



Looping for Success: How Seven Years with the Same Students Transforms Teaching & Learning

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Abstract

Educational looping has been associated with positive student outcomes. And yet, it is not a widespread phenomenon in the United States, with many studies focusing on two-to-three year cycles. With limited research on long-term, multi-level looping, this longitudinal study investigates the perceived benefits and challenges of a seven-year looping case at a Title-I urban school district in Texas. This longitudinal descriptive, single case study followed one teacher and sought to share this case through interview, journal, and archival data. Ultimately, the benefits of long-term educational looping were personal and professional growth, relational stability, and culturally responsive teaching development. Challenges explored including emotional strain, isolation, and workload. Findings suggest that the benefits outweigh the challenges and indicate the potential of extended looping to deepen teacher-student relationships and instructional responsiveness.

Keywords: *educational looping, case study, culturally responsive teaching, teacher-student relationships, multicultural education*

Introduction

Educational looping, also known as multi-year teaching or continuous progress, is a pedagogical practice where a teacher remains with the same group of students for two or more consecutive years, advancing with them to the next grade level (Burke, 1999; Cistone & Sheyderman, 2004). While existing literature primarily addresses two- to three-year cycles, this study explores an extended seven-year longitudinal case of a teacher-student cohort traveling from sixth grade through senior year of high school. The relational depth and academic consistency afforded by shorter looping models suggest potential transformative benefits; however, the impact of such an extended multi-level trajectory remains underexplored in the literature.

This research focuses on the experiences of Author 2, a teacher who initiated and completed a seven-year educational loop with a single cohort of students. This provides a unique data point in the study of teacher-student relationships and long-term academic success. Author 1, whose own background included non-traditional three-year looping cycles, sought to observe this seven-year dynamic to understand the full scope of its impact.

The successful implementation of long-term looping hinges not only on classroom dynamics but also on the teacher's professional support system. Therefore, this study investigates the

intersection of teacher-student relationships and collegial relationships within this distinctive case. This inquiry leads to the following research questions:

- What are the perceived benefits of educational looping for the teacher and students?
- What are the perceived challenges of educational looping for the teachers and students?

In order to explore these two research questions, Author 1 opted for a descriptive single case study approach. This type of case study is used to describe a phenomenon (seven year educational looping) and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003).

Literature Review

Educational looping, also known as multi-year teaching, is a practice where a teacher remains with the same group of students for two or more consecutive years. Looping is often used to enhance continuity in instruction, provide emotional stability in a classroom, and deepen student-teacher relationships. This strategy has been employed in various global settings, with notable historical roots in European education systems (Cistone & Shederman, 2004). In the United States, looping has gained attention as a potential method to boost student outcomes by minimizing the disruption of annual teacher changes.

Understanding the effects of educational looping is critical in addressing both academic and emotional challenges students face. Looping may play an essential role in fostering cultural responsiveness and inclusivity as well. This study aims to assess both the benefits and challenges of looping, particularly in culturally diverse classrooms. This study seeks to explore and synthesize existing literature on this topic. By examining relevant studies and identifying gaps, this review will suggest areas for future research on looping, particularly in multicultural settings.

An important note for this literature review is that educational looping can be known by other terms, depending on the context or region. This review of the literature used an additional term “multi-year teaching” (Chainey & Cassity, 2021). Author 1 used the term “educational looping” in this paper because it is more widely represented in the research.

Benefits of Educational Looping

Educational looping has known success around the world. These examples can be used to highlight what specifically about looping can be so beneficial. It must be noted that research on this topic peaked in the late 1990s and early 2000s and has since declined. As the current literature is dated and in need of revitalization, our study is highly relevant in today’s context. It is also important to note that while historically rooted in European systems, extended educational looping is a relatively rare and distinct phenomenon within contemporary U.S. public education, and is often limited to two- or three-year blocks. This study, which focuses on a seven-year trajectory, is therefore crucial for demonstrating the potential applicability and generalizability of deep, longitudinal relationships to a domestic audience that is grappling with student engagement and achievement.

One study, conducted in Quebec, Canada, followed two teachers for two consecutive years. The study focused solely on academic achievement and used a strict protocol to ensure that the teachers in both settings had similar profiles and pedagogical practices (Tourigny et al., 2020). The ultimate takeaway after this two-year endeavor was that the students in the looping classroom

showed higher grades in mathematics and writing when compared with the non-looping teaching counterpart. The authors argue that looping is a simple and inexpensive way to benefit students. This was further reinforced in a study comparing two groups of students between the fourth and fifth grade. One group looped with their teacher and the other group changed teachers for the second year. The authors analyzed standardized test scores and found statistically significant improvement in reading test scores for the students who had looped (Meeks, 2008). By reducing the time needed for teachers to acclimate to new students each year, looping enables teachers to dive into the content much more quickly than for teachers who are new to their students and need to dedicate more time to classroom culture or management.

Academic achievement is a wonderful indicator of success, but educational looping has so many more benefits. According to Hitz et al., (2007), an educational looping program enhances stability for the students and can lead to stronger connections among peers. This sense of belonging is something that students tend to struggle with, especially at the middle level grades, and so looping can be an effective strategy to combat this potential loneliness or disconnect. Additionally, culturally responsive teaching is critical in today's diverse classrooms and educational looping can provide an opportunity for our educators to deeply understand their students' cultural backgrounds. Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasized the importance of educators valuing and affirming the cultural identities of their students, which can be more effectively accomplished in looping classrooms. This study extends the literature on educational looping by demonstrating how sustained relationships can also support culturally responsive pedagogy, allowing teachers to tailor their practices to meet the cultural and emotional needs of a diverse student body. By focusing on multicultural and multilingual classrooms, this research fills a significant gap in the literature on the intersection of relational teaching practices and cultural responsiveness.

Challenges of Educational Looping

Conversely, educational looping can present some unanticipated challenges for the teachers. Close relationships can help our teachers craft lessons that meet unique needs, but the emotional stress that our teachers may feel from these deep and longitudinal relationships should not be discounted. Teachers may experience heightened stress as they take on the emotional and academic well-being of the same group of students for multiple years (Hedge & Cassidy, 2004).

Another challenge is the potential for professional isolation if the setting in which the looping occurs is one where looping is not the norm. While the teacher and classroom dynamic remains consistent throughout each year, the teacher is moving from grade-level team to grade-level team and can be seen as an outsider by peers, which can limit opportunities for peer learning (Hanson, 1995).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), a theoretical framework that emphasizes the importance of integrating students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process to support academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRP provides a lens through which the practice of looping can be examined, particularly in culturally diverse classrooms where long-term teacher-student relationships create opportunities for culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994)

defines CRP as an approach to teaching that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 17-18). Three core principles form the foundation of CRP: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Academic success ensures that all students meet high expectations while fostering a deep understanding of the content. Cultural competence requires teachers to affirm and incorporate students’ cultural backgrounds and identities into the curriculum. Finally, sociopolitical consciousness prepares students to critique and address systemic inequities in their communities and beyond.

The Role of Sustained Relationships in Operationalizing CRP

The extended teacher-student relationships inherent in looping provide a unique context for the operationalization of CRP. Emotional bonds and relational continuity, which are central features of looping, foster trust and connection between teachers and students. While not explicitly connected to educational looping, Spilt et al. (2012) suggests that supportive relationships - stable relationships - between teachers and students foster students’ engagement and academic achievement. This relational stability creates a platform for teachers to learn about and integrate their students’ cultural assets into the classroom.

Multidimensional Frameworks Supporting CRP in Looping

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979) offers a complimentary perspective by situating looping within broader systemic contexts, including the family, community, and school. This framework highlights the interconnectedness of these systems and their impact on students’ educational experiences. Looping classrooms serve as stable microenvironments within this broader system, supporting both academic and emotional development.

Additionally, Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a lens to address systemic inequities in education. By sustaining relationships over multiple years, teachers in looping contexts can better understand and challenge inequitable practices that affect their students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This study highlights how the teacher’s growing awareness of systemic barriers, such as language inequities and access to resources, informed her practices and advocacy efforts.

Reflective Practice as a Mechanism for Culturally Responsive Growth

Reflective practice is integral to the teacher’s ability to align her instruction with CRP principles (Schön, 1984; Gay, 2018). In this study, the teacher engaged in continuous self-reflection, using student feedback and personal journaling to refine her curriculum and instructional strategies. By combining the principles of CRP with insights from ecological systems theory and CRT, this theoretical framework underscores the transformative potential of looping in culturally diverse classrooms. It provides a foundation for understanding how sustained relationships can support culturally responsive teaching.

Methods

Research Design

A qualitative case study is a research approach that allows for the analysis of an experience through various data sources. To achieve the most reliable results, the data must be triangulated, meaning it must come from at least three different sources. Case study methodology is best informed by two practices - one outlined by Robert Stake (1995) and the other by Robert Yin (2003, 2017). A benefit of this approach is the relationship between the researcher and the participant. Both Authors worked on the same grade level team during Author 2's time teaching 7th grade English Language Arts. During that time, they were able to form a strong relationship mostly based on their shared experiences with the students. It was during this year that Author 1 began to collect stories from Author 2's experiences and the experiences of her students.

Author 1 selected a qualitative case study approach for several reasons. The first is that a larger study would prove to be almost impossible. Author 2 spent seven years with her students. Her story will be a unique and uncommon one. Additionally, Yin (2003) outlines considerations for successful case studies; they are most advantageous when (a) the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the subjects; (c) there are contextual conditions that are relevant to the phenomena under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the experience and the context.

This study is longitudinal in nature, spanning seven years of Author 2's teaching experience with the same group of students. Longitudinal case studies are particularly valuable as they allow researchers to observe changes and developments over an extended period, providing insights into how relationships and teaching practices evolve. Longitudinal case studies, which track phenomena over extended periods, are deemed essential for capturing developmental processes and complex, evolving relationships (Creswell, 2014). The extended timeframe of this study enables the exploration of how sustained teacher-student interactions foster cultural responsiveness, emotional stability, and academic success over time.

Data Collection

One fundamental feature of case study research is the implementation of multiple data sources. This serves to enhance the data credibility (Patton, 2015). The data sources utilized in this case study include interviews, archival records and subject journaling. The interviews were originally scheduled to be conducted at the end of each semester ($n = 12$)¹, and followed a semi-structured approach where the majority of the questions were repeated each time while still allowing for open dialogue should a particular response require additional context. Ultimately, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic required a bit of flexibility with the consistency of the interviews, with many occurring at the end of the semester, but in some cases, only occurring at the end of the academic year. The interviews focused on the personal and professional background of Author 2, providing insights into her experiences in teaching and classroom leadership. It begins with demographic questions, exploring her age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background. The personal story section delved into her college and professional experience. It then examined her path through alternative certification, such as Teach for America (TFA) or Teach for Texas (TE), and

1. There were two instances where interviews did not occur—once at the end of the first semester of Author 2's year in sixth grade and once during the pandemic.

the lessons learned during this process. The interviews reflected on each year of teaching, assessing her preparation as both an instructional and cultural leader, as well as her experiences with student and parent relationships. It included reflections on the academic performance of students, particularly in high-stakes tests, and ended with a look ahead to the decision-making process involved in transitioning to a new position at the end of each academic year, highlighting expectations versus reality. The interviews were conducted with consent from Author 2.

The archival records came straight from the participant herself and include such items as notes from students, notes from parents, and communication from administration both on campus and at the district content level. Finally, the participant kept a personal journal documenting her experience with this group of students. These were archival in nature and not reviewed until after Author 2 had left her school.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data. The steps for this process include (1) Data Familiarization, (2) Generating Initial Codes, (3) Searching for Themes, (4) Reviewing Themes, and (5) Defining and Naming Themes. To do this, the authors began with a process of data familiarization. Author 1 transcribed each of the interviews and then both of the authors read through the transcriptions, the archival records and the journal entries multiple times to become deeply familiar with the data. While Author 2, as the teacher of record, was intimately aware of her lived experiences, the process of reviewing the data—much of which came from over five years ago—allowed both Authors to write down their initial thoughts and observations from a fresh viewpoint.

At that point, the authors began the process of systematically coding to identify the patterns that existed. While this coding process was guided by the research they had done on educational looping, they worked to derive codes that emerged from the data as well. For example, “academic continuity” was a theme that emerged frequently in the literature. From there, the authors looked to group these codes into broader themes that aligned with the initial research questions. “Positive Impacts,” “Challenges,” and “Cultural Responsiveness” emerged as obvious themes.

Once these themes were identified, they were reviewed across all datasets—interviews, archival records, and journals. The resulting triangulation of this data showed that these themes were consistently reinforced. This helped to ensure the credibility of this study. Reflexivity was also considered by acknowledging the researcher’s role in shaping the interpretation of the data, particularly given the close relationship between the Authors and the relationship between Author 2 and her students. Regular checks were conducted where preliminary findings were presented and shared with Author 2 for feedback and validation.

School Context

This study took place at a public charter school in a large urban school district. The school serves a diverse student body with a wide range of cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds for grades 6th through 12th. The school community, including administration, was supportive of the research process. The initial sixth grade class included approximately 140 students. There was student attrition over the course of the seven years, as can be expected. Reasons for this attrition included family relocation, expulsions, and changing to other public schools that had larger athletic opportunities. The graduating class was approximately 120 students. The policy of this school district is not to take any new students after ninth grade. In the year that these students graduated, 71.7% of the students enrolled were considered at risk of dropping out of school, 96.4%

of enrolled students were considered economically disadvantaged, 51.6% of students enrolled were in English language learning programs, and 92.4% of that graduating class received their high school diplomas on time (Texas Tribune, n.d.). Additionally, the demographics for this campus in the graduation year was 7.9% African American, 0.6% American Indian, 0.9% Asian, 75.4% Hispanic, 0.7% White, and 14.5% Two or more races (Texas Tribune, n.d.).

Participant

The participant of this study was the teacher who engaged in the seven-year educational looping process. The teacher, referred to as Author 2, took a non-traditional path towards becoming a teacher. She received a B.A. in Political Science through her undergraduate studies and joined Teach For America upon graduation. Teach for America and the public charter school referenced in this study provided her with an alternate path to certification. Through these programs, she became certified as a teacher in Texas with the following licenses: Generalist 4-8; ELAR 7-12; and English as a Second Language 4-8. Author 2 began her teaching career as a sixth-grade writing teacher with the students referenced in this study and continued to loop with them through to their senior year of high school. She taught the following classes each year: 6th grade- Writing, 7th Grade- ELA, 8th Grade- ELA, 9th Grade- English I, 10th Grade- English II, 11th Grade- Introduction to Rhetoric and Compositions; and 12th Grade- AP English Language and Composition. Throughout the study, the teacher worked with students from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, providing a rich context for exploring culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) in action.

Author 2's experience with looping developed organically rather than through a formalized school initiative. Near the conclusion of her first year of teaching, her principal informed her that the seventh-grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher would be transitioning into an instructional coaching role, creating a vacancy at that grade level. Having established strong relationships with her sixth-grade students and recognizing the potential benefits of instructional continuity, Author 2 expressed interest in moving up with her cohort. The following year, a similar opportunity arose when the eighth-grade ELA teacher departed to attend law school, prompting Author 2 to advance with her students once again. This pattern continued through high school, as staffing shifts resulted in open ELA positions at each subsequent grade level. Up through Year 5 (tenth grade), the school principal actively supported Author 2's decision to continue looping, viewing it as advantageous for student development and school culture. By Year 5, however, the principal expressed a preference for Author 2 to remain in a state-tested grade level to strengthen standardized assessment outcomes. Despite this, Author 2 advocated to remain with her students, emphasizing the importance of consistency and long-term academic growth. The principal ultimately approved the request, and shortly thereafter, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic further shaped the trajectory and significance of her looping experience.

As Author 2 looped with the same cohort of students over seven years, her day-to-day professional responsibilities evolved in response to both student needs and structural changes within the school. Although the school schedule shifted multiple times during this period, the general hours remained 8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, and 8:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m. on Wednesdays. In Year 1, when her students were in sixth grade, Author 2 taught six periods of Writing, with approximately 20–25 students per class. She was allotted two preparation periods, though one was frequently designated for class coverage as needed. From Years 2 through 7, Author 2 taught three sections (six periods total) of English Language Arts with 24–28

students per class, which represented approximately half of the grade level each year. As a result, a small subset of students—approximately five—had Author 2 as their English teacher for the entire seven-year span, while others had her for three to five years. Beginning in Year 3, Author 2 additionally served as the Grade Level Chair, a leadership role that entailed acting as the first point of contact for disciplinary matters, coordinating cultural and community-building events, monitoring academic progress, and facilitating team collaboration. Although she did not directly teach all 140 students from the original cohort each year, she maintained consistent interactions with them in various academic and extracurricular capacities throughout the looping process.

Positionality Statement

The authors acknowledge their positionalities in shaping this study and its findings. Author 2, the teacher in this study, had a unique, long-term relationship with her students, making her an insider with an intimate understanding of their academic and emotional needs. This relationship provided deep insights into how educational looping can foster culturally responsive pedagogy. However, Author 2 also recognized the limitations of her perspective, particularly in terms of her emotional attachment to her students, which may have influenced her interpretation of their experiences.

Author 1 served as the researcher responsible for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. While Author 1 worked closely with Author 2, as a colleague and researcher, this dual role influenced the interpretation of data. As an outsider, the researcher approached the data with the aim of being objective, yet acknowledged the potential biases and assumptions that may have arisen from their professional relationship and familiarity with the school context. Both authors engaged in regular discussions to ensure that their interpretations remained grounded in the data and reflective of the participants' lived experiences.

Results

The interviews began in the fall semester of Author 2's year in the seventh grade. Interviews were planned for the end of each semester but flexibility was needed during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this seven year span, Author 2 dealt with the transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and this warranted an additional interview. The average duration of each interview was 40 minutes and 57 seconds. The shortest interview was 23 minutes and 41 seconds. The longest interview was one hour five minutes and 44 seconds. Over the seven years, technology changed as well. For the first few interviews, the interview was audio recorded and transcribed by hand. Eventually, this process changed to a Zoom recording with automatically generated transcripts. In both cases, the transcripts were reviewed by both Authors and revised for accuracy. Interview questions followed a semi-structured approach—while there was a guide for what would be covered (challenges, benefits, relationships), this semi-structured approach allowed for Author 1 to ask probing questions and for Author 2 to provide additional context (Appendix A).

The second data source—Author 2's personal journals—were collected unsystematically via the Notes feature on her personal mobile device. In total, Author 2 shared 34 journal entries. This averages approximately 4.857 journal entries per academic year. The final source also were self-reported by Author 2. These included notes received from students, administrators, and colleagues throughout the seven years. Examples of the types of notes collected include unofficial observation notes from administrators, end of year notes of gratitude from students, and shout outs

(positive descriptive praise) notes from colleagues. There were 20 notes included with an average of three per academic year over the course of the seven years.

Ultimately, four themes were identified resulting from the analysis of the three data sources: (1) Personal and Professional Growth, (2) Relational Stability for Students, (3) Enhanced Understanding of Culturally Responsive Teaching, (4) Challenges and Resilience. Each of these themes will be described below with evidence from the data sources.

Personal and Professional Growth

Author 2 and her students experienced many transitions and unique challenges over the course of their seven years together. Her students transitioned to middle school, transitioned to high school, and prepared for post-secondary plans. Author 2 was a novice teacher in her first year of this study, but by the end of the seven years was considered an instructional leader on her campus. Both Author 2 and her students dealt with massive disruptions such as prolonged school closures due to hurricane-related damage and the 2020 global pandemic. Regardless, the personal and professional growth demonstrated by Author 2 was a dominant theme in the data. Author 2 wrote in a journal entry from Year 7,

Every moment throughout the last seven years was moving me closer to my life's purpose. I made mistakes along the way. I wasn't perfect by any means, but I was growing and learning and becoming a stronger, more fulfilled version of myself. (Author 2, 2022)

This recognition of personal growth was further articulated in a journal from year 6 in which Author 2 wrote,

I can't help but look forward with hope and some slight anxiety about what this next year has in store. I am optimistic, energized, and excited to see seven years of hard work pay off for me and my kiddos. (Author 2, 2021)

Further analysis of Author 2's journal entries reveal that looping not only allowed her to grow personally, but also professionally. She notes in a journal entry from 2020 that looping feels "safe and consistent" while simultaneously "fulfilling [her] desire to continuously learn and grow because it's a new subject and material" (Author 2, 2020). Later that summer she expresses excitement about the upcoming year, sharing,

I'm excited about my proposal to switch up the IRC curriculum. I'm thrilled beyond measure to have another year with my students. And I feel energized getting involved with Teach Plus, starting High School Dems, and dreaming of the possibilities the future holds. (Author 2, 2020)

These quotes show that not only did Author 2 learn and teach a new curriculum each year, but she also was actively involved with a variety of clubs and organizations both on and off campus. Not only was this growth noticed by the author herself in her journals, but it was reinforced by notes from her colleagues and administrators. In year 5, her school principal wrote,

I am so grateful you're leading [the class of] 2022 through this closure. I actually believe 10th grade is one of the toughest [grade levels] to lead in times like this. You've been creative about incentives and energized your deep personal relationships to motivate kids. (Principal, 2020)

One noticeable development for Author 2 is her focus on connecting with the families of her students. In Year 1, Author 2 stated, "I really wasn't great about [family relationships] my first year teaching...I was afraid of speaking Spanish or messing up all the words to these parents" (Author 2 Interview, 2017). However, by the time that 2020 came around, Author 2 was much more connected with the families, "Parents are used to me texting; they have [had] a consistent person to contact" (Author 2 Interview, 2020).

Relational Stability for Students

To continue that focus on consistency, a second theme that emerged from the data analysis was that of relational stability for the students. Author 2 highlighted the impact of this approach in creating a supportive environment:

[In seventh grade], I had a lot more kids who would come to my room and cry to me about something that was going on outside of school. And, I think that they felt comfortable doing that because they had a relationship with me from sixth grade. (Author 2 Interview, 2017)

The sense of comfort and familiarity extends, with Author 2 expressing, "I think the kids are a lot more comfortable with me than they are with their other eighth-grade teachers" (Author 2 Interview, 2018). This comfort plays a crucial role in addressing students' personal challenges and concerns. Furthermore, she recognizes the significance of her role in providing stability and positivity during transitions, as elucidated by the comment: "I see the transitions and the people that leave and how that impacts them. That I can provide some type of consistency or just be any type of positive presence for them, I want to do that" (Author 2 Interview, 2018). The overarching sentiment emphasizes her commitment to being a constant and positive influence in her students' lives. Additionally, the joy derived from witnessing students' growth and development becomes a profound source of fulfillment. As expressed in one interview,

Just being able to see them grow, it's amazing just what wonderful humans they are, how kind and sincere they are, just being able to see that growth...see kids taking on leadership roles, developing their own personalities and their own beliefs and ideas. (Author 2 Interview, 2019)

Notes and letters from students highlight the strong emotional bonds that Author 2 formed with her students and the sense of belonging that this created in the classroom. Connections started to form during Author 2's first year teaching, with one student writing, "You make learning so much fun. You're very kind and cheerful and funny" (6th Grade, Note from Student. 2017). This foundation continued to grow over the next few years and by 8th grade graduation another student shared, "Whether small or big, you have positively affected everyone you've met, created a warm and joyful classroom environment that positively impacted many students in the grade" (8th grade,

Note from Colleague, 2018). Even when there were rough patches, students felt connected to Author 2 with one student sharing, “I know for a fact that you and me have had our ups and downs but just know that I still truly care about you deeply and of course I'll count on you whenever” (9th Grade, Note from Student, 2019).

By the time Author 2's students graduated from high school, the connections had grown far beyond the typical relationship that is formed after students spend one year with a teacher. As graduation neared, students wrote letters to Author 2 sharing that: “You have been there for me through thick and thin. I wish one day I would be able to do the same for you” and “For me, you are a teacher, friend, therapist, and family” (12th Grade, Note from Students, 2022). These quotes suggest that not only did students view Author 2 as a teacher, but as a support system, mentor, and cheerleader who cared about them as human beings, not just students.

Throughout the years, students expressed excitement about continuing their educational journey with Author 2, writing “I can't wait until next year because you're going with us to 9th grade” and “Thank you for staying with us despite how crazy it got” (8th Grade, Note from Student, 2019 and 12th Grade, Note from Student, 2022). Staff also noted the continuity that Author 2 provided for students with one teacher sharing, “You clearly care deeply about this class and act on that care to give them the best school experience you can” (8th Grade, Notes from Teachers, 2018).

This was especially evident at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic when Author 2 found herself teaching English II and leading the 10th grade level team. In a letter shared during teacher appreciation week that year, her principal noted the stability she brought to both the teaching team and students saying, “You've been creative about incentives and energized your deep personal relationships to motivate kids. I'm sure it is so meaningful to kids to have such a champion in their court during times like this” (10th Grade, Note from Principal, 2020). From the staff and student perspective, looping brought a sense of continuity, stability, and safety, especially during uncertain times.

It is evident through studying Author 2's journal entries that looping allowed her to develop deep and strong relational bonds with her students. Countless journal entries over the years highlight this fact, like this one from 12th grade in which Author 2 shares,

My students are some of the brightest, kindest, smartest, funniest people I know and I truly can't put into words how grateful I am to know them and how hopeful I am for the change they will make in the world. (12th Grade, Journal Entry, 2022)

Even in the midst of the uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic, Author 2's commitment to her students is clear with her writing,

Teaching in a pandemic is soul sucking, yet I can't help but feel that I'm meant to be in [the city] experiencing this with my kiddos right now. The universe has allowed me to move up with them every year and the reward of seeing them grow into their own intelligent, kind, and thoughtful people is well worth the struggle. (11th Grade, Journal Entry, 2020)

The deep emotional connection that Author 2 built with her students can be best seen in a journal entry she wrote in the weeks leading up to graduation,

Seven years with this bright, talented, funny group of kids is ending in the blink of an eye. I feel like a parent sending their kid off into the real world. Did I teach them enough? Was I kind enough? Did I tell them how proud I was of them and how much I care for them? Do they like me? Do they respect me? Will they look back on our time together with fond memories? Was I the teacher for them that I needed in school? I can't and wouldn't go back and change a thing. I hope through it all they know how much of an impact they've had on my life and I hope I've been able to provide even an ounce of consistency, love, and support to each of theirs. (12th Grade, Journal Entry, 2022)

This entry, written at the end of a seven year looping journey, highlights that Author 2's bond with her students was akin to that of family and the years they spent together and the challenges they overcame together only helped to solidify that bond.

Enhanced Understanding of Culturally Responsive Teaching

In the context of Author 2's journey as a culturally responsive practitioner, educational looping emerges as a pivotal factor shaping her instructional approach. A key revelation from her alternative certification underscores the profound impact of focusing on cultural responsiveness within the classroom setting. Author 2 recalls,

The most influential thing [I learned in my alternative certification] was the focus on being culturally responsive in my classroom—specifically in terms of choosing what texts we were going to read or what policies and procedures I had in place. (Author 2 Interview, 2017)

This emphasis on cultural responsiveness is not merely theoretical but translated into tangible changes in her teaching methods and curriculum. Through a survey conducted at the end of one academic year, Author 2 gleaned valuable insights into the students' learning experiences. The feedback indicated a heightened awareness among students about issues such as inequality and differential treatment based on identity and origin:

I did a survey at the end of the year, and a lot of them talked about how they learned about inequality or about how people are treated differently because of who they are and where they're from. It's like these big, enduring understandings and essential ideas that I wanted them to get out of my class. (Author 2 Interview, 2018)

This attests to the effectiveness of her culturally responsive instructional approach in fostering critical awareness and understanding. Furthermore, Author 2's commitment to adaptability and responsiveness is evident in her modifications to instructional activities. For instance, she strategically altered the format of "Vocabulary Day" to incorporate discussions on current events, demonstrating a proactive effort to integrate real-world context into the curriculum: "I changed up the recommended 'Vocabulary Day' so that I could talk about current events with students" (Author 2 Interview, 2018). Rather than spending an entire class period doing rote vocabulary practice as suggested by the curriculum, Author 2 embedded vocabulary practice into real world scenarios. She sourced articles from Newsela about current events that were thematically linked to the books students were reading in class and provided opportunities for students to practice vocabulary in

context rather than in isolation. Moreover, Author 2 leveraged student feedback to refine her teaching strategies, as evidenced by adjustments made based on survey results: “Based on the surveys I gave last year, I made some changes to my class and to the curriculum. Kids wanted more projects and more access to technology. (Author 2 Interview, 2018)

This feedback inspired Author 2 to create “Real World Application of Learning” projects for each unit that integrated technology, current events, and themes from each novel study that they were doing in class. For example, in 2019 when Author 2 was teaching 9th grade English I, students read *Farewell to Manzanar*, a memoir about Japanese internment camps in America during World War II. As part of their project for that unit, students compared and contrasted Japanese internment camps of the 1940s with present day immigrant detention centers, focusing on honing writing skills while advancing critical thinking and social awareness. Later that year, as her students read *A Raisin in the Sun*, and discussed the American Dream, prejudice, and hope, Author 2 developed a project in which students researched the impact of gentrification on their city and crafted an argumentative essay explaining the benefits and drawbacks of these types of policies. This iterative and reflective approach underscores Author 2's dedication to continuously enhancing her pedagogy to better align with the cultural needs and preferences of her students. In essence, the impact of educational looping on Author 2's development as a culturally responsive practitioner is vividly illustrated through her intentional integration of cultural responsiveness into her instructional practices and her responsiveness to student feedback.

A key component of culturally responsive teaching is the centering of the students' cultures, experiences and perspectives to improve the learning outcomes for all students. This was definitely a focus for Author 2 that was developed over the course of her seven years and which can be seen in the letters from students was the ways in which Author 2's guidance and support encouraged them to grow both academically and personally. Many students mentioned being inspired to work hard, to excel academically, and to make positive changes in their lives because of Author 2. Some students became more invested in their coursework, with one sharing “Before I met you I really hated reading and never really cared how my grades were. But you pushed me and brought out the best in me” (8th Grade, Note from Student, 2018). Others noted how Author 2 helped shape their worldview, sharing “You taught me a lot, not just about ELA or English, but about life and society as well” (9th Grade, Note from Student, 2019). Finally, some expressed gratitude for the ways in which Author 2 helped them develop personally with one student sharing, “I just want to thank you for being patient with me and not giving up on me. You're the reason I've decided to make a change” (7th Grade, Note from Student, 2017). These artifacts from students suggest that looping facilitated not only academic progress but also character development and self-improvement.

Challenges and Resilience

The emotional stress associated with the commitment to looping with the same group of students annually is a pervasive theme in Author 2's teaching experience. Her profound emotional investment in the well-being and success of her students is evident throughout the interviews, highlighting the intense connection she develops with each individual. Author 2 candidly expresses the depth of her emotional involvement, stating, “I feel very emotionally invested in my students. So, when kids have moved away or even if they're going through other hard things and are still here, I care so much and I feel all of those emotions” (Author 2 Interview, 2018).

This emotional connection, while a testament to her dedication, introduces a considerable challenge, as she grapples with the stress induced by such deep involvement. The drawback to looping becomes apparent as the emotional toll makes it challenging for Author 2 to strike a sustainable work/life balance. She acknowledges the difficulty of this balance, attributing it to the substantial time invested in creating unique materials for her class each year, preventing the reuse of resources: "It's hard finding work/life balance because I am spending so much time creating things for my class that I can't reuse" (Author 2 Interview, 2018). Additionally, the emotional challenges are compounded by the inevitable transitions students go through, whether through family relocation, a desire for a larger school with more programming, expulsions, or other circumstances, leading to a sense of loss and personal responsibility for their success: "It's challenging because you become so attached to the kids and then they move to other things (get expelled, etc.), and then it just falls away" (Author 2 Interview, 2019). The emotional depth Author 2 experiences is a double-edged sword, driving her commitment to her students but also exposing her to the inherent difficulties of letting go and adapting to the changes that come with each academic year. The emotional stress she endures underscores the complex nature of sustained relationships in an educational context, shedding light on the intricate balance between devotion to students and the imperative of maintaining personal well-being. This emotional toll parallels broader concerns in the field, where teacher stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue contribute to ongoing teacher shortages in the U.S. (Juárez & Becton, 2024).

Navigating relationships with fellow staff members and the broader school community posed a significant challenge for Author 2, ultimately influencing her decision to leave after her group of students graduated. Despite the deep connection she forged with the class of 2022, her interactions with colleagues were limited, with her admitting, "I don't know that many teachers on my team really" (Author 2 Interview, 2018). The disparity in her relationships with students versus staff members became apparent, as she expressed, "I really would not still be teaching in Texas and at my school if it weren't for these kids. Now, I'm thinking about staying until they graduate" (Author 2 Interview, 2018). The absence of close ties with her team members is emphasized when she acknowledges not being particularly close to many adults on her team (Interview 4). This disconnect is further highlighted by her reluctance to engage in conflicts between students and teachers, fearing bias or appearing partial (Author 2 Interview, 2018). Despite her unwavering dedication to her students, Author 2 faced challenges in gaining the support or understanding of her colleagues, with some expressing skepticism about her classroom management style (Author 2 Interview, 2020). As the pandemic and virtual teaching added additional strain to her profession, Author 2 grappled with thoughts of leaving, with the prospect of staying tethered to the job primarily driven by her commitment to the students: "I wouldn't actually quit my job, but I would probably consider quitting at the end of this year if it weren't for the students and wanting to see everything work out for them" (Author 2 Interview, 2020). Once those students had graduated, the connection to the school was no longer present and served as permission for her to leave her school.

Author 2 also noted challenges such as "learning to teach a new content every year," "adapting to a new team of teachers," "and adjusting based on ever changing expectations at [her campus] and [her district]" (Author 2 Journals, 2020). She shares that she spends a large portion of her free time planning lessons, hosting tutorials, and grading. While she acknowledges that many teachers do this, Author 2 highlights one of the challenges of looping, musing, "Imagine every year being like your first year" (Author 2 Journals, 2020). While looping allowed Author 2 to be creative and try out new instructional strategies, a very real drawback was the time and energy that looping took from other personal and professional pursuits.

Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the profound impact of educational looping on teacher-student relationships and instructional practices. This discussion section interprets the results in the context of the broader literature on teacher-student relationships, culturally responsive teaching, and professional development.

The theme of personal and professional growth underscores how looping fosters a reciprocal learning experience between teachers and students. Author 2's transition from a novice educator to an instructional leader aligns with existing research suggesting that long-term engagement with the same group of students provides a unique opportunity for iterative learning and reflective practice (Tourigny, et al., 2020). This growth is evident not only in Author 2's journals but also in external recognition from colleagues and administrators. Notably, her involvement with new clubs and curriculum changes demonstrates a proactive approach to professional development. These findings suggest that looping can serve as a powerful mechanism for sustained professional learning, allowing teachers to refine their practice and build confidence in addressing challenges.

The results emphasize the pivotal role of looping in providing relational stability, particularly during significant disruptions such as school closures and the COVID-19 pandemic. Author 2's ability to maintain strong emotional bonds with students over multiple years aligns with the literature on the importance of consistent teacher-student relationships for student well-being and academic success (Thijssen, et al., 2022). This stability appears to have created a classroom environment where students felt safe, valued, and supported, as evidenced by their notes of gratitude and reflections on her role as a mentor and advocate. These findings contribute to discussions on the critical importance of emotional safety in promoting resilience among teachers and students, especially during periods of uncertainty (Wang, et al., 2021).

Author 2's increased connection with students' families and her reflections on overcoming language barriers illustrate the role of looping in enhancing culturally responsive teaching practices. The iterative nature of looping allowed Author 2 to develop a deeper understanding of her students' cultural backgrounds, fostering stronger partnerships with families and tailoring instruction to meet diverse needs (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This aligns with the theoretical framework of culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes the value of long-term relational commitment in bridging cultural gaps and fostering inclusion (Chirichello & Chirichello, 2001).

Finally, the challenges encountered throughout the seven years, such as natural disasters and the transition to online learning, highlight the resilience required in teaching. Looping provided Author 2 with a unique perspective on these challenges, as her long-term relationships with students allowed her to identify and address their evolving needs. This finding supports the argument that looping can mitigate the negative impacts of external stressors on students by providing a stable and familiar support system (Burke, 1999).

This study demonstrates that educational looping holds significant potential for enhancing teacher-student relationships and fostering culturally responsive teaching practices. Despite challenges such as language barriers and emotional stress, the benefits of relational continuity in education are profound. Future research should further explore strategies to mitigate these challenges and capitalize on the strengths of looping to promote inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size is limited to a single teacher and her cohort of students, which restricts the generalizability of the results to broader educational settings. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data from both Author 2, which may introduce biases due to the subjective nature of personal recollections and experiences. Furthermore, while the longitudinal nature of the study offers valuable insights into the long-term impact of looping, the findings are specific to one teacher's experiences and may not fully capture the complexities of looping in other contexts.

Another limitation is that Author 1, at the time of data collection, was in progress with her doctoral degree and had not yet taken many research classes, which may have influenced the initial stages of the study in terms of research design and methodology. Additionally, because this looping was not planned in advance, Author 2 did not keep exact records of the specific students that she started teaching in 6th grade, how many left or joined the class in the interim, and how many years she taught each individual student. Overall, Author 2 knows that she started with roughly 140 students in 6th grade and ended with roughly 120 students in 12th grade. Despite these limitations, the study provides an in-depth exploration of the effects of looping and offers a valuable contribution to understanding culturally responsive pedagogy in longitudinal teacher-student relationships.

Conclusion

Author 2 grew up with her students. They experienced the rollercoaster of middle school together. They experienced the tumultuous 2016 Presidential Election, which rocked our community. They were disrupted by Hurricane Harvey and the aftermath. They worked through the challenges of remote learning during a global pandemic. So, as the authors conclude, they must acknowledge that these experiences were anything but typical. And, they must reaffirm that being able to go through this together, as a school family, made it something special. Back in 2018, Author 2 wrote, "When they go to college, I'm going to cry with their parents...and then I'll maybe go to grad school. Onto the next adventure, Like them" (Author 2 Interview). And, wouldn't you know...she did just that!

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Example

Educational Looping

An Ethnographic Study of Educational Looping at an Urban Title-1 Middle School in Texas

Interview 3: (Teacher)

- I. Reflections on Year 3
 - a. Refresh questions:
 - i. When did you decide to move to 8th ELA?
 - ii. What prompted this decision?
 - iii. How did students react when they first heard?
 - iv. What did you expect it to be like when you moved up with your students?
 - b. What were the first few weeks like?
 - c. Did you notice a difference in student behavior towards you verse other teachers on your grade level team?
 - d. What are your general reflections on the start of the year? Mid-year? End of the year?
- II. Relationships
 - a. Highs/Lows – Student Relationships
 - b. Highs/Lows – Parent Relationships
- III. Academic Performance
 - a. Curricular changes based on student interests?
 - b. What are the high stakes tests for your students in 8th ELA? (CA, Unit Tests, STAAR, etc.?)
 - c. How did the students perform relative to the partner teacher?
 - d. How did the students perform relative to the district?
 - e. How did the students perform with respect to your own personal goals for them?
- IV. Weaknesses of Looping
 - a. What were some of the challenges of moving up with your students?
 - b. Can you share specific stories of individual relationships and group dynamics in general?
- V. Strengths of Looping
 - a. What are some of the benefits of moving up with your students?
 - b. Can you share specific stories of individual relationships and group dynamics in general?
- VI. Questions for the Future
 - a. What are your plans when the students move to HS?
 - b. Would you move to HS English I with them if presented the opportunity?
 - c. How has traveling with the students been hard for you? Been a benefit for you?
 - d. Will you move back down to 6th grade and loop again if offered the opportunity?
 - e. What, if anything, would you do differently if you looped again?
 - f. Would you decide to not loop in the future? Why or why not?