

Reflections On Multiage Looping: Building Relationships That Support Learning

by

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B.Ed, University of Victoria, 1986

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This project is a compilation and synthesis of qualitative and quantitative research on multiage looping (split grade classrooms where students spend two years with the same teacher) combined with the reflections from students, parents, teachers and the principal of my school, all of whom have experienced multiage looping in the last three years. Key findings revealed a strong correlation between the research and the feelings of the surveyed participants, suggesting that multiage looping builds strong connections and relationships which allow for the co-construction of learning opportunities amongst teachers and students. This encourages more personalized instruction that motivates students to take risks with their learning. The relationships developed with parents over the extended two year period of time also helps to create stronger, more supportive communities of learners.

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to my incredible family who have encouraged me, believed in me, and celebrated with me along each step of this educational journey. A heartfelt thank you goes to my husband Grant and our children Emily, Cameron, and Matthew for their endless love and support.

A special dedication goes to my students who constantly inspire me. I am so grateful for all of the fun, laughter, hard work and learning we have done together; I will be cheering them on, always.

Thank you to my supervisor, Michelle Wiebe, whose mentorship, time, advice and guidance were so appreciated.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION, CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS, PERSONAL INTEREST, AND PURPOSE

Introduction

As teachers we are gifted a special role in our students' lives that allows us to make connections with our learners, value their diversity and provide opportunities for many types of learning. We have the capacity to hold the hearts and minds of our students in our hands, which is a huge responsibility and an immense honour. This project is comprised of my reflections and those of two of my colleagues with whom I have been involved in teaching multiage looping classes at the intermediate level for the last three years, my grade four and five students from those classes, their parents, and our school principal.

Multiage looping combines two concepts: looping (teachers and students working together for at least two years) with multiage education ("split" or "combination" classes with two grades being taught in the same classroom). In the study school, the grade four/five classes loop. At the end of each school year the grade five students will move on to middle school while the grade four students from that year will become the grade five students in the same class in the subsequent year, with a new group of grade four students joining them in September. This allows each teacher, who is involved, to begin the school year with a deep understanding of and familiarity with half of their students. This, in turn, allows the teacher to focus intently on building strong relationships with the incoming grade four students. In addition, the returning (looped) students know all of the classroom routines and are wonderful mentors to their new classmates. The teacher has extensive insight as to where these grade five students are socially and academically, how to best support them in their learning and therefore has more time to

focus on connecting with and learning about the new students in the classroom. The excellent role modeling of the grade five students with routines and expectations helps to provide a smooth transition to the intermediate grades for the new students. Looping is not a panacea for all issues, however, and there is always an option for a teacher or a parent to request an alternate classroom placement for the second year to accommodate individual needs.

Curriculum Connections

The new British Columbia Curriculum proposes to embody education for the 21st century because “The future our children must succeed in is different from the one we envisioned even 10 or 15 years ago. It is our job to prepare all children for success in whatever life path they choose” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016a, Graduation section). The focus of this new curriculum is to foster transformative learning with “... curriculum that enables and supports increasingly personalized learning, through quality teaching and learning, flexibility and choice, and high standards” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016b, Overview section). The Core Competencies of critical and creative thinking along with social and personal responsibility are woven throughout all subject areas that focus on the curriculum model “based on a ‘Know-Do-Understand’ model to support a concept-based competency-driven approach to learning. Three elements, the Content (Know), Curricular Competencies (Do), and the Big Ideas (Understand) all work together to support deeper learning” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016b, Overview section).

The new curriculum also suggests that “the focus on personalization and flexible structure of the curriculum support the configuration of combined grade classrooms” and that “multigrade programs should find a comfortable fit with the curriculum” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016b, Overview section). The new curriculum calls on teachers to respond to the

individualized learning needs of their students through differentiated learning, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), inquiry-based learning and place-based learning. Within this framework the idea of valuing diversity is tightly woven through the curriculum to “promote understanding of others and respect for all” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016b, Overview section), which also embraces Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge. “Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)” (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2014). In keeping with the new curriculum, the Greater Victoria School District has developed their vision and mission statements to promote the fulfillment of each student’s potential, allowing them to pursue their individual aspirations while their learning and wellbeing is nurtured “in a safe, responsive, and inclusive learning community” (School District No. 61, n.d.). The belief statement of my school is, “We care about ourselves, each other and this place.”

Mixed-age classrooms with the same teacher for multiple years have long been the staple of Montessori and Reggio Emilia schools. In these schools, younger children learn from older children, while older children reinforce their learning by helping teach concepts they have already mastered. It is believed this has a positive effect on achievement because it mirrors the real world, where individuals work and socialize with people of all ages and dispositions. In a multiage classroom students and teachers form a close, caring community making meaningful bonds that recreates a family-like structure (“Montessori, Waldorf and Reggio Emilia: a comparison of philosophies,” n.d.). Although Waldorf schools do not always have multiage classrooms, they follow Rudolf Steiner’s strong belief in looping, valuing student/teacher relationships extending over a period of years where working and learning together, students and their teachers would help each other and develop problem solving skills (Burke, 1997). Extended

periods of time spent together enable strong relationships to develop between teachers and students allowing deeper knowledge and understanding of student passions to support them in inquiry as a process to question, research, make connections and reflect to form new understandings (MacKenzie, 2016). Teachers can be more responsive to the learning needs of their students by helping to co-author learning experiences with them when they spend two years together.

Personal Interest

The initial idea for this study arose from the excitement and enthusiasm of both teachers and students involved in multiage looping at my school. When I transferred to my new school four years ago I taught a straight grade four class where students were far less academically prepared than those I had taught at my former school. As well, there were seven children in my class on Individual Education Plans, each with very significant and complex learning needs. I began that school year as I have begun every other, with the aim of developing connection and relationship with each of my students from the moment they walked through my classroom door, thereby working to build a classroom culture of acceptance and fostering a joy for learning. I want students to feel welcomed and loved for who they are so we can build a bond of trust between us as teacher and student, as well as between all of us collectively as a group. I believe this is integral for students to feel safe enough to take risks with their learning and to trust that no matter what happens, they will be supported, even when they make mistakes. By the end of the school year, I had figured out how to support my neediest learners and encouraged all of my students to work hard, be interested in their learning and build confidence in themselves as learners. The thought of sending my seven students with IEPs on to a new teacher for grade five, who would need to start trying to learn how to best support them all over again, seemed a shame

when I had already developed workable strategies for their learning. One of my colleagues had been looping with her multiage class for several years. In sharing my concerns about my class and brainstorming with her and the new grade five teacher, we decided to ask our principal if we could reorganize the intermediate classes for the next year to have three grade four/five classes, advocating for a multiage looping model of configuration. He agreed to our plan, which we have been following ever since.

My personal experience leads me to believe that there is a strong correlation between the relationship a teacher is able to build with students over two years and how effectively instruction can be individualized and differentiated. “Personalization refers to a teacher’s relationships with students and their families and the use of multiple instructional modes to scaffold each student’s learning and enhance the student’s motivation to learn and metacognitive, social, and emotional competencies to foster self-direction and achieve mastery of knowledge and skills” (Redding, 2013 p. 6). In my classroom, not only did student achievement rise, but the robust sense of community that developed through strong attachments and connections also created an engaging, stimulating educational environment that benefitted all learners. Students appeared to be more relaxed, more confident in themselves as learners and more willing to take risks with their learning in the second year with the same teacher, and in particular struggling students made huge gains. Bonds of friendship formed quickly between the older and younger students in the grade four/five classrooms which extended into their middle school years where each year now, the grade seven students are able to welcome their younger friends to grade six. The opportunities for student leadership and mentorship are fostered at both the elementary and middle school levels when children are placed in combination grade classes at the grade four/five level. The gift of time that multiage looping offers appears to have a myriad of benefits for

teachers and students while aligning closely with the goals of the new British Columbia Curriculum.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to compile and synthesize both qualitative and quantitative research on the theory and practice of multiage looping in the literature review, and to compare it with the reflections collected from the students, parents, grade four/five teachers and the principal of my school. There is a strong correlation between the reflections of the people taking part in the experience of multiage looping at my school and the conclusions drawn by other researchers. The thoughts and feelings shared by the participants about their experiences with multiage looping are poignant and powerful.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Long before students enter a school they have been busy learning through several years of every day experiences with their families. In 1897 Dewey wrote that “school life should grow gradually out of the home life; that it should take up and continue the activities with which the child is already familiar with at home” (p. 79). He believed that schooling is a social form of community life where children should be nurtured to grow, make connections, extend moral training and values, and experience learning as a process. Positive personal relationships involve genuine care, warmth and nurturing to develop closeness and build trust as reflected in the first of our First People’s Principles of Learning which states: “Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors” (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2014, p. 1). Noddings (2002) views the people in children’s homes as their primary educators and thinks that when children reach school age their education moves outward in “a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding and appreciation” (p. 31) suggesting that “schools should, as far as possible, use the sort of methods found in best homes to educate” (p. 289). Pinar (2015) discusses curriculum as “complicated conversations” (p. 119) involving individuals that come to school with different hopes, fears, historical contexts, and social, cultural, economic and political experiences whom we as teachers hope to engage, inspire, guide and mentor on their educational journey. This chapter presents a review of both quantitative and qualitative educational research on the benefits of multiage looping in developing strong relationships that build a sense of community to support learning by

connecting to the world outside of the classroom, as suggested by Dewey (1900) and with flexible grouping that encourages working together in a family-style atmosphere, as supported by Little & Little (2001). This can be especially significant for students who come from less stable homes and/or have complex learning needs because creating a support system of consistency, continuity and security is necessary for successful learning (Hanson, 1995), allowing each child “to grow at his or her own pace, not at an arbitrary fixed-grade rate” (Hitz, Somers & Jenlink, 2007, p. 82).

The Importance and Value of Relationships in Learning

Little & Little (2001) believe the theory behind looping goes back to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs that suggests once a person’s basic physical and safety levels of needs are met, they strive to establish meaningful relationships with others. Having their social needs met is a critical step in the development of the individual’s ability to connect with others in order to gain a sense of belonging, acceptance and self-confidence. Students who don’t get their basic needs met at home have the potential to have them met at school. The value of extra time being spent together in a multiage looping class is that the relationship developed with the teacher allows for a better understanding of the social, emotional and academic needs of individual students. Looping can be “viewed as a way to make the educational experience richer and more realistic” (Richards, 2018, p. 2).

Aoki (2004) suggests that it is “humanness that lies at the core of what education is,” (p. 188) and describes teaching as being “... attuned to the place where care dwells, a place of ingathering and belonging, where the indwelling of the teachers and students is made possible by the presence of care that each has for the other” (p. 191). Noddings (1992) calls for educators to

implement continuity in classrooms as she likens them to a community that is similar to a family where relationships are built while caring for children, to teach them, in turn, to care for others. She believes that modeling respect for the ideas and feelings of others will affirm and encourage the best in others.

Relationships between children and adults are a critical resource for development. For many children, relationships with adults are impoverished or conflictual and, in these cases, are a source of risk. Relationships with teachers are an essential part of the classroom experience for all children and a potential resource for improving developmental outcomes. (Pianta, 1999, p. 21)

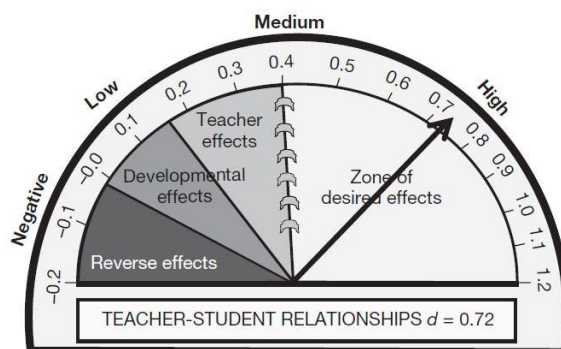
Elliot & Capp (2003) state that “Building relationships with students is the heart of multi-year teaching, and the soul is knowing each of the student’s needs based on information that has been gathered over a longer period of time” (p. 36). Daniel Burke (1996) furthers this line of thinking by comparing the teacher-student relationship to that of a pediatrician and a child saying it would be absurd for parents to send their child to a new doctor every year, but instead they “try to arrange for a single pediatrician to monitor their child’s growth and development over time” (p. 360).

Pianta, (1999) links positive teacher-student relationships to predictive outcomes including emotional, behavioural, and cognitive development. Murray, Kosty & Hauser-McLean (2016) add to Pianta’s work, finding that secure attachment positively influences relationships between learners and teachers with related outcomes that can inform instructional efforts and promote optimal learning environments. Further to that Zahorik & Dichanz (1994) conclude “long term relationships result in an emotional and intellectual climate that encourages thinking,

risk taking and involvement” (p. 75). As well, teachers report that a significant adult in children’s lives can result in less conflict, more self-control and social responsibility (Nichols & Nichols, 2003). They also suggest that multi-year placements for students provide the stability “to develop healthy cohesion and in-depth adult-student engagement” (p. 19).

Murray et al. (2016) examine how the theoretical perspectives of social support and attachment affect teacher-student relationships that contribute to child and adolescent development, specifically among low-income children and youth of colour. Their findings suggest “that interventions designed to improve emotional and behavioural adjustment should focus on reducing alienation in social relationships whereas efforts to improve school adjustment should potentially be tailored to build closeness and trust” (p. 131) and propose there are even stronger beneficial effects of positive teacher-student relationships associated with the students of colour than the Caucasian students. They also surmise that internalized attachments can continue to influence the qualities of consequent relationships.

John Hattie’s research (2009) finds that teachers who create positive relationships with their students are most likely to have above average effects on student achievement as evidenced in the image below. He found the teacher-student relationship had a 0.72 effect size on student achievement, almost double the 0.4 effect size that is considered to be highly significant.



Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses On Achievement*, p.118.

Hattie also notes that teachers are in a position to act as a powerful and effective means of support, encouragement and motivation to their students that will assist with their ability to learn, develop creatively, reduce anxiety levels and impact their mental health. These relationships matter more and have a larger effect on student results than socio-economic status, professional development or special learning programs (2009).

“Relationship- that of teacher to student, to the parents, to other teachers, and to the curriculum- is what gives looping its power” (Grant, Johnson & Richardson, 1996, p. 16).

Benefits of Looping

In single year placements, many teachers wish that they could have more time to continue teaching students what they need to learn. Just when their time together is about to end is when teachers believe they have the most comprehensive understanding of each child’s academic, social and emotional needs (Grant, Richardson & Forsten, 2000). The gift of an extra year of time is the most critical factor, not only for children but also for teachers and parents because it allows those long-term relationships to develop where all parties are deeply invested in student achievement and growth. In multi-year classrooms the increased time allows students to connect in more meaningful ways while constructing knowledge together in an emotional climate that cultivates social competence (Thompson, Franz & Miller, 2009). As Noddings (1992) notes, the gift of time involved in looping takes care of affiliative needs.

In 2003 Nichols and Nichols embarked on an empirical study to fill a void in educational research on looping. Their hypothesis was “that parents of looping students would have more positive attitudes toward the school and classroom environment” (p. 19). Four-hundred-fifty-five parents were recruited from seven elementary schools; 50% of the parents had never had a child

involved with a looping classroom, 10% had a child in their first year in a looping classroom and 40% had a child in the second year in a looping classroom. Data was collected through surveys to examine nine subcategories of parent attitudes and perceptions towards the teacher, the school, student academic support, student behaviour, the child's attitude towards the teacher, the child's attitude toward the school, student self-efficacy, student motivation, and the classroom as a nurturing community. Analysis of the data suggested that when students remain with the same teacher and cohort group they have "more positive attitudes toward the school and the teacher ... (and) this was found to be a significant predictor of positive parent perceptions of student motivation and attitude toward the school environment" (p. 23). Nichols and Nichols (2003) state that although anecdotal comments from the parents suggest looping classrooms may provide for a greater sense of family or community, these concepts were not specifically addressed in the surveys. However, they concluded that:

The most beneficial gain from multiple year work with children is the knowledge that the teacher has of his or her students, the confidence that the students have in their teacher and the communication lines that develop between parents and the teacher. No amount of record keeping, no matter how conscientious, can substitute for these close relationships, which may be lost when students change teachers on a yearly basis. In a world where human permanence is undermined and family structure is fragmented, the commitment that students, parents, and teachers make to one another should be sustained and treasured with prominent priority. In the future, looping may be one avenue to address this educational commitment in support of all students and particularly those who may be considered at risk. (p. 25)

Cistone and Shneyderman (2004) studied six-hundred-twelve general education students (not gifted or exceptional students) who had completed the second year of a loop with their teacher. A matching sample was created with six-hundred-twelve non-looping students who were of “similar gender, race/ethnicity, status on free/reduced lunch, primary exceptionality, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) level” (p. 50) and matched as closely as possible in achievement levels. In the spring data was compiled from norm-referenced achievement scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), year-end attendance statistics, and surveys (completed by principals and teachers) designed to measure the benefits of looping. They found that the students in the Looping Sample consistently outperformed the students in the Matching Sample on the reading comprehension and the mathematics applications sections of the FCAT at all grade levels. Nearly all students in the Looping Sample showed improved attendance over previous years and retention figures showed fewer students were retained in the Looping Sample (two students) compared to the Matching Sample (seven students). The vast majority of teachers and principals agreed that looping supports a gain in learning time at the beginning of the second year of the loop, that the increased time helped slower students to master basic skills, that looping increased the effectiveness of classroom instruction, and that they were enthusiastic about the student benefits of looping. Teachers did point out on the survey that each professional should always be allowed to choose whether or not they would participate in looping classrooms. Cistone and Shneyderman (2004) found “that looping can become a feasible school restructuring choice providing valuable educational benefits without significantly increasing operational costs” (p. 60).

Most recently, Hill and Jones (2018) researched the impact of students being assigned to the same teacher for a second year between third and fifth grade over the course of sixteen years

between 1997 and 2013. There was no looping policy in place in the schools where data collection took place, rather the repeat pairing of students with teachers was random.

While we study repeat student-teacher matches primarily as a window into the importance of student-teacher relationships, our results shed light on a policy which has received relatively little attention in the economics of education literature: “looping.”... We find that in such settings, the “unofficial” looping we observe has clear benefits not just for the students who were rematched, but also for the other students in the class; repeat student-teacher matches appear to generate spillover benefits to other students in the class. (p. 2)

Hill and Jones (2018) also state that the positive effects of repeat student-teacher matches are the greatest for minority students, likely because initially there may be a greater “social distance” between the student and the teacher, “meaning there is more to gain from increased student-teacher familiarity” (p. 2). Furthermore, they relate their research to that of Cistone and Shneyderman (2004), corroborating and building on their findings of increased academic achievement in looping schools, adding:

Our data allow us to not only strip away more general school fixed effects, but also student and teacher fixed effects. We therefore identify a very clean estimate for the impact of repeat student-teacher matches. And, given the estimated effect is positive, we think that our paper motivates looping as a beneficial and relatively low-cost policy that should be given due consideration. (p. 9)

Hill and Jones (2018) also refer to the related research of Ly and Riegert (2014) that found high school students benefit from being in classes with peers they have taken classes with before. “This suggests a potential mechanism operating in looping classes that is independent of the

teacher match; students may gain from familiarity with peers even when the teacher changes”
(Hill & Jones, p. 2)

Disadvantages of Looping

Hitz, Somers and Jenlink (2007) echo Gaustad (1998) in raising the biggest fear of some parents regarding looping. Gaustad cautions:

Longer contact can amplify the negative as well as the positive aspects of relationships. The greatest concern of parents is that their child might spend two years with an ineffective teacher. Time can also exacerbate problems with student-teacher personality clashes, unreasonably demanding parents, problematic mixtures of students, and specific weaknesses of a generally good teacher. (p. 4)

The research Hill and Jones (2018) published counters that, suggesting that lower quality teachers can improve their practice when they know their students well and have developed strong relationships with them. “We find that the benefits of being rematched appear to be largest for students of generally less effective teachers” (p. 2) so looping may be a tool for improving teacher performance.

Cistone and Shneyderman (2004) bring up a related issue that arises when there is a mismatch between the teaching style and a child’s learning style in the classroom; two years together could be a negative experience for both the teacher and the student. As well, Bellis (1999) indicates that creating a more familial atmosphere in the classroom can have unintended implications as “the research also discloses that increased familiarity has been known to breed negative sibling like behaviors between classmates as well as other interpersonal conflicts” (p.71). Chapman (1999) adds to that idea suggesting that some conflicts can emerge over time, not presenting in the first year of a loop. Gaustad (1998) suggests that the longer time-frame of

looping may increase the motivation of students, parents and teachers to be more open to problem solving together, rather than just “riding it out” for a year. She does maintain, though, that there must be a procedure in place for moving students if a significant problem cannot be resolved.

Grant, Johnson and Richardson (1996) raise the possibility of a child becoming too attached to a teacher and/or their cohort of peers such that being separated from them at the end of the second year could be traumatic. They suggest there could also be difficulties for a child transferring into the looping class from another school because the students are so tightly bonded. They do posit that the benefits of developing deep, strong relationships in looped classrooms far outweigh any disadvantages that may present transitioning in or out of the class, recommending that staff members work together to develop strategies to ease any anxiety or angst that students may experience.

Multiage Looping

There is a distinct deficit in the literature regarding multiage looping where the teacher is with every student for two years, but half of the class changes each year when the older students move on. Hintz, Somers and Jenlink (2007) state that in multiage looping classrooms “children are taught as a class and regrouped as necessary for different activities based on interests and/or abilities rather than on chronological age or grade level” (p. 80) and that the students get to experience being both the younger and older students by the end of the two-year loop. They recognize the professional collaboration that occurs as the teachers learn new skills together while sharing materials and ideas as a positive.

Grant, Johnson & Richardson (1996) report that an advantage to multiage looping over straight grade looping is the greater opportunity for mixed age interaction where the older

students get to mentor the younger ones, while the younger children look forward to the next year to when they can be “... the veterans. Also, with the seamless, continuous progress curriculum possible in a multiage (looping) class, children can truly learn at their own rates” (p. 18). They point out that multiage looping programs take “more work and planning and a lot more energy than single-grade looping classes” (p. 18).

When Jean Bowman, a local retired middle school teacher was interviewed for *Learn: The Magazine of BC Education* (2014), she shared her reflections below:

I have never in my career been able to get the depth of thought and levels of perseverance, enthusiasm and engagement in my students that I have since bringing inquiry-based and interdisciplinary learning into my multi-age class. . . . Let’s be honest- multiage is the way of the world. School is that last bastion where we ‘egg carton’ people, moving students from one arbitrary and artificial carton to the next. I say, let’s capitalize on our diversity and talk about it explicitly. Let’s embrace a classroom configuration of diverse learners with individual strengths and challenges and welcome everyone with their unique point of view and contributions. . . . This approach is an invaluable opportunity to build relationships, trust and achievement from year to year. For the students, it’s not about the grade or doing a job, handing it in and having it be over. It’s a philosophy of continuous learning. Our students see themselves as learners who are making progress and improving all the time. (“Inquiry-based Approach to Learning,” 2014, pp. 18-20)

The following reflections from my own experiences and those of my two colleagues, my students over the last three years, their parents and the principal of our school will contribute to

the existing literature by exploring multiage looping at the grade four/five level at an elementary school and examine any spillover effects that extend to the middle school years.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY, REFLECTIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research is to give voice to the perspectives of the people participating in multiage looping (students and teachers) at my school and those most connected to them (the parents and our principal). A secondary purpose is to investigate whether the benefits of the increased time to build relationships in multiage looping helps to ease the students' transition to middle school. The use of an anonymous open-ended survey was chosen to give the respondents the freedom to express their feelings about their experiences, allowing for their powerful statements to be highlighted and their voices heard.

Ethical Considerations

Adherence to ethical guidelines was essential in order to ensure participation was voluntary, consent was informed, and there was adequate protection in power over and dual role relationships. This required clear plans for safeguarding the anonymity and confidentiality of participants in order to minimize undue influence, coercion or any potential harm. Thorough reviews of my research intent, methodology, data collection and dissemination of results protocols were undertaken by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board and the Greater Victoria School District #61 Board with both committees granting approvals for my research.

Participants

Four years ago, during my first year of teaching at my current school, I taught a single grade class of grade four students. Thus, I was able to retain half of those students as my grade fives the next year when my colleagues and I began teaching grade four/five multiage looping classes. This allowed me to invite those students, (currently in grade seven at middle school) to participate in my research along with the students I taught the year after (currently in grade six at middle school) and my current grade five students that I have taught for two years. The parents of those students were also invited to participate in completing surveys. In addition, my two grade four/five teaching colleagues and our principal were invited to provide their views as well.

Research Procedure and Data Collection

Letters of intent and consent forms were sent out on January 8, 2019 to thirty-one families and three staff members. Sixteen families and three staff members chose to participate in my research by mailing signed consent letters back to our school Vice Principal, who acted as my neutral third party for distribution and collection of documents. She then sent each participant a survey that asked them to reflect on two general statements regarding multiage looping, four statements relating to academics in a multiage looping class, and four statements associated with social issues involved in multiage looping, followed by the opportunity to include any additional comments they wished to share (see Appendices A, B, C, D). All sixteen families and three staff members returned their completed surveys to our school Vice Principal who collected them, ensured there were no identifying markers on them, and then turned them over to me for analysis on February 15, 2019.

Reflections

The surveys for all participants (students, parents, teachers, and the principal of the school) were divided into three themed sections with a fourth section for additional comments to be shared if the participant wished to add them. Qualitative data was collected from participants who were asked to agree or disagree with statements and then explain why they felt the way they did; not all respondents chose to explain their feelings for every statement. The anonymous surveys allowed participants the freedom to express their opinions and feelings honestly and in as much detail as they chose to divulge. The data analysis provided the opportunity for each individual's comments to be recorded and shared within the established themed sections of the survey. The student and parent participant groups are discussed individually, but I have combined the comments of the teachers and our principal together.

General Statements

Based on my experiences of multiage looping in the last three years, I would highly recommend multiaged looping to students, parents, teachers and administrators. I have taught many split grade classes in my thirty-two years of teaching and have often kept a child or two for a second year for varying reasons (not to repeat a grade, but to move onto the next grade with me), but teaching multiage looping classes in the last three years has been the most enlightening, exciting and rewarding experience of my career. It allows me to support my students in becoming more confident and independent learners in ways I had never previously imagined. The extended time we have together encourages stronger bonds to form between teachers, students and parents, thereby supporting student growth academically, socially and emotionally

as we live and learn together. The gains students are able to make in two years have been very encouraging. My colleagues and our principal agree.

- I love being able to continue building strong connected relationships with each student and their families.
- You get to know the kids and their families in year 1 and continue to build relationships in year 2. The same goes for learning. You get to understand the students' learning styles/needs and can then meet their needs right away when they come back in year 2.
- The relationship between teacher and student is already established allowing this to be a springboard for further academic/social/emotional success.

We all believe that being in a multiage looping class also contributes to our students feeling more comfortable and secure at school.

- Because of the familiarity with routines, expectations and the teacher we see less anxiety in our students who return. The teacher's familiarity with students allows them to build upon an already established relationship.
- There is a certain "rite of passage" in being students in the oldest grades at the school. With the grade 4/5 looping I feel the kids get to feel "top dog" for two years as all of the classes participate in special activities together.
- When the student is entering the 2 years they have peers as role models and friends. Then the next year they are the role models. Then the year after that when they go off to middle school there is a group of kids they were already at school with, so they should have a sense of place.

When students were asked if they liked having the same teacher for two years, all but one of them agreed with that statement; the student that didn't agree felt neutral about it saying, "I also like having a new teacher each year." The students all felt they had a positive learning experience and thoroughly enjoyed the student/teacher relationship that developed over two years.

- I liked having her twice because she was so kind.
- I'd like to have her for three years.
- My teacher was so kind and friendly.
- You can get to know the teacher better and you get used to the work she gives out like homework and schoolwork.
- I already know the teacher from the year before so I feel I know a lot more.

- You don't do the same projects again. My teacher was wonderful so it was awesome to have her for two years.
- It feels easier to learn in grade five since we've already had her for grade four.
- My teacher was very kind and made us bond with the other grade, which made it very easy and fun in the last two years.
- You get to know your teacher better and are used to how things run.
- I learned more and did better because I knew my teacher very well.
- I got to know my teacher better and she already knew me too, what I'm like and what I have problems with.
- I really liked my teacher.

All but one student agreed that being in the same class for two years in a row made them feel more comfortable at school because they developed strong relationships with their same grade peers and the students a year older than them when they were in grade four, and those a year younger than them when they were in grade five.

- I feel more comfortable.
- I am so happy at school.
- I know most of the people in my class but I also get to meet some new people and work with them.
- In grade four I get to know the grade fives and in grade five I get to know the grade fours. I know everybody better.
- You know your classmates more and it will be easier to work with them.

The student who disagreed with the statement explained, "I don't think it made me feel more comfortable. I would have been fine if I changed classes. I did have a good relationship with my teacher though."

One parent felt their son would do just as well having a new teacher each year as he did having the same teacher for two years. All of the other parents agreed that they would recommend multiage looping to future grade four/five students and their parents for a variety of reasons, with the strongest support for the benefits of continuity and the development of relationships.

- The teacher, student, and parent(s) get to build a relationship. It's been a very positive experience.
- Continuity in teaching style has been beneficial for my son.
- The routines are already established with the teacher and the students so there is less stress for the returning students as they return the second year. Friendships are stronger with students being in the same class for two years in a row.
- It provides an environment where children are different ages. It also provides for continuity longer than a one year school term.
- The benefits are: children (Gr. 5) learn to be role models; those in Gr. 4 learn skills from the Gr. 5's, the teacher/student relationship has time to deepen in ways that cannot happen as easily in 1 year, and looping allows the teacher more freedom in planning and teaching the learning objectives over a two year period.
- I feel my child has benefitted from knowing what to expect from year to year as well as having her teacher have growing expectations of her skills.
- In the past I would not agree, but, if a student has an organized and prepared teacher then it works. The student/teacher relationship is so important.
- It has been a great experience so far. I was skeptical at first, however, throughout grade 4 my fear was unfounded and actually there are many more benefits than any downfall.
- The longer term teacher/student relationship has helped my special needs child and meeting new peers extends her friendship base. However, a downside would be if there is a negative teacher/student bond then one suffers for two years (if this ever happens).
- My child was able to have different ages of friends- variety. She could be a big buddy or a little buddy, a role model or look up to the others' examples of friendships.
- My son was shy and the continuity of teacher and classmates helped to make him feel more comfortable.

All parents but one also agreed that being in a multiage class helped their child to feel more comfortable and/or secure at school for many of the reasons above, but parents also added further thoughts.

- The transition to the second year is so smooth.
- This year (the second year) our child is much more comfortable asking questions of her teacher if she doesn't understand a concept or an assignment.
- This looping allows her the luxury of feeling comfortable in her environment from year to year.
- Having friends in different grades helps in middle school.
- My child loves his teacher, plus it's nice for the parents as they know what the teacher's expectations are. It's consistent for the child as well.

- Being new to the area and school, my son has benefitted from having a stable teaching and class environment in his new school.
- My son really looked forward to returning to the same class with the same teacher for grade 5. There were no hesitations and it was like going back to another day after a long weekend.

The parent who disagreed with the statement clarified, “My son is very independent so a multiage looping class didn’t make him any more comfortable.”

Academic Statements

I have found there to be excellent academic benefits to multiaged looping for all of my students, whether they are students with IEPs who struggle with learning, are “average” students, or ones who need extra challenge to keep them motivated and learning. Helping my students with the most significant learning needs was my biggest reason for wanting to move from a straight grade classroom to a multiage looping one in order to continue the progress that had been made the first year I taught them. I wanted to keep helping them to “fill the gaps” in their learning so they would be as ready as possible for the transition to middle school, however, I have been thrilled to see my students of all ability levels become more confident learners who stretch themselves as far as they can over the course of two years. I see that strong bonds of understanding between teachers and students help students take increased risks with their learning and let students feel confident to make mistakes, learn from them, regroup and move on. The stronger the relationship I have with my students, the more able I am to modify and adapt curriculum to support individualized learning needs through differentiated learning such as: Universal Design for Learning (UDL), inquiry-based learning and place-based learning. This also requires a support network of peers that seems to grow naturally in a multiage looping

classroom. My colleagues and I have agreed with all of the statements in the academic section of the survey and they have similar thoughts to share.

- I like having a two year spread to see where they come into grade four and how far I can stretch them by the end of grade five. We run a two year curriculum so the students do not repeat any of the material from the previous year. My students feel comfortable and trust that they can take risks with their learning because they have a history with me. I love it when the grade fives feel instantly empowered to take on a leadership role right in September and act as leaders in the room with their grade four classmates. Then the grade fours become grade fives and pay it forward. They love it!
- I have two years to understand learning and home life, adapt or extend programming, make sure designations are completed if necessary, know exactly how the student works from the year before so I can focus on meeting the needs of only half a new class. I know the students so well. As a group they take more risks in year two. I know how to get the students to dig deeper into their learning if I know them better. I think acceptance of differences is better tolerated or not even noticed when the kids are with you for two years and just know that different kids do things in different ways. That's just the way it is. You come in as the rookie and then the next year you are the leader and can lead because you know what to expect.

Our principal felt that the first three statements were “difficult to answer as agree or disagree because the answer depends so much on the ability, personality and attitude of the individual teacher. All of these statements are true provided the teacher creates the right conditions for success. Therefore, it is less about the structure and more about the teacher.” He further clarified his thinking about each statement with the following comments.

- Students’ learning and achievement improves by having the same teacher two years in a row provided it is a positive relationship between student and teacher. Students are academically challenged provided the teacher continues to extend and differentiate instruction for the individual student. Multiage looping at the grade 4/5 level helps students develop confidence in their ability to learn provided the teacher establishes a relationship that builds trust with the students to allow them to take risks as learners. The loop obviously allows more time for that relationship to establish and therefore increases the likelihood of success, also allowing more opportunities for kids to assume mentorship roles.

When students were asked to respond to four statements in this section of the survey that examine learning, being challenged, developing confidence in one’s ability to learn, and whether

they enjoyed being helped by and helping other students in a multiaged looping class, all but two of the students agreed with all four statements. Their comments help to explain why they feel this way.

- I was closer with my teacher and she knew my learning better. She challenged my learning and the second year she knew what to make me work on more. I always had confidence in my learning. I enjoyed talking with the younger kids and I still say hi to them when I see them at middle school.
- I was comfortable with the teacher and she knew what level I was at. This makes me feel more confident. I enjoyed being helped by and helping others.
- Everything was easier in grade five because I knew everyone and I was less shy. I don't really like getting helped or helping others.
- I was challenged in both years because my teacher knew me really well, what I was good at and bad at. She always helped me.
- Being in the same class for two years is good because the teacher knows what you know and what you don't. When your teacher knows you she'll make sure the lesson is a little harder to challenge our minds and that helps us learn more. When I was in grade 4 I liked asking the grade fives questions about how to do something and it is also fun helping the grade fours now.
- I learned more because I know how the teacher teaches. I learned lots of stuff and liked helping younger students.
- I liked learning different things in the two years. That challenges you. I liked getting time to review things and helping the grade fours.
- I agree I was challenged in both years but I can't put it into words.
- My teacher gave me challenges that made me see more clearly the things I was having trouble with. She always threw in new things so it was never too easy or too hard. My teacher was inspiring and gave me the confidence to raise \$336 for Cops for Cancer by shaving my head. I really enjoyed some of the grade five girls helping me when I was in grade four and when I was in grade five I loved helping the grade fours. I did better because I was not switching teaching styles and my teacher helped me to improve.
- We did different projects and work each year. My teacher makes it more challenging when you know something very well and you don't need to be ashamed when you don't get something because you know everyone. It is always nice to have someone older or younger to help you. Same with teachers!

The two students that didn't agree with the statement about building confidence in themselves as learners when having the same teacher for two years said that they felt neutral about the statement because they weren't sure it helped them feel more confident than if they hadn't had the same teacher for two years.

Parents had similar responses to those of their children with the vast majority of them agreeing with all four statements. As observers of their child's progress in a multiage looping class they saw continuous academic progress over both years where their child was challenged to extend their learning across subject areas. One parent felt neutral about the statement regarding whether having the same teacher for two years helped to develop confidence in their child's ability to learn. There were also four parents who were unsure about whether or not their child had benefitted from being mentored by students in the older grade in the first year and then mentoring the students in the younger grade the next year, feeling that they needed to be in the classroom to observe this.

- My daughter was consistently challenged because the teacher was aware of her abilities and areas requiring attention. The teacher consciously made an effort to vary her programs between years and grades. It was a consistent environment for learning. Our daughter enjoyed socializing with both her grade level and the other grade during both years of study.
- My child's stress level decreased and he was not anxious to go to school in the mornings. The teacher was knowledgeable about this student already and was able to help my child reach their highest potential. Academically my child thrived in this classroom the most because of the strong relationship and trust built between my child and his teacher. His confidence in his ability to learn was shaped by the strong relationship between him and his teacher.
- The first year prepared my child for the subsequent year. Building confidence is beneficial when the child is in the younger grade cohort, as they will look to the other students as examples.
- My child's comprehension and grades have improved significantly over previous years as looping lets a teacher know a child more in-depth, both their strengths and weaknesses allowing them to work together well. My child is even more confident about asking questions and has made friends with students in other grades in both years.
- The teacher knows every student's weaknesses and strengths to continue working to improve. Continuous improvement and stability creates confidence. My child developed solid connections and friendships with his classmates.
- My child with special needs learned well with the multiage looping strategy because the teacher knew her level and abilities. My child got to revise learning from the first year and learn new material in the second year. She made fast friends and was less stressed in class, feeling good and cared for by the same teacher and EA.

- My child was aware of the teacher's expectations and teaching style. I think it helped him become more academically inclined. As long as the teacher is supportive and challenges the children they will develop confidence in their ability to learn. Younger kids tend to look up to the older ones and older ones tend to like to help and teach or show younger ones. It makes them feel good/confident.
- My child felt comfortable to ask the teacher for help and she was familiar with my son's learning style. The teacher was able to adjust and push my son harder. A result of multiage looping is that students are more confident learners.
- The teacher/student relationship is so important. It can help the teacher decide to spend more time on areas that require more attention and less on other areas because she has two years of assessment. The teacher knew my child's strengths and areas that needed more work. Looping helped my child to see her own progress.
- The teacher is able to better identify areas requiring more focus and/or intervention required for my child's learning by pushing them further according to their capabilities. When my son started getting good results because his teacher understood what he needed, this gave him confidence and self-belief in his abilities. Feedback from the teacher tells me my son has engaged with and bolstered his peers on many occasions.
- My child's teacher had a performance baseline from the previous year to build on. The teacher built a trusting and caring relationship with our daughter, knowing her learning style and what suited her for learning. My daughter felt safe and in a supportive environment in an academic, mental, spiritual and physical way. She could ask her older friends for help or guidance and the next year she could be a role model.
- I think knowing what to expect and having clear expectations going into the next year have really made the process smooth. The confidence is already there and keeps on building, therefore, learning and achievement also steadily increase. Having the teacher knowing how to challenge the student from the previous year is key. Again, expectations and experience has been key in developing confidence. It's so nice to see older children inspire my son and I certainly hope that the younger ones now feel inspired by him and his friendship.
- I saw confidence and huge academic success in grade six for my child, I think because she was being built up in the previous two years by looping. The teacher/student relationship was solid allowing for giving challenges that the student could accept trustingly. Friendships and confidence soared for my child.

Social Statements

Multiage looping classrooms invite the development of friendships between students in older and younger grades by their very design; I love watching my grade five students welcome

and nurture the new grade four students, helping them to learn classroom routines and expectations. They are excellent mentors who naturally facilitate a smooth transition to the intermediate grades for their younger classmates. This appears to transfer from parent to parent as well, strengthening the sense of community between the students, parents and the teacher. As they share experiences, information, solve problems together and gain insights that build positive relationships, they develop shared understandings that support cooperative, productive engagement with each other. I believe that multiage looping at the grade four/five level also helps our students with their transition to middle school because they will already know many of the students a year older than them once they get there. Our former students certainly enjoy coming back to their elementary school classrooms to see how their younger friends are doing and reconnect with them. When the middle school band and choir have performances at our elementary school there is lots of waving back and forth between the performing students and those in the audience who were their classmates the year before. I believe this is a healthy and encouraging sign that becoming a community of learners extends beyond the two years we teach our students. My colleagues and our principal share these further thoughts regarding friendships and building a sense of community in our grade four/five classes:

- When students are in your class for two years the parents are more open, especially if you have taught a sibling because you might have that family for four years in a row. The grade fours are genuinely sad when the grade fives graduate from elementary. They may have been together in other multiage classes but now have to let the grade fives move on. The bonus is they will likely go to the same middle school. They spend the first week in middle school with groups of kids from grade 6-8. Middle school students actually come back to visit on their Pro-D Days to spend the day with their younger classmates knowing that their friends will be there.
- The kids feel part of a blended community and form friendships with kids their own age and older or younger. I love that families have the opportunity to branch out to older/younger families and form positive connections both in and out of the classroom. There is a sense of comfort when going to middle school as these new grade sixes have just spent the previous year with the kids going into grade seven.

They feel safe knowing some familiar faces. Again, the grade sevens get to take on a leadership role with the “newbie” grade sixes.

- The class becomes a class where they are a group of kids who play and build friendships together and they don’t see themselves as a specific grade, but rather as a whole class. They build friendships with everyone regardless of the grade. This in turn starts to take down the walls between this grade and that grade. In moving on to middle school, knowing familiar faces lessens the anxiety. I wonder how much so if they were to enter middle school in a grade six/seven class versus a straight grade six class. We have witnessed the positive reaction of grade sevens reuniting with former classmates as well as grade sixes visiting their former classes to reconnect with friends who are still in grade five.

Students all agreed that having two grades in a class contributed to good relationships between students, their families and teachers but just over half of them agreed that they developed strong friendships with older and younger students in the two year loop. I wonder if I hadn’t put the word “strong” in the statement and just said “friendships” whether the response would have been different? The vast majority of students thought they had (or would have) fewer worries about moving on to middle school because they already knew many students a year older than them, but there were three students who disagreed with that statement; however, all students agreed that they enjoyed (or think they will enjoy) reconnecting with their younger friends when they arrive(d) at middle school. The comments below explain their thinking around these social issues.

- I had many friends when I was in grade four and grade five with older and younger students. We could always talk about what we were learning. Because I had a lot of friends I didn’t really have any worries about going to middle school. When I see my older and younger friends we can talk, play and have fun again.
- I never really had any close grade five friends when I was in grade four, but they were always nice to me. When I was in grade five I made some strong connections to some grade fours who quickly became my good friends. We always had class trips with the other grade four/five classes which I felt made everyone bond even if they were in a different class. It also gave the teachers and parents who drove a chance to talk. I have heard there are some great teachers at middle school and since I know a lot of the kids in grade seven I feel prepared and ready for middle school. I know when my grade four friends are going to come to middle school I’m going to be so excited to show them around the school!

- I like having strong friendships in both grades so when you go to middle school you will know classmates and their families. You will like some more than others. Even if we haven't seen each other for a while, we will remember the times we had with our grade four/five teacher together.
- I made close friends with older students when I was in grade four but only made one close friend who was younger when I was in grade five. I liked knowing many people who were already at middle school when I went there. It gives you more people to hang out with and also lets you know who you would rather not hang out with.
- I was happy to see my friends that were in grade five when I was in grade four at middle school and it excites me to see my younger friends next year when they come to middle school.
- When I was in grade 4 I made lots of other grade 5 friends and this year when I am in grade 5 I have made lots of grade 4 friends. I have gotten to know their families and I know my teacher very well, too. I will know most of the grade sevens when I go to grade six next year and I will look forward to the year after when I will show all of my younger friends where everything is and help them learn what to do and where to go.
- I made friends with the kids older and younger than me but not really strong. I think it is less scary being around the older grades when you already know some people at middle school. I like to say hi to the older and younger kids I know but we don't really hang out at school.
- I like getting to know everybody longer and I have lots of older friends.
- I was friends with lots of grade fours in my class when I was in grade five. You get used to everybody in your class but if you haven't seen them in a while you might need to get to know them again.
- I played with friends in grade four and five both years because I got to meet more people. I'm not sure I will go to the same middle school as most others but if I do I will make the younger kids feel comfortable at their new school.

The vast majority of parents agreed with all four Social statements, although three parents disagreed with one of the four statements (there was one disagreement for each of the first three statements).

- My child did build up strong friendships with the grade fours (two in particular) that would not have happened otherwise. This was very beneficial for this particular student who has struggled with friendships in the past, especially with the friendship selection in their own grade. I would agree that relationships are definitely stronger spending two grade levels in one classroom. The parents also get to know the teacher better which builds a strong sense of community. My child knew older and younger students which helped them feel more confident about going to middle school. A stronger sense of school community is present as

the grade sevens know some of the grade sixes. Friendships make everyone feel more comfortable

- My son had many friends in both grades. My only issue in this regard is that when my child was in grade four he was so sad that many of his friends were leaving for middle school. I agree that a stronger sense of community was built because you get to know another group of students and their families which you may not have met otherwise. My son was happy to see his friends again in middle school which made the transition easier. He will be very happy to have even more friends at middle school next year when his younger friends arrive.
- My son made close friends that were older and younger. That opportunity teaches them that age difference isn't a barrier to making friends and building a "community" as they understand it. Just knowing that there were (are) older children that he knows made the adjustment to middle school easier. (It was helpful.) It will be fun for the friends who come up from elementary school next year to reconnect.
- We are still in contact with many of my daughter's friends from the first year of the loop. We have connected with many families at different grade levels both years. This makes my child want to attend the same middle school as her friends. She expressed the desire to meet up with all of her friends in middle school.
- My daughter had a good friend who was older that has moved back to Vietnam who she misses a lot. One of her best friends is a year younger whom she misses because my daughter has moved onto middle school. They will be together again next year. A community is developed where there is a variety of ages which adds a different variety of friendships between students and their families. Knowing a lot of the children at middle school helped my daughter with the anxiety and fear she had about going to middle school. She will enjoy seeing her younger friends next year by boosting her confidence because she will get to be a leader and a role model. This will help her friendships at middle school.
- My daughter made close friends both years. Students, families and teachers all get to know each other more; I hope multiage looping becomes a district policy. I think my daughter will worry less about going to middle school because she has those older friends already there and she is already looking forward to seeing her younger friends when they arrive at middle school the next year.
- When my child was in grade four she mainly built friendships with her same grade peers, although this could have more to do with the classroom dynamics of those children rather than anything else. When she was in grade five I saw her develop friendships with the younger grade four children. As parents, we too, get to learn the teacher's ways over two years. It was refreshing when my daughter was in grade five to already know how I could support the teacher. Our relationship was stronger and I was able to develop relationships with the parents outside of my child's grade too. When my daughter went to middle school she was so excited to see old classmates and reconnect. I think the team building there with grade 6, 7, and 8 students all together in the first week was smoother/easier because they already knew some of the grade seven kids. There was a familiar face to be seen. There is talk in my house already of seeing old friends when my child's younger friends arrive at middle school next year. I think there will be a

neat bridge, when my child is in grade seven, between the three grades at middle school.

- It is easier for my child who has special needs to meet a smaller group of children each year, so only having half a class to get to know was easier for her. I didn't really experience the community outside the classroom because I am too busy with work and couldn't join in much. The classroom was more of a larger community. My child can't recall names well, but students who know her at middle school will talk to her and hopefully welcome her. Reconnecting is good.
- I think my child mostly socialized with her own grade peers outside of the classroom as K-3 friendships persist.
- I would not say "strong" friendships but at school the different age groups interact and work together. The students are very familiar with their classmates and routines which is clearly evident when watching them at school.
- I can confirm that my child made strong friendships with students older and younger than him in two years. We had the opportunity to link with some of the families and we already had a positive and understanding relationship with the teacher. If my child goes to the middle school where most of the other students move to he will be glad to see his older friends. I think he will still have close friendships with his younger friends.
- Shadowing/mentoring and meeting diverse personalities helped develop friendships with older and younger students. My son makes friends easily so has no worries about moving on to middle school; he will enjoy reconnecting with older and younger students.
- The proof is in the pudding! My son is excited for middle school and to see his friends again. There is more cause to invest in relationships when we have the opportunity to get to know each other for a longer period of time. I think my child will enjoy reconnecting with his younger friends when they come up to middle school!

Additional Comments

My colleagues and our principal had the following comments to add.

- I love these grades (four/five) for looping! It's also used for grade six/seven classes at some middle schools which I feel takes away the "negativity" that some parents feel around the issue of split classes. Multiage looping has been a very positive experience for me as a classroom teacher. I also have had very positive feedback from my previous student families in the past.
- Multiage looping lets more teachers work together as we do at our school (all grade 4/5 teachers plan together). We have a two year curriculum so things stay fresh. Students anticipate and know what to expect when they are in your class for two years. I feel like one year is just not enough!
- The success of a multiage looping class comes from the teacher's ability to work with students where they are as well as teaching the class as a group. The

structure of a multiage class and its benefits are lessened if the teacher sees their class as two separate groups and less of a whole.

Eight parents shared additional comments.

- I do believe my positive review of this program was biased due to the competence of my child's teacher. Her competence allowed a good experience for my child for two years, however, if my child's teacher had been less than satisfactory my review would not reflect such a positive review.
- This being my first experience with multiage looping, I can say that I recognize the value and benefits of such a system and have been personally able to form a good relationship with the teacher and discuss and understand my child's learning needs.
- I really liked that my son had the same teacher for two years but if the teacher was not as wonderful as she was, then I could see how that could be disappointing for a student who was hoping for a new teacher in the second year.
- These two years spent in one classroom were incredible for my child, especially since his teacher was one of this student's very favourite teachers in all the world. The problem I have with repeating teachers is if the student and the teacher were not a good fit, it would prove to perhaps decrease confidence and learning in that student, particularly if that particular teacher was not particularly pushing the students academically. I do feel the multiage looping classes were beneficial though, to my child, who struggled with the friendship selection in their particular grade.
- I was originally strongly against my daughter being in a 4/5 split. I didn't want her with the older kids as she's already quite precocious. This experience of looping at her school has completely changed my opinion and I am now strongly in favour of looping grade 4/5 students.
- I think multiage looping allows the child to cross grades easier when making friends or just encountering someone in an older grade, or younger grade, in middle school. I think it might be a great foundation for creating unity between grades 6, 7 and 8 students rather than isolating the grades.
- Multiage is looping important to my daughter's sense of well-being, confidence and academic performance. Her experience at middle school has had a few hiccups re: friendships so I'm so happy that some of her grade four friends will be going to her middle school. These strong friendships could last for years and it gives me comfort and a sense of peace knowing my daughter has healthy, strong friendships!
- Ultimately any opportunity for teachers to invest more time and energy into students is great. I think confidence level is maintained and increased naturally with the multiage looping program. Teachers are invested, students are confident and have the chance to mentor and be mentored, and parents build stronger rapport with the teacher and the teaching/learning process. With more time we are able to create continuous learning.

Two students made final comments.

- I have enjoyed having the same teacher for two years because it has helped me in many ways. I am sad to be leaving my teacher but I am looking forward to seeing my grade six friends next year.
- I really enjoyed having split classes and the same teacher for two years because it made a big difference in my life and now I'm making a big entrance into middle school. I am prepared in every way and have friends that have got my back for me!

Conclusion

Multiage looping at the grade four/five level at my school has been extremely successful over the last three years. This educational philosophy is centered in the pedagogy of care where the gift of two years spent together fosters the development of meaningful, long-term relationships in a stable environment that creates a sense of community between students, parents and teachers.

Pedagogy means, in the original Greek sense, leading children. Teaching is truly pedagogic if the leading grows out of care that inevitably is filled with the good of care.

Teaching, then, is a tactful leading that knows and follows the pedagogic good in a caring situation. (Aoki, 2004, p. 191)

The thoughts and ideas regarding the important connection between positive relationships and learning are reflected both in the research in the literature review and the comments of students, parents and teachers/principal participating in my research. "The key to raising achievement is connecting students with teachers who support them not just as learners, but also as people" (Stipek, 2006, p. 49). Multiage looping allows those sustained relationships that encourage feelings of safety and trust to blossom, which in turn, helps teachers to plan more opportunities for individualized learning and motivates students to take risks in their learning. Teachers can

increase student involvement and responsibility over the course of the two years they spend together. The support for a multiage looping model of configuration garners support from all participant groups surveyed as long as the teacher is organized, invested and competent, which echoes the findings of Hintz et al (2007) and Gaustad (1998). As previously stated, multiage looping is not a panacea for all educational issues and there needs to be an understanding that a parent or a teacher can request an alternate classroom for the second year to accommodate individual needs. Nevertheless, the reflections of the students, parents and educators involved in my research are overwhelmingly enthusiastic in support of multiage looping, as are the researchers of both the qualitative and quantitative studies reviewed. The comments from the participants have been rewarding and enlightening to read, and are very honest in their appraisal of multiage looping from their individual perspectives.

The vast number of students and parents surveyed concluded that developing friendships with the older students in the first year of the loop was beneficial and the younger students enjoyed being mentored by the older students. The next year just as many students and parents relayed that in the second year of the loop the same students enjoyed developing friendships and mentoring the younger students which is also reflected in the literature. This community building was felt to extend to middle school where the vast majority of students look forward to reconnecting with their older and younger friends which eases anxiety around the transition to middle school. This is encouraging to me because I believe so strongly in striving to provide the most appropriate learning opportunities for my students. What I have learned through my research and my experiences is that multiage looping builds strong connections and relationships that allow for the co-construction of learning opportunities amongst teachers, students and their

parents over an extended period of time which, in turn, creates stronger, more supportive communities of learners.

Limitations

There are some limitations within this project. My lived experiences make me a supporter of multiage looping and these positive feelings could impact how I framed the survey questions and the actual questions I asked, which could have an impact on the data I collected. There was a small sample size because I was restricted by the number of students I have taught in multiage looping classes over the last three years. A final limitation would be that there is no triangulation of data to capture any different dimensions of multiage looping that my survey did not address.

Implications for Future Research

Multiage looping may be a model of configuration that other elementary and middle schools investigate as an effective means of implementing the new BC Curriculum, personalizing learning, and improving student achievement. Further research would add to the growing body of knowledge about the benefits and implications of multiage looping.

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APPENDIX A

Student Survey

Student Survey

Reflections On Multiage Looping: Building Relationships That Support Learning

You have been in a grade 4/5 class with the same teacher for two years.

Please circle your response to each statement and explain why you feel this way.

I. General Statements:

A. I liked having the same teacher for two years in a row.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

B. Being in the same class for two years in a row made me feel more comfortable at school.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

II. Academic Statements:

A. I think I learned more and did better in school having two years with the same teacher.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

B. I was challenged in my learning in both years when I was with the same teacher.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

C. Having the same teacher for two years helped me to develop confidence in my ability to learn.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

D. When I was in grade 4 I enjoyed having grade 5 friends who could help me, and when I was in grade 5 I enjoyed helping my new grade 4 friends.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

III Social Statements:

- A. I developed strong friendships with the older students in grade 5 when I was in grade 4, and then with the younger students in grade 4 the next year when I was in grade 5.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

- B. Having two grade levels in a class contributes to good relationships between students, their families and teachers.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

- C. I had (or I think I will have) fewer worries about moving on to middle school because I already know many of the students a year older than me.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

D. In Grade 7 I enjoyed (or I think I will enjoy) reconnecting with my younger friends when they arrive(d) at middle school.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

IV. Additional comments you wish to share:

Please mail this survey to Ms. * in the stamped envelope enclosed by February 15, 2019.**

APPENDIX B

Parent Survey

Parent Survey

Reflections On Multiage Looping: Building Relationships That Support Learning

Multiage looping combines two concepts: looping (teachers and students working together for at least two years) with multiage education (“split” or “combination” classes with two grades being taught in the same classroom).

Please circle your response to each statement and explain why you feel this way.

I. General Statements:

- A. I would recommend multiage looping to future grade 4/5 students and their parents.

Agree Disagree

I feel this way because:

- B. Being in a multiage looping class helped my child to feel more comfortable and/or secure at school.

Agree Disagree

I feel this way because:

II. Academic Statements:

- E. My child’s learning and achievement improved when having the same teacher for two years.

Agree Disagree

I feel this way because:

F. My child was academically challenged when staying with the same teacher for two years.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

G. Multiage looping at the grade 4/5 level helped my child to develop confidence in their ability to learn.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

H. My child experienced opportunities over the two years to be mentored by and be a mentor to their peers.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

III Social Statements:

- A. My child developed strong friendships with the students in the older grade when they were in grade 4 and then with the younger students the next year when they were in grade 5.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

- B. Having two grade levels in a class contributes to a stronger sense of community amongst students, their families and teachers.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

- C. My child had (or I think my child will have) fewer worries about moving on to middle school because he/she already knows many of the students a year older than them.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

D. In Grade 7 my child enjoyed (or I think my child will enjoy) reconnecting with their younger friends when they arrive(d) at middle school.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

IV. Additional comments you wish to share:

Please mail this survey to Ms. * in the stamped envelope enclosed by February 15, 2019.**

APPENDIX C

Teacher Survey

Teacher Survey

Reflections On Multiage Looping: Building Relationships That Support Learning

Multiage looping combines two concepts: looping (teachers and students working together for at least two years) with multiage education (“split” or “combination” classes with two grades being taught in the same classroom).

Please circle your response to each statement and explain why you feel this way.

I. General Statements:

- C. I would recommend multiage looping to future grade 4/5 students and their parents.

Agree Disagree

I feel this way because:

- D. Being in a multiage looping class helped my students to feel more comfortable and/or secure at school.

Agree Disagree

I feel this way because:

II. Academic Statements:

- I. My students’ learning and achievement improves when having the same teacher for two years.

Agree Disagree

I feel this way because:

- J. My students were academically challenged when staying with the same teacher for two years.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

- K. Multiage looping at the grade 4/5 level helped my students to develop confidence in their ability to learn.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

- L. My students experienced opportunities over the two years to be mentored by and be a mentor to his/her peers.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

III Social Statements:

- A. My students developed strong friendships with the students in the older grade when they were in grade 4 and then with the younger students the next year when they were in grade 5.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

- B. Having two grade levels in a class contributes to a stronger sense of community amongst students, their families and teachers.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

- C. My students have fewer worries about moving on to middle school because they already know many of the students a year older than them.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

D. When they are in Grade 7, my former students enjoy reconnecting with their younger friends at middle school.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

IV. Additional comments you wish to share:

Please return this survey to Ms. * in the enclosed envelope by February 15, 2019.**

APPENDIX D

Principal Survey

Principal Survey

Reflections On Multiage Looping: Building Relationships That Support Learning

Multiage looping combines two concepts: looping (teachers and students working together for at least two years) with multiage education (“split” or “combination” classes with two grades being taught in the same classroom).

Please circle your response to each statement and explain why you feel this way.

I. General Statements:

- E. I would recommend multiage looping to future grade 4/5 students and their parents.

Agree Disagree

I feel this way because:

- F. Being in a multiage looping class helps students to feel more comfortable and/or secure at school.

Agree Disagree

I feel this way because:

II. Academic Statements:

- M. Students’ learning and achievement improves by having the same teacher for two years.

Agree Disagree

I feel this way because:

N. Students are academically challenged when staying with the same teacher for two years.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

O. Multiage looping at the grade 4/5 level helps students to develop confidence in their ability to learn.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

P. Students experience opportunities over the two years to be mentored by and be a mentor to their peers.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

III Social Statements:

- A. Students develop strong friendships with the students in the older grade when they are in grade 4 and then with the younger students the next year when they are in grade 5.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

- B. Having two grade levels in a class contributes to a stronger sense of community amongst students, their families and teachers.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

- C. Students have fewer worries about moving on to middle school because they already know many of the students a year older than them.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

D. When they are in Grade 7, former students enjoy reconnecting with their younger friends at middle school.

Agree

Disagree

I feel this way because:

IV. Additional comments you wish to share:

Please return this survey to Ms. * in the enclosed envelope by February 15, 2019.**