Sustainability of the Educational Strategy Looping in Middle School Settings

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St. John Fisher College

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Sustainability of the Educational Strategy Looping in Middle School Settings

Abstract
This qualitative study explores teachers’ and administrators’ experiences with the strategy looping in middle school settings. Whereas schools should seek to match age-appropriate, research-based strategies to the needs of students, introducing and sustaining change in public school settings is challenging. Whereas some schools fail to deliberately provide structures to support the development of positive student-teacher relationships, other schools with structures in place meet with varying degrees of success. Within interviews and focus groups, obstacles teachers and administrators experience implementing looping programs were explored using the following broad questions: (a) What are the lived experiences of teachers and administrators involved in looping programs? and (b) what conditions encourage the institutionalization of looping in school settings? Results of the study are relevant to teachers and administrators seeking to implement looping configurations in middle-level programs.

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Sustainability of the Educational Strategy Looping in Middle School Settings

By

Darcy Smith

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Dr. John Travers, Chair
Dr. Kathy Broikou, Committee Member

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

August 2010
Dedication

Darcy wishes to thank several individuals for their support during the pursuit of her Ed.D. degree at St. John Fisher College. She is appreciative of her mother and father, Donald and Shirley, and the support they have shown for her education from childhood to adulthood. They always suspected she would become a professional student and she has come quite close to this expectation. Darcy appreciates the patience and support of Tom, during the many days when plans he would have preferred to engage in were abandoned to provide time for research and writing. Darcy is also grateful for the scholarly support she received throughout her pursuit of the Ed.D., including the guidance and supervision of Dr. John Travers, dissertation chair, and Dr. Kathy Broikou, committee member. Also appreciated was the Executive Mentorship and encouragement of Superintendent, Dr. Robert Ike.
Biographical Sketch

Darcy Nicole Smith is currently the principal of a middle school in Upstate New York. As an undergraduate, Ms. Smith first attended Eastern Nazarene College. She later transferred to Nazareth College where she earned her Bachelor of Science degree in English and Education in 1992 and her Master of Science degree in Secondary Education in 1993. She earned her Certificate of Advanced Study in Educational Administration from SUNY Brockport in 1998. Ms. Smith began doctoral coursework at St. John Fisher College in May 2008, in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Smith pursued her research in middle-level education and, specifically, long-term student-teacher relationships, under the direction of Dr. John Travers. She received her Ed.D. in 2010.
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Abstract

This qualitative study explores teachers’ and administrators’ experiences with the strategy looping in middle school settings. Whereas schools should seek to match age-appropriate, research-based strategies to the needs of students, introducing and sustaining change in public school settings is challenging. Whereas some schools fail to deliberately provide structures to support the development of positive student-teacher relationships, other schools with structures in place meet with varying degrees of success.

Within interviews and focus groups, obstacles teachers and administrators experience implementing looping programs were explored using the following broad questions: (a) What are the lived experiences of teachers and administrators involved in looping programs? and (b) what conditions encourage the institutionalization of looping in school settings? Results of the study are relevant to teachers and administrators seeking to implement looping configurations in middle-level programs.
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Introduction

Sustaining change within all types of organizations is challenging. Kotter (1995) described the process of implementing organizational change as follows:

In the final analysis, change sticks when it becomes ‘the way we do things around here,’ when it seeps into the bloodstream of the corporate body. Until new behaviors are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are subject to degradation as soon as the pressure for change is removed (p. 67).

Public schools, similar in composition to other organizations, have engrained cultures and people within them who tend to crave consistency (Cuban, 1993). The fact that positive reform strategies exist, but have difficulty establishing themselves in school settings in meaningful ways, is worthy of further scholarly discussion and research.

Several researchers have described obstacles that schools, in particular, face when introducing change into their systems (Berman, 1977; Cuban, 1993; Doyle & Ponder, 1977; Fullan, 2007; Oakes, Hunter Quartz, Ryan & Lipton, 2000; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005). Cuban (1993) referred to this phenomenon as “constancy and change” in education. In an effort to understand the complexity of change in public school settings, Cuban studied instructional practices in American classrooms from the year 1900 through the year 2000. Practices were analyzed through a review of classroom photos, articles, and district artifacts. From this analysis, Cuban reported “a seemingly stubborn continuity” in instructional practices related to student-centered initiatives in
spite of local and national reform initiatives (p. 2).

Degrees of change, as well as phases of change processes, have been discussed and named by educational researchers in separate studies. Marzano et al. (2005) used the terms “first-order” and “second-order” change in discussions of school reform (p. 65). First-order change departs only marginally from past practice. Alternately, second-order change alters systems in fundamental ways, requiring new ways of thinking and acting (Marzano et al.). Cuban (1993) used the terms “incremental” and “fundamental” to describe school change processes. Incremental change aims to improve the efficacy of existing structures, whereas fundamental change aims to permanently transform structures. Some incremental and fundamental changes in education have become institutionalized in school settings. For example, kindergarten has become commonly recognized as a primary grade level and computers have become standard in most classrooms (Cuban). Nonetheless, “Many, maybe even most, educational innovations are short-lived” (Marzano et al., p. 65).

An exploration of change-related challenges in school settings provides context for focusing on one educational strategy in particular: looping. Looping occurs when teachers move to subsequent grades with the same group of students, generally for a time period of 2 to 3 years (Nichols & Nichols, 2002). Looping restructures school organization in the settings where it is introduced and is typically done to provide more continuous student-teacher relationships during adolescence, a period when students need positive adult influences (Scales, 1999).

Despite the promise looping appears to hold as an intervention strategy, middle-level schools across the United States have struggled with what Cuban (1993) referred to
as “constancy and change.” Whereas some countries outside the United States have practiced looping for many years, in the United States, the strategy has met with different levels of commitment by teachers and administrators (see Appendix A).

Jacobson (1997) suggested that “for all its positive reviews, looping is not getting a lot of attention from the education research community” even though “educators who have been through other cycles think looping is one of the more common-sense approaches to hit schools in years” (p. 4). Is it feasible for looping to be widely implemented in public middle schools? Or are the perceived obstacles associated with its implementation so enormous that looping will continue to struggle to gain the momentum needed to establish a firm foundation in American schools?

Discussion that follows describes the place looping currently holds in American middle-level public schools. Understanding the history and rise of middle-level programming in the United States demonstrates the struggle middle schools have faced positioning themselves within the hierarchy of American education. Difficulty establishing middle-level credibility adds to the complexity of sustaining relevant educational reform strategies for adolescent students.

Following a review of the history of middle-level schooling, the degree to which looping complements middle-level philosophy is explored. A case for finding effective ways to make looping replicable and sustainable in middle school settings is then established. Finally, challenges associated with introducing, sustaining and institutionalizing educational change is described to illustrate the struggle educators have experienced establishing middle-level reforms such as looping within American schools.
History of Middle-Level Education

Historical accounts show early efforts to educate America’s children occurred in one-room schoolhouses. As town populations grew, two levels of schooling emerged: (a) elementary/grammar schools, and (b) prep/finishing schools. These two levels eventually solidified their standing within the American public school system, becoming what is known presently as elementary and secondary schooling. Proponents of middle-level education suggest the traditional notion of public school education occurring in two levels, rather than three, contributes to ongoing struggles to create and to maintain developmentally responsive schools for students in middle grades (George & Alexander, 2003).

Early support for a third level of schooling in the United States occurred after World War I and intensified following World War II. Pioneers of the early junior high model argued school design should reflect the needs of young adolescents. The emergence of the junior high model, however, does not seem to have been inspired by the desire to provide a unique educational experience for adolescents. George and Alexander (2003) asserted that junior high schools were created as a divide between elementary and secondary schooling in order to increase the level of difficulty and seriousness of the educational program. Schools in the middle were thought to bring a strong academic focus to instruction that had previously been considered too elementary in nature for adolescent students. Rettig and Canady (2000) suggested early middle schools were not created to address the developmental needs of adolescents but rather to address administrative needs of school districts such as overcrowding or integration.

Heightened criticism of junior high schools occurred in the 1950s with opponents
arguing high-school departmentalized models were too abrupt a change from the self-contained structures of elementary schools. Teachers who shared the same students tended to work in isolation, teaching uninteresting and unmotivating content to adolescent learners (George & Alexander, 2003). In 1954, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development proposed a shift from junior high departmentalization to flexible block scheduling, the development of “school-within-a-school” configurations, and the design of exploratory subjects addressing interests of adolescent students. In the late 1960s, Upper St. Clair Township School District convinced the Pennsylvania State Department of Education to allow the district to establish a new school for students in Grades 6, 7, and 8 that became the first middle-level school based upon the philosophical foundation still underlying the middle-level concept presently espoused (George & Alexander).

The middle-level organizational structure commonly known has struggled to overcome opposition from critics from the time of its inception. In 1970’s Crisis in the Classroom, Silberman made the provocative statement, “Junior high school, by almost unanimous agreement, is the wasteland – one is tempted to say cesspool – of American education” (p. 324). In the late 1990s Mitchell asserted, “We should abandon the whole middle school concept. Middle schools are a disaster. They slow down the intellectual progress that kids make in elementary school” (cited in Norton, 2000, p. 2). Swaim, the Executive Director of the National Middle School Association (NMSA) at the time, countered with the statement, “The issue is not the name over the school door and grade configuration, but what is going on that is appropriate learning for this developmental stage” (cited in Norton, p. 2).
Advocates for and critics of middle-level education continue to argue today. The reality is that 50 years after offering middle-level education as the suitable, more inspired replacement for junior high education, districts across the country still struggle to meet the academic and social needs of adolescent students in an effective manner. That middle-level education must continue to campaign for its survival only complicates schools’ abilities to make fundamental and lasting student-centered changes to programs and practices for young adolescents.

_A National and International Exploration of Middle-Level Performance Data_

Reports from national statistics centers and state education departments add credence to critical stances on middle-level education. A review of middle-level test scores and research literature on the rigor of middle-level programs highlights the debate regarding the efficacy of schools in the middle that intensified in the late 1990s. For instance, Norton (2000) reported that middle-grades reform was situated at the top of the national education agenda in 2000. This same year, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted an analysis of characteristics of middle-level public schools. The executive summary of the NCES report stated, “Educators, parents, policy-makers and researchers have focused considerable attention on middle-level education in recent years, prompted by widely held concerns about middle schools’ academic rigor” (NCES, 2000, iii).

In survey responses collected for the analysis, negativity about the current state of some middle-level schools was evident in teachers’ evaluations of school climate and operations. For example, 20% to 30% of respondents reported they felt constricted by rules that prohibited their instructional efforts and conflicted with their professional
beliefs; that building administrators did an inadequate job securing instructional supplies; and that it was a waste of time to do their best as teachers (NCES, 2000).

The NCES study also asserted that student achievement begins to decline in the middle grades. According to the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS), whereas fourth-grade students in the United States scored above the international average of 26 nations on testing in 1997, the performance of students in eighth grade fell below the international level and below the level of 20 other nations that same year (NCES, 2000). Moreover, diminished test scores at the eighth-grade level were reported as “not a temporary lull that is erased in the later grades” (NCES, 2000, p. 4). High school student test scores did not rebound to the level reported in elementary testing results, but rather continued to be among the lowest of the 21 participating nations in tests of general knowledge (NCES).

As national attention turned to middle-level reform, governing bodies within individual states began to look critically at middle-level test scores and, as a result, many issued calls for program reform. For example, in 1997 the governor of South Carolina charged the state’s task force to examine middle-level teacher training, the level of academic rigor, and school organizational structure (Norton, 2000). In 2001, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) issued a report that found only 57% of students in Grade 8 met the state standard of accountability in English language arts (ELA) and only 39% met the standard in mathematics testing in 2000. Responding to low performance, NYSED’s research department initiated a study examining the degree to which established middle-level best practices were being implemented in schools across the state and found “a clear incongruity between what is known to make a
difference in the education of young adolescents and what is actually happening” (NYSED, p. 2).

In June 2009, Congressman Raul Grijava of Arizona and Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island reintroduced the “Success in the Middle Act,” which included a recommendation to offer $1 billion in grants annually to local school districts to improve low-performing middle grade schools. Reforming middle-level programs across the country is a monumental task that does not appear to have made discernable progress since attention was first called to it in the late 1990s as evidenced by the continuing need for legislation. In the identification of best practices for young adolescents, however, a certain level of agreement appears to have been reached on strategies to meet student needs most effectively. The National Middle School Association (NMSA) and the New York State Middle School Association (NYSMSA) have both issued position papers with tenets summarizing conditions and practices most suitable for adolescent students. A considerable amount of overlap exists between the recommendations of the two organizations.

NMSA’s publication (2003), This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents, contains six recommendations for middle-level programs: (a) curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative and exploratory; (b) multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to diversity; (c) assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning; (d) organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning; (e) school-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety; and (f) multi-faceted guidance and support services.

NYSMSA’s (2001) middle-level best practices are outlined and categorized into
seven elements; however, the overall themes are very similar to NMSA’s guidelines: (a) a philosophy and mission that reflect intellectual and developmental needs of young adolescents; (b) a challenging, purposeful, and standards-based educational program; (c) organization and structure that support academic excellence and personal development; (d) classroom instruction appropriate to the needs of young adolescents, provided by teachers knowledgeable of students within this age group; (e) strong educational leadership; (f) a network of personal and academic support; and (g) professional training and staff development connected with the six previous characteristics.

Although there appears to be overwhelming agreement on the goals of these two organizations, as well as a general acceptance of these beliefs by the middle-level educational community, various levels of commitment to and implementation of these practices appear to exist. NMSA draws a high level of support from middle-level educators across the United States. With over 30,000 members representing principals, teachers, central office personnel, professors, college students, parents, community leaders, and educational consultants across the United States, Canada, and 46 other countries, NMSA conferences are well attended and their resource materials are highly circulated. In spite of this, there appears to be a discrepancy between what middle school members in the United States claim to espouse and what they practice. Analyzing the degree to which middle-level recommendations are being implemented is important in attempting to evaluate whether or not progress with middle-level reform in this country is being made.

*Middle-Level Reform*

In a large study conducted in 2000 by the National Association for Secondary
School Principals (NASSP), the degree to which espoused middle-level best practices are actually occurring within middle schools was explored (Petzko, 2004). Middle-level teachers and administrators representing different geographic areas of the country were surveyed to determine the value placed on identified best practices within their programs. Survey responses revealed ongoing conflict in carrying out the conditions described as best within middle-school settings.

Middle-level literature, for example, describes opposition to student academic tracking. The term tracking refers to placing students on teams or scheduling them into classes based on academic ability. However, more than 80% of school principals who responded to the NASSP survey reported their schools organize students by ability for at least some subjects, placing them into distinct classes or dividing them within heterogeneous classes with this purpose in mind (NASSP). Maehr and Anderman (1993) argued “schools that group students by ability send a strong message to students that some are more inherently able than others,” a message contrary to the premise of providing challenging, purposeful curriculum for all (p. 600).

Another belief espoused by middle-level organizations is the importance of positive school relationships between adults and students. One of NYSSMA’s seven essential elements endorses the value of creating “close, sustained relationships between students and teachers” (NYSED, 2003, p. 4). Similarly, as described earlier, NSMA calls for school “organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning” (NMSA, 2003, p. 29). Yet, NASSP survey data suggest many middle schools fail to establish deliberate systems or implement programs to facilitate the creation and maintenance of positive relationships (Petzko, 2004).
Advisory programs are one example of school organizational structures where the development of positive relationships between students and teachers can be encouraged. Advisory programs, which generally provide daily meetings between consistent adults and groups of students, are suggested for building cohesiveness and school community (George & Alexander, 2003). In the NASSP survey, only 32% of middle-level leaders reported having fully implemented advisory programs in their schools (Petzko, 2004). Even in schools with established programs, George and Alexander reported, “Sadly, the advisory function of the middle school teacher has failed to achieve its purposes in many schools where it has been implemented” (p. 245).

Principals did not rate having a school advisory program as high in order of importance as they rated provisions for team planning time or, ironically, opportunities for professional development related to middle-level best practices (Petzko, 2004). Rating team-planning time over advisory programs in order of importance, as demonstrated by survey results, seems to suggest middle-level teachers and administrators place more emphasis on establishing structures to support adult collaboration than on programs that promote the development of teacher-student relationships in middle-level settings. Oakes et al. (2000) reported, “Advisor-advisee programs did little to attend to students’ social and personal concerns. Many teachers resisted advisory activities preferring to maintain their professional distance and focus exclusively on students’ academic needs” (p. 155).

Juovenen (2007) further raised concern related to the efficacy of middle-level schools, having argued, “Rather than helping to bridge the transition from primary to secondary school, this intermediate phase has been identified as contributing to the
disengagement and increasing sense of isolation of youth” (p. 197). Juovenen’s work noted most international comparisons of student success, including the statistics from NCES noted earlier, deal strictly with academic descriptions. It is more likely, for example, to see international comparisons of mathematics or science scores than comparisons of degrees of implementation of strategies known to support adolescent development. Comparisons of international rankings related to students’ senses of belonging and perceptions of school experiences are rarely made, even though middle-level organizations espouse adult-student relationship rigor on a basis equal with instructional rigor.

Researchers in Juovenen’s 2007 study analyzed World Health Organization data related to Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) internationally. The HBSC survey was administered to 11, 13, and 15 year olds in North America, Israel, and parts of Europe. Juovenen’s researchers used data from the most recent time the survey was conducted (1997-1998) for the 12 countries that had available achievement data. In this large study, 32,793 youth were sampled. Approximately 2,000 to 4,000 students represented each of the 12 participating countries. In regard to the general school climate, Juovenen determined:

Middle school aged students fared the worst compared to their peers in all other nations . . . American teens did not consider their schools to be a pleasant place where they belong . . . the mean of the ratings of school climate for American students was almost 2 standard deviations below the 12-nation sample mean . . . middle school aged students in the United States feel more socially isolated than their peers in 8 of the other 11 nations. Thus, lack of social and emotional support
in school should indeed be a cause for concern (p. 199).

Disengagement of middle-school students can be identified as early as Grade 6 (Balfanz, Herzog & MacIver, 2007). Data collected during an 8-year longitudinal study followed 12,972 students enrolled in Grade 5 through their dates of dropout or graduation. Disengagement is often seen as a symptom of adolescence. However, students who exhibited characteristics of disengagement in this study did not grow out of them, signifying that these characteristics cannot be attributed solely to age. School detachment levels increased and solidified as children matured, providing evidence for the need to intervene early with strategies considered best for adolescents.

Although middle-level proponents such as NMSA and NYSMSA call for an increase in adult support and interaction with students during adolescence in order to offset feelings of isolation and disengagement, middle schools are generally organized to provide less opportunity for building sustained and meaningful student-adult relationships than primary or elementary schools. “Scholars have looked at several specific aspects of the classroom and school environment and have shown that negative changes in these aspects of student experiences as students make the middle or junior high transition are linked to decline in school motivation and engagement” (Eccles, 2004, p. 141).

Rettig and Canady (2000) asserted, “Several of the discrepancies between stated middle school beliefs and actual practice have their roots in the school schedule” (p. 4). Within elementary school programs, students are typically taught core subjects by the same teacher throughout the school day with the exception of specialty teachers, who instruct subjects such as art and music. In sixth or seventh grade, when students begin
middle or junior high school, they are usually assigned different teachers for each core class. Rather than remaining with the same teacher for most of the school day, students move between different core teachers approximately every 40 minutes for traditionally scheduled schools and approximately every 75 minutes for block-scheduled schools. Block-scheduled schools offer classes that meet for longer periods of instructional time, but meet less often, typically every second, third, or fourth day. Teachers in middle schools, much like teachers in high schools, often instruct 150 to 180 different students per day (Juovenen, 2007). The common practice of assigning large numbers of students to teachers contradicts recommendations to provide more opportunities for adult care and continuity during this period of student development.

School days tend to become more fragmented as students move from elementary programming to middle-level programming. A challenging developmental period for adolescents is made more difficult by the increasing number of teachers with different styles and expectations with whom students interact. Juovenen (2007) argued, “At the time when young teens greatly benefit from stable and close relationships with their peers and extra familial adults, they must switch to schools in which information and the maintenance of stable relationships with teachers and peers is difficult . . . the size and organizational structure do not facilitate a sense of connectedness but may instead promote feelings of isolation” (p. 198).

Explanation of the Problem

If organizations that exist to support adolescent education commonly endorse positive student-teacher relationships as an important building block for student success, why do schools struggle to make relationship building a program priority? A perplexing
issue that merits exploration is the comparison of espoused middle-level best practices with actual school practices, specifically related to building longer-term student-teacher relationships. An instructional configuration supported in research literature for promoting positive student-teacher relationships is the educational strategy known most commonly as looping. Teachers who loop “tend to invest more of themselves in their students when they know them longer and better, and they tend to persist in finding solutions to academic problems and other problems because they have more time to do so” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 134).

Positive student-centered practices such as looping seem to have difficulty establishing solid foundations in public schools, in the same manner in which other student-centered initiatives have struggled to take hold in the past, as identified by Cuban (1993) and Fullan (2007) earlier in this discussion. Because looping appears to experience different levels of implementation success, a problem worthy of further study is one that seeks to understand the characteristics that differentiate sustainable looping programs from programs that have proven to be unsustainable. Accepting that schools are established to meet the developmental needs of students, and recognizing that middle-level organizations describe the need for these relationships, why do other competing needs become as important, or more important, than committing to establishing and maintaining positive relationships with students? What are the specific change-related obstacles that schools experience when they seek to implement looping structures into their programs?

**Problem Statement**

Supporting student development through the establishment of caring student-
teacher relationships is critical. Research suggests one form of support, looping, offers identifiable benefits to students. As looping appears to have difficulty becoming established within school settings, findings that isolate actions or beliefs exhibited by teachers or principals that foster the sustainability of looping would add to the current body of research literature.

As a result of inquiring about the present state of looping in school systems which previously espoused its benefits in research literature, this researcher discovered several districts that once expressed support for looping have since discontinued this practice (Appendix A). This finding, similar to the discoveries made in Petzko’s 2004 study, confirms a gap between what is recognized as best middle-level practice and what is occurring in relationship-building practice within school settings.

Examining practices related to implementing looping will help American public school districts involved in reform initiatives prepare for the obstacles encountered when introducing and sustaining longer-term relationships. The central problem of this research was the apparent disconnect between published studies in research literature supporting the efficacy of looping and the reported practices occurring in schools presently. Through exploring the lived experiences of individuals who have experience with looping, this study sought to help practitioners understand why some schools and districts are able to institutionalize the strategy while others either radically alter initial plans or abandon the practice altogether.

*Theoretical Rationale*

Two theoretical frameworks provided a foundation for discussing the sustainability of looping: (a) Stage Environment Fit Theory, which establishes the need
for developing strong teacher-student relationships at the middle level; and (b) Diffusion of Innovations Theory, and other selected change-related research, which probed the challenges associated with introducing, implementing, and sustaining organizational change in school settings.

*Stage Environment Fit Theory*

Positive relationships between teachers and students address a fundamental need of adolescent-aged students. NMSA and NYSMSA tenets suggest schools should match educational environments to students’ stages of physical, emotional, and social development. Related research discussion supports the argument that positive teacher-student relationships in middle schools should not be casually promoted, but deliberately discussed and planned for, directly alongside other school goals, academic or otherwise (Eccles, 2004).

In the late 1980s, Midgely and Eccles began devising a theoretical framework to guide research related to school transitions and their impact on adolescent development. For many students, entrance to middle school marks the onset of diminished motivation that can lead to school failure (Eccles, Wigfield, Midgely, Reuman, Maclver & Feldlaufer, 1993; Balfanz et al., 2007). An explanation offered for declining academic performance at the middle-school level often points to the effects of puberty and related psychological turmoil. Drawing on Person-Environment Theory, a new theory related to adolescent schooling called Stage Environment Fit Theory emerged, which suggested “motivational and behavioral declines could result from the fact that traditional middle grades schools are not providing appropriate educational environments for early adolescents” (Eccles et al., p. 554).
Compounding the effects of psychological turmoil inherent in adolescence, the instructional environment tends to change drastically between elementary and middle school years. Schools “in between” typically have larger student populations than elementary schools and tend to have departmental subject specialists, rather than instructional generalists. Wagner (1997) asserted, “Teachers see an average of 150 students a day for a semester or perhaps a year. The next year, teachers start over, trying to get to know the names of another 150 or so students” (p. 88). Therefore, as a result, middle-level teachers are less likely than elementary teachers to know their students well.

Elementary teachers typically engage students in smaller-group instructional episodes. A guided reading lesson, where teachers work with segments of the class on reading skills tailored to individual needs, is an example (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Middle school and junior high classrooms are more likely to be dominated by whole class instruction where students are instructed simultaneously, allowing less opportunity to know students on a personal level (Wagner, 1997). Starting at the middle-level, and continuing through high school, teacher lecture and student note-taking increase. Note-taking is considered to be a low-quality instructional practice that limits the opportunity for teachers to interact with students on personal levels (George & Alexander, 2003). Overall, in comparison with elementary teachers, teachers in middle schools feel a stronger need to control classrooms and provide less opportunity for student choice (Wagner; George & Alexander).

Eccles et al. (1993) sought to determine if a correlation could be made between a change in classroom environment at middle grades and a decrease in student motivation and performance. Measures used to test this hypothesis included student and teacher
questionnaires and field observations. Study results found evidence researchers had predicted, including an increase at the middle-level in classroom teacher control, an increase in student ability grouping, and a decrease in teacher efficacy and the quality of teacher-student relationships (p. 567). For example, in regard to relationship building in schools in the middle years, of the 1,301 students surveyed, 230 students stated their teachers offered low support during the 2 years of their junior high schooling. Two-hundred seventy-four students who had rated their teachers high in support after their first year in junior high, moved their ratings to low support following their second year at this level (Eccles, et al.).

NMSA’s landmark publication, This We Believe (2003), may have been inspired by the studies that contributed to the formulation of Stage Environment Fit Theory. More recent articles lament the fact that what is known about recognized best practice at the middle-level does not occur consistently in schools in the United States, in spite of the recognition of Stage Environment Fit Theory (Petzko, 2004). In an article published in the Harvard Educational Review, a middle school teacher compared his role to that of a prison guard at Sing Sing Correctional Facility (Sipes, 2004). Sipes described disturbing similarities between the roles of teacher and prison guard, specifically teachers’ and guards’ preoccupation with control, their perpetuation of adversarial social environments, and the prevalence of environmentally induced stress. Conover (2001), the author of the book on which Sipes based his correlation, makes reference to his belief that to some extent, prisoner aggression has roots in the frequent change of officers in charge of prison facilities. This finding seems to suggest sustained relationships in all organizations, including prisons and schools, may provide a sense of calm, order, and support which
individuals need in order to thrive (Sipes, 2004).

**Theory Related to Change in Education**

Stage Environment Fit Theory endorses the importance of matching educational strategies and interventions to the particular needs of middle school students. Also critical to the evolution of this discussion is exploring what is known about how school systems and the people within them respond to change. Whereas there is a vast amount of literature related to change initiatives in education, particular theorists were selected for inclusion in this discussion because of the relativity of their work to the crafting of the field study that was conducted.

Rogers’ (2003) work, for example, provided a framework for discussing how innovations, such as looping, can be diffused into organizations of all types. The work of Cuban (1993), Fullan (2007), and Doyle and Ponder (1977) described, in more specificity, the challenges of implementing change, as well as the attitudes and perceptions of people part of change initiatives. Inclusion of the work of Doyle and Ponder and that of Berman (1977), although older, was of consequence because of the connection it offered to the study.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory uses knowledge of promising inventions to promote their assimilation into the culture of organizations. Rogers (2003) provided this insight about organizational change:

Getting a new idea adopted, even when it has obvious advantages, is difficult. Many innovations require a lengthy period of many years from the time when they become available to the time when they are widely adopted. Therefore, a common problem for many individuals and organizations is how to speed up the
Rogers (2003) defined diffusion as, “The process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (p. 5). A system may choose to adopt or reject an innovation, even if it shows promise for members of that system. An innovation is defined as “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (p. 12). In spite of the fact that an innovation may have been implemented elsewhere, those innovations that are new to individuals or to organizations may still be classified as innovations.

Rates of adoption related to diffusion become important when discussing which factors contribute to the abandonment or sustainability of educational innovations such as looping. Rogers (2003) described five factors that influence the rate of adoption of innovations: (a) relative advantage (the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea that supersedes it); (b) compatibility (the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with existing values); (c) complexity (the degree to which the innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use); (d) trialability (the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis); and (e) observability (the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others) (p. 16).

Doyle and Ponder’s work (1977) shared similarities with the work of Rogers, but dealt particularly with change initiatives in education. The goal of Doyle and Ponder’s seminal study was to ascertain which conditions support efforts to establish sustainable change in school settings. Suggestions for broad reform efforts that do not consider the
key role of teachers in rejecting or accepting change lack the substance necessary for enacting lasting change. Throughout the past several decades, developing teacher autonomy in classrooms has minimized the ability of change agents to propose and secure change in classroom settings. Doyle and Ponder stated, “Teachers are the final arbiters of classroom practice” (p. 2).

Through data collection, Doyle and Ponder (1977) sought to understand the ways practicing teachers respond to change. Two collection methods were used: (a) interviews with teachers about their perceptions of change initiatives, and (b) an analysis of available evidence from existing studies about innovative projects. An output of the study was the coining of the term “practicality ethic,” which means recommendations perceived as practical by teachers are the ones most likely to be incorporated into classroom procedures.

A major challenge lies, however, in determining what teachers categorize as practical and thus will more readily adopt. Teachers judge the practicality of new ideas according to three criteria, which share similarities with Rogers’ (2003) factors of innovation adoption: (a) instrumentality (clear, concrete and able to be acted on immediately); (b) congruence (matching regular ways of conducting classroom activities with the established culture and environment); and (c) cost (the ratio between what is gained in comparison to what is invested in the change) (Doyle & Ponder, 1977).

Considering the degrees of change described by Marzano et al. (2005), implementing first-order change, which does not require substantial changes to past practice, is much easier than seeking to implement second-order change, which requires altering established organizational cultures and structures.
The work of Cuban (1993) and Doyle and Ponder (1977) are both referenced in the work of Eilam and Shoham (1997), who also described change processes in public school settings. These researchers specifically studied teacher resistance to change and cited several possible reasons change was avoided, including (a) negative past experiences associated with new initiatives, (b) staff exhaustion, (c) skepticism about the benefits new innovations offer, and (d) overload associated with introducing new strategies while seeking to maintain momentum with other strategies already in use. These reasons provided a higher degree of specificity about why teachers and administrators appear to be less welcoming of second-order changes and how knowledge of these concerns might be used to coax more effectively the shift to new practices in school settings.

In Eilam and Shoham’s study (1997), for example, university researchers partnered with participating elementary-level schools to collect qualitative data in the form of observation summaries, interviews, and documents. One finding particularly relevant to the consideration of obstacles to implementing change in school organizations was the problem of teacher overload. Researchers recommended teachers enhance their curriculum with a road safety supplement course of study. A teacher claimed, “The subject is of utmost importance to these kids, but I have no time in my classes of 41 children to experience it with them; better for me to go with the reading curriculum” (p. 44).

This quote illustrates how teachers play key roles in encouraging or discouraging school innovation or improvement. Huberman (1998) suggested that the career cycles of teachers could serve as predictive factors related to teachers’ willingness to support
innovation or school improvement efforts. A plotting of responses from a study related to teacher willingness to embrace school change showed a gradual and linear decline in levels of support for change efforts over time. Huberman (1998) makes the observation that “over time . . . teachers see themselves as less willing to invest as heavily in their careers, and more specifically, in attempts to change local practices” (p. 128). Berman (1977) similarly reported the number of years of experience of teachers involved in innovative projects has a consistent, negative relationship to project outcomes of reforms.

A reason teachers may be unreceptive to change efforts is that many feel they already carry a heavy burden and, as a result, express fear and concern when suggestions are made to try new curricular or instructional approaches. Fullan (2007) asserted that, for most teachers, “Daily demands crowd out serious sustained improvements” (p. 130). In the study referred to earlier, Eilam and Shoham (1997) organized high school students to supervise student recess to relieve teacher burden and assist in multiple ways in the classroom. In so doing, researchers reported, “The result was an immediate decrease in the teachers' load, enabling teachers to carry out all the educational practices they desired” (p. 44). Therefore, it appears providing time for teachers to process new initiatives while supporting teachers through change may be critical to successful adaptation.

Other researchers recognize similar expressions of initial conscious or unconscious barriers to change in organizations. Studer (2003) said, “We have to get comfortable with discomfort because we will experience it frequently when we seek to change the status quo” (p. 100). Studer described five phases of organizational change: (a) the honeymoon; (b) reality sets in; (c) the uncomfortable gap
performance will begin to stall); (d) consistency; and, ultimately, (e) leading the way (results). Within the phase referred to as the “uncomfortable gap,” an analogy was made to a marathon runner hitting a wall and determining whether to stop or to persevere.

A critical point in organizational change comes during the “uncomfortable gap” when leaders consider the feasibility of either moving forward in spite of obstacles or abandoning initiatives. Diffusion of Innovation Theory typically focuses on adoption related to personal decision-making. In contrast, school leaders have responsibility to direct change initiatives that are positive and student-centered, but also affect individuals other than only themselves. Just as psychological and social problems of change confront teachers, those that confront principals are at least as great (Fullan, 2007).

Although dated, a study led by Berman on behalf of the Rand Corporation (1977) offered guidance on implementing change efforts in public schools. This longitudinal study’s purpose was to analyze survey data collected from 100 Title I projects in 20 states, focusing specifically on questions related to implementing, sustaining and spreading part or all of the innovative project strategies after federal support ended. The study queried 100 superintendents, 171 principals and 1072 teachers. The reported data pointed to three factors affecting continuation of innovative programs: (a) federal input, (b) project characteristics, and (c) institutional setting.

First, when federal funding was removed, local districts often could no longer afford to continue programs at their own expense. Second, program characteristics affected continuation. Programs that administrators actively supported tended to be continued. Programs that experienced a change in leadership during implementation, or where building principals felt programs were imposed by district office personnel,
experienced an increased risk of abandonment. Third, the institutional setting was found to have the strongest effect on continuation. Key to institutionalization was whether or not the program could become a seamless part of the school culture rather than extra work or a project separate from the mission of the school. Although looping costs nothing beyond that of alteration of traditional school schedules, as Berman (1977) suggested, it is likely that the school culture has a strong effect on the continuation or discontinuation of looping programs.

Fullan’s (2007) work provided additional comment related to the third finding of the Rand study: the difference between the processes of restructuring and reculturing schools. Large-scale reform efforts in the 1960s failed because they focused on embracing the latest innovations without taking into account the culture of the schools where the innovations were to reside. While Rogers (2003) suggested adopters of innovations are concerned with the practicality of innovations, Fullan (2007) asserted that practicality alone is not enough to ensure adoption.

Teacher decisions on adoption, according to Fullan (2007), are typically influenced by three factors: (a) the possible use of new or revised materials, (b) the possible use of new teaching approaches, and (c) the possible alteration of beliefs (2007). In regard to achieving lasting reform, the third element, alteration of beliefs, is the most critical. Fullan argued, “Finding moral and intellectual meaning is not just to make teachers feel better. It is fundamentally related to whether teachers are likely to find the considerable energy required to transform the status quo” (p. 46). Datnow and Stringfield (2000) made a similar assertion:

The improvement of schools is possible when the reform effort is well thought
out, when teachers are active agents in the change process, when there are sufficient resources and time to support the reform, when capable leadership is present and when school cultures change along with school structures (p. 3).

Cuban (1993) offered six explanations for systems’ resistance to change: (a) cultural beliefs are widespread and deeply rooted, appearing to divert attention away from certain types of instruction; (b) an underlying function of schools continues to be to sort students into niches; (c) a breakdown occurs between the creation of educational policies and their implementation; (d) district, school, and classroom structures shape dominant instructional practices and may be in conflict with larger reform initiatives; (e) teaching practices tilt toward constancy rather than change; and (f) teacher belief systems influence their roles in ways that promote as well as detract from changing classroom practices.

Cuban’s (1993) final point speaks to the need to alter values when introducing change efforts that might be unfamiliar or might conflict with current teacher beliefs. Kouzes and Posner (2007) asserted, “Shared values make a significant and positive difference in work attitudes and performance” (p. 68). Because second-order change requires altering entire groups of teachers’ and administrators’ belief systems, it is not hard to understand how change processes have difficulty starting and taking hold in school systems. Nor is it complicated to imagine that when shared values are not present in organizational settings, reform efforts would not be able to be sustained, no matter how promising the innovations may be.

Likewise, Marzano et al. (2005) identified day-to-day responsibilities of school leaders that negatively impact the introduction of second-order change. These include:
(a) culture, or maintaining an environment where ideas are shared and staff members readily cooperate; (b) communication, meaning the fostering of open lines of communication; (c) order, or the establishment of procedures that provide consistency; and (d) input, meaning fostering procedures to ensure input from staff members regarding key decisions and policies.

Summarizing the lessons from change theorists, three theorists in particular pointed to issues integral to successful school reform. Berman (1977) said, “Social science literature focuses on the adoption of innovations and virtually ignores implementation” (p. 22). Thirty-years later Fullan (2007) identified the same issue as a contemporary one to contend with when implementing change in organizations: “Reform is not just putting into place the latest policy. It means changing the culture of classrooms, school districts, universities and so on. There is much more to educational reform than most people realize” (p. 7).

The struggle looping has faced to solidify a place in American middle schools is not a phenomenon unique to looping. Worthwhile programs or reform strategies are subject to abandonment if a great deal of attention is not given to planning for implementation and continuity. Innovations are not self-sustaining. Berman (1977) asserted, “Even successful innovations have a way of disappearing after several years.” In the Rand study of programs that were implemented as a result of federal funding, only 5% -15% of school and district sample participants had fully institutionalized their innovative programs after 2 years. Likewise, in moving from teacher-centered instructional practices to student-centered practices, Cuban (1993) stated, “In view of the powerful social, political, organizational, and cultural constraints on teacher behavior and
the difficulty in capturing teachers’ attention, 25% may well be viewed as a victory” (p. 282). Kotter (1995) said, “Half of all change efforts fail at the start” (p. 580). With the findings of these researchers in mind, it no longer seems unusual that some districts that endorsed the value of looping programs in literature are no longer looping.

Significance of the Study

Due to changing American family dynamics, more pressure has been placed upon schools to serve as parents throughout the growth and development of school-aged children. Many communities struggle with issues of poverty and related social problems. These factors are significant when describing the need for longer-term relationships between students and teachers. Many children in poverty live in single parent homes or with aunts, uncles, grandparents, or other extended family members rather than with their parents. For example, the Census 2000 Brief reported 2.4 million grandparents in the United States are child caregivers and currently hold primary responsibility for grandchildren under 18 years of age (Simmons & Lawler Dye, 2003). Census 2000 was the first to collect information on the extent to which grandparents act as primary caregivers. As a result of continuous changes in family structures, it is advisable that children’s emotional and physical needs be carefully monitored by school personnel.

Looping helps teachers monitor changes in children’s demeanor and academic progress. Mednick (2003) suggested, “Teachers who learn about and value the strengths, experiences, and knowledge their students bring from their diverse backgrounds and home cultures have students return that respect and want to learn” (p. 3). Scales (1999) stated, “Schools that nurture positive relationships among students and teachers are more likely to realize the payoff of more engaged students achieving at higher levels” (p. 23).
In a decade when disconnected students have done drastic things to call attention to their needs, connecting students with caring adult role models in schools has never been more critical. Balfanz et al. (2007) asserted, “Middle school students in high-poverty neighborhoods face greater dangers and temptations than when they were younger and are often recruited into roles that interfere with school attendance and involvement” (p. 225). NMSA (2003) reported, “Far too many children grow up lacking adequate supervision. Without responsible adult role models present, unhealthy situations exist when young adolescents live in an environment rife with temptations” (p. 5). Because these challenges appear to intensify at the middle-level, strategies to connect positive role models with children at critical points of need are unequivocally important.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the practice of looping and its sustainability at the middle-level through conversations with individuals who have experience in settings where looping is occurring or has occurred. Because the strategy of looping has been described as a positive student-centered approach for students of all ages, this researcher was interested in why the adoption and sustainability of looping have not been consistent with reports of its efficacy in research studies. With the absence of strict mandates from the federal government endorsing delineated practices for relationship building, can teachers and administrators looking to increase opportunities for positive relationship building create strong, sustainable looping programs within their schools or districts? What lessons do teachers and administrators have to share about the benefits as well as the challenges of working within schools with looping programs in place?
The researcher currently serves as the principal of a middle school in Upstate New York. For the purpose of this discussion, this school was referred to as PMMS. Students and teachers at PMMS are currently participating in a pilot looping program in Grades 7 and 8. For the reasons expressed in this discussion, PMMS decided to implement looping as an intervention strategy. The decision, however, met with mixed support from the faculty members who were to be part of the pilot. In June 2008, this researcher met with PMMS teachers to discuss the reasons some opposed the impending teacher move from Grade 7 to Grade 8 with the same group of students. Minutes from this meeting indicate that several teachers expressed concerns that could be categorized under Fullan’s (2007) four characteristics of change with which individuals struggle. These change-related characteristics include (a) need, (b) clarity, (c) complexity and (d) quality/practicality. Table 1.1 organizes these concerns by category.
Table 1.1

*Characteristics of Change Related to the Implementation of Looping*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PMMS Grade 7/8 Teachers</th>
<th>Need</th>
<th>Clarity</th>
<th>Complexity</th>
<th>Quality/Practicality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2008</td>
<td>Confusion regarding why looping is occurring</td>
<td>Desire to review data that supports looping in order to understand why looping is better than traditional structures</td>
<td>Fear of dealing with a difficult parent/student for multiple years</td>
<td>Concern about learning a curriculum level not taught before – concern about being less effective at a new grade level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling what is in place currently works fine</td>
<td>Stress related to perceived increased accountability for student test scores</td>
<td></td>
<td>Concern that some subjects do not flow together from Grade 7 to Grade 8 as well as others (for example, Life Science to Physical Science)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.1 shows some teachers expressed frustration over the need to change current practices and expressed confusion about the need to loop, feeling single-grade configurations better met their comfort level and desire to teach a specific curriculum at a certain grade level. In the category of clarity, some teachers expressed belief that PMMS has opportunities in place for teachers to build positive relationships with students, demonstrating a level of disinterest in offering more to students than what is currently
offered. The level of complexity was described as a major obstacle to looping for some teachers who were worried about teaching curriculum they had not taught previously. Some teachers admitted feeling increased levels of stress related to accountability and student test scores. Last, in regard to quality and practicality, some teachers felt their particular subject areas were not conducive to looping. For example, a science teacher felt that the seventh-grade Life Science curriculum was completely different from the eighth-grade Physical Science curriculum and did not feel an instructional benefit would be realized by teaching two curriculums that would not easily build on one another from one year to the next.

Whereas a number of initial concerns were expressed by a segment of the teaching population at PMMS, desires of other teachers to loop convinced those concerned to proceed with planning. In the spring of 2009, the first class of students at PMMS completed an instructional loop from Grade 7 to Grade 8 with their core team of teachers. Core refers to teachers on interdisciplinary teams who teach mathematics, science, ELA, reading, and languages other than English (LOTE). An instructional loop in this conversation refers to the completion of 2 years where the same teachers were assigned to a common group of students. In this case, the instructional loop for students occurred during the seventh and eighth grade years.

During the first grade-level team’s instructional loop from Grade 7 to Grade 8 (2007 through 2009), data were collected to explore the efficacy of looping, as well as to investigate teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the strategy. At PMMS, in spite of the hesitation of some teachers prior to the start of looping, initial data showed promise. Table 1.2 demonstrates a reduction in the number of student retentions at Grade 8 for the
first cohort of looping students, who remained with the same group of teachers from the
fall of 2007 through the spring of 2009.

Table 1.2

Retention Figures - PMMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number of Students Retained in Grade 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>06-07</td>
<td>12 (non-looping cohort)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07-08</td>
<td>12 (non-looping cohort)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07-09</td>
<td>1 (first looping cohort)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For a student to be promoted at PMMS, he or she must meet the following
criteria: have an overall average of at least 65% in all courses taken in that school year
and fail no more than one core course in a school year. Students failing two or three
courses may take courses in summer school, and upon passing, be promoted to the next
grade-level. Students who fail more than three classes are retained without the option of
attending summer school for promotion. In the two non-looping cohorts that preceded
the first looping cohort, 11 more students were retained or required to participate in
summer school in order to be promoted to the next grade-level than were similarly
required in the first looping cohort. This is an important difference considering no other
significant program changes can be offered to explain this improvement (PMMS, 2009).

Seeing a decrease in the number of students retained as a result of participating in
a program where looping occurs is not specific to PMMS. In a Connecticut middle
school, the principal reported that after implementing a looping program in Grades 7 and
8, Grade 8 student failures were dramatically reduced. Only five students were required to participate in summer school to be promoted to Grade 9 (Lincoln, 2000).

Another data point at PMMS that suggests value-added benefits for looping students was provided by the New York State Intermediate Assessments in ELA and mathematics. Assessment tests were given to the first looping cohort in January and March of 2009, as they had been to the non-looping cohorts that preceded them. Table 1.3 shows a comparison of mathematics and ELA scores between the first looping cohort and the cohort that preceded it. Levels 3 and 4 meet the expected standard.

Table 1.3

*State Assessment Data – PMMS*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Subject Area</th>
<th>% of Students in Levels 3 and 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>07-08</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08-09</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although it is important to acknowledge this chart compares different groups of students on different versions of these assessments, since the inception of the NYS intermediate testing program in the late 1990s, PMMS has never had more students score in levels three and four on these exams than in this most recent administration that was also the first looping cohort to take these exams (PMMS, 2009).
Although data suggested looping provided a modest edge for student cohort success in the areas of promotion/retention and state testing, perception data collected at PMMS met with mixed reviews from stakeholder groups. In spring 2009, surveys were administered to three stakeholder groups from looping cohort one: parents, students, and teachers. Survey questions were taken directly from a national study first conducted by NMSA in the late 1990s. Explained in more detail in Chapter 2, questions for the PMMS survey were taken from NMSA’s book *Making Big Schools Feel Small* (George & Lounsbury, 2000). This large study, referenced in several articles and studies on looping at the middle-level, included hundreds of respondents from geographical areas across the United States.

Adapted survey questions used at PMMS were open-ended. Participants were given a series of prompts on which to indicate agreement or disagreement. Additionally respondents were given space to add narrative comments. Prompts from respondents in each stakeholder group were compiled to yield overall percentages of individuals who agreed, disagreed, or were undecided in connection with a prompt. Prompts from each of the three surveys had some overlapping similarities. However, neither the number of prompts to respond to, nor the wording of the prompts, were exact matches from one stakeholder survey to the next. The teacher/administrator survey contained three times more prompts than the student and parent surveys.

National survey results showed educators were “by far” the most positive about the long-term relationships; student responses were the second most favorable (Jacobson, 1997). Educators in the national survey included teachers and administrators. Parents, although generally still positive about looping overall, were the least favorable of the
three groups in the summary of the national survey. PMMS survey results varied considerably from those reported in the national survey. Parents were the most positive about looping with students coming in second in their report of perceptions. Teachers at PMMS, in comparison, were the stakeholder group least positive about the strategy of looping.

Although contrary to the results of the national survey, PMMS results were congruent with a study Lauer (2000) conducted related to multi-age practices, of which looping is a part. Described in more detail in Chapter 2, this study reported mainly negative perceptions from teachers after the first year of implementation of an elementary school program that occurred district-wide. Whereas most teachers expressed a desire to revert to traditional scheduling structures, parents indicated a 95% satisfaction rate in connection with the program and a waiting list formed at the end of the first year.

Results of the PMMS surveys also reflected a similar finding reported by the Rand study (Berman, 1977). Non-gradedness, a term defined and discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 and of which looping is a part, was described by Berman as one of the most difficult change efforts to successfully implement. “These types of reforms can be viewed as radical and undesirable departures from school norms unless the principal actively supports them and runs interference with disapproving parents and teachers” (Berman, p. 157).

The parent survey was mailed to homes of PMMS students with pre-paid return envelopes to encourage participation. Thirty-four parent surveys were returned, yielding a participation rate of approximately 24%. In regard to the prompt, “Staying with the same teachers for more than one year has helped my child to be successful
academically,” 76% agreed, 12% disagreed, and 12% were undecided. One parent wrote, “Absolutely – my daughter knew her teachers’ expectations going into 8th grade. She was able to get right to work on her assignments.” In regard to the prompt, “Staying with the same teachers helped the teachers to better know and respect my child,” 85% agreed, 6% disagreed and 9% were undecided. One parent stated, “The teachers knew my daughter’s strengths and weaknesses and could zero in on them quickly.”

One hundred and twenty-five students completed the student survey, a return rate of approximately 83%. On the student survey, a prompt that stated, “Staying with the same teachers for more than one year helped my teachers know me better and care about me,” yielded responses in which 77% of students agreed, 21% disagreed, and 2% were undecided. Two students who agreed with the prompt stated, “They knew my weaknesses and helped me overcome them” and “They got more of a chance to understand my hyperness and how I learn best.”

Nine teachers who were continually employed and consistently assigned to one group of students in Grades 7 and 8 responded to the teacher survey, yielding a participation rate of 90%. With a significantly smaller number of participant respondents in this stakeholder group, each teacher response weighed much more heavily than did each response in other stakeholder surveys. In response to the prompt, “The long-term teacher-student relationships as organized in our school stimulated a more intense level of teacher commitment to students, providing special help to those who need it,” only 44% of PMMS teachers agreed with the statement as compared with 81% of teacher/administrator respondents in the national survey. One PMMS teacher wrote, “I believe that our teachers are committed to the above statement regardless of the amount
of time spent with students.” The respondent, in this case, appeared not to accept or agree with the idea that knowing student needs as a result of a longer-term relationship would increase his or her ability to be more diagnostic of the needs of students.

The prompts teachers most uniformly agreed with in the PMMS survey dealt with acknowledgement that longer-term teacher-student relationships increase the level of teacher accountability for student success and increase teacher knowledge of middle-level curriculum. This response correlates directly with the concern some teachers expressed prior to looping about the perceived teacher accountability that accompanies looping scheduling configurations. These responses might suggest that this group of teachers, or some members of the group, were not yet able to move beyond personal beliefs about looping in order to discuss advantages and disadvantages of the strategy for students in this school.

**Overview of the Study**

This researcher engaged in a qualitative exploration of the strategy of looping with teachers and administrators in middle schools. The study probed the level of disconnect between reports of the efficacy of looping and the reports of how some teachers and administrators perceive the strategy. Whereas studies on the efficacy of looping have been conducted in different schools and at different grade levels, no published studies were located that specifically explored how teachers’ and administrators’ lived experiences influenced decisions to continue or abandon looping programs in public school systems.

**Research Questions**

Researcher questions for this study included (a) What are the lived experiences of
teachers and administrators engaged in the process of looping? and (b) what conditions encourage the institutionalization of looping in the school settings in which it is introduced?

The researcher used qualitative methods to explore these research questions. A study design utilizing interviews and focus groups with participants who have had experience with looping in different school settings was proposed and carried out. To address central questions, the researcher interviewed building principals in districts who have had looping scheduling configurations in place for different periods of time. The researcher anticipated these interviews would begin to isolate the conditions that facilitate acceptance and support of looping by administrators and teachers and/or identify the conditions that made looping difficult to sustain. Interviewing middle-level principals with different degrees of experience with looping was intended to provide varying perspectives to best address the broad research questions of this study.

To offer a second set of voices to the issue of looping sustainability, the researcher conducted focus groups with two sets of teachers in separate Upstate New York middle schools. Teacher participants, like principal participants, had varying lengths of experience with looping as the number of years these school-wide looping programs have been in place varied by 6 years. The researcher explored reasons why some teachers came to embrace looping whereas others expressed desires to revert to traditional scheduling practices.

Definition of Terms

 Diffusion of Innovations Theory – This theory suggested delays in adopting innovations that could potentially improve a process or organization are affected by five
factors: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability (Rogers, 2003).

Focus Group – A group focused on a particular discussion topic (Jayanthi & Nelson, 2002).

Institutionalization – When project-related change becomes part of the standard educational repertoire at both the district and classroom level (Berman, 1977).

Looping – When a teacher moves to the next grade with the same group of students, generally for a period of 2 or 3 years (Nichols & Nichols, 2002). Other terms synonymous with looping include teacher-student progression, two-cycle teaching, multi-year teaching and the 20-month classroom (Forsten, Grant, Johnson, & Richardson, 1997).

Middle School – A school planned and operated to provide developmentally appropriate educational experiences that build on elementary schooling experiences leading to high school for students enrolled in grades 6-8, or 5-8, who are 10-14 years of age (George & Alexander, 2003).

Stage Environment Fit Theory – A theory that suggests middle schools should begin reform efforts by matching educational environments to students’ stages of physical, emotional, and social development (Eccles, 2004).

Transcription – “Constructions from an oral conversation to a written text,” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 183).

Waldorf Philosophy – Based upon the work of Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, Waldorf education centers on six key elements: (a) a theory of child development; (b) a theory of teacher self-development; (c) a core curriculum that
integrates artistic and academic work; (d) a method of teaching as an art that seeks to synchronize teaching methods with the children’s capacities; (e) integration of teaching and administration; and (f) using the school and greater Waldorf community as networks of support for students, teachers, and parents (Easton, 1997).

Conclusion

Whereas identifying positive strategies or programs and replicating them in other classrooms, schools, or districts seems simple, change is much more complicated than duplicating a page on a copying machine. School leaders must engage in open, honest discussion about why change in American public schools is so complicated to introduce and why strategies or programs with promise have difficulty taking root in some systems and not in others.

In a discussion of middle school reform, Erb (2000) asserted, “Just adding on more responsibilities to teacher roles will not lead to effective change . . . without adequate support, reforms will not take hold” (p. 2). Erb further summarized his position by stating, “The longer the recommended practices have been in place, and the more they have interacted with one another, the more powerful are the changes that occur in middle schools” (p. 5).

In the review of literature that follows, focus was placed upon determining the level of efficacy of looping programs and summarizing what is known about how programs are established and discontinued in school districts within the United States and abroad. This discussion set the stage for introducing specific methodological plans to explore the lived experiences of individuals who have worked, or currently work, in settings with looping programs in American middle schools.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

*Introduction and Purpose*

Although the subject is much older, improving student achievement in public schools has become more topical in recent years. Gough (1990) suggested the focus of schools should be as follows:

Our goal, as this new decade begins, should be to establish pockets of excellence – school programs that serve students effectively in our own locales. With enough such pockets, we will be able to stitch together a nation-wide system of schooling that effectively serves the needs of young people in the 1990s and beyond (p. 339).

Whereas 20 years have passed since Gough made this proposal, public educators continue to seek reform through the introduction of new ideas, as well as the reintroduction of ideas used previously (Cuban, 1993). Undoubtedly “pockets of excellence” exist in schools across the United States, but replicating success from one school setting to another is challenging. Introducing change, as well as sustaining it, is a monumental task. Fullan (2007) asserted, “We have still not cracked the code of getting beyond the classroom door on a large scale basis” (xii).

Looping is an educational strategy some consider a “pocket of excellence” (Hitz, Somers, & Jenlink, 2007; McCown & Sherman, 2002; Bellis, 1999; Gausted, 1998). Research studies presented in Chapter 2 describe the advantages reported in looping programs in public and private K-12 educational settings across the United States,
Europe, and East Asia. Some studies subtly explore the idea that although looping may be a strategy beneficial to students, the philosophy upon which looping is based is not one to which all educators subscribe.

The Origin of Looping

Considerable debate exists in literature regarding the origins of looping. Hitz et al. (2007) suggested roots of looping trace to America’s one-room schoolhouses. Simel (1998) proposed that the origins of looping trace to school systems in countries such as Germany and Japan, arguing no evidence exists that American teachers looped with students for any pedagogical purpose until mid-1980. McCown and Sherman (2002) speculated that the importation of Waldorf schooling provided the basis for the first looping schools in America.

Prior to opening the first Waldorf school in Germany in 1919, Steiner outlined his philosophy of education in a lecture series that described the importance of continuity in teacher relationships with students (Steiner, 1996). According to Steiner, teachers’ knowledge of child development phases should be extensive. Because children grow at different rates, only teachers who have continuity with students can recognize development, or lack of development, in children and compensate appropriately for this the following year.

Contemporary Waldorf schools reflect Steiner’s (1996) original philosophy. Assuming the role of third parent, teachers progress with children throughout the elementary school years (McCown & Sherman, 2002). Easton (1997) suggested a demanding and challenging commitment by the teacher to long-term relationships with students is deeply engrained in Waldorf school culture and makes these schools unique
and successful. One Waldorf school teacher who exemplified this philosophy remained with three separate classes of students from Grades 1 through 8 and related his personal experience as: “Waldorf teachers . . . make a commitment to the children they teach . . . they commit themselves and take a chance because the relationship between the students and teacher is central” (Petrash, 2002, p. 120).

Noddings (2005), American educator and writer, like her predecessor Steiner, also promoted a belief in relationships as the necessary foundation for children’s schooling experiences. In her book The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education, Noddings suggested schools should mirror caring family environments. Noddings refrained from using the term looping in her book; however, her work asserted teachers and students should remain together for more than one school year. Noddings suggested, “Middle school students might work with the same philosophically compatible team of teachers for 3 years and high school students may work with, say, the same math teacher for 3 or 4 years” (xvii).

Farmer (2002) shares a philosophy similar to Noddings, but directly names the strategy looping, the term by which teacher care and continuity has come to be known. In an article about his experience with reform initiatives at Frank Lloyd Wright Middle School, Farmer asserted, “It is somewhat strange, then, that teachers who are entrusted to protect, nurture, and enlighten our most prized resources would be relegated to nine-month relationships with our children and youth” (p. 21). Similarly, Flinders and Noddings (2001) urged consideration of the fact that most individuals would not argue children should change parents regularly so that they can learn from a variety of parenting styles. Next to parents, teachers play the most critical role in the lives of
children.

Steiner (1996), Noddings (2005), Flinders and Noddings (2001), and Farmer (2002) all speak to the practicality of looping as a strategy for supporting student growth and development. Whereas looping is not a complicated strategy to employ because it costs districts nothing above that of altering traditional scheduling structures, its introduction into American schools has been anything but simple or straightforward. Looking beyond the surface level of programs in this country, it appears looping has met with mixed reactions from those who have experience with the strategy.

*Looping – Contemporary Practices Outside of the United States*

Different from reports of looping in American schools, research literature describes consistent implementation of looping in several European and East Asian countries. Throughout Denmark, primary and lower elementary classes and teachers remain together for multiple years (Morrill, 2003). Wagner (2003) reported, “The Danish tradition of small schools in which teachers spend as much as 8 years with the same group of students continues to be the norm” (p. 667). In German elementary schools, student groupings formed in Grade 1 remain intact with consistent teachers through Grade 4 (Zahorik & Dichanz, 1994). In China, homeroom teachers remain with students for 3-year rotations in elementary, junior, and senior high schools (Hitz et al., 2007). A report by Liu (1997) described differences in school structure between China and the United States as amplified by America’s artificial fragmentation of disciplines, which place emphasis on content expertise rather than on relationships. China’s system-wide practice of grouping students into three instructional segments, with teacher continuity throughout each segment, facilitates strong teacher-student bonding.
Similarly, elementary school teachers in Japan remain with assigned classes for 2 or more years. Japanese middle schools, similar to Chinese schools, are organized by homerooms where teachers oversee morning meetings and teach several subjects to the same group of students (LeTendre, 2000). Japanese culture emphasizes student-teacher relationships above specialization of teachers in one grade level or one content area (Nichols & Nichols, 2002). Sato (1993), in a 2-year study chronicling the daily lives of teachers and students in Japan, reported teaching is a 24-hour-a-day, 12-month-a-year job.

As with Chinese schooling, teachers in Japan recognize the importance of developing strong relationships between teachers and students and understand that the building of trusting relationships takes time. “Teachers spend much time building relations before covering textbook material, especially in the beginning of the school year” (Sato, 1993, p. 128). Whereas United States educators have been searching to find the right middle-level organizational structure for nearly a century, Japanese educators have been content with the same model since the World War II era (LeTendre, 2000). Similarly, Wagner (2003) described Danish educators as having “long understood the importance of relationships in motivating students to want to achieve, and of a more personalized approach to teaching and learning” (p. 667).

To compare the degree to which national education policies impact school practice, LeTendre (2000) conducted an ethnographic study, and became immersed in the daily routines of two American and two Japanese middle schools. As part of his field work, local, regional, and national policy documents related to middle-level education were collected from both countries. After reviewing them, it was reported, “In the United
States there is no unified source for policy documents, particularly for middle schools. The lack of a distinct middle school unit or focus in the Department of Education is itself evidence of the disarray in the organizational field of middle grades schooling” (p. 10).

As discussed in Chapter 1, middle-level organizations espouse tenets related to best practices for middle schools. However, no central control exists to ensure these tenets are implemented. In Japan, the Ministry of Education exercises significant control over individual schools. Unlike the United States, where local schools can determine the grade-level configurations in their districts, in Japan, the only middle school configuration is Grades 7 through 9. The overall organizational form of Japanese middle schools, including the reduced number of daily instructional transitions and increased amount of time working with the same homeroom teacher, is better suited to the needs of young adolescents according to LeTendre (2000). As endorsed by Stage Environment Fit Theory described earlier, Japanese educators have matched the needs of adolescent students with a deliberately established school program and have been doing so for decades.

Research in the area of teacher continuity in China, Japan, and Denmark shows looping is a central philosophy in schooling in these countries. LeTendre (2000) stated: My work demonstrates that if educators or policymakers in either system are to make lasting changes in the way teachers teach, they will need to address a whole range of non-academic issues. Veteran teachers on both sides of the Pacific give the same advice to novice teachers: You cannot teach a class of students until you have established a basic social relationship with the students (p. 15). Unlike in the United States, strong national policy helps facilitate positive practices like
longer-term teacher-student relationships in European and East Asian school systems
(LeTendre).

Looping in the United States

Whereas looping is a recognized practice in the United States, the literature
reviewed does not show widespread or systematic implementation as has been chronicled
in foreign school systems. In the United States, looping tends to be initiated in districts
or schools by individuals who have developed interest in the strategy, either by reading
literature or visiting schools with looping programs in place. Elliott and Capp (2003)
described the initiation of a looping program in an elementary school: “The impetus for
multi-year classes came from a teacher who had researched the design and made a
proposal to the principal, who was looking for a way to supercharge curriculum delivery”
(p. 35).

In a 1996 survey of middle schools across the country, George and Alexander
(2003, p. 383) identified “several dozen schools engaged in looping in some way” in
different geographic areas. The explanation offered for the rise of these seemingly
sporadic programs was that individual educators decided looping teams worked for their
schools and students. The scattered implementation of looping in locations across the
United States raises a question: can looping become as widely disseminated a practice as
it has in Japan, China, and Denmark? Without more direction from the United States
Department of Education, it is improbable looping will emerge in schools other than
those where innovative teachers or administrators are interested in experimenting with
the intervention.
The Efficacy of Looping

Probing more deeply into research literature related to the struggle to maintain programs for developing long-term student-teacher relationships, it is important to recognize that the literature related to looping is overwhelmingly supportive. Article discussions related to looping describe increased promise for students who are part of looping configurations. Instructionally, looping provides the type of continuity Steiner suggested in his model of Waldorf education (Delviscio & Muffs, 2007; Hitz et al., 2007; Chapman, 1999). Looping increases the amount of instructional time available to teachers, making it unnecessary to spend time at the beginning of the second year learning student names and developing classroom chemistry and rapport (Simel, 1998; Chapman, 1999; Bellis, 1999).

When instructing students for a period of 2 or more years, teachers become familiar with individual student learning needs, and can differentiate activities and assignments to meet varying needs (Hitz et al., 2007; McCown & Sherman, 2002; Bellis, 1999; Gausted, 1998). Opportunity exists to create more meaningful teacher-student relationships that can positively impact student motivation (Delviscio & Muffs, 2007; Hitz et al., 2007). Students exhibit less apprehension in the classroom in the second year of the loop (McCown & Sherman, 2002) and deeper bonds develop not only between students and teachers, but also between teachers and parents (Hitz et al., 2007; McCown & Sherman, 2002; Simel, 1998; Bellis, 1999).

Discussion of potential disadvantages of looping programs relates mainly to concern about potential teacher-student personality conflicts (Hitz et al., 2007; Chapman, 1999). A second aversion to looping by some teachers may be the need to plan
sequentially for a 2- or 3-year period, rather than repeating the same curriculum from one year to the next (Forsten et al., 1999). Further discussion of challenges to the implementation of looping, rather than disadvantages of the strategy itself, are discussed in detail later in the text.

Whereas the number of published research-based studies on looping is not overwhelming, having broadened the scope of research to levels other than the middle-level allowed for a presentation of positive study findings related to the strategy. The next section explored studies related to looping programs at the elementary and middle school levels.

Research Studies

Elementary level. In Cleveland FAST (Families are Students and Teachers), a pilot project that occurred between the fall of 1993 and spring of 1996, students were randomly assigned to classes with the same teachers and classmates from kindergarten through second grade (Hampton, 1998). Researchers who implemented the project were critical of traditional school organization that mirrored the “insecure environment” that many students have in their home environments by “thrusting students into different classrooms with unfamiliar teachers and classmates each year” (p. 415). Cleveland FAST provided three interventions for students and families in the program to offset student learning challenges: retaining the same teacher for 3 years, participating in yearly summer enrichment programs, and providing parent education classes.

Participating students’ test scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) showed growth above that of students not involved in the program. For example, FAST students in the program between 1993 and 1996 had a mean score in reading of
73.10 on the CTBS. Non-FAST students within the same school building had a median score of 50.32 and non-FAST students in other buildings in the district had a median score of 48.61. Similarly, in mathematics, FAST students had a mean CTBS score of 77.27 as compared to 40.20 for non-program students in the same building and 53.43 for non-program students in other buildings in the district (Hampton, 1998).

In addition, increases in scores were seen when results of students in teachers’ classes who looped were compared with test scores from their own previous classes that had not looped. Whereas this analysis compares different groups of students, improvement in overall class achievement suggests that looping may play a key role in enhancing student performance. Overall, the study found the program’s effect on student achievement was impressive. As demonstrated above, achievement of students in Project FAST in reading, ELA, and mathematics was significantly higher than the achievement of other students in the same school and schools in the district that had not looped (Hampton, 1998). However, it is important to note that looping was only one of three interventions that occurred concurrently within this study.

In another study, Rodriquez and Arenz (2007) used qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the value of looping in an elementary school setting. Participants included six teachers who looped with classes in the 2005-2006 school year, their 87 students, and one parent of each student. Qualitatively, the study analyzed open-ended and multiple-choice questionnaires completed by teachers, students, and parents concerning the social and emotional benefits of looping following participation in the program. The questionnaire investigated “self-reported perceptions of the impact of looping on the socio-emotional well-being of the students, long-term relationships
between stakeholders, classroom discipline, students’ attitudes toward school, academic success, and overall satisfaction with the looping experience” (p. 47).

The Grade Level Assessment of Students (GLAS), a criterion-referenced test, was administered and compared across groups to look for significant differences between students who participated in looped settings and students who did not. The GLAS was administered twice to participating students: first, as a pre-test before looping and second, as a post-test following looping. Paired sample t-tests were used to compare and analyze the treatment and control groups’ mean growth in calculated percentage scores on each subtest of the GLAS (Rodriguez & Arenz, 2007). The GLAS assessed students’ skills in four areas: (a) writing strategies, (b) vocabulary, (c) reading comprehension, and (d) language conventions. Results were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (SPSS).

Data collected from the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study indicated looping configurations offered greater opportunities to develop strong relationships among students, parents, and teachers and that these relationships positively impacted academic success (Rodriguez & Arenz, 2007). Looping was also found to be associated with gains in academic progress in several skill areas of English language arts. Only two instances were found where progress of non-looped students was superior to progress of looped students in what researchers characterized as “differences not significant” (p. 52). Researchers acknowledged a limitation to the study’s findings was the ability to control for positive practices present in the classroom, other than looping, that might have also had an effect on the data used in the evaluation.
In a separate large elementary-level study, Cistone (2004) explored the impact of looping on student achievement in English language arts and mathematics, student attendance, and student retention rates, and also discussed teacher and administrator perceptions of looping as an intervention strategy. To determine the influence of looping on academic achievement, a matched student sample was created using student test scores on the Stanford Achievement Test from the year prior to the 2-year study, which occurred between 1998 and 2000. Teacher, student, and administrator participants were selected from 26 Florida elementary schools. Students were matched not only on academic performance, but also on attendance, race, and qualification for free or reduced priced meals. Results of the study demonstrated students in looping configurations, as a group, exhibited significantly higher performance in reading comprehension and mathematics applications on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) than students in the non-looped sample.

As a group, students’ attendance during the second year of the loop improved whereas attendance within the matched group declined within the same period. In regard to teacher and principal perceptions of looping, survey results showed “the majority of participants in both groups had positive attitudes toward looping” (Cistone, 2004, p. 58). A limitation of the study, however, was that probing the perceptions of teachers and principals in several schools with pockets of looping rather than a larger, school-wide program where all teachers were involved in looping configurations, introduced the potential for bias. Because teachers in this study chose to loop, they likely held positive attitudes about looping prior to the pilot that were merely reinforced through
participation. More applicable to this particular discussion would be the inclusion of data collected in settings with more diverse groups of teacher participants, including some describing themselves as less committed to the strategy prior to the study.

In a small elementary-level study, a classroom teacher and university professor studied a loop between Grade 1 and 2 during the 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 school years. The collaborative team developed surveys for the parent and child participant groups. Surveys asked participants to categorize their reflections using prompts related to social, emotional, and academic advantages and disadvantages of looping, before and after the intervention occurred. Sixteen parents and 18 students completed surveys. “A Standing Ovation for Looping,” chosen as the title of the article that summarized the study, demonstrated researchers’ overwhelmingly positive findings (Chirichello & Chirichello, 2001).

In Grade 1, students responded to the written survey by circling happy, sad, or neutral pictures of faces to indicate yes, no, or not sure in connection with prompts. In Grade 2, when student reading levels were higher, words were substituted for faces. Numerical values were assigned to statements and a class average was produced; scores at or above 2.5 were considered very strong and scores 2.0 to 2.5 considered strong. No mean scores below 2.1 were reported, which caused the researchers to conclude that the 18 students involved had positive looping experiences (Chirichello & Chirichello, 2001).

Likewise, parent survey responses were all in the strong or very strong categories, except for one prompt that captured the concern of parents of students who had transferred to the school mid-way through the loop. These parents felt the adjustment to a looping situation was difficult for their children. Some interviews with parents and
students at the end of the first year and prior to the start of the second year occurred; however the number of interviews was not specified. Responses from students and parents showed excitement and anticipation for the upcoming year and some interview respondents stated pleasure at not needing to worry throughout the summer months who the teacher or classmates in the new school year would be. The strength of this study is that it measured both student and parent perceptions of looping and did so with both quantitative and qualitative measures. However, it appears qualitative measures were used with only a portion of the participants who had completed the written surveys. Interviewing all participants consistently would have strengthened the study overall (Chirichello & Chirichello, 2001).

In another elementary study, Nichols and Nichols (2002) developed a survey instrument to determine the impact of looping on parental attitudes toward their children’s school program related to nine features of a looping environment. Surveys were administered to 445 parents in the spring of 1997. Prompts included “I feel my son or daughter’s teacher knows my child’s strengths and weaknesses” and “My child feels like school is a second home” (p. 20). Parents responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale with the extremes of strongly agree and strongly disagree.

Ninety-two percent of the parent population completed surveys as part of year-end parent conferences. Two hundred surveys were completed by parents of students in the looping program and 255 surveys were completed by parents of non-looping students. Nichols and Nichols (2002) said “results of the exploration of the impact of looping classrooms on parent attitudes are encouraging” (p. 23). Involvement in a looping program was said to correlate positively with parent perceptions of student attitudes and
motivation toward school, as well as to serve as a predictor of increased parent satisfaction with a child’s school in comparison with families not involved in a looping program. Researchers encouraged future studies be conducted to “examine the longitudinal influence of looping on student achievement and behavior and its impact on teacher attitudes” (p. 24).

Middle-level. In regard to studies of advantages and disadvantages of looping at the middle-level, researchers from the University of Georgia worked with an interdisciplinary middle-school team of teachers to qualitatively explore the impact of classroom practices and looping on student motivation for 3 school years between 1990 and 1993. In a study titled “The Delta Project,” researchers documented the impact of looping with paper and pencil instruments, student interviews, transcripts from team planning sessions, and observations (Mizelle, 1993). “In general, it seems students’ self-esteem and attitudes toward school improved during the 2 years of the study” (p. 13). This study, as presented as a limitation in findings from Rodriguez and Arenz’s (2007) study, fails to evaluate the degree to which other independent variables such as flexible scheduling, interdisciplinary instruction and cooperative learning attributed to the success of the Delta Project, apart from the strategy of looping.

A more recent looping study was conducted with Wisconsin middle school participants (Baran, 2008). An instrument called the School Attitude Measure (SAM), with a version designed particularly for the middle-level, was used to quantitatively evaluate looping’s effect on perceptions of students from Grade 7 to 8. SAM, an 85-item instrument with a 4-point response scale, was completed individually by study participants. Instrument items were reported to have high face validity and reliability.
coefficients above .8. Research questions encompassed five areas: (a) academic motivation, (b) academic self-concept (performance based), (c) academic self-concept (reference based), (d) students’ sense of control, and (e) student attitudes toward instructional mastery.

Of the five measures, two were found to show significant differences in the construct being measured between students who had looped as seventh and eighth graders: academic motivation and sense of control over their school performance, (P< 0.05). In summary, the study showed “Looping classrooms may have a powerful effect on students’ attitudes and their success in school and might provide an added benefit to young students” (Baran, 2008, p. 189). However, these results would have carried more weight had more than two of the five items shown significant findings.

In the separate widely known middle-level study referred to in Chapter 1, researchers who were part of NMSA’s looping survey (George & Lounsbury, 2000) identified teachers, administrators, and parents of looping students from 63 school districts across the country as potential study participants. Participation was elicited by placing advertisements in middle-level publications. Of schools invited to participate, 33 schools with long-term teacher-student relationship structures in place completed and returned survey instruments in 1996.

It is important to note that in this study, the classification of long-term teacher-student relationships included looping arrangements, but also an unidentified number of respondents were involved in programs that not only looped, but were also termed “multi-age configurations.” Responses, both negative and positive, are evaluations not only of looping practices but also, in some instances, multi-age practices. Respondent
answers, therefore, could have been affected by confounding variables.

In some schools, only administrative participants completed surveys. In others, individual teachers participating in looping programs completed surveys independent of building administrators. The survey measurement tool used was original to this study and consisted of prompts to which participants agreed or disagreed. Space was provided for additional comments related to each prompt, which also generated open-ended responses. No description, however, was given regarding testing the instrument’s validity, nor does the study seem to have been re-administered as part of any other published research study since the time of its original administration. This researcher used this survey in her preliminary program evaluation of looping at PMMS in the spring of 2009.

That responses were collected from many schools was a positive attribute of this study. Many studies available for review capture the perspective of only one school or schools from a single district. George and Lounsbury (2000) summarized overall teacher and administrator responses from the surveys as strongly positive in regard to looping configurations. However Lawton (1996) reported, “Because the study was based on those surveys which respondents chose to return, there may be some advocacy bias at work in the findings” (p. 10).

*Topic Analysis Supported by Literature Citations*

A summary of research studies related to the efficacy of looping raises the question of why some school districts move away from looping after a period of time, especially when numerous studies demonstrate the ability of looping to impact school programs positively in fairly significant ways. Studies supporting the benefits of looping have been published at a steady rate since the late 1980s as presented in this discussion.
Many of these articles, however, are discussions about the strategy of looping, rather than in-depth quantitative or qualitative research studies. That looping literature encompasses all levels of American schooling demonstrates America’s interest in teacher-student relationships. Contradictions, however, appear in these articles.

For example, in 1996 Burke (1996) stated, “Despite the findings of research and the enthusiasm of participants, multi-year teacher-student relationships remain uncommon in U.S. schools” (p. 360). The year prior, however, Hanson (1995) reported, “As school systems from coast to coast are looking for innovative ways to restructure schools in order to improve school performance, many are looking to multi-year assignments” (p. 42). The discrepancies practitioners and researchers report about looping only serve to further confuse schools seeking guidance on implementing such programs.

In light of endorsements from state and national middle-level organizations, it is puzzling that more schools have not adopted looping. Moreover, of the school districts that responded to this researcher’s request for information, one half that once endorsed looping in educational texts and journals have discontinued their looping programs (see Appendix A). In literature related to looping and looping studies, names of school districts such as Attleboro Central in Massachusetts and Milwaukee Public Schools repeatedly appear (Forsten et al., 1999; Grant, Richardson, & Forsten, 2000; Black, 2000; Lincoln, 2000; Reynolds, Barnhart, & Martin, 1999; Gausted, 1998). Articles published in the last decade describe Attleboro’s dedication to looping in Grades 1 through 8 (Grant et al., 2000). Denault (1999) stated, “I had the pleasure of visiting the Attleboro schools. I can attest to the effectiveness of Attleboro’s program and the accuracy of the successes
their teachers have reported” (p. 20). An October 15, 1997 article posted on Education Week on the WEB described the Attleboro Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, Thibodeau (Jacobson, 1997), as having said that there are 4,400 students looping in the district because personnel felt the strategy offered positive benefit for all students. In the same article, the president of the Attleboro Education Association also endorsed the continuation of looping practices that were occurring at the time.

In an e-mail communication with a current middle school principal in Attleboro, the looping framework described in scholarly journals, newspaper reports, and the words of district leaders in the past decade appears to be almost dismantled: “As a district, it would seem we are the only school that had some looping in the past school year” (R. Sarkarati, personal communication, July 10, 2008). Of interest is why a district well-known for supporting looping 8 years ago, no longer implements a strategy once enthusiastically embraced.

Similarly, Milwaukee Public Schools worked with a consultant in the early 1990s to infuse Waldorf philosophy into urban public schools as part of a school reform initiative. Peterkin, Milwaukee Superintendent of Schools at the time, asked the question, “Can lessons be learned from an independent school movement and incorporated into a public school environment?” (Crespo & Hale, 1997). Teachers in Milwaukee Waldorf-inspired programs loop with the same class of students from first through fifth grade. Ten schools of this type opened in Milwaukee in the 1990s. In a video-taped interview with Peterkin, the former superintendent stated that by the end of the decade, two of the original 10 schools had closed. However, reasons for closure were not stated.
Why would a district that enthusiastically embraced the Waldorf model, of which looping is a strong component, close rather than seek to establish more schools that endorse a philosophy about which Milwaukee school administrators were passionate? The Association for Waldorf Schools’ website reports the number of Waldorf schools in North America doubled in the last 10 years. As support for the philosophy seems to be expanding in the private school sector, it is interesting to speculate why Waldorf-inspired public schools do not seem to be seeing a similar type of expansion.

In a non peer-reviewed article published in the Detroit Free Press in September 2003, a reporter described classroom teacher Betty Bruner’s first day of school with her class that had moved as a group with her from Grade 1 to Grade 2. The article stated, “The district implemented the program to meet a federal requirement that students read on grade level by third grade.” But the reporter went on to write “At Vernor, where looping was common a decade ago, Bruner is now the only teacher doing so” (Pratt, 2003). Nothing further is mentioned in the article about why less looping was occurring in 2003 than was in the previous decade, continuing to prompt interest in pursuing what appears to be an interesting contradiction in looping implementation in the United States.

Moving toward an original research study related to looping, this researcher probed available literature to identify reasons looping may have difficulty sustaining itself in American public school systems. Reasons were not overtly described in most summaries, but rather appeared minimized or, perhaps, even downplayed.

In his discussion of change initiatives within American schools, Cuban (1993)
suggested why innovations, such as looping, have difficulty penetrating the fabric of existing school culture. Two of Cuban’s tenets in particular relate to this discussion: (a) teaching practices in general tilt toward constancy rather than change, and (b) teacher belief systems influence teacher roles in ways that promote, as well as detract, from changing classroom practices.

Other researchers, for example Fullan (2007), suggested that schools must be restructured not only for change, but also recultured for change. Perhaps these schools’ inabilitys to follow initiatives through from adoption to institutionalization were results of weak organizational planning or inconsistent leadership.

In the following section, studies selected and presented for discussion were included because they begin to provide answers to the study’s research questions: (a) What are the lived experiences of teachers and administrators involved in looping programs at the middle-level?, and (b) what conditions encourage the institutionalization of looping in the school settings in which it is introduced?

The researcher looked at all studies for information related to these broad questions and identified points of relevance from research from the following subgroups: child care centers, public elementary and middle schools, non-graded or multi-age programs, private sector Waldorf schools, and foreign school programs.

*Early childhood education.* Researchers conducted a qualitative study in a preschool child-care setting in which data were gathered through interviews with parents and teachers. Similar to NMSA, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has a philosophy promoting long-term student-teacher relationships, advocating that “every attempt is made to have continuity of adults who work with
children, particularly infants and toddlers” (Hedge & Cassidy, 2004, p.134). In this study, two teachers were interviewed for 2 hours and an unspecified number of parents were interviewed for 30 minutes each.

Overall, this study found that teachers and parents viewed the looping arrangement as beneficial, citing ease of transition and ability to anticipate children’s needs. Parents noted they enjoyed developing friendships with other parents over time as a result of the arrangement. In regard to challenges, one teacher’s personal age-level preference was not met through her participation in the looping arrangement. She stated “I strictly prefer working with infants . . . I do love these children, but they are growing and they are going to be two. There are lots of new issues that crop up and one has to take care of all of those, I don’t prefer that” (Hedge & Cassidy, 2004, p. 136). The other teacher interviewed shared the same apprehension at first, but the benefits she saw with looping helped her overcome her concern: “I always wanted to be a preschool teacher. But at the same time I wanted to try out this new system of looping. Initially I did find it hard to be in the infant room, but gradually I got used to it” (Hedge & Cassidy, p. 136).

A second teacher-centered looping concern was identified: in the second year of a looping arrangement, teachers need to plan activities for new age groups rather than utilizing the same plans as the year prior. This particular concern was not overwhelming in this study as both teachers saw planning as specific to the needs of the children rather than to a specific age group. For a teacher who holds this view of planning, planning is new each year regardless of working in a traditional or looped setting. For teachers who do not share this philosophy of planning, looping could be seen as an imposition on their professional, and perhaps personal, time. In regard to study limitations, this small study
did not “fully explore the teacher and student characteristics that are most advantageous in making looping a successful endeavor” (Hedge & Cassidy, p. 138).

**Multi-age education.** The terms multi-age and non-graded are both used to describe classrooms where students of differing ages are educated by the same teacher or teachers, together, in one classroom setting (Lauer, 2000; Yarborough & Johnson, 2000). In multi-age classrooms, “Children of different ages form one class which spans a minimum of two grade-levels . . . many multi-age classrooms also participate in looping” (Lauer, p. 6). Teachers in these settings generally instruct the same students for 2 or 3 years consecutively. For example, in a multi-age classroom of third and fourth grade students, as students in Grade 4 exit the program, students in Grade 3 move up to Grade 4 with the same teachers in the same classroom setting while a new set of Grade 3 students join the classroom.

Whereas the following section focuses on studies related to multi-age groupings, of which looping is part, it is important to note these studies do not deal with looping singularly. However, findings are applicable to the discussion of sustainability of multi-year student-teacher scheduling configurations, as well as to the sustainability of looping.

Hoffman (2003) engaged in a small qualitative study focusing on teacher beliefs that guide instructional practices in multi-age elementary classrooms. This modified case study focused on four multi-age teachers purposefully selected for interviews and classroom observations. Participants’ levels of teaching experience ranged from 6 to 14 years.

Six common beliefs of multi-age teachers were determined as a result of summarizing interviews and observations, one of which was the importance of teacher-
student relationships. “The teacher and students must get to know one another well so that the teacher can understand students’ learning styles and unique personalities and the students can come to understand similar information about each other and their teacher” (Hoffman, p. 12). These teacher perceptions about multi-year relationships are similar to those purported by educational philosophers Noddings (2005) and Steiner (1996), introduced earlier in this chapter.

This study provided an example of case study research in a school setting where beliefs related to multi-year teaching were explored by talking with teachers about their experiences. A limitation identified by Hoffman (2003) was that interviews and classroom observations occurred during a condensed period of time; researchers noted that spacing researcher-participant interactions over the course of several months might have yielded a more accurate description of teacher perceptions in a school setting (Hoffman).

Another multi-age study was conducted by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) in partnership with a predominantly Native American school district with low socio-economic status. Data was collected through classroom observations, surveys of teachers and parents, and interviews with administrators. The purpose of the study was to summarize research literature on multi-age practices, describe a multi-age program adopted by a district as a primary reform strategy for raising student achievement, and to inform the educational community about multi-age grouping as a reform strategy (Lauer, 2000).

Due to low student achievement in previous years, the district superintendent mandated a change to multi-age classrooms. Following the first year of the program,
administrators reported feeling pressure from veteran staff members to discontinue multi-age classrooms. Only 1 of 4 schools in the district did not report friction as a result of the implementation, and this was because this particular school had already been using multi-age grouping prior to the mandate (Lauer, 2000).

According to administrative participants in the study, “A major barrier to the multi-age approach was the lack of effort on the part of many teachers to change instructional practices” (Lauer, 2000, p. 20). This noted barrier is similar to what Cuban (1993) referred to as classroom practices tilting toward constancy rather than change. Veteran teachers, more so than newly hired teachers, expressed feelings of incompetence, a phenomenon also reported by Berman (1977) in his study of 100 federally funded projects in public schools across the country. Parent surveys, however, indicated 95% satisfaction with the multi-age program and a waiting list formed at the end of the first year.

In response to study results, Lauer (2000) reported, “Restructuring classrooms into multi-age formats was based on practices which research has shown to be psychologically and educationally effective. However as a reform strategy, the switch to multi-age classrooms requires complex changes, particularly of its teachers, in both philosophy and practice” (p. 35). Lauer’s study is the only one located that deals frankly with how a teacher group can derail multi-age grouping, even though research suggests it could impact students in a positive way.

McREL’s multi-age study, presents an interesting predicament. Some supporters of looping feel that it should not be a mandated practice as it was in the district studied by McREL. Delviscio and Muffs (2007), for example, stated, “Looping or any variation of
multi-grade grouping should be an option, not a requirement” (p. 28). Forsten et al. (1999) stated, “Multi-age design requires major conceptual change and some teachers are not adequately prepared or even well suited for teaching in such a classroom” (p. 16). Bellis (1999) suggested that, “Successful programs . . . demonstrated a commitment to keeping the program voluntary for both parents and teachers and providing all participants a means of opting out” (p. 71).

However, since some teachers in studies presented preferred not to participate in looping configurations, should their wishes have been accommodated? How do schools navigate the pressure to implement best practices and innovative programs, without, at times, mandating such practices? In the case of the McREL study, the superintendent mandated the change, and then discarded his mandate a year later. Yarborough and Johnson (2000) suggested, “Taking on and convincing them (parents and community members) that non-gradedness can work is one job too many for many school leaders who already have extensive responsibilities” (p. 46).

Yarborough and Johnson (2000) also discussed struggles implementing and maintaining multi-age programs at the elementary level. These researchers spoke of the “waxing and waning” of non-gradedness through the years in the same manner Cuban (1993) described, “constancy and change” in education. Researchers included a chart summarizing published articles related to non-gradedness and tracked how many articles were published on the topic each year over a period of years and, as a result, made the same comparison that this researcher has made: the strategies of looping and multi-age classrooms both seem to be worthy of praise. However, the appeal of looping and non-gradedness has waxed and waned. “In spite of favorable research and apparent efficacy of
nongraded schools, they have never become widely popular at any point in history” (Yarborough & Johnson, p. 3).

Inhibitors to multi-grade configurations were reported as follows: (a) defying tradition (gradedness is the only school format some people have known); (b) lack of implementation time (many of the reasons innovations fail is a lack of time made available to the people involved to plan); (c) recruiting faculty (because so many innovations have been thrust upon American teachers over the last 2 or 3 decades, many teachers have become suspicious of new programs; teachers feel safe in programs that are familiar); (d) leadership, politics, and community support (committed leadership is critical); (e) competition with other innovations; and (f) lack of agreement about what non-gradedness is (lack of nationally agreed-upon guidelines for non-gradedness has been a major deterrent) (Yarborough & Johnson, 2000). Whereas it is important to note issues of implementation related to non-gradedness, it is also important to note that these issues relate to factors entirely outside the underlying positive impact on pedagogy. Similarly, the struggle between best practice versus personal preference appears to also occur in the case of looping.

Elementary education. Because of their applicability, two dissertation studies that explore long-term student-teacher relationships are included. The first study demonstrated findings from two practitioners’ action research study exploring looping. The purpose was to measure the effect of looping as an intervention strategy on parent, student, and teacher relationships, as well as to determine if looping impacted available academic time in an elementary setting (Krogmann & Van Sant, 2000). The Gates-MacGinitie Reading Assessment, measuring comprehension and decoding, was used to
distinguish progress between two groups of students, one looping and one non-looping group. The test was administered to students in the spring of the first and the fall of the second year.

Median comparisons of scores from participants prior to looping were 29.5 (non-looping) and 32 (looping) as compared to fall results of 37 (non-looping) and 49 (looping), after looping had occurred (Krogmann & Van Sant, 2000). Whereas median scores on the test for the looping group were slightly higher in the first administration, the median difference was quite significant following the second administration. This study did, however, have limitations. Reading growth at early ages can be attributed to factors outside of the classroom as well, for example, students who read with their families at home.

In addition, researchers did not describe how the looping and non-looping groups were matched so it is unclear if other factors might have influenced results; nor did researchers specify whether or not participants were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. However, still applicable to the discussion of the sustainability of looping is a separate piece of data gathered in this study: teacher journals. Paraphrased comments from journals expressed some teacher-centered issues related to looping: not about whether looping is a positive strategy for students, but about the extra work involved in teaching a new grade level. Some journal responses expressed desire for common planning time during the school day to combat increased work (Krogmann & Van Sant, 2000), similar to the study of Eilam and Shoham (1997), where teachers were willing to implement new curriculum when the burden they were carrying was relieved in some other way.
Another dissertation study with applicability to the sustainability of looping programs in public schools was conducted by Weary (2000). This study explored the difficulty of taking what has been a private school concept in America (Waldorf education and looping) and infusing its philosophy into public school culture as was the goal of the Milwaukee Public School system in the 1990s. Peterkin, the superintendent of Milwaukee schools, questioned if the private Waldorf school philosophy could be infused into public school settings (Crespo & Hale, 1997). Weary sought to answer this question by engaging in a descriptive case study that employed questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. Two study purposes were articulated: (a) to assess the perceptions and levels of satisfaction of teachers and parents related to looping in a public school setting; and (b) to compare looping in a private Waldorf school setting, thought to be the source from which looping in public schools came from, to looping programs in public schools.

Within the study, the West Perry Public School had 7 teacher, 19 student, and 19 parent participants. The Crossroads Waldorf School had 2 teacher, but no parent or student participants. A pre-existing measurement instrument was adapted for data collection. Interviews with teachers were done prior to beginning the second year of the looping cycle, as well as after completing the loop. Parents were afforded the opportunity to answer questionnaires anonymously. Classroom observations at the public school occurred throughout the 2-year study, whereas observations at the Waldorf School occurred once each year due to researcher travel distance. This eventuality should be considered a study limitation.
In regard to findings, the two Waldorf school teachers cited one disadvantage to looping arrangements at the conclusion of the first year (concern about student/teacher conflict) and one at the end of the second year (not right for all parents and/or students). The seven public school teachers listed 10 disadvantages after the first year and five after the second year. The public school findings in this study showed that although the number of teacher-perceived disadvantages was high in year one, the number decreased from year one to year two. When public school teachers were asked if they would continue looping in the future, one said, “Yes, things got better with experience” (Weary, 2000, p. 92).

Findings of this study are particularly applicable to this researcher’s study. Whereas public school teachers reported looping to be advantageous for children, teachers also reported, “Intellectual extremes are exhausting and emotionally draining to the teacher because of the need and desire to meet each child’s needs” (Weary, 2000, p. 84). Further exploring this statement with teachers would prove interesting as it appears teachers perceived the need to individualize to meet students’ needs in looped classroom settings, but not in traditional settings.

This seems to suggest that teachers in this study associated looping with higher levels of teacher accountability, as did teachers in the PMMS program surveys described in Chapter 1. Whereas it seems rhetorical to ask, should high levels of accountability exist for the instruction of all students each year, regardless of whether or not teachers are assigned to looping classrooms? Why is the same level of accountability not felt as strongly by teachers in single-year grade configurations as those in looping configurations?
Also interesting to explore is the fact that some looping teachers reported an increased comfort level after completing a second loop with a new group of students. One teacher in particular affirmed that the second looping experience was better for her personally because she was able to make better plans and was more capable of setting long-term goals with students the second time around (Weary, 2000). Similar to claims made by George and Alexander (2003) asserting that teachers grow accustomed to certain subject or grade levels at which they wish to remain, Weary suggested, “Because teachers are accustomed to what they teach, some do not want to change and try something new” (p. 41). Hesitation to change was also seen in the study of Hedge and Cassidy (2004), where a preschool teacher expressed the desire to teach a particular age-level and did not prefer to advance with children.

Similarities between Weary’s (2000) study and Lauer’s (2000) study also exist. In Lauer’s study, teachers were assigned to multi-age classrooms, of which looping is a part. Due to concerns expressed after completing the first loop, teachers were able to choose to participate in a looping or traditional program the following year. Both Weary and Lauer’s studies suggested value may exist in committing to a looping program for a minimum of two or three complete cycles before considering dismantling the program. Weary said, “The results of the current body of research do show the pedagogy of Waldorf education could be translated to public schools,” but it appears a solid framework for public school looping programs in the United States is difficult to build and maintain, as was seen in the Milwaukee Public School system (Weary, p. 54).

Another study that provides an example of the importance of demonstrating commitment to an initiative for a period of time was conducted by Nevin, Cramer, Voigt,
and Salazar (2008). In this descriptive case study, two teachers with a co-teaching relationship looped with their students from Grade 3 to Grade 4. Researchers observed classroom practices to understand how they might affect student performance. Teachers in the study had worked together for 2 years prior to making the decision to loop with a group of students. Twenty-four students were assigned to this classroom. Eight of the students were identified with special learning needs. Study participants included co-teachers (or two teachers assigned to share responsibility for a mixed group of regular education students and students with special needs), 24 students, a classroom teacher aide, and a school guidance counselor.

Data sources collected included weekly classroom observations and interview summaries with adult participants. Interview responses were coded and items similarly coded were grouped into overarching themes. The FCAT was used to determine the level of student academic gains. Summarizing achievement gains, 6 of the 8 special needs students and 14 of the 15 non-disabled students met adequate yearly progress in mathematics. All eight special-needs students and 14 of 15 non-disabled students made adequate yearly progress in reading (Nevin et al., 2008). Researchers concluded, “It is important to the research team that the students in their class showed progress similar to classmates in other fourth-grade classrooms,” but it does not appear any formal comparison between looped/co-taught and non-looped/non-co-taught classes were made (Nevin et al., p. 297).

In specifically looking at interview responses related to looping, adult participants in this study spoke positively about looping with the exception of one comment made by the counselor. One teacher expressed, “Teaching a child for more than 1 year allows the
teacher to gain knowledge about a child’s intellectual development over time . . . both the
general and special educator felt that students reaped the benefits of looping because their
teachers had gained the extra teaching time” (Nevin et al., p. 297). The counselor,
however, expressed concern about how students would adjust to new classroom
environments, the year after completing the loop.

Three of the participants had been involved in a previous study of looping and co-
teaching and brought their prior experiences to this study. In doing so, they anticipated
and corrected some potential issues prior to beginning this project. These issues,
however, related more directly to the co-teaching side of the study than to the looping
side. Corrections made related to assigning the special educator to the program full-time
rather than giving her additional responsibilities in other classrooms and, a lesser number
of special needs students were assigned in order to provide more positive peer role
modeling to the classroom than had been assigned previously (Nevin et al., 2008).

This study adds to the discussion of sustainable versus non-sustainable looping
programs. Three of the four adults involved were very positive about looping. Three of
the teachers had prior experience with looping, and when allowed to make modifications
from what they learned from their first experience, were willing and interested in looping
again with classes of students.

This report is similar to the report of a principal who described his school’s
experience implementing looping. He reported, “While there was an initial split over
looping, after working for 2 years with the same students, the concept is now endorsed by
the entire faculty (Lincoln, 1998, p. 31). Little and Dacus (1999) also reported that with a
looping pilot program “fewer problems arose in the second year than in the first” (p. 44).
In regard to multi-age practices, of which looping is a part, a principal quoted by Viadero (1996) stated, “All that is required of [his] colleagues across the state is a little ‘stick-to-it-iveness.’ Eventually parents, and teachers will come around to the approach” (p. 33).

Lincoln (1998) also provided evidence to refute the concern reported by the counselor in the Nevin et al. (2008) study who wondered how students would adjust the year following participation in a looping program. Lincoln reported attitudes of high school freshmen from his school’s pilot program were compared to the non-looped pilot group in Grade 9 according to four dimensions: (a) academic competence, (b) social skills, (c) self-efficacy, and (d) attitudes toward school. Results showed that following participation in a middle-school program that engaged in looping, “looping classes excelled in each of the four categories” in a traditional high school (Lincoln, p. 31).

In a discussion of an elementary looping pilot program, reports of teacher-perceived obstacles related to looping were often squabbles over territorial issues. Teachers were hesitant to share materials and equipment that had been in their possession with teachers moving into the grade levels they were temporarily vacating. The article further reported, “Moving teachers to keep like grade levels within the same complex every year was creating problems that some teachers could not adjust to” (Little & Dacus, 1999, p. 43). Similar to Yarborough and Johnson’s (2000) report of teacher aversion to multi-age practices, teacher concerns in this article were based upon organizational issues and not necessarily upon objections related to the pedagogy of building longer-term relationships between teachers and students.

Middle-level education. In a recent article, Fenter (2009) described a middle school looping pilot program he oversaw as principal in a New York State school. Pilot
participants included teacher and student volunteers. Whereas an in-depth qualitative study was reported to have been conducted, no details were given about who participated or what specific methods for data collection were used in the study. Fenter claimed, however, “The fears that might otherwise have stopped the implementation of the model were unfounded based on the real experiences of the parents, students, and teachers” (p. 30). In this particular case, teacher concerns expressed prior to the pilot program were never, in actuality, realized. Had pre-program teacher concerns been allowed to determine whether or not looping would be implemented, the program would not have begun. This raises the question as to how often looping programs are abandoned by schools before they have been implemented long enough to collect sufficient data to evaluate the strategy meaningfully.

The Rand study led by Berman (1977) suggested educational innovations are more difficult to implement at the secondary level, the level with which middle schools are associated, than at the elementary level. Secondary teachers are often characterized as subject oriented in contrast to the child-centered orientation attributed to elementary teachers (Berman). Also discussed was the difficulty associated with implementing reforms that can be viewed as radical or undesirable departures from school norms, which looping has been categorized as by some teachers and principals. With these two obstacles in mind, it might be suggested that implementing looping at the secondary-level could be one of the more difficult projects that schools or districts could choose to undertake (Berman).

*Education outside the United States.* A discussion of perspectives of those who have studied both foreign schools and American schools suggests that American teachers
may not value building relationships with students in the same way as do foreign teachers and school systems. Varying beliefs about the purpose of schools, and the manner in which they should be organized, complicates this issue. For example, Oakes et al. (2000) asserted the following about the American public school system:

Efforts to infuse the ethic of care into schools confront deeply entrenched deficit views of disadvantaged students, their families and their neighborhoods.

Moreover, a powerful ethic of care challenges norms about the appropriate social distance between schools and families – norms arguing that relationships and well-being are private rather than public matters, and therefore beyond the proper purview of schools (xvi).

Juovenen’s (2007) analysis of international rankings of students’ senses of belongingness and perceptions of their school experiences showed “negative views of school and a sense of isolation are not universal problems of young adolescents across cultures,” but problems in American middle schools (p. 199). Juovenen’s findings asserted American adolescents are detached from their teachers and schools, whereas students in 8 out of 11 other countries reported feeling connected to their schools and teachers.

Perhaps less teacher commitment to relationship building with students and more commitment to content and curriculum skill development occur as a result of how teachers are trained in American colleges and universities versus how teachers in other countries, or in Waldorf schools, are trained. Whereas it is important to note that instructional pedagogy in American colleges and universities is not standard from one institution to the next, teachers are generally prepared to teach within a framework of
state and national standards. Oberski and McNally (2007) explored what they described as a growing debate between classifying teaching as an art or as a science. Researchers looked specifically at documents that defined standards for beginning teachers in Scotland and argued that the content and number of competency statements within these documents discouraged teachers who entered the profession with “inner drive and passion” by confronting them with an overwhelming amount of “dead theory” and impractical, non-critical information (Oberski & McNally, p. 940).

On the contrary, authors praised the holistic educational practices espoused first by Goethe and later, Steiner. In existing Steiner-Waldorf teacher education programs, “The teaching of classroom skills is balanced by in depth engagement in creative activities, thereby developing students’ faculty of feeling through imagination” (Oberski & McNally, 2007, p. 941). Does the United States’ heavy emphasis on content standards and standardized testing leave less time for new teachers to focus on developing relationships with students? Or, does it suggest to these developing teachers that content clearly comes before relationships? Additional points made by Wagner (2003) and LeTendre (2000) seem to support this claim.

Wagner (2003) reported that when Denmark engaged in education reform in the decade prior, leaders did not begin with new laws mandating more testing as has been the practice in the United States. Instead, Denmark’s last school reform movement began with a national conversation about what it meant to be an educated citizen. Almost no school dropouts occur in Denmark, despite the fact that the system is now educating an increasingly diverse population. Meanwhile, the Danish tradition of small schools in which teachers spend as many as 8 years with the same group of students continues to be
the norm. “Danes have long understood the importance of relationships in motivating students to want to achieve and of a more personalized approach to learning. In short, the Danish system works” (Wagner, p. 667).

After spending time in both U.S. and Japanese schools, LeTendre (2000) asserted American teachers’ responsibility for and connection with students is very weak in comparison to that of Japanese teachers. To Americans, Japanese teachers appear controlling and to Japanese teachers, American teachers appear “cold and callous” (LeTendre, p. 95). LeTendre proposed that school organizational patterns in the United States promote a barrier between students and teachers. Whereas in Japan, homeroom teachers take personal responsibility for dealing with student academic and behavioral issues, American teachers often send students with problems to nurses, counselors, social workers or school administrators. Oakes et al. (2000) quoted an American middle school teacher as saying, “Teachers see themselves as educators. They do not see themselves as becoming a buddy or an advisor or a counselor. They’re not nuns or priests” (p. 160).

In Japanese middle schools, teachers feel empowered to address issues of safety and morality with their students and take a proactive stance in promoting ideas such as abstinence. In the United States, teachers other than those hired to teach the health curriculum are likely to remain silent on topics like abstinence, perhaps for fear of being accused of espousing personal viewpoints in the classroom (LeTendre, 2000).

Liu (1997), like LeTendre (2000), offered an opinion that individualism is deeply embedded in American culture and as a result, American teachers tend to be less willing or interested in involving themselves in personal or family problems of students than teachers in China. Liu warned that even if America desired to do so, it could not simply
copy the Chinese format of teacher-student progression because the Chinese system is based on a strong, uniformly held belief in relationships that is not present in America. As further evidence, Sato (1993), a researcher who engaged in a 2-year ethnographic study of the daily lives of teachers and students in Japanese classrooms reported: “Consequently, a teacher is a category that feels and acts much differently in Japan than in the U.S., where teachers often must be paid if they do any work outside class hours (and) where home visits are rare” (p. 112). Although Japanese schools are noted for being highly challenging academically, Sato asserted that an emphasis on community, connectedness, commitment, and caring is what appears to be a crucial difference between schools in the U.S. and schools in Japan.

Summary of Obstacles Related to Looping Implementation

Whereas research studies conducted specifically to explore why looping is difficult to implement or sustain in public schools could not be located, through scrutinizing the literature, some claims can be made based upon reports from educators who have had experience with looping. Claims reviewed fell into six broad categories: (a) lack of tangible incentive to change (support for students’ needs in many cases, did not seem enough to lessen this concern); (b) removal of external, consistent supports that were the driving force behind looping (for example, university support, staff development opportunities, etc.); (c) weak or inconsistent school leadership during the change process; (d) lack of time (both in preparing instructional materials and in committing to the strategy for a long enough period of time to evaluate its impact meaningfully); (e) teacher concerns related to sharing materials or changing classrooms; and (f) disinterest in becoming a more important figure in the lives of students.
In applying researchers’ assertions to these claims, several discussions can offer further illustrations. For example, an innovative Japanese initiative called the “ELEC Effort” proposed reforms to English language instruction based upon Charles C. Fries’s Oral Approach. In a summary of the ELEC effort, Henrichsen (1989) recounted an overwhelming amount of support from financial backers and organizations in the United States, Japan, and other countries at the onset of the initiative. Whereas ELEC achieved some success, after a decade of intense financial and intellectual effort, “ELEC failed to achieve its main objective . . . ELEC was unable to change the grand strategy of English language teaching in Japan or to bring overall improvement in teaching methods” (Henrichsen, p. 1). Within the ELEC case study, teacher benefits to adopting innovations, in this instance a new method of language instruction, versus the consequences of choosing not to adopt were explored. Teachers who chose not to change were not affected in any way. As one veteran teacher/administrator later stated, “Why should they [teachers] change? They are paid” (Henrichsen, p. 185).

Some educators, therefore, are likely to perceive innovations as simply more work to engage in, at least initially. Without additional compensation for their efforts, some teachers and administrators choose to merely maintain the status quo. In his discussion of organizational change, Argyris (1965) stated that few subordinates alter their behavior until it is clear how they will be rewarded for their efforts. A principal who oversaw the implementation of a looping program reported a teacher who participated stated, “The pay is the same, the work is double, but the professional satisfaction rewards to the teacher are unimaginable” (Elliott & Capp, 2003, p. 36). In this circumstance, the teacher expressed the belief that the additional investment was worthwhile and personally
stimulating. Elliott and Capp suggested that not all teachers, particularly those who have not chosen to teach in a looping configuration, would share the same enthusiasm for an increased work-load. Generally the number of years a teacher has taught is in direct opposition to his or her willingness to participate in school reform initiatives. Berman (1977) stated, “Passage of time on the job dampens enthusiasm for innovation” (p. 162).

In a research study related to implementing and sustaining Evidence Based Interventions (EBI’s), Schaughency and Ervin (2006) reported, “In many cases, EBI's that have been taught and successfully implemented in the field have not been sustained when external supports (such as staff development support) are removed.” As with EBI’s, when key teachers or administrators no longer participate in or oversee looping programs, it appears these programs have difficulty being sustained.

Another obstacle related to looping implementation may be weak or inconsistent leadership within public school looping programs. In an article that described visionary leadership in middle schools, Brown and Anfara (2002) claimed, “Visionary leaders at the middle-level share a passion for continuous improvement and growth, work diligently at laying a foundation for change, fully investigate the rationale underpinning reform, and dialogue passionately with a purpose” (p. 25). The importance of leadership suggests principals who are directed to implement looping or who inherit looping programs may not be able to articulate its vision passionately. Therefore, they may not be able to sustain the necessary level of support or enthusiasm for maintenance of the strategy.

In their discussion of a case study conducted by NMSA on looping, George, Spreul and Moorefield (1987) concluded that student-teacher progression has the potential to become burdensome to administrators who may be placed in positions to
continually justify the strategy to stakeholder groups. Berman (1977) suggested that principals not part of the original innovation effort might contribute to abandonment of projects: “The principal gives sometimes subtle, but nonetheless strong, messages concerning the legitimacy of continuing project operations in the school” (p. 150). With administrator turnover rates, which a RAND study cites averages about 15% of schools per year, innovations may lack the consistency necessary to keep efforts moving forward at a steady pace (Rand Corporation, retrieved December 12, 2009).

Other leadership experts share similar advice on the critical nature of strong leadership through change initiatives. Fullan (1993), for example, asserted, “Effective school leaders are key to large-scale sustainable education reform” (p. 16). Jackson and Davis (2000) argued, “No single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in middle grades students' performance than the school principal” (p. 21). Brown and Anfara (2002) contended reform is a developmental process. It takes time to work through what Studer (2003) referred to as “the wall.” Without tenacity and clear vision, leaders tend to abandon new ideas rather than persevere when implementation becomes challenging.

Recounting the implementation of looping and other intervention efforts at Frank Lloyd Wright Middle School, Farmer (2002) stated, “While the results have been impressive, getting to this point has not been without struggle. It has taken 9 years of consistent leadership, countless discussions and disagreements, heated debates and deep soul-searching by all who take their work as public educators seriously” (p. 21). Hand in hand with consistent leadership, taking the time to fully implement and evaluate looping is also critical. If teachers are allowed to opt out of participation after only a year of
experience with looping, they may base this choice not on an evaluation of the true advantages or disadvantages of this strategy but rather upon the impact it has on their personal or professional time. Or, teachers may opt out in an effort to remain at the grade level that is, to them, most appealing. It appears that with time, teachers may develop more partiality to the strategy as linking feelings of professional fulfillment to looping appears to take more than a single year to realize.

The Nevin et al. (2008) study showed teacher participants who expressed concern as a result of their first experience with looping and co-teaching subsequently chose to loop and co-teach again in another cycle. Knowledge and discussion of obstacles prior to establishing a looping program may alleviate small issues before they build into larger issues that could derail a program. Weary’s study (2000) demonstrated teachers grew more comfortable with looping the longer they participated in looping configurations. The work of Hedge and Cassidy (2004) and the work of Weary both described how the manner in which teacher perceived demands on their planning time affected their willingness to embrace or reject the strategy of looping. Teachers who view planning as an act inspired by the students to whom they are assigned, as opposed to the content they are assigned to teach, may be more accepting of a strategy like looping.

Whereas Balfanz et al. (2007) used a term other than looping to describe the importance of long-term teacher-student relationships, “shepherding” shares in common with looping the underlying importance of connecting students with continuous adult support throughout middle-level schooling. “Effective strategies in reaching a non-responsive student typically require assigning a specific adult, usually one of the student’s main teachers, with the responsibility of shepherding (building a close
relationship) with the student” (p. 232). Authors claimed shepherding was shown to significantly improve struggling students’ attendance and behavior. Whereas authors described shepherding as an easily employable strategy, they also acknowledged “it has not been without the struggles of implementing anything new” (p. 232).

Elliott (1998) suggested breaking with tradition and adopting a 2-year instructional cycle is challenging. But, “Once a school has abandoned the traditional one-class, 1-year, one-teacher way of doing things, it is easier to break with tradition in other ways” (Elliott, p. 39). Using looping as a way to encourage out-of-the-ordinary thinking may help teachers think creatively in other aspects of teaching and learning as well.

Summary of Methodologies in Current Research Studies

Literature reviewed in Chapter 2 demonstrated that different approaches have been employed to study the impact of looping, depending upon the study’s purpose and research questions. Overall, methods in looping studies vary widely. In studies related to efficacy, both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used. The work of Rodriguez and Arenz (2007), where student test data were analyzed quantitatively and student perceptions of looping were explored qualitatively, is one example. The administration of surveys to students and parents to obtain their perceptions of looping is also a common quantitative approach. An illustration is found in the surveys developed and administered in the Chirichello and Chirichello (2001) study.

A persistent flaw in many research studies is that researchers tend to study looping because of a personal interest in the strategy, raising questions as to whether or not these researchers showed unintentional bias in the results presented. Another related
issue is that within the small number of published articles, many do not measure up to the rigor of scientifically based research. Scientifically based research methodology, for example, was endorsed in 2003 when the U. S. Secretary of Education altered the prioritization of funding to give highest consideration to randomized controlled trials (RCT’s) (Donaldson, Christie, & Mark, 2009). Of the studies reviewed in Chapter 2, most do not stand up to the exactitude of scientifically based research and many studies are over 10 years old.

Although this researcher’s study does not fit the designation of scientifically based research, it does provide rich discussion on the topic and addresses a gap in the research literature. Published articles reviewed fail to probe the factors that contribute to sustainability or to abandonment of looping as an educational strategy. Some studies include a mention of potential obstacles related to looping implementation, but it appears that no large-scale studies dedicated to the strategy have been conducted.

The results of the study were intended to assist schools in designing vision for sustainable looping programs by learning from programs that have, or have not, been sustained. The study had a strong design and, as a result, produced trustworthy results that transcended the simple reporting of numerical findings of student achievement following participation in looping configurations. Rich descriptions of lived experiences add to the body of research and advance a dialogue about future study opportunities related to looping.

Gaining the attention of the U.S. Department of Education could provoke thought about what role this body should play in promoting longer-term student-teacher relationships in public schools. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2008) reported,
“Federal policymakers have a critical role to play in assuring that secondary school improvement efforts are clear, accountable, and well designed and have sufficient resources to provide excellent education to all of America’s students” (p. 2).

Middle school students are currently an underserved population that lacks adequate funding necessary to implement developmentally appropriate programs with strategies espoused by NMSA (NMSA, 2006). Lobbying groups such as NMSA have created policy recommendations that endorse the strategy of looping. In 2006, NMSA published *Success in the Middle: A Policymaker’s Guide to Achieving Quality Middle Level Education*, which urged policymakers at the national level to: “provide incentives to states and school districts to create small learning communities within middle-level schools through practices that include – but are not limited to – teacher and student teams, looping, multi-age grouping, schools-within-a-school, and learning academies” (p. 19).

**Conclusion and Summary of Remaining Chapters**

Chapter 1 presented broad issues related to middle-level reform efforts within American public schools in the last several decades, and provided evidence about how looping fits the articulated reform agenda of middle-level organizations. Theoretical frameworks related to Stage Environment Fit Theory and change initiatives in education were introduced and described. Data were presented from one school currently involved in a looping implementation program, setting the stage for discussion of relevant literature.

Chapter 2 introduced general findings from efficacy studies related to looping programs throughout the United States. Comparisons between American and foreign
school cultures were made in the context of a discussion of philosophies related to encouraging supportive relationships between teachers and students. Drawing from research literature, reasons looping has difficulty being sustained were extrapolated and discussed.

The following chapter, Chapter 3, focuses on the design and execution of the researcher’s study. As a result of data collection and analysis, which is described in detail in Chapter 4, a summary report of findings emerged and may be helpful to middle-level communities interested in implementing and sustaining looping programs. This summary is presented and discussed in Chapter 5.
Chapter 3: Research and Design Methodology

General Perspective

This research study explored the characteristics that promote the institutionalization or abandonment of the strategy of looping in middle-level school settings. Because looping is described as a positive, student-centered approach, this researcher was interested in uncovering why some schools that introduced looping into their programs later reverted to traditional organizational structures. As looping has been institutionalized in some schools where it was practiced but not in others, the researcher sought to determine what influences exist in schools with on-going programs versus those with abandoned programs.

Qualitative methodology was utilized in an effort to uncover an understanding of looping. The voices of teachers and administrators who have been or are still involved in looping programs yielded pertinent data. Stories of participants’ experiences from implementation to institutionalization, from implementation to abandonment, or some combination in between, provided data to address the research questions of this study.

Qualitative Research Methodology

In matching a research design to a study exploring the lived experiences of public school teachers and administrators, qualitative methods were best suited. Since the 1980s, qualitative research methods have become “key methods of social research” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 11). Roberts (2004) defined qualitative research as inquiry that “begins with broad, general questions about the area under investigation.”
Researchers seek a holistic picture – a comprehensive and complete understanding of the phenomenon they are studying” (p. 111). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) described qualitative inquiry as an “odyssey into our discipline” (p. 174). Creswell (2007) contended, “qualitative research begins with philosophical assumptions that the inquirers make in deciding to undertake a qualitative study” (p. 15).

For example, a researcher seeking to collect data in the form of numbers would not likely choose qualitative methods. Carney, Joiner, and Tragou (1997) wrote, “Quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes . . . the word qualitative implies an emphasis on the process and meanings that are not rigorously examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency” (p. 2). Basit (2003) stated, “Social phenomena . . . need not be explained numerically. It is the quality and richness of the response to a social situation which we should focus on” (p. 151). A researcher looking to explore the experiences of participants in connection with a certain topic of interest should engage in a qualitative versus a quantitative study to discover the richness in experience, rather than merely revealing numerical data related to the phenomenon.

Whereas postpositivism, which is the inability to be positive about claims of knowledge when studying human actions, is typically seen as the worldview for quantitative data, social constructivism, which intends to make sense of the meanings others have about the world, is seen as the worldview of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). Social constructivists assume that individuals wish to understand the world in which they live in a more complete manner. Questions used by qualitative interviewers are broad, so participants can construct the meaning of a situation (Creswell, 2007).
Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggested, “Qualitative researchers . . . regard their research task as coming to understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them” (p. 6).

Experienced qualitative researchers describe the perspective of their research as a paradoxical one: “It is to be acutely tuned in to the experiences and meaning systems of others – to indwell – and at the same time to be aware of how one’s own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 123). The challenge qualitative researchers face is to describe what they see with minimum interpretation (Maykut & Morehouse). Disciplined data analysis, described later in this chapter, helps to guard against interpretation, which may confound the findings through researcher bias.

Common characteristics of qualitative research include the following: (a) data are collected in a natural setting, typically face to face and over a period of time; (b) the researcher is a key instrument; (c) multiple sources of data are generally collected; (c) the design of the study is emergent; and (d) results of the study are typically holistic in nature (Creswell, 2007).

Looking at qualitative studies in education specifically, Berliner (2002) suggested the desire to understand the particularities of individual situations and settings has caused these studies to become important in educational research. Merriam (1998) described five types of qualitative research found in education: (a) the basic or generic qualitative study, (b) ethnography, (c) phenomenology, (d) grounded theory, and (e) case study. Basic or generic qualitative research includes description, interpretation and understanding sought in a broad manner. Through different acts of data collection, the
researcher seeks to identify patterns in the topic of interest in the form of themes and categories.

Ethnography focuses on uncovering and describing beliefs, values and attitudes within a specific society or culture. Phenomenology occurs through the pursuit of collecting data from participants’ firsthand experiences with a given phenomenon. Grounded theory inductively builds assumptions around an aspect of practice and is ultimately grounded in the real-world experiences of participants. Case study involves an intense study of a single unit or bounded system and can occur in combination with the previously described types of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998).

Within the five broad categories of qualitative research methodology, researchers select appropriate methods to craft studies that will yield rich data from study participants. Different data collection methods in qualitative research include conducting interviews, engaging in observations, and examining documents (Merriam, 1998). Within these categories, further techniques and processes occur, depending upon the type of data the researcher seeks to collect.

The methodology of this researcher’s study is best categorized as a generic qualitative study which employed two specific data collection methods: interviews and documents. Within the category of interview, individual interviews as well as focus group interviews occurred. In regard to document analysis, related school and district documents were collected but provided only limited details to supplement information shared in interviews and focus groups.

Methods

Within the broader category of interviewing, two qualitative methods matched the
purpose of this study: individual interviews and focus groups. Both approaches allowed for open-ended discussions. Responses to the following research questions were explored: (a) What are the lived experiences of teachers and administrators involved in looping programs at the middle-level?, and (b) what conditions encourage the institutionalization of looping in the school settings where it is introduced?

In addition to the data collected from focus groups and interviews, the researcher collected documents from school settings that provided definitions and descriptions of schools’ looping programs. Evaluation materials used to determine perceptions of stakeholder groups in connection with looping were also sought. Merriam (1998) affirmed, “Documents are . . . a ready-made source of data easily accessible to the imaginative and resourceful investigator . . . the term document [is an] umbrella term to refer to a wide range of written, visual, and physical material relevant to the study at hand” (p. 112). Creswell (2007) considers documents to be one of the four basic types of “words or images” that qualitative researchers collect to help them answer their research questions.

The Research Context

In keeping with common characteristics of qualitative research, the natural settings in which data were collected in this study were schools where looping programs are in practice or have taken place. In-person data were gathered by talking directly to participants in the middle school settings where they work. Different from quantitative research, within this qualitative study the researcher, herself, was a key instrument, gathering information personally rather than using questionnaires or instruments developed by others. The primary focus was determining and sharing participants’
meanings related to looping.

The researcher brought to the study an understanding of obstacles associated with implementing looping from her own experiences as a public school administrator and from the literature reviewed. However, focus in this study was on discovering the meaning participants hold in relation to developing personal connections with children in academic settings and the usefulness or lack thereof, of looping, as an intervention strategy. In an attempt to develop a holistic account, the researcher interviewed participants in more than one school, probing commonalities and differences among settings.

Research Participants – Focus Groups

Research participants in this two-part study included teachers and administrators with looping experience at the middle school level. Rubin and Rubin (2005) recommended the researcher should, “Picture the research arena as a theater in the round and try to locate interviewees with different vantage points on what is going on at center stage. You then talk to individuals from each of those vantage points” (p. 67).

Different vantage points were captured by conducting teacher focus groups in two different middle schools. Two particular sites were selected because they represented different points in the looping implementation process. One school has had a looping program in place for 8 years. It might be argued that looping has become institutionalized within this school. Berman (1977) said that institutionalization occurs when project-related change becomes part of the standard educational repertoire at both the district and classroom level. Looping in this setting appears to have become part of the cultural fabric of the school.
The second school was selected because of the contrary perspective it provides. Looping has been newly introduced into this school, and its fate beyond the 5-year implementation phase has not yet been determined. The voices of teachers in this school provided perceptions of looping at an earlier stage of implementation. Obstacles associated with implementation are still new to teachers and administrators in this setting.

The middle school with the looping program in place since 2007 will be referred to in this discussion as PMMS. PMMS is located in a rural/suburban setting and has 453 students in Grades 6 through 8. PMMS is one of four schools in a district with an enrollment of 2,100 students.

At PMMS, looping was studied for several years before the first teacher-student loop was scheduled. A Looping Study Team was assembled and reviewed research, read articles, and made visits to schools with established looping programs in New York State and Connecticut.

The Looping Study Team sought input from teachers regarding, for example, whether or not the program would begin with a single grade-level team or both grade-level teams. Teachers overwhelmingly chose a full grade-level loop, thus requiring that all teachers participate. Some teachers, at the time of initial implementation, were more supportive of the relationship-building philosophy central to looping than others. The Looping Study Team, however, determined the program had more potential benefits than obstacles to overcome and procedures were put in place to help ease teacher anxiety during the onset of the pilot. Two teams of seventh and eighth grade teachers with approximately 12 teachers at each grade level are currently participating in a 5-year pilot study. One team of teachers completed its first Grade 7 to Grade 8 loop in the spring of
2009 and a second in the spring of 2010.

The second set of teacher focus groups was also conducted in a suburban setting. For the purpose of this discussion, this setting was referred to as MWMS. MWMS was selected for two reasons: (a) it has a looping program that appears to have become part of the culture of the building and (b) it shares demographic similarities with PMMS for comparison purposes (see Table 3.1).

A few differences between the two middle schools should be noted: a larger school site than PMMS, MWMS currently enrolls 701 students. MWMS is part of a larger school district, relative to comparing it to PMMS, with 4,024 students district-wide. Within the district there are three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Whereas PMMS has a student population of sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students, MWMS contains only two grade levels: seventh and eighth. Table 3.1 shows demographic characteristics of PMMS and MWMS.
Table 3.1

School Demographic Information (New York State Comprehensive Information Data Report, 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PMMS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of students</td>
<td>532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade levels</td>
<td>6,7,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student attendance</td>
<td>96.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student stability</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students suspended (07-08)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of professional staff</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families on public welfare</td>
<td>1-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students receiving free lunch</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students receiving reduced price lunch</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All students and core teachers at MWMS engaged in the looping process for the first several years of implementation. However, recently, mathematics teachers at MWMS have ceased the process of advancing with students. The term core teacher refers to teachers of the subjects of English language arts/reading, Social studies, mathematics, and science. At PMMS, because the building contains sixth-grade teachers with certifications that prevent a sixth- to seventh-grade loop in New York State, only core teachers in Grades 7 and 8 loop. Whereas PMMS completed its first student-teacher
loop at the conclusion of the 2008-2009 school year, MWMS has been looping since 2001. Principals in both buildings have served in leadership capacities in their respective buildings for more than 10 years.

The present MWMS principal made the decision for teachers to loop with minimal input from stakeholder groups. In the first year, teachers were given a choice to participate or not participate in looping. In the second year, all teachers were required to participate as a result of the principal’s decision to standardize the looping strategy throughout the entire building. The staff at MWMS prepared for the implementation of the looping design by reading research articles and visiting other area schools involved in looping. In a preliminary interview with the principal of MWMS, she was clear that looping in this school was never described as a pilot program. When looping began, she made a long-term commitment to adopt the philosophy behind the strategy: providing caring, continuous adult teacher teams for young adolescent students.

Like their colleagues at PMMS, the MWMS teachers held differing opinions about looping prior to entering the implementation phase. Some expressed enthusiasm for looping and some preferred not to participate. Regardless of individual opinions, when the Grade 7 year ended, teachers looped with students as a team to Grade 8. Looping has continued consistently in all subject areas at MWMS, with the exception of mathematics, for the past 8 years. In the 2007-2008 school year, a request was made by the mathematics department to revert to traditional structures for this subject area only and the principal granted approval for this request for the following year. However, after a year of not participating in looping, the department is in disagreement about whether or not to return to looping.
Focus Group – Size/Selection

In determining the number of participants to include in each teacher focus group, Jayanthi and Nelson (2002) suggested researchers consider whether the purpose of the discussion is to yield depth or quantity of responses. With depth as the primary purpose, the recommended number of participants in each group is 6 to 8. When quantity of responses is most important, the recommendation is 8 to 10 participants (Jayanthi & Nelson). Because the intent of this study was for depth in discussion rather than quantity of responses, 6 to 8 teacher participants were included in each focus group and three focus groups were conducted in each of the two participating schools. Overarching objectives for focus group discussions can be found in Appendix C.

Demographic information collected from teacher focus group participants included the length of time teaching, the length of time spent in looping programs, the subject(s) teachers instruct, and the titles of the teaching certifications possessed. The researcher introduction letter and participant screening form, found in Appendix D, were used to collect demographic information and organize groupings. Table 3.2 displays the characteristics of teacher focus group participants at PMMS and MWMS.
Table 3.2

*Characteristics of Teacher Focus Group Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Participants</th>
<th>PMMS</th>
<th>MWMS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of years of teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Certification</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Certification</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twenty-three core teachers at PMMS were invited to participate in the study and 16 of the 23 participated, yielding a participation rate of 70%. Twenty-six teachers from MWMS were invited to participate and 20 participated, yielding a participation rate of
Appendix G includes the conversational guide used with focus groups. Six main questions served as the basis for discussion. The researcher served as both the interviewer and focus group facilitator.

Research Participants - Interviews

Principal participants in the study were purposefully selected for inclusion as a result of their experiences leading schools at some phase of a looping journey. The selection of interview participants employed a qualitative sampling technique known as snowballing. Snowballing, also known as chain or network sampling, is defined by Merriam (1998) as “a strategy that involves asking each participant or group of participants to refer you to other participants” and is the most commonly used form of purposeful sampling (p. 63). Because looping does not occur widely or systematically throughout school systems, it was impossible to select the participant sample using random selection. Rather, principal participants were identified through articles in research literature, regional, county and organizational listservs, and through word-of-mouth connections during the period interviews were conducted.

Creswell (2007) suggested researchers seeking to interview participants who have experienced a common phenomenon should interview “from 5 to 25 individuals” (p. 61). Rubin and Rubin (2005) asserted, “You do not need a vast amount of interviewees to increase the credibility of your findings; instead, you have to convince readers that you have interviewed to obtain different points of view and that when brought together these understandings provide a complete picture” (p. 68). In this study, the researcher planned to interview no fewer than five principals who had looping experience and to continue to
interview above and beyond that number until the point of saturation was reached. The point of saturation was considered reached when no new ideas were shared in interviews, but participant comments simply mirrored those that had been made in previous interviews. Creswell also advised that whereas a research plan is important to have in place before the start of data collection, the qualitative researcher must be prepared that after the field is entered, “questions may change, the forms of data collection may shift, and the individuals studied and the sites visited may be modified” (p. 39). The researcher found this claim to be true, as explained in Chapter 4.

Principals from the Upstate New York State region provided unique experiences, some having initiated the looping concept in the school buildings where they work and some having inherited looping programs after assuming positions where looping was in place. One participant had experienced looping in a building that later chose to abandon its program. Principals who participated in the study have leadership experience at the building level ranging from 3 years to more than 10 years.

*Instruments Used in Data Collection*

Kvale and Brinkman (2009) stated researchers should plan the purpose and design of interviews prior to engaging participants in discussion. Within planning, researchers choose to implement one of two types of interview sessions: open-ended/unstructured or semi-structured (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Open-ended, broadly structured interviews are meant to obtain a general understanding of a topic. This type of interviewing generally occurs at the onset of a study to help the researcher better understand the topic. Semi-structured interviews, conversely, tend to occur when the researcher knows more about the topic and prepares a question guide to refer to during the interview. Typically,
qualitative researchers do not overstructure interviews so they are able to follow the lead of the participant regarding his or her lived experiences (Rubin & Rubin).

Appendices E and F include conversational guides used in conducting semi-structured interviews with principals. Two guides were developed for use: one for principals with experience supervising continuous looping programs and one for principals who have supervised looping in schools that have converted to traditional scheduling configurations. In some interviews both guides were utilized because some principals had related experience in both situations.

Rubin and Rubin (2005) asserted, “Asking everyone the same questions makes little sense in interviewing . . . an interview is a window on a time and a social world that is experienced one person at a time, one incident at a time” (p. 14). Rubin and Rubin used the term “responsive interviewing,” an approach that “allows a variety of styles yet incorporates what is standard in the field” (p. 15). Conversational guides were employed as a reference in interviews but not followed so narrowly that their use limited opportunity to explore the unique experiences of each participant. Questions in conversational guides provided scaffolding toward the broad research questions. Interview content was recorded using a digital voice recorder. Individual interviews were transcribed and coded to extract common themes and patterns.

Procedures Used

Because of the critical nature of the facilitator role, the researcher personally moderated focus groups, although her presence in the focus group setting where she works should be considered a limitation. Jayanthi and Nelson (2002) suggested facilitators considering moderating groups for their own research studies should refer to a
checklist provided in their text to be certain the researcher possesses the characteristics of a good facilitator and can be impartial even when perceptions contrary to their own personal opinions are shared. Prompts on this checklist included “I am willing to listen and learn from the participants” and “I can take constructive criticism” (p. 17). Working through the checklist, the researcher answered positively for each of the prompts posed and impartially moderated focus groups in this study.

The researcher tested focus group questions with teachers who were not part of this research study, but who had experience looping, prior to engaging study participants at PMMS and MWMS. In addition, the researcher conducted two interviews with principals with looping experience at levels other than the middle in order to test and revise study questions prior to engaging in interviews.

Data Analysis

Perspectives from research literature. Shenton (2004) stated. “Although the standing of qualitative inquiry has improved considerably in recent years, one of the major criticisms, which in some quarters, continues to be made of work of this type is that the research processes undertaken are described in insufficient detail and are not truly transparent” (p. 143). Maykut and Morehouse (1994) affirmed qualitative research has been criticized as being highly subjective. Disciplined data analysis, however, increases its standing in academic circles, as well as improves the reliability and rigor of individual studies. In seeking to make the process of data analysis in this study more transparent, a later section describes the steps this researcher followed to produce reliable findings.

Gough and Scott (2000) asserted the following about quantitative data analysis:
(it) produces straight-forward yes/no answers [and] presents few problems from the point of view of coding. Categories are pre-determined by the researcher and are normally also clear to the respondents at the outset . . . whatever is discovered by the researcher is likely to be easy to handle” (p. 340).

Contrary to quantitative analysis, Basit (2003) stated, “Data analysis is the most difficult and most crucial aspect of qualitative research” (p. 143). Whereas quantitative research tends to offer a clear point of departure between data collection and data analysis, no such point exists with the analysis of qualitative data. Seidel (1998) offered a contrasting point of view, asserting that the complex and rigorous practice of qualitative data analysis can be reduced to a simple foundation: noticing, collecting, and thinking.

A possible criticism of qualitative methods is that “the simple act of breaking down data into its constituent parts can distort and mislead the analyst” (Seidel, 1998, p. 5). This researcher continually worked back and forth between breaking down parts of the data and seeking to use the parts to create holistic themes in an attempt to guard against such distortion.

Organization. This researcher engaged in full transcription, capturing on paper exactly what participants stated including grammatical errors and stalling words. The researcher personally transcribed interview and focus group sessions. Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggested doing so “forces you to pay attention to what interviewees said and helps you prepare for the next interview” (p. 204). Silverman (2001) argued that repeatedly listening to participants’ words during the transcription phase heightens researchers’ awareness of the speakers’ perceptions.

As Maykut and Morehouse (1994) suggested, transcriptions from each interview
and focus group were labeled in order to keep track of the many pages of text that were
generated during the data analysis phase. Pages were labeled with a “T” for transcript
and “I” for interview or “FG” for focus group. The initials of the interview participant or
location and number of the focus group were also used in labeling. Hard copies of
transcriptions, as well as the digital recording devices containing recorded conversations,
were kept in a locked file cabinet and will continue to be maintained in this manner for 3
years. Electronic copies were kept on a password-protected computer.

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) also recommended the qualitative researcher
designate a physical space with walls on which visual displays can be affixed and
referred to throughout the data analysis phase. The researcher used an appropriate space
in her home office.

Different perspectives exist regarding the value of utilizing software designed
specifically to help researchers code data. For the purpose of this study, this researcher
did not employ any coding software in her analysis. Basit (2003) stated that learning
software packages takes a considerable amount of time. Because this researcher had
months rather than years to analyze data, she chose to focus attention on the process itself
rather than on learning a software program she had not had experience with previously.

Formative and summative processes. Shenton (2004) suggested the following
steps be part of the formative process of data analysis: post-meeting observations and
post-transcription review. Post-meeting observations are written down immediately
following interview and focus group conversations, prior to listening to the recording, to
capture the researcher’s initial impressions. Post-transcription review refers to recording
notes after the creation of the first transcript and then repeating this process after the
completion of subsequent transcripts. This process leads the researcher to detect preliminary themes and test these themes with later participants, perhaps inviting them to help explain themes that are in the process of being uncovered. Rubin and Rubin (2005) asserted, “Interviews are systematically examined and analyzed immediately after they are conducted to suggest further topics and questions to pursue” (p. 16).

This researcher kept a field journal in which post-meeting and post transcription notes were made. In addition, she conducted member checks with participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described member checking as seeking input from research participants regarding the accuracy with which the researcher has captured the experience of the participants. Member checking helps to improve accuracy of results as it offers opportunity for unintentional misrepresentations to be corrected and reduces the opportunity for bias. In this study, the researcher created a summary of the main points from each interview that she shared with the individual participants for validation. She also created a summary of the focus group conversations and had one member of each group review and validate the data for accuracy.

Interview and focus group conversations were transcribed and coded. Seidel (1998) defined coding as “the process the researcher uses to begin to create order” (p. 4). Guetzkow (1950) stated, “Coding procedures involve two operations: that of separating the qualitative material into codable units and of establishing systems of categories which can be applied to the unitized material” (p. 57).

As recommended by Maykut and Morehouse (1994), transcripts were scrutinized and the physical act of cutting apart units of data occurred. Data units were placed on Post-it notes. Like themes were grouped and affixed to presentation boards. Following
affixing notes onto boards, the researcher determined a category or theme to name the grouping. This process occurred separately for data from principal interviews and teacher focus groups. A concept web was created to determine linkages between concepts and the data being scrutinized, as recommended by Shenton (2004) and Basit (2003). Webs were added to and manipulated throughout the collection process.

The designation of themes was kept flexible until saturation was met and data collection ceased. Continual review and manipulation of concept webs helped the researcher reduce the amount of data collected into a reasonable number of categories to describe and to present as findings. In preparation for the summative act of writing conclusions in Chapter 5, the researcher continually compared findings from the data collected with those of the researchers and theorists presented in Chapters 1 and 2 to make connections and identify common themes, as suggested by Shenton (2004). The six challenges the researcher noted from the literature review in Chapter 2 proved helpful in providing a framework for coding, however, she remained open to the possibility of more or fewer categories emerging during this process. Information to support some of the six challenges in the data was uncovered as well as, alternatively, new categories that have yet to be discussed in the literature.

Summary of the Methodology/Conclusion

Research in this study allowed for a reflective look at past practices, offering opportunity to separate characteristics of programs with continued implementation of looping from those abandoned or restructured. Using qualitative design and employing interviews and focus groups as main data collection strategies, discussions with principals and teachers who are, or were, part of looping programs occurred. Knowledge of how
success was achieved and an understanding of difficulties encountered by schools that had been unable to sustain looping programs will provide valuable guidance for future looping practitioners.

Findings from this study, as well as their connection to research literature related to looping and reviewed in Chapter 2, are presented in Chapter 4. Study conclusions are described in Chapter 5. Also in the concluding chapter, the researchers’ journey of professional growth and development as a result of planning for and conducting this study is chronicled. In the summary discussion, the researcher makes recommendations based on findings for teachers and administrators to consider should they wish to explore looping as an organizational structure for their middle schools. The researcher did not intend this study would stand alone but did intend for it to add to the body of research currently available related to looping.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Whereas exploring the efficacy of looping suggested that the strategy was beneficial for students and teachers, the focus in this study was not on proving or disproving value. Instead, the focus was on exploring the lived experiences of teachers and administrators involved in longer-term student-teacher scheduling configurations. Research literature reviewed in Chapter 2 confirmed that looping generates interest in academic communities. Nonetheless, the literature also indicated a paucity of quality research on the topic. A preponderance of existing studies simply enumerated the advantages and disadvantages of looping and many of these studies were more than 10 years old. In order to provide greater depth and breadth on the topic of looping, this researcher designed a qualitative study that extended beyond describing the strategy of looping to probing authentic experiences of individuals who have worked within looping configurations.

Data from two complementary sources were collected over a 2-month period: focus groups composed of individual teachers and interviews with principals. The focus groups with teachers were conducted in two middle school settings: MWMS and PMMS. MWMS has had a continuous looping program in place in core subject areas, with the exception of mathematics, for a period of 9 years. PMMS has had a core looping program in place for 3 years. At both PMMS and MWMS, the decision to implement looping was made by building principals, with input from leadership teams. At MWMS,
teachers were first given a choice to advance with students or remain within traditional scheduling configurations. However, beyond MWMS’s first year of looping, all core teachers were assigned to 2-year configurations, regardless of personal preferences.

Three teacher focus groups were conducted at each middle-school site. The decision to select sites with a discrepancy in the number of years that looping programs were in place was deliberate. It was intended this difference would provide unique and varied perspectives at different points in teachers’ looping journeys.

Eleven Upstate New York middle school principals were also interviewed for the study. Interviewing ceased when the point of saturation was reached and participants described professional experiences similar to those shared previously by their colleagues.

Thirty-six teachers participated in the study’s six focus group sessions: 16 teachers at PMMS and 20 teachers at MWMS. Focus groups were composed of seventh- and eighth-grade teachers representing different core subject areas. Whereas the original intent was to have focus groups of 6 to 8 participants, due to illnesses and scheduling conflicts, two sessions at PMMS were composed of five teachers, rather than the original expectation of six. At MWMS, groups were composed of 8, 7, and 5 participants.

The researcher’s role during focus group sessions was to define process and to observe participant interactions. Ground rules were reviewed with participants prior to the start of each session. A participant was identified to pose one of each of the researcher’s six questions to fellow focus group participants. Free-flowing conversation centering on that question continued until participants had completed sharing. At that time, the next participant posed another of the pre-identified questions. This process continued until groups had fully discussed each of the study’s six questions.
Research Questions

This investigation centered on two research questions: (a) What are the lived experiences of teachers and administrators involved in the process of looping?, and (b) what conditions encourage the institutionalization of looping in the school settings in which it is introduced?

Data Collection and Analysis

The content of interview and focus group sessions was captured using a digital recording device. The researcher also wrote personal reflections in a journal throughout the period of time data were collected in the field. Following each interview, data were transcribed by the researcher. This process provided another opportunity for the researcher to interface with the study’s data. Hard copies of transcriptions were also printed for analysis. Memos summarizing participants’ shared experiences were drafted and shared with either the corresponding interviewee or one participant from each focus group. Through the process of member checking, one participant from each focus group verified a summary of the narrative data, derived from the six sessions. Similarly, 10 of the 11 interviews were verified. A member check response was not received from one interview participant in the study.

Coding and categorizing occurred continually during the time period data were collected in the field. Participant experiences related to the research questions were identified and coded within transcripts. Phrases capturing lived experiences of participants were transferred to Post-it notes and then affixed to presentation boards. Either the number of the focus group where a comment was made, or the initials of the interview participant who made the comment, were recorded on the reverse side of the
note. As a result, the researcher was able to determine easily and accurately the number of participants who made similar comments across the 11 interviews, as well as across the six focus groups.

Two separate presentation boards with data affixed were created: one for focus group data and one for interview data. The flexibility of Post-it notes facilitated the continual grouping of comments pertaining to lived experiences and conditions. Notes were regrouped several times during the process, as new data were added and new insights were gained by the researcher.

Webs were created to assist in grouping data into categories. As a result of thoughtful organization, themes related to research questions emerged. Individual transcripts were revisited and participant quotations were identified to include in Chapter 4, to further describe the identified themes. Quotations were marked on transcription pages using Post-it flags. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) suggested the use of quotations is a “common mode for presenting the findings of interview inquiries” (p. 279). Quotations selected for inclusion in the text and within tables added specificity to the presentation of results by describing experiences within looping configurations in participants’ own words.

Results – Teacher Focus Groups

Focus group data revealed lived experiences of teachers involved in looping configurations as well as conditions that, in the opinion of participants, supported the sustainability of looping. Several experiences and conditions described in the first focus group were repeated in later focus group sessions, indicating many individual experiences described by teachers were lived experiences of several participants in the study.
Research Question One – Lived Experiences

The study’s first research question was: What are the lived experiences of teachers involved in middle-school looping configurations? Teacher experience was classified into five stages describing participant reflections and perceptions. Such perceptions covered the time from when individuals first learned they would be looping with students through advancing with students the first several years of programming. These phases, which the researcher has termed Five Stages of Teachers’ Looping Experience, include: (a) Stage One: Initial Reluctance Related to a New and Unknown Strategy, (b) Stage Two: Discovering the Benefits of Looping, (c) Stage Three: Pre-looping Perceptions Versus Reality of the Lived Experience, (d) Stage Four: Reconciling Benefits of Looping with Personal Teaching Preferences, and (e) Stage Five: Continued Momentum or Abandonment.

Stage One: Initial reluctance related to a new and unknown strategy. Within stage one, teachers identified several changes that affected their professional, and sometimes personal, lives when looping configurations were adopted. Whereas literature reviewed prior to data collection suggested teachers might not be interested in looping because of the added work that appears to accompany implementation (George and Alexander, 2003), this study revealed teacher concerns were deeper than time commitment alone. Discussion of pre-looping reluctance revealed concern, and in some cases anxiety, about trading self-perceived excellence at a designated grade-level for the unfamiliarity of a grade-level not taught previously.

Teacher efficacy, or a teacher’s confidence in his or her ability to promote student learning, has been correlated to teachers’ willingness to adopt instructional innovations
Confident teachers have been shown to demonstrate a higher degree of optimism toward teaching innovations than do teachers who do not possess as high a degree of confidence (Hawkins). Whereas teachers in this study acknowledged looping was hard work, they accepted the notion that more effort would be required initially. Rather, a fear of ineffectiveness was identified as the main concern driving teacher reluctance toward the strategy of looping, not the amount of work that would be required. Reluctance was also prompted by a concern that teachers would not be good matches for the students assigned to them, or that they would be required to work with challenging students or parents for multiple years. Teachers new to the profession, who were still becoming comfortable with general classroom competencies, also expressed feeling overwhelmed by having to learn 2 years of new curriculum at the onset of a teaching career, rather than implementing the same grade-level curriculum for 2 consecutive years.

Educational researchers such as Steiner (1996), Noddings (2005), Flinders and Noddings (2001), and Farmer (2002) speak to the practicality of looping as a strategy for supporting student growth and development. However, time spent advancing grade levels with students was necessary for teacher participants in this study to acknowledge fully and to appreciate such benefits. Doyle and Ponder (1977) used the term “practicality ethic” to suggest innovations perceived as practical by teachers are the ones most likely to be incorporated into classroom procedures. Within this study, the act of experiencing the benefits of looping, firsthand, revealed the practicality of the strategy more clearly than if teachers were to simply read about the benefits of looping in research literature.
Stage Two: Discovering the benefits of looping. Following reluctance exhibited at the onset of implementation, teachers resolved themselves to the challenge of 2-year instructional assignments and discovered the benefits that result from teaching within looping configurations. Within this stage teachers experienced a level of confidence that uniquely comes from spending multiple years teaching the same group of students. Following the completion of a looping cycle, teachers reported knowing the 2-year curriculum cycle intimately and described their level of instructional skill as more well-rounded. Previous to their participation in a looping design, some teachers spent years at a particular grade-level, teaching a single curriculum year after year. As a result, curriculum units had not been peer reviewed by colleagues who taught at other grade-levels.

Initially sharing materials among department members was described as a survival strategy, necessary to manage an unfamiliar curriculum the first year. Teachers shared lesson plans and activities when the idea of creating new lessons and instructional materials from scratch seemed overwhelming. One focus group participant stated, “I think it really brought some departments together. At first, we had to rely on each other.” However, later in the process, this collegial sharing served to provide a value greater than mere survival, resulting in lesson and unit refinement and broader peer collaboration. As a result of gaining a greater curricular perspective, several teachers reported feeling refreshed and renewed. One focus group participant stated, “You know, you have this long-term commitment. I think sometimes, you try harder. And that stretches us personally and professionally.” Another participant shared, “I love it. I think it is just such a benefit for kids. I think it makes us stronger as teachers.”
Social studies teachers, for example, reported enjoying the sense of ownership over the 2-year curriculum cycle and the opportunity it presented to prepare students for a state assessment covering Grades 7 and 8 curricula. Throughout the 2 years, teachers possessed greater ability to adjust instructional pacing based on student needs than could have been achieved in a single year. When greater amounts of time were spent on a unit in Grade 7, a teacher could recoup this time by adjusting planning in Grade 8.

Whereas teacher and team perseverance with students was identified as important regardless of the scheduling configuration in a school, teachers described examples of increased levels of perseverance and a stronger sense of commitment to students as benefits of looping. For example, addressing a developing issue with a student in Grade 7, mid-year, might have been intentionally avoided in previous years. One participant stated, “I think it forces us as professionals to persevere. If you only have them for a year, it’s much easier to go – well in 90 days, I don’t have to deal anymore.”

Teachers admitted that in single-year configurations, they might have simply waited for the end of the school year rather than investing time working on challenging academic or behavioral issues with students. Knowing a student would be assigned to the same teacher or team the following year encouraged teachers to work through issues with students and their families more deliberately. Jackson and Davis (2000) corroborated this finding, asserting teachers who loop “tend to invest more of themselves in their students when they know them longer and better, and they tend to persist in finding solutions to academic problems and other problems because they have more time to do so” (p. 134).

Teachers also reported developing a more complete understanding of student strengths and weaknesses as a result of the 2-year instructional commitment. They could
more accurately individualize planning for students in the second year, after becoming familiar with each student’s strengths and weaknesses in the first year. A special education teacher described the benefit of writing a child’s Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), which guides year-long instruction for Students with Disabilities, at the end of year 1 of a loop, and being the same teacher to oversee the IEP in year 2. Teachers experienced a greater sense of pride in student accomplishments in looping configurations because student growth was more readily visible over 2 years than in a single year. A teacher described this sense of pride, stating, “We have a handful of kids who we have just seen drastic improvements with and changes in since last year. So, it’s really cool to see that.”

In addition to curriculum benefits within departments, some teachers also reported observing greater benefits working as grade-level interdisciplinary teams, with the same students, for a period of 2 years rather than one. At both MWMS and PMMS, core teachers not only engage in a looping program, but do so as part of a team of five to six teaching professionals to which a group of students is assigned for Grades 7 and 8. Elliott (1998) argued that, “once a school has abandoned the traditional one-class, 1-year, one-teacher way of doing things, it is easier to break with tradition in other ways” (p. 39). Some teams in this study self-reported that they began to demonstrate initiative focusing on issues with students they had not previously addressed. One participant noted, “But looping with the entire grade and also with the team of teachers really is a different story. It’s just so much better and, I think, valuable for everyone involved.”

For example, a seventh-grade team identified instances of bullying at the onset of the school year. Rather than suggesting counselors or administrators intervene, the team
addressed bullying behaviors themselves, creating a program promoting pro-social behaviors and teambuilding. Following participation in the program, teachers reported students showed characteristics of a stronger, more unified student body. Teachers also demonstrated a stronger desire to establish positive relationships with students early in the school year, as well as to set clear academic and behavioral expectations in year 1.

A clearer vision for looping developed at the onset of a teacher or team’s second looping sequence than was present in the first looping sequence. Experience encouraged teams to be more assertive, to display ownership over student progress, and to develop positive teacher-student relationships. An unexpected outcome of looping with students as a complete interdisciplinary team was the increased level of ownership that teachers felt, not only independently, but also as a team. A sense of ownership grew not only with regard to academic development of students, but also over students’ social advancement.

One focus group participant described this increased ownership in the following way: “I think upstairs we took a lot more on ourselves instead of dumping them on the office. We deal more personally with the students.” Another focus group participant described the team’s interest in students’ social development:

. . . like the issue of bullying we are looking at this year on our team. This is something we can even take apart. We don’t have to deal with it all in one day. We can deal with a little bit of it and work through it over the next years and have a bigger strategy in place in some ways. It’s exciting, the things we have been able to do in 2 years.

*Stage Three: Pre-looping perceptions versus reality of experience.* In the third stage of teachers’ looping experience, teachers adjudicated which initial fears were
realized versus those fears that did not occur. Whereas some anticipated fears emerged and remained well past the initial implementation phase, most teacher-anticipated fears related to looping were never realized.

Teachers generally reported that pre-looping concerns expressed at the onset did not occur in actual looping experiences. Through perseverance and professionalism, teachers were not instructionally unprepared or ineffective. Whereas teachers’ abilities to anticipate content-related student misconceptions took time to develop, teachers did not struggle with new content to the extent they had feared. And as previously suggested, teachers ultimately felt more knowledgeable in subject matter overall as a result of teaching 2-year curriculum cycles. One teacher stated, “I know what the students have learned and what I still need to teach them.”

Teachers also reported initial reluctance about potentially working with a difficult student or parent for 2 consecutive years. However, this concern manifested itself no more in looping configurations than in traditional settings. One team described working with a difficult student for 2 years, and whereas the experience was challenging, the student's needs were more thoroughly addressed as a result of the looping configuration. Had the student moved to a new team in Grade 8, the original team’s efforts to secure extra support for the student would have been disrupted. The needs of this student were met continuously as a result of working consistently with this team of teachers. A teacher described the benefit of this time by stating, “I think it forces you in some ways to take deeper steps into those problems because you have more time. And some things that you couldn’t have tackled before, maybe in a year, you say, you know in 2 years, I really think we can make a difference.”
Similarly, two teachers in separate focus groups reported that teaching students as seventh graders made managing the behavior of those students as eighth-graders less challenging. Less of what teachers referred to as *eighth-grade-itis*, a teacher-coined term referring to students who put forth less effort in Grade 8 than in Grade 7, was seen in students with whom teachers had looped than those with whom teachers had not looped. One focus group participant made this point emphatically:

I’ve found in the past, eighth graders, if you haven’t taught them in seventh, tend to be difficult, behaviorally. That just disappears. I don’t have that issue. I have such a strong rapport with my kids. You can really enjoy them in the eighth-grade year.

Ongoing teacher reluctance related most often to the concern that looping arrangements could yield uncomfortable pairings of teachers and students. However none of the participants in any of the six focus groups said this possibility was realized. They could not recall an experience in which they were required to maintain an unproductive teacher-student match for a period of 2 years.

Within the focus groups, most of the pre-looping concerns expressed, such as concern about managing difficult students, never materialized in the actual experience of looping. The genuine experience of looping differed considerably from teachers’ initial projections. Teachers recognized more benefits than they had expected, a finding also present in the research literature. Describing a looping program in a school where he worked, Fenter (2009) reported, “The fears that might otherwise have stopped the implementation of the model were unfounded based on the real experiences of the parents, students, and teachers” (p. 30).
Also in the stage of *Perception Versus Reality of Experience*, teachers reported discovering ways to overcome obstacles they had originally associated with looping or had discovered through their lived experiences. For example, teachers reported developing routines, for example, making detailed notes on lesson plans so that they could later recall changes to make before teaching these same lessons again. Teachers began to adjust to what they referred to as “the shock” of ending the school year with “soon-to-be-ninth-grade students” and transitioning to “just-promoted-from-sixth-grade students” in the fall, which required a significant shift in expectations.

Within this phase, most teachers reported they would continue to participate in a looping program if given the choice, even though they acknowledged the existence of some drawbacks to looping configurations. In their discussions about looping, 32 focus group participants expressed a desire to continue looping, whereas one teacher was undecided what she would choose if given the opportunity to discontinue looping.

Mathematics teachers at MWMS, in their second year of a traditionally scheduled program, are the only core subject teachers no longer looping in this school. Three of the four MWMS mathematics teachers continue to support single-year scheduling in the subject area they teach. However, two of the three supported continual looping in other subject areas. One MWMS mathematics teacher would choose to resume looping, if given the opportunity.

Opinions expressed by teachers in focus group conversations were consistent with opinions recorded on pre-focus group screening forms, completed prior to session participation. This consistency supports the reliability of data. The perceptions that teachers shared in conversations with peers were consistent with perceptions recorded on
forms shared only with the researcher. Table 4.1 displays individual teacher perceptions of looping for the 36 focus group participants, as reported on focus group pre-screening forms.

Table 4.1

Focus Group Participants’ Perceptions of Looping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions of looping</th>
<th>PMMS Participants (n=16)</th>
<th>MWMS Participants (n=20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Supportive</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Unsupportive</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsupportive</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Degrees of teacher support for looping were similar in both school settings. Most teachers reported a “supportive stance” regarding looping. A smaller number reported a “somewhat supportive stance.” One individual in each building reported a “somewhat unsupportive stance.” No participants reported an “unsupportive stance.”

Stage Four: Reconciling benefits of looping with personal teaching preferences.

Within stage four, positive experiences with looping encouraged teachers to continue teaching within this configuration. These individuals generally expressed that academic benefits for students, as well as the personal relationships developed throughout, overshadowed teachers’ personal desires to teach at only one grade level, even when teachers perceived it to be easier for them to do so. This finding is consistent with those
reported in research literature. For example, Weary’s study (2000) demonstrated that the number of teachers’ concerns expressed during the implementation phase of looping was twice as many as were reported the following year, after having time to work within, and adjust to, a looping configuration. Similarly, teachers in the Nevin et al. study (2008) expressed a desire to apply newly developing knowledge, as a result of experiencing looping, to make adjustments to the program in future years. Having the opportunity to implement improvements to the program the following year, teachers were interested and willing to continue within the program.

The exception to such reconciliation in this study was the MWMS mathematics department. In 2008, a department request to remain at one grade-level in order to focus on content mastery was granted by the principal, although dissension over abandoning looping practices in this department continues to exist in this school at the present time.

Stage Five: Continued momentum or abandonment. This final stage of looping implementation identifies factors outside the realm of looping that can influence teachers’ desires for continued support of, and participation in, looping programs. Such factors can serve as catalysts for returning to traditional practices. Looping can be abandoned after experiencing years of support from teachers and departments, depending on the magnitude of the factor’s influence. Such factors can cause teachers to revert to stage one, Initial Reluctance, even after having previously moved through the five stages of looping experience and coming to value the benefits of looping.

An example of one factor discouraging momentum was encountering state-imposed curriculum changes. Three mathematics teachers at MWMS expressed
frustration about such changes, which were reported to have occurred frequently, compounding the personal and professional stress of beginning a new course and planning lessons from scratch each year. Frustration caused some teachers to emphasize teacher curriculum mastery above relationship-building with students, a finding corroborated by Liu (1997).

Mathematics teachers at MWMS were also required to infuse SMARTboard technology into their instruction, in addition to preparing lessons for a new grade-level curriculum. One teacher felt unskilled in the use of technology and was overwhelmed by state curriculum changes that coincided with what she described as additional building-level expectations. With changes affecting her department, she felt she could not adequately maintain her effectiveness and balance her personal responsibilities. She stated, “... and then with the technology, but it takes me a little longer with technology, but it is overwhelming. I guess, it’s overwhelming.”

Another mathematics teacher at MWMS, however, expressed an opposing opinion, saying the value of looping, in her estimation, outweighed the challenge of outside factors. Her preference to manage these factors and advance with students and team colleagues is currently outnumbered by other department members’ positions.

Other changes, for example alterations in a building’s master schedule, can affect the value teachers ascribe to looping, which in turn can influence continued momentum. A new schedule in the 2009-2010 school year decreased time for teachers at one school to meet as a team in order to discuss students and curriculum. A reduction in team time dampened enthusiasm for team-wide interdisciplinary projects and team-building activities that were originally planned to encourage the development of positive teacher-
student relationships. Teachers reported these activities were more prevalent at the start of looping, before the schedule was altered. As a result of the altered schedule, teachers had less time to work collaboratively on creating a climate of care and concern. Several teachers expressed the opinion that the new schedule hindered the efficacy of looping and that this schedule change might affect their overall perceptions of the looping program.

Tables 4.2 through 4.6 provide examples of teacher comments related to the Five Stages of Teachers’ Looping Experience, which further illustrate teachers’ lived experiences in looping configurations.

Table 4.2

*Initial Reluctance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was hesitant and, um, not excited about it, partly because my personal experience was that I had changed quite a bit – who I was teaching with changed every year the first few years I was teaching and I had recently moved to seventh grade after teaching eighth for so many years . . . I think that made me nervous for another big change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was kind of scared because I had gone through my first year and then the thought of having to start, basically, all over again, creating everything from scratch again, was kind of daunting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just fear that it could be a very hard time if we did loop with a rough group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Quotes

When I came on board to be a teacher I considered myself a teacher and, um, looping definitely pushes you into that role. You are not just a teacher of eighth grade or seventh grade. You are their teacher.

I think it has made me a better, more well-rounded teacher to teach the two different grades – curriculums.

We’ve come together as a community of educators, and I guess a community of the kids. I don’t know – (we) amped it up so much that we can go beyond what we do in the classroom and really make deeper connections with the whole. We’re working on antibullying . . . I don’t think I ever imagined that we’d be this far with what we are doing.

We have a handful of kids who we have just seen drastic improvements with and changes in since last year. So, it’s really cool to see that.

You know, you have this long-term commitment. I think sometimes, you try harder. And that stretches us personally and professionally.
Table 4.4

*Pre-Looping Perceptions Versus Reality of Lived Experiences*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think fears that were originally in my head came from outside sources. It was like ‘well you should be worried about this when they get to this point in your second year. They’re gonna get nuts or this or that.’ That really wasn’t the case and that still hasn’t been the case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like they (concerns) have lessened. I am more comfortable with looping with the more experience I have gotten with it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was really nervous and worried last year that I just didn’t know the history. But when I did it, it was just as good as it is this year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know with the first loop we were much more concerned. Maybe because it is the second time around, or it’s the group of kids, but that worry seems to be kind of gone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t feel like a lot of things I heard would happen have been a problem. I think they (the students) are more comfortable and I am more comfortable, but I don’t think that is always a bad thing. I think it is a good increased comfort.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5

*Reconciling Benefits Versus Personal Desires*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The relationship I have with this group now outweighs my desire to teach all kids. Getting to know the kids and all those things kind of outweighs some of the stress of having to do the work. Because the work will always be there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I guess the only reasons I would come up with (to abandon looping) are selfish ones about curriculum and planning multiple years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.6

*Continued Momentum Versus Abandonment*

Participant Quotes

This is my fourth year and to put things in perspective based on how my position has changed, with looping I have gone through 7 curricula... so it gets to be a lot... I am capable of teaching it... but my level of stress has gone up because of teaching two new curriculums this year.

We were really good when we first started looping about communicating and asking each other, the different loops, questions and stuff... And now that we have all kind of done that, we are just... doing our own thing... I think what we are doing is fine but it could be better.

If we stopped looping, I don’t know if I would still want to work here. I really don’t.

In addition to specific participant quotations, Table 4.7 shows the frequency with which identified lived experiences were discussed across the study’s six focus groups. A summarized version of participant comments is included in column one. Column two displays the number of focus groups, out of a total of six, in which a lived experience was discussed.
Table 4.7

**Looping Frequency Chart – Lived Experiences of Teachers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Comment</th>
<th>Number of Focus Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Know better student strengths and weaknesses</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-year consistency of teacher/team expectations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become a more well-rounded teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy ownership over 2 years of curriculum</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to challenge kids more</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids exposed to fewer teachers (less well-rounded?)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial concerns about looping ease over time</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher excitement in seeing kids change</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See less student “eighth-grade-itis”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers take more responsibility for student behavior issues</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be challenging for a new teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much familiarity can develop between teachers and students</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continual state and building mandates can complicate looping</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher transition from Grade 8 to Grade 7 can be difficult</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy control over instructional pacing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More effective as a subject department</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeps teachers fresh</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stronger relationships with students and parents</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggle over the importance of relationships versus teacher content mastery</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important to take good notes on lessons’ strengths and weaknesses</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing kids better outweighs knowing less kids overall</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much focus on curriculum and not enough on kids</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accelerated classes/teacher certification can disrupt loops</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater sense of teacher pride</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss kids over holiday breaks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer more relaxing when teachers and kids move up together</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only get to teach a unit you love every 2 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connects disconnected kids</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only one lived experience was identified and discussed in all six focus groups: the ability of teachers to know more thoroughly student strengths and weaknesses. This experience appears to have been commonly accepted and acknowledged by teachers who taught in looping configurations. Examples of other commonly cited experiences
included enjoying the ability to provide students with consistent expectations for academics and behavior over 2 years, and the benefit of becoming a well-rounded teacher as a result of teaching Grade 7 and 8 curricula. A number of experiences were also unique to only one focus group; seven points were made exclusively in one of the six focus groups, but not in any others. The fact that some points were made in only one focus group should not diminish the importance of the stated experience. Table 4.7 shows the frequency with which comments were made but not the length of time devoted to discussion of this experience, or the level of passion with which the experience was described by the participant.

*Research Question Two - Conditions*

The study’s second research question was: What conditions nurture the sustainability of looping configurations in middle schools? Conditions which influence initial implementation, as well as the continuation of looping in school settings identified by teachers in focus groups, can be categorized into two overarching themes: (a) Personal Approaches to Change, and (b) Developing a Cultural Support System.

*Personal approaches to change.* Attitudes with which individuals approach new initiatives can affect the implementation phase of said initiatives, as well as their potential for long-term sustainability. Personal negativity influences the ability to judge an initiative on its merits rather than on the manner in which it affects the status quo. In general, teachers and administrators grow comfortable and content with known quantities in organizations; requesting an individual expand outside of his or her comfort zone can be poorly received. Fullan (2007) stated, “We have still not cracked the code of getting beyond the classroom door on a large scale basis” (xii).
Cuban (1993) identified six factors affecting teachers’ willingness to change. Two of these factors included: (a) teaching practices tilt toward constancy rather than change; and (b) teacher belief systems influence teaching roles in ways that promote, as well as detract, from changing classroom practices. Eilam and Shoham (1997) suggested that concern about staff exhaustion as a result of the number and frequency of new initiatives in schools can impact teachers’ abilities to evaluate initiatives with open minds.

In reliving initial reactions to looping assignments through focus group discussions, some teachers identified a personal struggle to show enthusiasm for a strategy that would change the school structure to which they were accustomed. In so doing, those who adopted a positive attitude about the change reported they were able to think more creatively and more quickly recognize the benefits of looping. These individuals identified themselves as student-centered teachers willing to focus on children’s needs above their own personal needs or desires.

Experiences of teachers in this study reveal Personal Approaches to Change are key for principals to identify and to explore during the initial implementation phase of looping. Within focus group discussions, teachers identified behaviors in themselves and others that helped, or hindered, the implementation of looping. Teachers who demonstrated positive attitudes, flexibility, and problem-solving skills reported that these attributes were essential in advancing implementation of the program. One focus group participant described colleagues with negative attitudes toward looping in the following way: “There is a lot of stuff supporting it (looping). There’s just, you know, a couple of birds yapping away. They really don’t have much to go off of. It’s just their own
Another crucial element in fostering implementation was teachers’ willingness to share collegially in order to facilitate familiarity with a curriculum they may not have taught previously. Teachers who assumed negative positions took longer to adapt and experienced more difficulty identifying the positive aspects of looping. However, teacher participants in this study who may have held negative positions regarding looping initially, came to support it, as evidenced by data presented previously in Table 4.1. This table demonstrated that the teachers in this study developed a positive perception of looping over time, even if they did not possess this perception initially. This phenomenon is also discussed by principals later in this chapter.

*Developing a cultural support system.* When developing a cultural support system, teachers identified efforts to infuse looping into the culture of the building that were necessary for easing the transition to looping, as well as encouraging its sustainability over time. Teachers identified actions of school leaders that helped ease the initial transition and assisted teachers in accepting, and eventually enjoying, teaching the same students for 2 years.

Teachers overwhelmingly cited provisions for additional collaborative planning periods, particularly at the onset of looping, as unequivocally important. Planning time relieved the pressure teachers felt to become experts with curriculum new to them. Also important was the willingness of principals to listen to teachers’ concerns, including those unique to a certain teacher or department. For members of collegial teams, looping as a unit served as a support system for working through change. Teachers also suggested that during initial implementation, looping should be the only second-order
change occurring in a school building. Additional changes were said to amplify the period of teacher reluctance. Compounding change initiatives can potentially become overwhelming, causing teachers to avoid supporting innovations in future years.

Another important variable in the looping process for teachers involved maintaining the personal and instructional comforts to which they were accustomed, for example, remaining in the classrooms where they were assigned. Determining uncomplicated ways to share textbooks and equipment across grade-levels, without spending valuable portions of planning time, were also cited as key elements in promoting success.

Further into the implementation process, teachers reported that it was important to revisit the original mission of the looping program, referring to it alongside other new initiatives under consideration. For example, teachers at one school expressed that a new master schedule had created challenges for team collaboration. In the case of mandates that come from outside the school, it is important to consider their unique impact on looping programs. The philosophy of looping focuses on relationship-building above a focus on a particular subject area. When concerns about subject mastery arise and are expressed by teachers, revisiting the mission and seeking to balance department concerns with building philosophy, while still supporting the mission of looping, is critical for long-term looping sustainability.

Table 4.8 shows quotations from participants that describe conditions supporting the sustainability of looping programs in middle school settings: Personal Approaches to Change and Developing a Cultural Support System.
Table 4.8

*Conditions Which Support Looping Sustainability – Teacher Focus Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Participant Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Approaches to Change</td>
<td>I think if you go in with these preconceived notions, this is going to be terrible, you know, it very well might be that way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think it is an attitude thing. If you go into it with crabby pants and saying you are not going to like it, you are not going to like it. And it is going to be tricky at times, but it’s going to work. You’ll be fine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a Cultural Support System</td>
<td>Scheduling is huge. Unfortunately we have a schedule right now where we have very little time to spend as a whole group. The first loop I was involved in, we did all kinds of activities together and it created that sense of unity and cohesiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Giving teachers time to work together to share lesson plans and ideas and just the day to day things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It really helps to be on a team.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.9 displays the frequency with which comments about conditions supporting the sustainability of looping in middle schools were made across teacher focus groups. A summarized version of participant comments is included, as well as a number (n=6) indicating the number of groups where this condition was discussed.
Table 4.9

*Looping Frequency Chart – Conditions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Comments</th>
<th>Number of Focus Groups (n=6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide extra teacher planning time</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be open-minded</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loop as a team rather than as individual teachers or departments</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share materials with colleagues</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have common planning time for teams</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During implementation, have looping be the only new initiative</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realign teams to create the best collegial matches before looping begins</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start with a pilot team</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate patience</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing support from administration</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a system for sharing materials/equipment across grade levels</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yearly moving of teacher classrooms complicates the process</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Table 4.9, no common observations regarding conditions occurred across all six groups. Groups more often discussed unique observations rather than common observations within this category, offering several distinct, although not opposing, participant thoughts and experiences about the conditions which support the sustainability of looping.
Comparison of Focus Group Data – MWMS and PMMS

Prior to data collection, the researcher anticipated focus group sessions would reveal distinct differences resulting from the varying time periods looping programs have been in place in the two separate schools in this study. However, data revealed PMMS teachers, although newer to the looping experience, shared many points of focus in common with MWMS teachers who, in general, had more experience with looping. It is important to note, though, that some teachers at MWMS had looped no longer with students than PMMS teachers. Four of the 20 focus group participants at MWMS were hired within the past 3 years.

A few points of difference, however, did emerge across the two different settings. Four categories of teacher experience were discussed in MWMS focus groups that were not discussed in PMMS focus groups. These included: (a) teachers enjoy exercising control over their instructional pacing throughout the 2-year cycle, (b) changes in state curriculum complicate the process of planning for looping configurations, (c) reconciling personal feelings related to the importance of mastering subject content versus the benefit of developing relationships with students, and (d) keeping notes regarding revisions on lesson plans in order to adjust lessons in future years. These points are likely to emerge more often for teachers who have had more experience with looping. For example, PMMS teachers, only having completed one looping cycle to date, may not have yet had enough opportunity to enjoy adjusting instructional pacing over 2 years for this to be an identified point of importance.

Likewise, a point of focus in the PMMS focus groups not mentioned in MWMS focus groups was the idea that initial teacher reluctance to looping eases over time.
Whereas it may be reasonable to assume this comment was implied in the discussions of MWMS teachers as a result of most teachers’ current perceptions of looping as noted previously in Table 4.1, it was not overtly stated by any participant. The fact that the period of initial reluctance can be recalled more recently by PMMS teachers may have influenced these participants' desires to speak readily about this experience.

Exploring the specific comments of mathematics teachers in one setting versus another brings forth consideration of initial disruptions in looping configurations that could ultimately lead to school-wide abandonment. Longevity may, again, come into play in that MWMS teachers have experienced more years of curriculum changes while teaching within looping configurations than PMMS teachers have experienced.

Two PMMS mathematics teacher participants shared viewpoints in direct conflict with viewpoints shared by three of the four MWMS mathematics teachers. Comments in the MWMS focus groups seemed to endorse more value, at this stage of the looping experience, on the personal desires of teachers. Viewpoints were heavily influenced by what was perceived as an increased workload for mathematics teachers, in particular.

One MWMS teacher expressed that frustration this way:

And the curricula have changed so much . . . after this many years, you shouldn’t be spending that many hours at it. I don’t want to come to work exhausted by the planning because I want to have the energy to teach the children, too . . . I guess I look at it as more my job to prepare them for the test they have to pass to graduate.

Conversely, a PMMS mathematics teacher stated, “So, to me, I didn’t see it as a complex part, to sit down and do it. More of an exciting adventure. I just didn’t see it as
complex. Just took it as, yeah, you get a new curriculum and go with it.” PMMS mathematics teachers, who teach similar classes and curriculum, did not compare the workload of their department to any other department, or identify state-imposed curriculum changes as a point of concern related to looping.

One of the four MWMS mathematics teachers also expressed opposition to the department’s recent change back to a single-grade configuration. She lamented the loss of continuity that looping offered:

Because I teach math I am in seventh grade forever. And I miss it (looping) terribly. Because I feel like when I start with them in seventh grade, I am like everyone else here in the room. And at the end of the year I have to say ‘bye have fun’ and I feel like I don’t get to see the second half of the race. You know, I don’t get to see them cross the finish line.

The focus group data appear to indicate that different philosophies have developed within a single school setting. Two comments from MWMS teachers from different departments demonstrate these opposing philosophies. One MWMS teacher declared, “As an ELA teacher, I was very excited about it (looping). Because reading and writing are skill-based. It gives me more time and I can be more thorough with kids.” Conversely, a MWMS teacher in a separate focus group stated, “and math looping is hard because it is so skill-based.” In this case, one teacher expressed looping to be a good match for her skill-based curriculum, whereas another described a skill-based curriculum as a complicating component in a looping configuration.
Summary – Teacher Focus Group Data

Results of focus group data revealed teacher experiences related to looping followed a pattern of five stages. Whereas most teachers exhibited a level of anxiety or concern over teaching in a configuration new to them, they generally came to accept the benefits the strategy of looping holds. Principally, those benefits revolved around personal teacher efficacy and the positive development of student academic and social competence. Most teachers in the study expressed the desire to continue teaching within looping configurations. Some teachers, however, continue to struggle reconciling the benefits of the strategy with their personal desires and teaching preferences.

Sustainability is particularly impacted by outside factors that complicate the change to looping. For example, curriculum changes or additional building-imposed innovations often add to the stress and anxiety teachers feel toward the change process in general. Such issues with reconciliation begin to speak to the issue of abandonment, offering suggestions why an efficacious strategy might be abandoned in spite of the fact it offers promise to teachers and students in public middle schools.

Results – Principal Interviews

A pre-field work assumption made by the researcher was that by limiting the scope of interview participants to those with looping experience at the middle-level, discussions with principals across school settings would be similar. Furthermore, the researcher assumed that principals’ experiences with implementing looping programs would share common features. These researcher-based assumptions proved to be untenable. Looping programs in almost every school setting visited were defined and implemented differently.
The principals who participated in this study had a wide range of lived experiences with looping. Some principals implemented the looping programs in the buildings where they worked, whereas other principals inherited programs. Some administered programs where only select content areas participated in looping, while others maintained traditional schedules. Still other principals had in place, or continue to have in place, programs where all content area teachers participate in the looping program.

This difference in program configuration becomes important when considering factors that support the sustainability of looping. Table 4.10 portrays data related to principal participants, including descriptions of looping programs principals are currently overseeing or have overseen in previous positions. Because the experience of principal participants in this study varied widely, it may be useful to consult Table 4.10 to reference principals’ backgrounds in order to situate the experiences these individuals describe within the text and tables that follow.

Table 4.10 shows that of the 11 principals interviewed, four have experience with full middle school looping programs, where all core teachers in a building loop. One of the four principals is noted as having a partial program in place currently, as this school changed from a full to a partial program 2 years ago. Beyond what would be considered a full team loop, schools have, or have had, different levels of looping implementation in place. In three schools, looping occurs, or occurred in past years, within one, two, or three core content areas. For example, in one school, only ELA teachers looped with students when the program was in place. In another school, ELA, Social Studies and LOTE teachers loop, but Math and Science teachers do not. Alternatively, four schools
had, or have, only one team loop, maintaining traditional single-year teacher-student scheduling on at least one other team, or multiple teams, in the same school building.

Table 4.10

*Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference Number</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
<th>Years as a Middle Principal</th>
<th>District Description</th>
<th>Looping Program In Place?</th>
<th>Partial Looping/Full Looping Program?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>MS Principal</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Partial (all core areas but mathematics – all core areas previously)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>MS Principal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Partial (one team)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent (former MS Principal)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Partial (one team)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>MS Principal</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Partial (ELA, SS and LOTE) (was ELA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>MS Principal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>MS Principal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>MS Principal</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>MS Assistant Principal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Partial (one team)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>MS/HS Principal</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Partial (ELA and SS) Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>MS Assistant Principal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Superintendent (former MS Principal)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Partial (one team)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It should be noted that in two of the three schools identified as currently having full core looping programs in place, accelerated classes and teacher certification issues require one class of students to be off-loop in science due to New York State certification requirements.

*Principals – Lived Experiences at the Onset of Looping*

Presenting principals’ lived experiences with the strategy of looping is clearest when the study’s two research questions are addressed together, rather than separately. Principals, because they are not part of classroom looping situations personally, have different experiences than teachers at the start of looping initiatives. During the momentum building phase, principals responded to the reactions of teachers, many of whom were experiencing initial reluctance (stage one) toward the process of looping, as described earlier in this chapter. The focus of the principal at the onset of implementation was on establishing conditions in order to make looping more appealing to teachers struggling with change.

The majority of the principals in this study initiated looping programs in their respective school buildings. None of the principals were mandated to implement programs from either Board of Education policies or from superintendent directives. Therefore, none were personally resistant to the looping strategy. Each, instead, served as a key determiner in the decision to implement the looping design, except for Principals 2, 5, and 8 who inherited looping programs in the buildings where they work when they accepted their positions. As a result, 8 of the 11 principals possessed a level of commitment to the implementation process. Extra work for these principals, at the time, did not involve preparing curricula as it did for teachers, but rather managing teachers’
resistance to what was perceived, in some cases, as an administrative-driven initiative. In some schools, strong resistance from pockets of teachers who did not support the change, were obstacles for principals to overcome.

Principals described managing several challenges at this stage of implementation. One challenge involved determining if teachers possessed proper certification to teach at the seventh- and eighth-grade levels, particularly in mathematics and science, where accelerated course work is offered. Where advanced courses are offered and looping scheduling configurations are in place, accelerated science was reported to pose the biggest challenge for schools.

All schools in this study that offered accelerated course work in science, offered the course “Earth Science.” However, not all teachers certified to teach General Science in Grades 7 and 8 also possess certification to teach Earth Science. Schools in this study approached this obstacle differently. Some have properly certified staff and can maintain a pure looping design. Other principals utilize an off-team teacher to instruct accelerated classes, which creates a one-subject disruption in the team loop for these students.

One former middle school principal cited certification to be a bigger obstacle for looping programs presently than it was when he initiated a looping program in the 1990s. No Child Left Behind legislation has since imposed stricter certification standards on teachers, thereby limiting the principal’s autonomy to schedule teachers creatively. Principal 11’s former school had taken advantage of a system in place at the time called “Experimental Middle-Level Status,” where middle schools petitioned the State Education Department for waivers allowing teachers the freedom to teach a grade-level before, or beyond, in the content areas in which they were certified. Securing
Experimental Middle-Level Status allowed for these deviations to occur without schools being penalized for having to report uncertified teachers as part of their faculty. Experimental Status also enabled this school to maintain a looping configuration that spanned three grade-levels: Grades 6, 7, and 8. Currently, complications with a 2-year loop emerge when introducing accelerated coursework into middle-level schedules. A 3-year loop, with certification requirements as they exist in New York State presently, would be very difficult to implement or to maintain.

Yearly moving of teacher classrooms was identified in literature as an obstacle to looping implementation. Principal 6, who began looping with a pilot team, reported that moving classrooms was necessary at the onset of implementation and confirmed it was a source of teacher frustration. When the looping program expanded to all core teachers building-wide, moving classrooms was no longer necessary. Teachers, who had been required to change rooms previously, could remain in the same classrooms within a school-wide looping configuration. This change was cited as a stress reducer for teachers and a strong selling point for moving to a school-wide program.

Another management challenge identified by participants was convincing teachers to share lessons and instructional materials for looping. Whereas most teachers saw the benefit of sharing as described in results presented from teacher focus groups, not all did. One principal described a particular department as “more toxic” than others, complicating the preparation for changing grade levels through teacher unwillingness or inability to work together effectively.

Table 4.11 displays quotations by principals about their initial lived experiences with looping.
Table 4.11

Quotations - Lived Experiences at the Onset of Looping, Principals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal 1</td>
<td>There were some individuals who were vocal about not wanting to loop, um, and pretty adamant about wanting to stay where they were and I just continued to reiterate to them that you need to build a relationship with kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 5</td>
<td>I had tons of volunteers that wanted to teach seventh and eighth grade. This one said to me ‘no, I gotta stay at seventh. I’m not comfortable going to eighth.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 6</td>
<td>(Recalling a concern of a teacher). ‘I’ve taught seventh grade Social Studies for 20 years and I know it better than anybody in this building and why would you put that at risk?’ And so on the flip side, we had to really pump up a lot of people in the fact that, no, you are certified in the content area. You’re comfortable with the content. You know you can do this.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Principals – Conditions at the Onset of Looping

During the initial move to looping, a number of conditions that encouraged continued momentum were cited. Some principals suggested offering pilot programs in middle schools the first year of looping implementation, to allow teachers to choose to participate or not participate, prior to moving to full-building programs in the second year. In such models, teachers supportive of the program might persuade other, more resistant colleagues, of the benefits of looping.

One principal suggested taking a “dipstick indicator” to gauge the comfort levels of staff members at the onset of looping. If a percentage of faculty are resistant, time might be spent studying related research to determine the best way to build a culture...
supporting the philosophy. Another important element at the onset is what Principal 6 referred to as “pumping up people.” Teachers reluctant or anxious about an impending change are relieved knowing leadership believes in them.

Table 4.12 includes quotations illustrating conditions principals put in place that were identified to help facilitate teachers’ initial transitions to looping.

Table 4.12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal 1</td>
<td>It was really listening to their concerns and being very open to having these conversations always and hearing what the concerns were and trying to provide . . . trying to provide them time and resources to move into that change because, you know, I think a lot of the change process is being scared. Can I do this? Am I prepared? So, trying to provide and give as much support as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 3</td>
<td>I think you make the decision, you get the support of as many people as you can get – you know, you’ve got your leaders, you’ve got your followers. Then you’ve got that other group. You go with the leaders and followers and the other group has to make some decisions on their own, that are personal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 10</td>
<td>It is knowing that when your good teachers are showing uneasiness or even acting out or up, it’s because there is discomfort and there may be more to it than what we are thinking. It’s putting yourself in their shoes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 11</td>
<td>My issue to them was tell me what your problems are. Tell me why you wouldn’t do this and then what I need to do to help you to be comfortable overcoming those obstacles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Principals – Lived Experiences Following the Implementation Phase

As they progressed further into the process of looping adoption, principals had different experiences from those at the onset of implementation. Whereas challenges continued to emerge, successes were also realized. Principals observed the same benefits classroom teachers reported seeing on their teams and in their classrooms. Principals expressed observing initial teacher reluctance and anxiety begin to ease as personnel moved through the implementation process. Principals and teachers alike were excited by the advantages teachers reported: (a) improved teacher-student relationships, (b) knowledge of student strengths and weaknesses, and (c) greater familiarity with curriculum after 2 years. Principals in this study, however, more broadly described the benefits of looping than did participating teachers, chiefly as a result of having a building-wide viewpoint rather than a team or classroom perspective.

Principals, for example, reported observing improvements in student attendance and student behavior. Opposing viewpoints, however, were presented by principals regarding the impact of looping on student academic performance. Some principals described improvements in quarterly student grades in the second year of looping implementation and on performance levels of state assessments. However, others declared that advantages were not, or have not yet, been seen. There does not seem to be a way to arbitrate this discrepancy other than consulting research literature and reporting efficacy studies that have been previously conducted, many of which were reviewed in Chapter 2.

In this study, the researcher could not identify a reason for the discrepancy in participants’ reports of student achievement as related to looping. It could not be tracked
to buildings where school-wide looping programs versus partial programs are, or were, in place. Nor does the length of time looping was in place seem to play a role. Reports of academic advantages varied widely. Some principals adamantly described academic benefits they observed and documented, whereas others reported that, regrettably, academic benefits had not materialized. The fact that social benefits for students had been realized was, however, a source of agreement among participants.

As schools moved further into implementation initiatives, areas of professional weakness became more apparent. The impact of these weaknesses was described by Principal 7 as “teachers being exposed” by looping configurations. Teachers with poor relationship-building skills or below-average instructional skills cannot hide within looping configurations. Because they have increased ownership over curriculum and state testing preparation, when students perform poorly, particularly in repeated years, teacher ineffectiveness reveals itself.

Principal 10 noted one such “exposed” teacher who currently loops in the school where she works. Whereas most principals in the study commented on parent support for the looping program or described few to no parent requests for teacher or team changes, this principal reported a different experience related to one teacher. The principal has adjudicated so many complaints about this particular teacher that consideration has been given to not looping this subject in the future on this particular team. This principal’s lived experience in dealing with poor teaching was described as follows:

I have parents calling me regularly . . . first it was ‘I don’t want my child to go to eighth grade and have him.’ And now it’s ‘I don’t want my sixth grader to come in if they are going to have him.’ It’s targeted . . . it may come down to . . . we
don’t loop Science. Because I can’t hurt kids.

Hiring new teachers to serve on looping teams can prove stressful to other teachers, and by association, to principals. This concern was also noted in teacher focus group sessions. Whereas most principals espoused value in beginning a teaching career within a looping configuration, many acknowledged the fact that new teachers are generally seen as having 2 induction years when they loop, rather than one. Staff turnover was also identified as a point of consideration. Faculty entering and exiting programs disrupted the continuity looping programs sought to establish.

In schools with partial looping programs in place, principals reported more ongoing challenges related to looping than were reported by principals who administered full implementation programs. Simply stated, partial looping programs experienced unique issues. One reason is that where partial looping is in place, looping does not appear to have become part of the cultural fabric of these schools. Principals in partial looping programs generally experienced the same joys and challenges as their colleagues in full-implementation programs, but in addition, had to manage issues beyond those of principals in school-wide programs.

In some partial-program schools, for example, a single looping team was branded with a particular reputation that prompted parents to request their children be placed on that team, or conversely, not be placed on that team. For example, in one school, the looping team was viewed as elite because it offered more accelerated class sections. In another school, no accelerated class options were offered on the looping team and as a result, the team was branded as one for the placement of mediocre student performers.

One participant noted that issues of jealousy can develop when a looping team
receives special attention in newsletters or meetings. Looping teachers can feel isolated and are sometimes not invited to participate in grade-level activities. Or, they may have a schedule different from other grade-level colleagues, which prevents them from engaging in collegial interactions, or prevents students from participating in special activities or field trips.

Table 4.13 provides additional quotations relating to principals’ lived experiences that were reported further along into the implementation phase of looping. As opposed to initial lived experiences, these experiences occurred 2 or more years into the implementation of a looping configuration.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal 1</td>
<td>We didn’t find changes in academics that we thought would happen. We thought we would see higher levels of success. There was nothing as significant as we thought it would be. But I think it was more of the shift in the philosophy piece and the relationship piece.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 4</td>
<td>(Referring to a teacher). She actually, after the first year, wanted to go back but I was like ‘you’re a second year teacher – you’ve got to trust me on this. We know what we are talking about.’ And now she doesn’t see it any other way. It’s kind of interesting how she came full circle with that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 6</td>
<td>My seventh grade Social Studies teacher who was absolutely like ‘this is the stupidest thing on the planet – I can’t believe we are doing it,’ she is actually my biggest proponent of looping. She got to know her kids and once she realized they would just come in and know her expectations in the fall and they would sit right down and get to work because they already knew her and she didn’t have to do any icebreakers . . . she was thrilled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 9</td>
<td>Very few discipline problems – like none . . . they kick all of the tough problems by like November of the first year . . . in terms of run of the mill classroom management stuff, it’s just gone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 11</td>
<td>Growth over time was unbelievable. By the time they (students) were at the end of eighth-grade, they were at or above their peers in the same cohort, which was amazing.</td>
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</table>
Principals – Conditions Supporting Sustainability of Looping Programs

Later into implementation efforts, conditions which encourage sustainability were also able to be identified. Whereas some conditions previously noted need to remain constant, for example, supportive, responsive leadership, the issue of continuous leadership was discussed separately.

Replacing a leader in a building, even when the replacement is an exceptional principal, appears to jeopardize a newly developing looping program. If levels of discomfort with looping remain with any teachers, if given a choice, these teachers will likely gravitate back to what is considered comfortable. A principal who was not invested in the original adoption of looping may be more inclined to abandon the looping design than one who originally invested time and energy into implementing the program.

Principal 11 illuminated this issue by describing a conversation he shared with the superintendent with whom he formerly worked. Following his resignation to accept a position in a different district, the superintendent in his former district asked the following (as reported by Principal 11):

Why is this thing (looping) – why is it not supporting? The staff came to me and said ‘we can’t sustain this on our own. We need leadership holding people accountable because we need all 12 of us. Four of us or eight of us can’t do it. It’s got to be all 12 of us.’

And the former principal suggested, “If you don’t know what you are holding people accountable for, then how can you hold them accountable?” This experience illustrates the difficulty a principal new to a looping configuration might experience and why he or she may choose to abandon the process rather than seek to carry through an initiative
over which he or she did not have original ownership.

Continuous leadership was also described in research literature related to sustaining educational change, as cited in Chapter 1. As Principal 11 recalled in his experience, Berman (1977), likewise, suggested that change in leadership during implementation, or where building principals felt programs were imposed by district office personnel, were important variables that increased the risk of abandonment.

To promote sustainability, beyond the suggestion of continuous leadership, principals found continually sharing data related to the program with stakeholder groups helped maintain focus on the initiative. Planned celebrations of program success with faculty, students and community members reinforced continued momentum. Schools with strong cultures, deep traditions, and articulated shared beliefs appeared to be better able to sustain innovative programs.

Principals also recommended, wherever possible, making looping systemic in a school. In addition to having core teachers loop, Principals 6 and 10 have specialty area teachers, such as music and art teachers, advance grade-levels with students. Value was also identified in having counselors, psychologists and administrators loop with student groups, as longer-term relationships between students and individuals in these positions possess significance as well.

Table 4.14 includes quotations which describe, in participants’ words, the actions they took, and continue to take, to encourage looping sustainability.
Table 4.14

*Quotations – Conditions Supporting Sustainability of Looping Programs, Principals*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal 1</td>
<td>I want to experience the change. I want to see it happen. I want to create it and I want to live the success. I don’t want to just implement it and move on. So I think if I had left in the third, fourth, even fifth year, I think some people might have moved away. Or, there may have been a conversation about moving away. Now, absolutely not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 2</td>
<td>It’s the person leading the ship. It’s what you believe in. It’s what you’re doing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 6</td>
<td>I think a key is making it systemic. Meaning, you know, we even loop our music teacher for 7/8. Your counselors loop. My Assistant Principals loop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 7</td>
<td>It has to be a way instead of something that is not just done because it is good to loop. It has to be a part of the core beliefs of everything you do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 9</td>
<td>I think traditions communicate values to your kids and your parents and the teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Summary of Interview Data*

Results of interview data indicate the decision to adopt looping configurations is complicated. The experiences of teachers and principals shared in this study reveal that, in general, teachers exhibit reactions that show they progress through the five stages of teacher reaction to the implementation of looping. Earlier stages represent the reactions of teachers as they are first exposed to the idea, and later stages describe reactions as a result of their lived experiences during the implementation process. Principals, as a
result, need to manage and provide appropriate levels of support throughout these stages, to create a culture that will sustain the looping initiative.

Looping configurations require continual maintenance. Principals can not simply mandate a move to looping and expect adoption to be successful. As described in Chapter 1, Fullan (2007) stated, “Reform is not just putting into place the latest policy. It means changing the culture of classrooms, school districts, universities and so on. There is much more to educational reform than most people realize” (p. 7). Looping philosophy must be cultivated continuously if schools wish looping to be sustained. Looping must become part of a larger mission to meet most effectively the unique needs of middle-level students.

Documents

The researcher intended to collect and analyze school documents related to looping to illustrate looping journeys in middle school settings. In reality, the few documents available to review made completing this part of data collection unachievable. Although some schools offered state assessment data, a number of caveats accompanied the data. For example, in some instances, instructors had changed due to resignations or retirements. In other cases, the standardized state tests had changed from one administration to another, either in format or in the timeframe when they were administered. Reviewing this type of test data would not have added reliably to this discussion.

Schools that have had looping programs in place for longer periods of time indicated that parent information about the program is no longer emphasized in
orientation programs or descriptions of the school’s offerings. Because looping had just
become “what we do,” it was not highlighted separately from the overall school program.

Principal 10 shared a document created by a study group at the time the building
first discussed whether or not to adopt a looping configuration. However, overall, not
enough written information was available in schools with which the researcher worked to
make document analysis a viable contribution to this study.

Conclusion

Results of this researcher’s qualitative study on looping were presented in this
chapter. Chapter 5, which follows, allows for more discussion of results as well as
findings related to research literature previously reviewed in Chapter 2. Chapter 5 also
provides recommendations, based on the study’s findings, for teachers and principals
interested in exploring looping as a strategy. The researcher’s journey throughout this
study is recounted, both as researcher of the change process and middle-level best
practices, and as a principal overseeing a looping program within a middle school.
Chapter 5: Discussion

*Introduction*

The framework for this study arose from interest in identifying and evaluating best educational practices for middle-level schools. Through the process of reviewing literature, looping was identified frequently as a strategy found in exemplary programs for middle-level students. The researcher’s interest in best middle-level practices gradually paired itself with an interest in not only identifying such practices, but also in seeking to also determine methods for introducing, implementing and sustaining such practices. Whereas NMSA and NYSMSA tenets, introduced in Chapter 1, describe effective practices for middle schools, identifying specific actions to make their outlined vision a reality in schools remains challenging.

A review of the literature related to innovation and change, particularly initiation of change efforts in school systems, revealed that these efforts frequently encounter resistance as a result of the traditional structures, beliefs, and ideas that are found in many public school settings. Cuban (1993) described this phenomenon as “constancy and change” in education. The researcher was motivated to explore the relationship of constancy and change in practices in middle-level schools through the lens of the strategy entitled looping.

As identified in Chapter 1, the central problem of this study was probing the apparent disconnect between published studies in research literature supporting the efficacy of looping and the reported practices occurring in schools. Chapter 4 presented
results of this researcher's qualitative study. By exploring the lived experiences of individuals who have experience with looping, this study sought to offer an understanding of why some schools and districts are able to institutionalize the strategy of looping, whereas others either radically alter initial plans or abandon the practice altogether.

In Chapter 2, the researcher summarized information on looping obtained from existing literature including reasons looping may be difficult to sustain in public school settings: (a) lack of tangible incentive to change (support for students’ needs in many cases, did not seem enough to lessen this concern); (b) removal of external, consistent supports that were the driving force behind looping (for example, university support, staff development opportunities, etc.); (c) weak or inconsistent school leadership during the change process; (d) lack of time (both in preparing instructional materials and in committing to the strategy for a sufficient period of time to evaluate its impact meaningfully); (e) teacher concerns related to sharing materials or changing classrooms; and (f) disinterest in becoming a more important figure in the lives of students.

Within this researcher’s study, claims “a” (lack of tangible incentive to change), “b” (removal of external, consistent supports behind looping), and “f” (disinterest in becoming a more important figure in the lives of students) did not surface in interviews with principals or focus groups with teachers. In regard to claim “a,” focus group discussions did describe an initial reluctance by teachers to loop. Reluctance, however, was not tied to the desire to secure a tangible incentive for additional effort put forth. For example, no teachers suggested they should be paid stipends to teach in looping configurations.
Additionally, no principals or teachers cited the use of university supports or specific staff development initiatives, related to looping adoptions, in the adoption programs of which they were part. Claim “b,” therefore, was also not discussed by participants in this study.

Claim “c” (leadership consistency), was discussed by principal participants in interviews, but not by teacher participants. Principal 11, for example, acknowledged that leaving the school where he had worked shortly after the looping program was implemented, left the program vulnerable. The impact was compounded by the fact that his successor lacked experience with middle-level philosophy and did not choose to make looping a priority. This result supports Berman’s (1977) claim, introduced in Chapter 1, that programs administrators actively support tend to be continued.

Claim “f” (disinterest in becoming a more important figure in the lives of students) was not discussed by either teachers or principals in this study. Whereas differing philosophies may exist regarding best practices for building relationships with students, no participant diminished the need for such relationships. Although one teacher suggested her job was to prepare students academically for state testing and the transition to high school, she did not explicitly say she would do so separately from building relationships with students.

As study results demonstrated in Chapter 4, multiple teachers expressed the concern summarized in claim “d,” perceiving there was a lack of time to prepare for a curriculum new to them. A smaller number of comments alluded to claim “e,” regarding the sharing of materials and the changing of classrooms. Teachers had not experienced the request to change classrooms on a yearly basis. However, two principals who were
interviewed had experienced frustration as a result of requiring teachers who were looping to change classrooms. Teachers in one focus group also discussed sharing textbooks and moving science equipment between grade-level colleagues as an unappreciated time commitment in the first year of looping implementation. However, once a system was established, this process became manageable in future years.

The fact that not all six claims were substantiated in this researcher’s study may be a result of the fact that the programs at PMMS and MWMS have matured. These schools may be further into the implementation of looping than teachers or principals represented in studies reviewed in Chapter 2. In addition, both sets of teachers at MWMS and PMMS experienced continuous leadership during the transition to the looping program.

**Implication of Findings**

While not a primary research question, in Chapter 2 the researcher identified several schools that had once endorsed the value of looping in research literature later abandoned the strategy. From data shared in this study, several factors have been identified that caused schools and leaders to abandon looping, even after successful periods of implementation.

In Chapter 1, the researcher suggested the implementation of new strategies is impacted by what Cuban (1993) referred to as “rates of adoption.” Rates of adoption are important when discussing factors that contribute to the abandonment or sustainability of educational innovations such as looping. These five factors are defined as follows: (a) relative advantage (the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea that supersedes it); (b) compatibility (the degree to which an innovation is perceived as
being consistent with existing values); (c) complexity (the degree to which the innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use); (d) trialability (the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis); and (e) observability (the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others) (p. 16).

Lived experiences in this study demonstrated that most teachers, after having sufficient time to adjust to the changes resulting from looping configurations, perceived that looping offers advantages for student learning and teacher efficacy. However, these advantages are typically realized slowly, after a period of time. Many teachers originally felt conflicted about what the strategy of looping could offer to them and to their students. At the onset, they felt they were investing more work to learn new curriculum, as well as struggling with fears about poor student-teacher matches that would last for 2 years. This may have caused teachers to wonder whether the effort they needed to invest was worthwhile. Compatibility of looping with personal beliefs and desires, a lens Cuban (1993) suggested teachers view innovations through, whereas absent initially, does appear to develop over time.

Teachers described several complexities related to the process of looping. For example, a frequently mentioned challenge was unfamiliarity with curriculum and students at a grade-level not taught previously. The comfort of remaining at one grade level, where lessons and units were prepared, delivered and refined, is compelling to individuals who thrive on comfort and continuity.

In regard to trialability, pilot programs with individual teachers or departments are possible to initiate, but trial periods often provide less accurate and less desirable depictions of what looping systemically entails. In a trial phase, such as those suggested...
by some principal participants in this study, a 2-year commitment is still required by teachers. Therefore even “trialability” of looping might be considered a complex process that requires a degree of dedication from the onset. Trying out looping may actually create more complications than offering a school-wide program from the onset. Teacher participants in trial or pilot programs may lack collegial support from peers. Teachers and principals appear to oversee an increased number of management issues, such as teachers changing classrooms, within trial or pilot programs.

Cuban’s (1993) last factor affecting adoption, observability, was also not easily evaluated in connection with looping because the benefit of looping tends to take time to be realized. Whereas teachers in Weary’s study (2000) suggested more benefits and fewer obstacles were encountered in the second looping cycle than the first, it took 4 years for teachers to arrive at this conclusion. It takes time for teachers to gain confidence with new curriculum and to discover advantages of having 2 years to instruct students.

In interviews with principals, some described observing several teachers instructing in exactly the same manner in 1-year versus 2-year scheduling configurations. Rather than pulling content and strategy themes through 2 years of instruction, some teachers taught students for both years without connecting content and strategies from one year to the next. Gradually, teachers identified the value of expanding on curriculum, for example creating portfolios or 2-year notebooks documenting student growth over time. But a change in teaching practices was not necessarily observable early on in the implementation phase.
In light of the work of Cuban (1993), it appears that major challenges do exist in implementing looping configurations and likely contribute to some schools’ and districts’ abandonment of the strategy over time. The current investigation corroborated many of those findings.

First, it appears that unique challenges accompany looping programs that develop as pockets within a school, as opposed to programs that are systemic and embedded within the school culture. In schools where only select teachers, students and subjects loop, and other subjects maintain a traditional 1-year schedule, observable disadvantages emerge. It becomes challenging to avoid eroding crucial elements of middle-level philosophy when new interdisciplinary teams are created each year. These schools may limit themselves by having some teachers work with students for multiple years, but not all teachers. Therefore, the team perspective becomes distorted in the second year because some teachers have the advantage of knowing students, whereas to other teachers, students are unknown. This detracts from a team of teachers being able to continue where they left off as a unit in Grade 7.

The team concept, at the heart of middle-level philosophy, is described in position papers written by members of middle-level organizations such as NMSA and NYSMSA. Within these papers, *teaming* is a widely accepted and endorsed component of successful middle-level programs. In focus groups at PMMS and MWMS, teachers described advantages of looping as a team, as opposed to looping individually. They cited continual collegial support of teammates as important in maintaining looping configurations. Pure teacher teaming is a middle-level component that schools with random pockets of looping were not able to experience.
In Chapter 1, the researcher suggested that a perplexing issue that merits exploration is the comparison of espoused middle-level best practices with actual school practices, specifically related to building longer-term student-teacher relationships. Whereas NMSA endorses looping as a strategy for developing positive relationships between students and teachers, NMSA also endorses the value of interdisciplinary teaming. In schools where only some teachers or departments practice looping, middle-level best practices may be at odds with one another. Strategies, therefore, may not be able to provide the reinforcement they could if they occurred together, as part of a comprehensive middle-level plan. NMSA’s policy document (2006), *Success in the Middle* urged policymakers to “provide incentives . . . to create small learning communities within middle-level schools through practices that include . . . teacher and student teams, looping, multi-age grouping, schools-within-a-school, and learning academies” (p. 19). These practices were not presented as a list from which schools should select, but rather as a list of strategies that, when implemented together, complement one another. Similarly, in describing the most efficacious blend of middle-level practices in school settings, Erb (2000) argued, “the longer the recommended practices have been in place, and the more they have interacted with one another, the more powerful the changes that occur in middle schools” (p. 5).

Another relevant element in the discussion of sustainability is an understanding of the reason looping was originally adopted by schools. Within two schools described by principals in this study, one out of five teams at Grades 7 and 8 advance grade levels with students. Looping adoption in these schools is not practiced in order to provide more continuous student-teacher relationships to the student body as a whole, but rather was
implemented as a result of enrollment and budget issues. Simply stated, it was easier for schools to create split teams, composed of Grade 7 and 8 students, than it was to have additional shared or part-time staff employed in their programs.

Rettig and Canady (2000) asserted, “Several of the discrepancies between stated middle school beliefs and actual practice have their roots in the school schedule” (p. 4). In the case of the “split team,” whereas some students and teachers benefited by participating in a looping model, if the school schedule were to change in the future due to student enrollment, it is probable looping would be abandoned because of the complications scheduling such a change would bring forth.

In schools where looping is implemented as a budget-saving measure, it will not likely survive if enrollment declines and a combined Grade 7/8 team is no longer needed. These programs lack grounding in the philosophy of looping. Instead, looping serves as a scheduling solution, not a method for promoting longer-term teacher-student relationships. When Principal 8 was asked to predict what would happen if enrollment declined and a split team were no longer needed in the school where he works, he stated, “We would go to separate teams (abandon looping) for the sole purpose that it is easier to schedule.”

In schools where only select subject areas loop, or only one team of multiple teachers loop, not only does there appear to be a disconnect with middle-level best practices, but it appears that more management issues manifest themselves for principals. Principals described teacher frustration with having to move classrooms each year to remain in the hallway where grade-level students needed to reside.
Principal 5, who works in a school where looping was abandoned, stated ELA teachers showed frustration related to looping-inspired classroom changes. Although these changes were not the primary reason for program abandonment, moving classrooms each year was viewed as a negative result of looping. Principal 6 stated that although a full school looping program is currently working in his school, originally only one pilot team looped and this team was obligated to move classrooms each year. When discussion shifted to having all teachers loop, a positive selling point for teachers was that they no longer needed to move classrooms.

Although room changes may seem trivial points, some principals in the research literature have cited continual room changes to be stress factors that accelerate the abandonment of looping. Little and Dacus (1999) reported “moving teachers to keep like grade-levels within the same complex every year was creating problems that some teachers could not adjust to” (p. 43).

Where principals are placed in positions to combat increased levels of frustration by teachers, parents, or students, leaders lacking fortitude may choose to abandon looping in the interest of self-preservation. Yarborough and Johnson (2000) suggested, “Taking on and convincing them (parents and community members) that non-gradedness can work is one job too many for many school leaders who already have extensive responsibilities” (p. 46).

In Chapter 1, Studer’s (2003) five phases of organizational change were introduced: (a) the honeymoon, (b) reality sets in, (c) the uncomfortable gap (organizational performance will begin to stall), (d) consistency, and, ultimately, (e) leading the way (results). When the period referred to as “the uncomfortable gap”
develops, some administrators may choose to take the easier path and revert to what is known and is easier to manage. Such a scenario revealed itself in this study. Principal 8 stated that if student enrollment changed, he would abandon looping to make the process of scheduling simpler.

Another potential reason looping is abandoned was expressed in the divergent opinions of mathematics teachers who participated in teacher focus groups in this study. Fullan (2007) asserted, “Daily demands crowd out serious sustained improvements” (p. 130). In the case of some MWMS mathematics teachers, daily demands such as changing curriculum and increased technology implementation expectations influenced teachers’ willingness and desire to continue looping. Discussion suggested teachers chose to promote personal preferences over a shared vision of student-teacher relationship-building. One department’s individual, and perhaps opposing, philosophy influenced the scheduling and instruction of students. Such a trend may be the beginning of further discrepancy and eventual program dismantling. Fullan stated, “Finding moral and intellectual meaning is not just to make teachers feel better. It is fundamentally related to whether teachers are likely to find the considerable energy required to transform the status quo” (p. 46). In the case of some MWMS mathematics teachers, it appears this meaning was never found, or if it was found, it was crowded out by the daily demands these teachers felt they faced.

How the return of the mathematics department to a traditional scheduling configuration affects the long-term looping program at MWMS would be an interesting case study. Other departments in this school could follow suit and abandon looping in the future for the same reason. Or pressure from other departments could influence
mathematics teachers to return to looping. Experiencing a more stable state curriculum for a period of years might encourage mathematics teachers to return to a looping configuration because it appears some degree of value was recognized in looping by this group of teachers.

Huberman (1998) suggested that teachers with more years of experience may be less willing to invest in new innovations. Berman (1977) similarly reported the number of years of teacher experience has a consistently, negative relationship with innovative project outcomes. Results of the present investigation, however, did not support Huberman’s and Berman’s claims. The two teachers who described themselves as “somewhat unsupportive of looping” on their participant screening forms had been teaching for 4 and 7 years, respectively. All teachers in the study who had been teaching longer than 10 years described themselves as supportive or somewhat supportive of looping. However, at PMMS, for example, four teachers who have been teaching longer than 10 years and who were invited to participate in the study did not. The voices of these teachers, therefore, were not included in study results and would have added to the discussion. Teacher participants in this study have progressed past the initial reluctance phase. Timing could have affected the manner in which the more experienced teachers who did participate in this study recalled their acceptance of looping as an innovation.

Each principal in the current research investigation who participated in building-wide implementation of looping expressed the intent to continue practicing the strategy. Principals of schools with different variations of looping in place seemed more uncertain of the future of looping, or of their ability or desire to expand the program. For example, Principal 5, who oversaw an inherited looping program where only ELA teachers had
looped, was interested in bringing back looping, but only if all subjects were to participate. Principal 4 seemed content with continuing looping in the core areas of ELA, Social studies and LOTE and felt that she had “other fish to fry” with mathematics and science teachers she intended to address before seeking to implement looping more widely. Principal 2, who has had one looping team in place for many years, but two teams that do not loop, expressed a personal desire to expand looping but was not certain he had the staff to support such a move.

Of the principals with whom this researcher spoke, solid looping programs that appear to be on the road to sustaining themselves were found in buildings where all core teachers loop. However, this claim is not necessarily supported within the research literature. Attleboro Central Schools, for example, had a district-wide looping program in place for a period of time which ultimately did not sustain itself. However, the researcher has previously presented some suggested reasons schools abandon looping. These appear to be programs which espouse mixed philosophies and programs where principals tire of justifying the value of looping programs. Additionally, fragile programs appear to be affected by inconsistent leadership. Where looping was originally implemented in schools for budget reasons, if student enrollment in these buildings were to change, principals stated their preference would be to revert to school-wide traditional practices for ease of scheduling.

Limitations

Limitations within this study reflect the inherent nature of qualitative design as well as issues specific to this particular investigation. For example, on a broad scale, the educational community generally attributes more value to scientifically based research
than it attributes to studies of a qualitative nature. For example, the selection of
participants in this study called for use of a sampling technique known as snowballing.
The researcher connected with teachers and principals through word-of-mouth referrals
rather than by randomly selecting study participants from a pool of pre-identified
individuals. Because looping is not a mandated strategy and is not systematically
practiced in middle schools across the state, the use of random sampling was not feasible.
As a result, this study may garner less credibility with district administrators or
commissioners of state and national education departments. However, a quantitative
design would not have produced the rich descriptions of participants’ lived experiences
that this study was able to produce.

Whereas the number of participants in this study was appropriate for a qualitative
study where depth of response was an objective, participants were drawn from only one
region of Upstate New York. The length of time available to the researcher to collect
data in the field, and her choice to interview participants rather than administer a mail or
on-line survey, limited the number of participants in the study. The type of school (all
public), school location (primarily rural and suburban areas), and other demographic
features need to be taken into consideration when reviewing the findings of this study or
seeking to compare them to similar studies that might be conducted in the future.

Another characteristic of qualitative design that could be considered limiting is
that results can be more easily influenced by researchers’ personal biases and
idiosyncrasies than can the results of quantitative studies. However, within this study,
steps were taken to guard against such biases. For example, the researcher utilized a
question guide during interview and focus group sessions that provided a degree of
structure to conversations. Protocol for focus group sessions was developed and utilized, which ensured consistency of process across sessions and allowed the researcher to be an observer rather than a participant in the discussions. Member checking was employed to minimize the potential for researcher bias when categorizing results. The accuracy of all but one interview and focus group session summary was confirmed by a study participant. However, the researcher is unable to guarantee that no personal bias affected the study’s results.

Three teacher focus groups were conducted at PMMS, the school where the researcher is also the building principal. Whereas the researcher could have identified a moderator other than herself to facilitate these groups, her development of the study made her most qualified to oversee focus group protocol and to ensure respect for the intent of the study. Her presence may have influenced conversations within focus groups in this setting and thus needs to be noted as a limitation. However it is also advisable to consider that the honest, forthright discussions that occurred in PMMS focus groups may have been a result of the trusting, comfortable relationship between participants and a known facilitator. The fact that the researcher was familiar to participants in one focus group setting, and not in another, and that responses in both settings shared similarities, helps uphold the validity and trustworthiness of this study’s data.

Whereas the integrity of the study’s design remained intact throughout the time data were collected and analyzed, unexpected circumstances did create some deviations from the original plan. Thirty-six teachers participated in six focus group sessions: 16 teachers at PMMS and 20 teachers at MWMS. Although the researcher intended to form focus groups of 6 to 8 participants, due to illnesses and scheduling conflicts, two sessions
at PMMS were composed of five teachers, rather than the original expectation of six. At MWMS, groups comprised 8, 7 and 5 participants, respectively. Participant mortality is a common occurrence in both qualitative and quantitative studies, however, it is less of a threat in a study with a qualitative design as opposed to one with a quantitative design, where equal pairings of comparison groups have been closely structured. It is important to note that whereas a degree of deviation from original planning occurred, these minor changes did not appear to impact data collection or results.

A limitation inherent in all studies is the fact that some participants whom researchers would like to participate choose not to, or are unable to participate. For example at PMMS, 23 teachers were invited to participate in the study. Seven individuals who were invited to participate either chose not to, or unexpected events arose that affected their intent to participate. A theory that arose in the review of research literature suggested more experienced teachers are less willing to support new initiatives and less willing to try new approaches. Whereas this study included 11 teachers from PMMS and MWMS who have had 10 or more years of teaching experience, the participation of additional teachers classified within this range of experience would have provided more evidence to prove or disprove this theory related to the strategy of looping.

An additional deviation within the study was that one method of data collection the researcher had intended to include in order to triangulate study findings was not included. Because sufficient documents did not exist within the districts where the researcher collected data, it was not feasible to include document analysis as a reliable part of study results.
Recommendations

As a result of exploring lived experiences of teachers and principals working in looping configurations, this researcher, at the conclusion of data analysis, is able to offer the following suggestions to school personnel considering adopting such programs. First, schools that commit to looping programs should collect data throughout the first several years of implementation and a full program evaluation of looping is recommended. Formal evaluation speaks to one of the rates of adoption Cuban (1993) described: “observability.” Whereas test data can be part of considering the impact looping has on a program, it should not be the sole indicator for continuing or abandoning a program. As many researchers expressed in their studies of looping in Chapter 2, such as Rodriguez and Arenz (2007) and Hampton (1998), it is difficult to attribute increases or decreases in student test scores simply to looping. As schools implement looping, it is probable that they are also implementing, for example, new reading textbooks or new common assessment tools that could also impact results on state assessments. An evaluation that includes both quantitative and qualitative methods, in combination, would be most helpful in creating an accurate picture of the impact of looping on an organization.

For example, interviews or surveys administered to parents, students and teachers can provide useful information. Sometimes only the loudest voices are heard and an administrator or building leadership team may perceive teacher reluctance to looping to be more widespread than it may be, in reality.

Second, the strategy of looping should be implemented for an agreed-upon period of time during which data is collected, but also during which time no final determination
about the future of looping is made. In literature as well as results of teacher focus
groups described in Chapter 4, teachers admitted it took time for them to adjust to the
initial changes looping brought forth, for example, teaching a curriculum that was
unfamiliar to them. One teacher stated, “After we went through the first full loop and the
kids did all right on the state test, did I think it was perfect? No. Has it gotten a lot
better? Yes.”

While curricular fears seemed to diminish early on in the process, some teachers
continued to express concern regarding the potential to work multiple years with groups
of challenging students, even when their experiences had not been such. It appears some
districts, such as the district of focus in the McREL study (Lauer, 2000) where multi-age
classrooms were mandated by the superintendent and eliminated the following year, have
not devoted enough time to working through the challenges that change brings forth.
Whereas a great deal of teacher unrest emerged in some schools initially, it appears
through literature citations and the results of this study, time helps teachers to better
accept and appreciate the benefits looping can offer.

Third, it is recommended that looping be initiated with consistent building
leadership in place throughout the implementation timeframe. Unrest that can be part of
beginning a new looping program, with teachers assigned to grade levels unfamiliar to
them and working with grade-levels of students they have not worked with before, may
be too volatile to survive a change in leadership as well. Leaders assuming new positions
deal with inevitable issues that arise from the implementation of innovations but do not
necessarily have the background or the investment to push through such obstacles. An
administrator with longevity in a position may feel more empowered saying no to parents who request team changes or to departments that want to abandon the process without giving it ample time to be practiced.

The four principals in this study with experience with full core looping programs demonstrated consistency in their roles. The principal at MWMS introduced looping to her staff and has been in her position consistently since that time. Principal 6, although only a principal in the building for 3 years, served previously as Assistant Principal in this school. Principal 7 served as the first principal of this school; she designed the program’s vision and selected the professionals who teach within it. Principal 10 proposed and studied looping with teachers and has overseen the first 2 years of the program with staff.

Leadership consistency appears to have had an effect on the continuation of these looping programs. The principals in this study helped to introduce and initiate programs as well as have continued to be present to assist teachers with challenges that have arisen. However, this is not to suggest that once looping programs are established, they do not need continual maintenance. If looping is a school priority, as with most initiatives, it needs consistent attention, commitment and evaluation. Berman (1977) suggested that worthwhile programs and reform strategies are subject to abandonment if a great deal of attention is not given to implementation and continuity.

Fourth, in designing successful looping programs, advice to principals most often cited from teachers involved in looping configurations is that they ensure the provision for additional teacher planning time, particularly at the onset of the program. Administrators may be hesitant or unable to provide additional collegial planning time
and, in such cases, it may be best to wait to implement looping until such support can be provided. In the case of PMMS teachers, many who were not in support of looping at the onset, better accepted the idea once provided with planning time. Through the process of living through a looping cycle, teachers grew to enjoy the instructional advantages it provided. Many now say they would not revert to traditional scheduling configurations, if given the choice.

Suggestions for Future Research

Results of this study demonstrate teachers become more accepting of looping as they gain experience with the strategy, regardless of whether they initially chose, or were assigned, to participate in looping configurations. Both the principals of PMMS and MWMS admitted moving forward with plans to begin looping school-wide, even though not all teachers were supportive. Principal 6 stated he had naysayers at the beginning of the process, indicating he moved forward without one-hundred percent consensus to do so. Studying this idea more specifically in order to prove or disprove such a finding would further quantify this qualitative finding.

Whereas this researcher has a general idea of where teachers stood on support, or lack of support, for looping at the onset of the project at PMMS, she wishes she had captured hard data showing definitively where each teacher was, either in support or not of the program, before and after the experience. In the years after finishing one or two complete loops with students, if such data were available, teacher perceptions could have been compared.

Another study that would advance research on looping at the middle-level is one focusing on the differences in experience between single middle school teachers or
departments that loop versus full teams or full schools of middle-level teachers who loop. This researcher infers from the lived experiences shared in this study that the looping experience is more fulfilling and successful when teams loop together, and remain together for a period of years, as opposed to teachers and departments who loop with students but do not have the support and camaraderie of a whole team.

_The Researcher’s Journey_

The Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College has impacted my personal and professional development in profound ways. Components of the program have guided my growth in two areas in particular: the development of my ability to conduct scholarly research and the cultivation of my leadership skills.

Prior to entering St. John Fisher College’s Executive Leadership Program, I had accrued 10 years of experience as a school principal. As a result of time spent in this role, my confidence and competence had been fairly well established. Approaching the end of my tenth year, I felt the need to extend beyond the leadership vantage point to which I had grown comfortable. In the past 2 years, the readings, class discussions, presentations and assignments which comprise the Executive Leadership program have evoked within me a positive type of vulnerability. Whereas in the first 10 years of my leadership role, I had come to believe I generally knew what I needed to know, in the past 2 years I have come to understand there is much more I need to learn. Through such vulnerability, as well as honest, personal reflection, I have grown exponentially as a leader.

Within the program, I have taken several leadership assessment tools and collected 360 degree feedback from friends and colleagues. These tools have helped me
to develop a clearer understanding of my professional attributes as well as to identify areas for continued growth. Each course of study has added a specific dimension to my overall leadership development plan by illuminating how I can further improve my personal leadership style and practices.

I entered St. John Fisher College’s doctoral program possessing several positive skills: (a) persistence, (b) initiative, (c) strong knowledge of instructional practices, programs and strategies for middle-level learners, and (d) strong planning and organizational skills. Whereas these skills have served me well, since delving more deeply into the study of leadership, these skills have been honed through exposure to new experiences, resources, and mentors.

For example, the program has engaged candidates in a great deal of collegial work. Participating in group projects alongside other leadership professionals has taught me to demonstrate a greater degree of patience and flexibility. I have improved my ability to gauge when, and to what extent, to assert my opinions. Alternately, I can also better assess when to extend leadership opportunities to others. I have learned to express my ideas more directly and concisely, while encouraging and affirming the contributions of others. I place more value on the contributions of others than I had sometimes considered previously. I have been inspired by the diversity of thought and experience that members of cohort 3 have provided. Within collegial projects, I have assumed roles I would not have readily chosen for myself. Extending beyond my immediate comfort zone has increased my confidence in leading where I have traditionally felt less comfortable and confident.
Whereas there has been marked growth in my leadership skills, intense growth has also occurred in my ability to read critically, to analyze data and to produce scholarly, academic writing. A recent vacation revealed to me an example of the manner in which I process information differently than I did previously. While on a bus tour in Costa Rica, the individual narrating the ride commented that the country has the third highest literacy rate in the world. My mind quickly began forming questions to pose regarding this statement: (a) What is the universal standard by which literacy is defined in this circumstance?, (b) what year was this study conducted?, (c) how many countries were represented?, and (d) how was data collected? Even while on a sightseeing tour, my mind naturally switched to critically analyzing data being presented. Within personal and professional experiences, I no longer simply accept assertions without seeking to situate the evidence presented. I have become inquisitively skeptical within my search for understanding.

Conducting and transcribing interviews and focus group sessions during the collection of data for this study also positively impacted my leadership skills and practices. The facilitation of data collection placed me in the role of observer; typically, I find myself in a more central, domineering role in the professional setting. Through deliberately removing myself from the center of attention, and observing rather than participating in discussions, I was able to see the value of seeking opportunities to listen rather than to speak. Whereas I have always understood the value of listening, I do not think I realized prior to this experience how long it had been since I had simply sat back and listened, without speaking, to a conversation of a group of teachers with whom I work.
In exploring areas of focus for my dissertation study, I was naturally drawn to a topic of professional interest: the strategy of looping. Having worked as a middle school teacher, it was difficult for me to imagine why other teachers would not value the instructional advantages which result from spending 2 or more years teaching a common group of students. To help frame an understanding of this personal and professional struggle, I studied literature related to change processes in organizations. Before embarking on the dissertation writing journey, I had not predicted my research would make me a student of the change process. However, as the journey progressed, I found an understanding of the change process to be critical for me to cultivate, regardless of the school reform being implemented.

In seeking to make systemic changes in school communities, principals will undoubtedly meet with challenges. The theoretical and practical knowledge I have gained related to implementing organizational change initiatives has been invaluable. And, in the process, I have come to understand that teacher aversions are not usually about avoiding extra work but are instead rooted in the desire to be effective in their positions. I would say that I was much quicker at jumping to uninformed conclusions about teachers’ avoidance of change prior to engaging in this research study.

This study has supported personal development in depth of leadership understanding and personal patience. When I seek to advance areas of school-wide reform in the future, I now know that my focus must be strategic and my level of care and support for teachers high. What I did not know before that I know now is that the implementation of change initiatives involves much more than issuing mandates. Kouzes and Posner’s (2002) text, to which I was first introduced in this program of study,
presented five research-based practices that promote effective leadership: “modeling the way, inspiring shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart” (p. 14). Looking at these practices in connection with personal leadership success and failure is humbling but important.

Looking back at my leadership in connection with looping implementation at PMMS, I am proud to identify glimpses of Kouzes and Posner’s commitments in my practices. However, a key lesson was learned that was not fully known at the beginning: change takes leadership courage, creativity, and commitment over time. Armed with new knowledge, facing future challenges seems not only possible, but exciting. With knowledge rather than instinct fueling leadership action, challenges can be met with the same degree of openness to process but with a higher degree of confidence in the leadership strategies available.

Whereas participation in the Executive Leadership Program will provide the title of doctor for me once requirements are completed, there has been a higher result in this process than simply earning a title. Combined experiences within the classroom setting and within the research field have impacted the manner in which I think and the mode in which I lead.

Conclusion

Chapter 1 of this discussion introduced Gough’s (1990) vision for the reform of school practices. Gough imagined that the process of stitching together what he referred to as “pockets of excellence” would promote the widespread adoption of best practices and improve student learning in America’s public schools. Research studies presented in Chapter 2 demonstrated that the educational strategy looping might be considered one
such “pocket of excellence.” Studies revealed that looping offers several advantages for student performance and teacher efficacy. Shared perceptions from teacher and principal participants probed in this study have added support for the benefits of looping that are reported in research literature.

After reading this discussion, teachers and principals may wonder why they might invest time and energy implementing looping in school settings when the process can be challenging. Although not observable immediately, my experience has been that looping has the potential to positively enhance the culture of a middle school. Taking away the barrier of working with students for a single year at PMMS has removed other barriers with which teams struggled previously. Teams have assumed more ownership over the actions of their students, molding them to be not only productive students, but also good citizens. I have observed teams engage in community service projects, team-building projects and student workshops on pro-social skills that these same groups of teachers had not advanced with students prior to looping.

Whereas the focus of this study dealt specifically with middle schools that engage in longer-term student-teacher relationships, personal lessons learned through examining teachers’ and administrators’ journeys to implement looping likely differ little from implementing other first- or second-order changes, such as putting into place advisory programs or block scheduling. Had I possessed knowledge of the findings of this study prior to implementing the looping program in the middle school where I work, I could have guided the change process much more efficaciously. Recommendations are shared with the academic community to help leaders who have the desire to introduce longer-
term teacher-student relationships into their schools, and who are looking for guidance to begin the process.

Given the opportunity to rewind history and choose whether or not to implement looping in the school where I work, I would emphatically still choose to implement looping, in spite of the many challenges faced. One of the lessons learned in the quest to provide the caring environment looping requires in schools is that there must also be an emphasis on a positive parallel relationship between teachers and principal. Factors that make looping desirable in the classroom, when exhibited by the principal, encourage teachers to engage in the strategy: trust, consistency, warmth, and knowledge of needs. This same type of environment between teachers and the principal is critical for fostering conditions that encourage teachers to open their hearts and minds to the larger responsibilities that come with instructing and caring for students on a long-term basis.
References


National Middle School Association (NMSA) (2003). *This we believe: Successful schools for young adolescents.* Westerville, Ohio.


New State Education Department (NYSED). *Essential elements of standards-focused middle-level schools and programs.* Unpublished, the University of the State of New York.


Appendix A

Looping Constancy Chart - Current Status of Looping Schools Referenced in Literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Book/Article</th>
<th>Currently Looping?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln Middle School</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Long-Term Teacher-Student Relationships: A Middle School Case Study by George, Spreul, and Moorefield (1987)</td>
<td>Pockets of looping remain but the program in the study ended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gainesville, FL</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsford Middle School</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Making Big Schools Feel Small: Multiage Grouping, Looping, and Schools Within a School by George and Lounsbury (2000)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsford, NY</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skohegan Middle School</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Making Big Schools Feel Small: Multiage Grouping, Looping, and Schools Within a School by George and Lounsbury (2000)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skohegan, ME</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westview Middle School</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Making Big Schools Feel Small: Multiage Grouping, Looping, and Schools Within a School by George and Lounsbury (2000)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longmont, CO</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manatee Education Center</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Making Big Schools Feel Small: Multiage Grouping, Looping, and Schools Within a School by George and Lounsbury (2000)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naples, FL</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conyers Middle School</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Making Big Schools Feel Small: Multiage Grouping, Looping, and Schools Within a School by George and Lounsbury (2000)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conyers, Georgia</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attleboro Central School District</td>
<td>Elementary and Middle School</td>
<td>Multiage and Looping: Borrowing from the Past by Grant, Forsten and Richardson (1999)</td>
<td>No longer looping in a systematic way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attleboro, MA</td>
<td>Elementary and Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresno Unified School District</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>The Effect of Looping on Perceived Values and Academic Achievement by Rodriguez and Arenz (2007)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calwa Elementary School</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresno, CA</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Looping for Long-term Success by Coash (2005)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix, AZ</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Letter to Principal Participants

Dear

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my dissertation study on looping. I will be contacting you soon to set up a specific time for our in person/telephone interview. In our conversation I hope to focus on your experience with the educational strategy looping in your current or former role as a middle school leader.

The interview format will be semi-structured. While our conversation will be guided by questions I have prepared, I am also interested in providing you opportunity to share any looping experiences you may wish to discuss that are not covered in my planned questions.

I expect our conversation to last 30-45 minutes. As I appreciate the time you are providing to me, please let me know if there is any way I can make the interview more convenient or beneficial for you.

I will record our conversation with a digital voice recorder. The interview will be transcribed, analyzed and coded along with interviews from other middle level colleagues. Recordings and transcriptions will be kept in a secure location to protect your privacy. Within the study and the resulting dissertation report, you and your school/district will remain anonymous; no comment you make will be able to be attributed to you.

You may withdraw participation at any point during the interview. I believe, however, our conversation will feel more like a collegial exchange than a formal interview. The attached consent form describes the risks and benefits of participating in this study.

I would also like to request permission to review any documents you or your school use to describe looping to stakeholder groups: students, parents, teachers, Board of Education members, etc. In addition, I would be very interested in reviewing any program evaluation tools you have used or any data you have collected to evaluate your program.

I plan to complete my dissertation study in August 2010. Should you be interested in a copy of the report, I would be happy to provide it to you.

I wish to sincerely thank you for your participation. It is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Darcy Smith
Appendix C

Focus Group Objectives

Broad objectives for focus groups include:

To explore the lived experiences of middle school teachers involved in looping scheduling configurations.

To explore what teachers perceive to be advantages and disadvantages of looping arrangements.

To determine if teachers become more or less committed to the strategy of looping over time.

To determine if teacher perceptions of looping, whether supportive or non-supportive, relate to the strategy of looping itself or more directly relate to incidental aspects of looping (learning a new curriculum, creating new lesson plans, spending additional personal or professional time on instructional planning, etc.).

To determine what, if any, support systems can be put into place to encourage more appeal for looping in cases where initial appeal is lacking.

To determine whether the subject area a teacher instructs, the number of years of experience a teacher has, or the certifications they hold affect their perceptions of looping as an intervention strategy.
Appendix D

Focus Group Researcher Introduction Letter and Screening Form

Dear [Name]:

My name is Darcy Smith and I am a doctoral candidate at St. John Fisher College and the Principal of Palmyra-Macedon Middle School. I have been working with your Principal on my dissertation research. Because of the experience you have with looping, I am interested in your participation in a focus group to discuss your perceptions related to longer-term teacher student relationships. Focus groups will be held in your school’s Conference Room on [date].

If you are willing to participate, please read and sign the attached consent form and complete the attached participant screening form. Focus group sessions will be digitally recorded and transcribed for use in my study. While comments shared will be summarized and contribute to overall study results, you and your school will remain anonymous. You will not be matched directly to any comments you make nor will your name be mentioned outside the focus group setting or in any report.

The focus group will last approximately 45 minutes and will be comprised of six to eight participants from your school. Participants will discuss their experiences with looping based upon seven pre-determined questions. I will be present to serve as the moderator, note-taker, and facilitator.

Your participation would be greatly appreciated. Should I be able to answer any questions that will help you to determine your willingness to participate, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Darcy Smith
Home (585-264-9927)
Work (315-597-3450)
dnsmith@rochester.rr.com
darcy.smith@palmaccsd.org
Looping Teacher Focus Groups
Participant Screening Form

Name ________________________________________________     Gender _________

Email __________________________________________________________________

School Address __________________________________________________________________

How many years have you have participated in a looping scheduling configuration (either at your current school or another school)? ________________

How many years have you been teaching? ________________

Subject(s) You Teach __________________________________________________________________

Current Grade Level Assignment ________________

Titles of Teaching Certifications You Possess ________________

What is your stance on your middle school’s looping program?

_____ supportive
_____ somewhat supportive
_____ somewhat unsupportive
_____ unsupportive

Have you participated in a focus group before?

_____ Yes
_____ No
Appendix E

Conversational Guide 1 – Principals
(Schools with continuous looping programs in place)

Background Questions:

1. How long have you been a middle school principal in the district where you work?
2. How long has this middle-school been looping?
3. Were you the principal of this building at the time looping was adopted?
4. Do you recall how this school first became interested in looping?
5. Are any of the teachers or administrators who initiated the looping program still working within the program?
6. How was the concept of looping introduced to teachers in the building?
7. Are there any other looping programs in place in other school buildings in this district?

Main Questions:

8. What were the challenges, if any, that had to be overcome to implement a looping program in this school?
9. How long did it take to overcome challenges related to looping if challenges were, in fact, experienced?
10. How do you think teachers would respond if you chose to end the looping program and revert to traditional scheduling structures?
11. Have you or your school’s leadership team ever considered reverting to traditional scheduling structures? If so, what reasons led to this discussion?
12. Have you, personally, felt pressure from any stakeholder group in the district to abandon looping?
13. Are there features of looping that teachers do not care for? If so, what are these features?
14. If you were to no longer be the leader of this school, do you think looping would continue?
15. What advice would you give to an administrative colleague considering proposing looping to his or her staff?
16. In your opinion, would you say your building has been restructured to engage in looping or recultured to embrace and support looping?

Follow-up Questions:

17. Do you know of any other schools in this area that have or have had looping programs in place?
18. Do you have any written, school-generated materials that you use to describe looping to parents, teachers or students of which I may have a copy?
19. Do you have any evaluation tools that you use to assess the looping program or data from your program that you have compiled?
Appendix F

Conversational Guide 2 - Principals
(Schools that have discontinued looping or significantly altered their programs)

Background Questions:

1. How long have you held your position as principal within this school?
2. How long did a looping program exist in this school or district? What years did the program occur?
3. Do you recall where you or this school first learned about looping?
4. Do you recall who or what committee group first made the decision to implement looping?
5. What grade levels looped in your program?
6. Are there any looping programs in other schools in the district?

Main Questions:

7. What factors led to the discontinuation of looping?
8. Who or what committee made the final decision to eliminate looping as a scheduling option?
9. Was any disappointment expressed as a result of the decision to move away from looping (upset parents, teachers, students?)
10. Were the originators of the looping program still active with looping up through the time the decision was made to revert to traditional structures?
11. Did you personally support adopting looping? Did you, personally, support the decision to move away from looping?
12. What do you perceive to be the obstacles to implementing looping programs in middle school settings?
13. What advice would you give to a colleague interested in beginning a looping program in his or her school?

Follow-up Questions:

14. Do you know of any other schools in this area that have or have had looping programs in place?
15. Do you have any written, school-generated materials that you used to describe looping to parents, teachers or students of which I may have a copy?
Appendix G

Focus Group Question Protocol

Background questions:
1. Please share your name and the subject you teach.
2. How long have you been a teacher who loops?

Main Questions:

3. At the start of your looping experience, how did your existing values and prior teaching experiences affect your personal feelings about looping?
4. How complex is the strategy of looping to implement? Has the level of complexity related to looping influenced your willingness or desire to loop?
5. As you gained more experience with looping, did original concerns or fears associated with the strategy lessen, increase, or remain the same?
6. If personally given the choice to continue or discontinue looping, what would you choose?
7. If you would chose to abandon looping practices, what would be the reasons leading to this decision?
8. What advice would you give to a school beginning looping in order to make the smoothest transition to multi-year grade level configurations possible?
Title of study: Sustainability of the Educational Strategy Looping in Middle School Settings

Name of researcher: Darcy Smith

Faculty Supervisors: Dissertation Chairperson: Dr. John Travers 585-385-7259
Committee Member: Dr. Kathy Broikou 585-385-8112

Purpose of study: The researcher is pursuing a doctoral degree in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York. As part of this process, a research study must be conducted. The purpose of this study is to probe the sustainability of the strategy looping in middle level settings through exploring the lived experiences of teachers and principals who have had experience with longer-term teacher student relationships.

Approval of study: This study has been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Place of study: Principal interviews will occur in school settings across New York State where individuals work. Teacher focus groups will occur in two middle school settings where teacher participants work.

Length of participation: Focus group and interview sessions are estimated to last 45 minutes. In addition, the researcher will follow up with interview participants and one member of each focus group to verify the accuracy of her description of the information shared. These follow ups will occur through email.

Risks and benefits: There are no physical risks to participating in this study. Through participating in this study, participants will contribute to results of a study which intends to add to the body of research currently available on the educational strategy looping and to provide guidance to schools that wish to consider adopting looping programs in their school communities.

Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy: Neither names nor any other identifying information will be presented in the written analysis of the interviews and focus groups. Written transcriptions will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home for one year after the successful defense of the dissertation and then shredded. The electronic format of interview sessions will be stored on an external hard drive in the researcher’s home.
Your rights: As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

_______________________________________
Print name (Participant)

Signature _______________________________ Date __________________________

________________________________________
Print name (Investigator)

Signature ________________________________ Date __________________________

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact the Office of Academic Affairs at 385-8034 or the Wellness Center at 385-8280 for appropriate referrals.