

LOOPING AS AN ALTERNATIVE TEACHING METHOD:

TEACHERS IN SCHOOLS THAT WORK MOVE UP WITH LEARNERS TO CLOSE CONTENT AND SKILLS GAPS:

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SUMMARY: *Looping*--when a teacher moves with his or her learners to the next grade level rather than sending them to another teacher at the end of the school year--is an alternative teaching method that is growing in popularity and has been successfully implemented in different countries.

This policy brief examines the experiences and effects of *looping* in schools that work. It also highlights benefits and possible drawbacks of looping.

Advantages of looping

Advantages touted by advocates and practitioners of looping include strengthening learner-teacher bonds, improving results, expanding time for instruction and increasing parent participation

Disadvantages of looping

Among the possible drawbacks is that parents worry about the prospect of their children being assigned to a weak teacher for two or more years in a row. Teachers, on the other hand, worry about being stuck with a difficult class

Many schools that work maintain that the profound benefits of looping outweigh and “neutralise” its drawbacks.

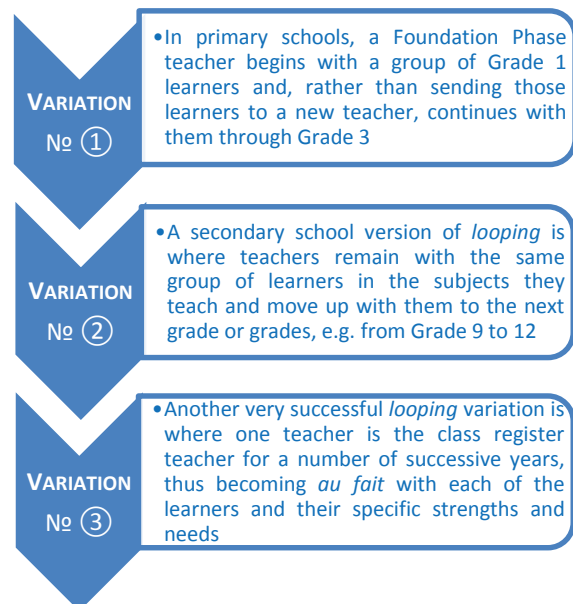
INTRODUCTION

Teachers often blame teachers in the grades before when learners get to their classes ill-prepared academically. There is a continual search for ways to improve education and learner achievement in South Africa.

¹ In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) to conduct the *Schools that Work II* study. This study sought to examine the characteristics of top-performing schools

The government, as outlined in the National Development Plan, continues to call for higher standards and higher quality education. The question remains, “How can we affectively reach all children?” Teachers in schools that work¹ are exploring alternatives to the traditional method of education to answer this question. These teachers have found *looping* and inter-school collaboration as part of the answer. The latter is discussed in Policy Brief N-18.

Looping is the practice of a teacher staying with the same group of learners or class for two or more consecutive years. There are three main variations of *looping*:



in South Africa. The best practices discussed in this advocacy brief are based on the findings of that study. The full report is available on the Department of Basic Education website: www.education.gov.za/Resources/Reports.aspx



This policy brief examines the experiences and effects of *looping* in schools that work.

WHAT IS LOOPING

Looping is an alternative teaching method where a teacher moves with his or her learners to the next grade level rather than sending them to another teacher at the end of the school year. As one teacher moves up a grade, another must drop down to take the next group of learners. This teaching method has been implemented successfully for years in many countries including Germany, United States, Japan, Israel, Sweden, Italy, Jamaica and China.

Looping is sometimes called multiyear teaching, family-style learning, teacher rotation, continuous learning, continuous progress, multiyear placement, persisting groups, multi-year grouping and a variety of other terms.

WHY SCHOOLS SHOULD CONSIDER LOOPING


While good results in the National Senior Certificate examinations cannot be linked to any one particular strategy or programme, some high-performing schools identify looping as one important contributing factor. Different schools derive different benefits from multi-year teaching or looping.


A limited number of quantitative studies exists on the benefits of looping. However, qualitative research indicates that looping has several academic and social advantages for both learners and teachers. These are briefly discussed below.





Numerous research studies, practitioners (including teachers in schools that work) and advocates of looping contend that most of the benefits of looping come in the second year and subsequent years in a looping cycle.

Among the most frequently mentioned benefits of looping are the following:

Looping:  Provides teachers and learners with extra teaching and learning time

 Increases teacher knowledge about their learners' intellectual strengths and weaknesses in a way that is impossible to achieve in a single year

 Gives teachers more opportunities to build on prior knowledge, which leads to increased learning


 Allows the teacher to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of the individual learner, rather than attempting to meet the needs of the whole class

Each of these benefits is briefly discussed below:

BENEFIT No 1

- Providing teachers and learners with extra teaching and learning time

Adding more instructional time is one of the key benefits of looping as a teaching design. Teachers in schools that work posit that looping saves time, which they use for different purposes including the following:

 Because teachers teach the same group of learners for two or more years, “getting-to-know-you” time becomes virtually unnecessary during the second year and subsequent years. Time is not lost learning a new set of names and procedures as well as figuring out exactly what they learned the previous year:

You know your learners very well. You don't have to start to get to know them in Grade 12. It is a bit easier if you know them quite well and they know your teaching methods and style.

[Teacher, School GK-Quintile 4]



On the first day of the second/third year of looping, teachers start where they had left off in the previous year. Thus, as one teacher notes, “a start of a totally new school year does not feel as such but feels more like return from a long vacation.” (Teacher, School EE-Quintile 4)

Ū Additional time from looping gives teachers the opportunity to assess learner achievement, identify content or skills gaps, diagnose potential academic problems and it affords teachers more time to close and address accumulative content gaps among learners in a way that is impossible to achieve in a single year.

Moving up with learners through different grades addresses complaints you always hear from Grade 12 teachers about the quality of learners they receive in Grade 12. In our school, teachers take the same cohort of learners from Grade 9 to 12. So, I say to teachers “You’ve been with these learners for the last four years. What’s your excuse?”

[Principal, School EE-Quintile 4]

Looping teachers create an academic bridge between the first and second year. Thus, struggling learners have a chance to catch up during the longer time span.

BENEFIT № 2

- Increasing teacher knowledge about their learners' intellectual strengths and weaknesses

Ū Having taught the same subject(s) to the same group of learners over time, teachers say they know their needs, strengths, interests, personalities and how they learn best. “In other schools, often, when teachers only start to figure out their learners’ needs and how best to address them, off they go into a new class with new teachers in the following year,” (Teacher, School LF-Quintile 3). Teachers in looping schools say this is the least of their

challenges. In these schools, teachers report that they know their learners’ strengths and general weaknesses right from the first day of a new school year. They know where their learners started from, the progressions they have made and goals on which they still need to work. They know the skills that each learner struggled with the year before, as well as tasks in which they usually excel. And so, no time is wasted at the beginning of the year.

BENEFIT № 3

- Giving teachers more opportunities to build on prior knowledge, which leads to increased learning

Ū Teachers’ extensive knowledge of learners in their first year of engagement with them, gives them (teachers) more time to prepare effectively for the upcoming year. As a result, teachers say they gain more teaching time in the second and subsequent years of looping:

It’s like you are given a second chance to teach your learners if you have another opportunity to teach them again in the next grade.

[Teacher, School KT-Quintile 3]

Teachers in schools that work build on the learners’ prior knowledge and previous experiences from the first year.

BENEFIT № 4

- Meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of the individual learners

Ū Teachers, having looped, understand learners’ needs better. They are able to differentiate more effectively in different ways—by academic needs, learners’ learning styles and learner interests. When they loop, teachers feel that they are afforded another opportunity to improve on what they did not



do as well the first year. Thus, they can focus on topics and skills that learners are struggling with and that they [teachers] did not emphasize enough the previous year:

I keep on reminding [learners]: ‘In Grade 10, you have done this work under this topic. In Grade 11 you have done it under that topic.’ In that way, it is easier for me to integrate and reinforce what I taught them in previous grades. I remind them that in Grade 12, we are just doing 40% of the work. About 60% was covered in Grade 11.

[Teacher, School FH-Quintile 1]

SOCIAL BENEFITS

Among the social benefits touted by researchers, proponents and practitioners of looping in schools that work include the following:

Looping:

☞ Encourages a strong sense of community or family atmosphere that is especially beneficial to learners and their parents:

Teacher-to-learner relationship: A level of trust between teachers and learners builds up over time

Teacher-to-parent relationship: Better rapport between parents and teachers results in more active parent involvement

Learner-to-learner relationship: Looping permits learners to get to know one another well

☞ Gives developmentally delayed learners the chance to catch up to the rest of the learners as they develop and mature

☞ Gives teachers sufficient time to make high stakes decisions such as learner retention and referrals to services for learners with special needs. Teachers have more opportunities to meet the learners’ individual needs before they are retained or labelled as “disabled”

☞ Reduces apprehension about the new school year and the new teacher after the first year of looping

POSSIBLE DRAWBACKS ABOUT LOOPING

Looping is not a panacea. As with any method or practice, there are pros and cons that need to be considered when deciding if looping can enhance learning. Following are some of the potential downsides to looping:

☞ Teachers are stuck with difficult learners two or more years in a row

☞ An inappropriate match, e.g. a personality conflict between teacher and learner or learner and learner

☞ The possibility of learners assigned to a weak teacher for multiple years

☞ Teachers having less exposure to new learners and learners having less exposure to different teaching styles

☞ Learners who are not in the class for the full looping period may be left with gaps in their education

☞ The difficulties faced by new learners who enter or join a class that has looped

☞ The possibility of becoming overly attached, thus making it very difficult for the learners transitioning to the next grade after having the same teacher for two or more years

☞ Teachers may be less comfortable and not adequately competent to teach a subject at different grade levels

BALANCING THE PROS AND CONS OF LOOPING

Advantages and disadvantages of looping must be considered carefully. In balancing the pros and cons, looping proponents and practitioners argue that the school management teams must make sure that looping, as a teaching design, is practised under the following conditions:

☞ Where teachers are experienced and are competent in terms of pedagogy and subject content knowledge

☞ Where a novice teacher is teamed with a more experienced teacher, or where a less able teacher is paired with one or two more effective and experienced teachers

☞ Where there is strong teacher collaboration to “neutralise” all arguments against looping. *Teacher collaboration* is discussed in sufficient detail in Policy Brief N-05.

