

Looping

to Meet the Needs of Gifted Children



A three-year looping schedule has found unexpected success in meeting the emotional and academic needs of gifted and talented children.

Michael W. Pratt

The implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has had many positive effects on students in schools today. The results have been less positive, however, for high-achieving students. Recent studies have shown that although our country's lowest achieving students are making large gains, our top students have seen little or no gains (Duffett, Farkas, & Loveless, 2008). Teachers often focus their instruction on students who need the most help, leaving little time to meet the academic or emotional needs of gifted students.

Gifted children face a number of social and emotional obstacles, such as perfectionism, lack of self-confidence, difficulty forming relationships, disorganization, isolation, and narcissism. In order for gifted students to be academically successful, schools must find ways to meet these social and emotional needs.

Looking at Looping

In many districts, the gifted and talented program consists of a weekly pullout model in which students are removed from the regular classroom for a specified period to receive differentiated instruction. The curriculum usually focuses on enrichment, since students receive instruction in the core subjects in their regular classrooms. In our district, we have introduced a looping model for our gifted and talented program that has helped participants to interact with one another and develop successful relationships.

We originally started with an academic pullout program that provides 90 minutes of daily math and science instruction for students in grades 3, 4, and 5. In these pullout sessions, content was explored at a faster rate and in greater depth than in the regular classroom. The program's teachers were able to specialize grade-level instruction and build deep content knowledge.

However, creating a master schedule became a challenge after several years of rapid growth in our school community, requiring a reassessment of the school program to serve a greater number of students. At Orchard Park Elementary School, we discovered that looping solved the problem. Instead of teaching one grade level each year, all three teachers in the gifted and talented program would have the opportunity to increase content knowledge across all three grades. Students who initially qualified for the program would be assigned to one of the three teachers, beginning in third grade. They would then loop with that teacher for the next two years. As new students qualified for the program, they would be placed into a class at their grade level and then continue looping.

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Measuring Success

Although the looping schedule helped accommodate the population surge and facilitated the creation of a master class schedule, it has had a far greater impact than anyone imagined. Because relationships build over a three-year period, students in the program are able to develop close friendships with their same-age peers. They also begin to realize they are not expected to know everything the first time it is presented. By looping over three years, students become familiar with the program's atmosphere, rules, procedures, and routines, and appreciate that there is no repetition of unnecessary class content.

Current and former students in the gifted and talented program at Orchard Park recently were asked to complete a survey about the school's looping model. Responses to the question “How has GT made you a better person?” varied, with many citing the program's academic strength. However, a number of the respondents added that they now were more confident in front of others, while others commented that they had become more outgoing, that they had developed strong bonds with their teacher, or that they became better organized. One response that gets to the true soul of a gifted child was “I don't feel like I don't fit, and I feel normal.” Another was “I learned that we are not all the same, and that is okay.”

Of the 132 students who completed the survey, 96.9 percent said that a major strength of the program was having the same teacher each year. More

than 86 percent said they learned more about math by having the same teacher, and 68.1 percent said they enjoy math more now than they did before they entered the program. Students also said that they felt appreciated for their gifts in math and science, supporting the idea that looping benefits the students' academic skills and attitude about school. One student said that the program “gave me confidence with tackling certain subjects that might be challenging to me.”

We also asked parents of current and former students to complete a brief survey on their experiences with looping. The results were enlightening. Asked if looping was a positive experience for their child, 100 percent replied in the affirmative. They also affirmed that the program met their child's academic needs (99.3 percent), emotional needs (92.9 percent), and social needs (93.6 percent). One parent responded that the gifted and talented program “has been the best experience for my child. Her teacher has grown to know my child better than any other teacher has in the past. Knowing the whole child allows for a fuller experience in the classroom.”

Another parent stated: “We feel the program takes into consideration each child's personal development and is not one size fits all. She was very happy to have her teacher for three years, as she has had problems in the past with self-esteem. Her teacher made her feel comfortable and secure at school.”

Since this program has been in place, we have witnessed gifted students come out of their shells. They are now risk-takers, even when they know they may not always be successful. They are gaining confidence, and many of our gifted students serve in school leadership roles. Best of all, our gifted students have learned to accept each other for who they are. Today, as you walk into gifted classes, you see students working together to solve problems, readily sharing ideas, and listening to each other.

Making It Work at Your School

In order to make a looping program like ours work at your school, you will

need teachers who have a commitment to content and a commitment to children. They must understand that they are the key element in making a gifted and talented program successful, and that they have the power to be positive role models.

Your school also will need an administrator who is willing to sit down and look at every child's personality to ensure that each is

matched with the right teacher. No longer can you schedule students based on demographics. The administrator who places students into these classes needs to know how every child learns best.

Looping schedules that keep students paired with teachers has been an unexpected success for our gifted students. The long-term commitment has made our teachers central stake-



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holders in the overall success of these students, and we have found students and teachers developing relationships that lead to the true development of gifts and talents.

Perhaps this parent said it best: "In my opinion, it was a perfect scenario. The teacher was completely familiar with my child's work habits and capabilities. The curriculum was consistent and there were no concerns over what they may or may not have covered the previous year. I feel, because of that, there was no unnecessary time devoted to duplicated material. Instead, my child was able to be fully challenged and encouraged to grow." □

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Reference

Duffett, A., Farkas, S., & Loveless, T. (2008). *High-achieving students in the era of NCLB*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

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