the following five questions:

1. How do you like being with the same teacher and peers for two years?
2. How would you characterize your relationships with your teacher and peers?
3. With looping, has your motivation to do school work and your attitude towards school improved or not?
4. If you could have looped in grammar school would you have preferred that and would you prefer to loop in high school?
5. Are there any weaknesses with looping that we haven't discussed?

The responses were recorded and analyzed for themes and recurring patterns according to grade level. Furthermore, the differences in opinions between males and females are discussed. It became clear that students in general like looping; however, some concerns were recorded.

Grade Seven: The seventh grade students said that they preferred looping to the conventional classroom setting and noted the following positive attributes of looping:

1. A sense of family
2. Closer and stronger relationships with classmates
3. Higher comfort level with teachers
4. Work harder to establish friendships with peers
5. Work harder to get along with teachers
6. Less stressful the second year of looping
7. Knowledge of teachers' expectations
8. Participate more towards the end of the school year
9. Improved grades
10. Increased learning

11. Less slacking off towards the end of the school year
12. Improved attitudes toward school

The majority of students preferred to be in a looping classroom; however, several students were unsure of the benefits. Four students in particular, two male and two female, expressed that they would have preferred not to loop either because they did not like their teachers or because they felt that looping limited their exposure to students outside their looping classroom. The students, in general, commented that they felt closer to their classmates and teachers, which created a sense of family. In addition, they reported that they worked harder at building these relationships, making an effort to get along with classmates and their teachers and, thus, increasing their comfort level because they were going to be together for a duration of two years.

Students commented that they expected to be less stressed-out during the summer because they knew what their environment would be like in the fall. The majority was excited about this; however, one girl mentioned that she would miss the excitement she felt prior to meeting a new teacher and getting new classmates. The students commented that they felt that they were learning more in a looped classroom. The majority commented that their level of participation was up towards the end of the semester because they felt comfortable with their peers and teachers. They also expressed that they expected to participate even more the following year. They also reported that they were not “slacking off” and “smarting off” towards the end of the first year, as they normally would do in the past in a conventional classroom setting. They contributed this to the fact that they were going to be with the same teachers the next year. Another benefit was that they felt less stressed towards the end of the year because the teachers were not trying to cover as much material. They contributed this to the fact that teachers would be able to go over the material during the next grade level.

Overall, the seventh graders did not report that they felt more motivated to do well in school; however, several students commented that they were starting to work harder to please the teachers because they knew they were going to be with them in eighth grade. The majority expected to work harder next year, and they expected their grades to go up.

The majority felt that their attitudes toward school were starting to improve and attributed this to their improved relationships with their peers. They felt that they had made some very good friends. However, the majority reported that they did not feel too excited about school.

The males were more positive towards looping in grammar school and the majority would have preferred it if they had a good teacher. The females did not report any strong preferences towards looping in grammar school because they felt that they already knew all the teachers and students well due to the smaller size of the school. However, both males and females reported that it would have been beneficial to have looped between the grades six and seven in order to lessen the stress of moving to a new school and getting all new classmates. The majority of students reported that they felt intimidated about high school and would have preferred to loop between eighth and ninth grade in order to ease the transition. However, they did not prefer to loop beyond ninth grade. Overall, they reported that they expected looping to help them get ready for high school, mainly due to their strong relationships with their peers. As one girl mentioned, “In high school I can always go back to lean on my old looping friends.”

A limited number of drawbacks emerged from the 7th grade focus groups as follows: Overall, the students were pleased about being in a looped classroom. One girl reported that

she felt that looping was the best situation for her. She was shy and she was relieved that she did not have to make an effort to meet people outside of her looping house. However, a female classmate felt that this was a drawback. She preferred to have more exposure to the rest of the school and would have liked to know all the students in school.

The majority of students expressed a concern of being “stuck” with a bad teacher as one of their greatest concerns with looping. However, none of the students interviewed had a desire to leave their looping classroom if given the option. Both males and females contended that they expected it to be difficult to leave their teachers at the end of the eighth year. However, they did not seem overly concerned about it.

Grade Eight: The eighth grade students made the following comments:

1. Prefer looping over traditional classroom
2. More confident
3. A sense of family
4. Easier to make friends
5. Everyone is included and all are friends
6. Feel strong bonds with peers
7. Improved relationship with teachers
8. Knowledge of teachers’ expectations
9. Increased classroom participation
10. Increased motivation
11. Better grades
12. Want to do well in order to please teachers
13. Teachers have increased knowledge of students academic capabilities
14. Improved attitude towards school
15. The teachers make learning fun
16. Wouldn’t want to come to school if part of a conventional classroom
17. Increased communication between students and teachers
18. Increased self-esteem
19. Feel more confident to enter high school
20. More independent
21. Feel prepared for high school

Overall the students reported that they enjoyed their looping experience and that they preferred it to conventional classrooms. There was a clear difference in the eighth graders’ feelings about looping compared to the seventh graders’. They mentioned that their relationships with their peers and teachers really grew strong during the second year of the looping cycle. They felt a strong bond with their classmates and reported that all classmates were friends and got along well. Furthermore, they reported that there were fewer cliques and that they all put forth an effort to get to know all students in their class.

One student stressed that she now “had many best friends.” In addition, they felt very close to their teachers and were comfortable confiding in them about what went on in their personal lives. As a result, they contended that they felt like their peers and teachers were all part of a family. They also reported that their camp experience at the beginning of eighth grade was a much more positive experience for them compared to the school’s non-looped eighth graders because they already knew their classmates and teachers. In addition, they ex-

pressed gratitude that they could lean on each other during difficult times. The class had recently lost a classmate due to a tragic accident, and they all reported that it was helpful that they could show their feelings openly due to their strong relationships.

The majority reported that they felt motivated to do well in school. One student reported that he “faked” sick the previous year in order to stay home from school. This year he hated to miss school and looked forward to every single day. The majority expressed that since they liked their teachers and because their teachers’ knew what each student’s capabilities were, they wanted to do well. In addition, they felt that their teachers would not let them get away with not putting forth their best effort. They contended that the teachers expected a lot from them, but also felt that the teachers wanted to make school fun by being creative in the classroom.

Students reported that they felt they were learning more this year. The teachers could cover more material because they knew what the students had been exposed to previously and the students participated more because they were comfortable in their learning environment. Several students reported that they received better grades this year as a result. One female student expressed that “school did not feel like school this year.” Instead, she felt that she was learning while spending time with her best friends. Furthermore, she mentioned that she would not have felt that way if she had been part of a conventional classroom. In addition, several students reported that they looked forward to going back to school after their summer vacation prior to starting eighth grade. They also contended that they really liked attending the summer activities their teachers had planned for them. One student reported that she had planned to request to leave her looping house after seventh grade and move into a traditional learning environment; however, she decided to stay. Now the seventh grade female stressed “looping is the best thing that happened to me in my school career.”

The students reported that they enjoyed spending time with their teachers and communicating with them. They also said that they had taken the initiative to decorate the classroom and they had also held a surprise party for one of their teachers.

In addition to being positive to looping in middle school, the eighth graders overall would have liked to have looped in grammar school, as well. They felt this would have helped them build stronger relationships and would have increased their learning. All students expressed that they did not wish to loop in high school, explaining that they felt this was a time for them to expand their horizons and meet other friends. However, some expressed that they felt that it would be beneficial to loop through ninth grade in order to ease the transition to high school. Several students felt that they were better prepared for high school than students in conventional classrooms because looping had given them better self-esteem and made them more confident. As one female student explained, “Because of looping, I know that I can make good friends and this has made me confident that I can meet new friends in high school.” Many students also expected to do well academically in high school because of their increased confidence and because looping had made them more independent.

A limited number of drawbacks emerged from the eighth grade focus group as follows:

The majority of students were nervous about leaving their looped environment at the end of eighth grade. This was especially a serious issue for the females. The second concern was being with a teacher they did not like for an extended period. Some also missed the excitement they felt when getting a new teacher.

Conclusion

This research study suggests that a close, stable relationship between students and teachers is vital for effective education. The teachers interviewed for this study believed that looping was an instructional design that positively impacted their relationships with their students and also their parents. In addition, they believed that looping increased learning and led to academic growth. The majority of students interviewed expressed that they preferred to be in a looping classroom. The eighth grade students, especially, noted that they felt like their teachers and student peers were like family. The seventh grade students reported that they looked forward to being with the same teacher and peers the following year. The results from this study indicate that teachers and students overall are very enthusiastic about looping and the strong bonds that develop between teachers and students. In addition, students develop deep relationships with peers that many expected to last a very long time. As one student expressed, "I now have many best friends!"

The results reinforce the current research and literature on looping. It appears that looping does provide many essential components for a positive learning environment. Recent studies depicted "U.S. middle schools as the 'Bermuda-Triangle' of education where kids lose their way academically and socially" (Wallis, 2005, p. 49). Jackson, a middle school expert, noted that educators' "good instruction and caring relationships" are what makes for successful schools today (Wallis, p. 51). Both of these are characteristics of the looping environment. There is a need to build on this knowledge and encourage educators to support looping with all of its positive impacts. This study shows that looping should be seriously considered for students. Looping classrooms may have a powerful effect on students' academic and social development, especially during the critical middle school years.

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