

The Effects of Looping on Perceived Values and Academic Achievement

Carmen Rodriguez and Bernard Arenz

This study was designed to examine the effects of looping, a practice whereby teachers and students stay together for more than one year, on perceived values and academic achievement in language arts at a Fresno Unified School District elementary school in Fresno, CA. Looping has many perceived advantages, such as the development of long-term relationships, and disadvantages, such as incompatibility between the student and teacher, associated with looping.

The study contained both qualitative and quantitative elements. Questionnaires were used to investigate the perceived values of looping among teachers, students, and their parents. Academic performance on Grade Level Assessment of Standards, a criterion-referenced test, was analyzed and compared for significant differences between looping and non-looping students. Looping was found to be perceived as a positive value. Teachers, students, and parents all reported positive experiences with looping, and significant differences favoring looping students were found on measures of writing strategies, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

Achieving academic success is one of the most critical goals in education today, especially for our diverse groups of students. For many students, school is their only source of safety, stability, and acceptance. The relationships that teachers develop with their students enable teachers to fulfill the role of a guide (Flinders & Noddings, 2001). These relationships set a foundation of trust that in turn may function as a catalyst for academic achievement. Looping

is an option that might foster these critical relationships and positively influence academic achievement.

The term looping comes from the approach in which a teacher picks up students in 1 year, progresses with them for 2 or more years, and then loops back to the earlier year to begin work with another group of students (Bracey, 1999). Looping casts the teacher and his or her students in a relational drama that unfolds over the course of 2 or 3 years. The essence of looping is the promotion of strong, extended, meaningful, and positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and their students that foster student motivation, stimulating improved learning outcomes for students (Bogart, 2002; Burke, 1997).

Looping is comprised of four basic principles. The first is that when looping is instituted, teachers keep groups of students together over long periods of time. Second, the teacher or team of teachers progress with their students to the next grade level. Third, the school personnel determine the period of time students and teachers stay together. Finally, teachers need to be adequately prepared to deliver instruction in new grade levels to ensure that the best results will be attained (Grant, Johnson, & Richardson, 1996).

While looping can be traced back to the one-room schoolhouse of colonial times in the United States, very little quantitative and qualitative research has been conducted on this pedagogical design. The existing literature on looping is largely anecdotal. Many assertions made by looping proponents are unsubstantiated, but despite the limited body of research, there are specific factors that are positively associated with looping designs (Bogart, 2002). These factors were examined at a school that participated in looping for 3 years.

Carmen Rodriguez, M.A., is a teacher for the Fresno Unified School District, Fresno, CA. Email cr123@csufresno.edu. Bernard Arenz, Ph.D., is a professor in the Kremen School of Education and Human Development, California State University, Fresno, CA. Email barenz@csufresno.edu.

When six teachers at Calwa Elementary School in Fresno, California opted to progress to the next grade level with their students for the 2005-2006 school year, the ramifications of implementing looping became a great concern. Calwa Elementary failed to achieve Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs) in English language arts, as set forth by federal accountability measures, and is currently designated as a Program Improvement Year 3 school. Specifically, Calwa's numerically significant subgroups of low socioeconomic status and Hispanic students and English language learners have been unable to make adequate progress in language arts, as measured by the California Standards Test (CST). Calwa Elementary School is one of 65 elementary schools in the Fresno Unified School District, in Fresno, California. Ninety-four percent of the students at this school site are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (Fresno Unified School District, 2005a). Students live in poverty and have instability in their homes, and many lack positive role models in their lives.

Schools can function as the safe haven that many children seek. Often, students are victims of situations that prevent their basic needs from being satisfied, hindering their well-being, and ultimately affecting their learning. Because school may be the only source of stability in the lives of these children, it is critical that Calwa Elementary, as well as other schools, explore other ways of meeting their students' basic needs. One of these avenues is looping, which enhances opportunities for personal and social development, thereby fostering the sense of belonging and membership in students (George & Lounsbury, 2000).

Engagement and membership are goals that schools must promote as a way of helping students arrive at the outcomes of achievement and personal and social development. The traditional practice of breaking up classes or teams each year and assigning students to different groups and new teachers is an impediment to membership. Because of the failure of many families and communities to provide adequate opportunities for social bonding and membership, the school becomes even more important as a source for social development (George & Lounsbury, 2000). Therefore, looping classrooms create a strong link to positive social groups in the school setting.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived values of looping by the teachers, parents, and students who participated in looping for 2 or 3 years, as measured by qualitative methods. In addition, this study also examined the differences in student academic performance in language arts between looping and non-looping groups as measured by quantitative methods. The findings will be used to determine if looping is in the best interest of students and teachers at Calwa Elementary School as it pertains to social and emotional development and academic achievement.

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

- What are the perceived values of looping by teachers, students, and parents on social and emotional development and academic achievement of students, as measured by qualitative methods?
- Is there a significant difference in student academic performance in language arts between looping and nonlooping students, as measured by quantitative methods?

Summary

As an instructional scheduling strategy, looping has recently received attention in the educational community, but little research is available to support its efficacy. This is of great concern at Calwa Elementary, where looping was implemented in one classroom 3 years ago and eventually implemented in six classrooms 2 years ago. Calwa Elementary School is in urgent need of exploring the research on looping, as implementing the practice of looping carefully may yield a positive effect on the social and academic well-being of its students. Advantages associated with looping have been documented, yet there are disadvantages that merit equal attention and examination.

Historical Background of Looping

Looping can be traced back to the creation of Waldorf education in 1919 by Austrian scientist and philosopher, Rudolph Steiner. Steiner believed that teachers should assume the role of the third parent and progress with their students through their primary years (Ogletree, 1974). In Germany, the Waldorf School grew rapidly, becoming the largest nondenominational school in the country.

In the United States, the progression of teacher and students throughout grade levels has existed since colonial times, when students of various ages were confined to the same room and progressed with the same teacher throughout the years. These petty schools, as they were called, were not created as a preference for that type of school structure (Simel, 1998). The creation of petty schools stemmed from the need to educate children living in rural areas. John Dewey's idea that the classroom functioned as a community became popular during the late 19th century during the Progressive Era. Looping in the United States today is most often found at the elementary school level (McCown & Sherman, 2002).

Advantages Associated With Looping

Qualitative research supports looping and indicates that it has several advantages for students, parents, and teachers (Northeast and Islands Regional Educational