

Looping: Here's What Happens When Students Have the Same Teacher More Than Once



By [Madeline Will](#) — June 21, 2022 5 min read



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When students have a teacher for more than one year, they benefit academically and behaviorally, [a new working paper shows](#).

The study, which was published this month by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, captures all instances of repeat student-teacher matches—a teacher who happens to move from 2nd to 4th grade, a high school math teacher who teaches multiple grade levels, and a teacher who “loops” with her same class for two years. But intentional looping is not very common, which the researchers say is an opportunity for schools as they work to meet students’ academic and social needs in the wake of the pandemic.

“Student-teacher relationships are a key and core feature of a successful school, and one way to help develop those is by giving teachers and students more time to get to know each other,” said Matthew Kraft, an associate professor of education and economics at Brown University and a co-author of the paper. “These relationships aren’t just about academic achievement. These relationships help students to show up to school and have a relationship where they’re not getting suspended as frequently.”

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The researchers looked at nearly a decade's worth of statewide data on students and teachers from Tennessee to understand the effect of repeat student-teacher matches on outcomes for students in grades 3 through 11. (The researchers excluded instances where a student has the same teacher twice because they've been held back.) Having a teacher for more than one year is a relatively common phenomenon. In the study sample, 44 percent of students were taught by a teacher more than once, although most of these instances appeared to be unintentional.

Researchers found that repeat teachers are linked to slight increases in students' test scores in math and English/language arts across all grade levels. The gains were most pronounced among higher-performing students and white female students. Repeat teachers are also correlated with a slightly reduced number of absences and suspensions across all grade levels. Male students of color benefit the most from this effect, which is significant since this group of students is the most likely to be suspended and disciplined.

When half or more of a teacher's class are repeat students, all students—including those who didn't have the teacher before—tend to perform better academically and receive fewer suspensions. The researchers note that this suggests the benefits of intentional looping could be even greater than this paper's findings.

With intentional looping, teachers can adjust academic content to maximize learning over two years, the paper says. And learning how to support an individual student is a teaching skill that can take time to develop, just like classroom management and teaching a certain subject, said Leigh Wedenoja, the lead author of the paper and a senior policy analyst at the Rockefeller Institute of Government at the State University of New York.

"You're constantly picking up little skills that contribute to how effective you are as a teacher," she said. "Everyone is going to be a little bit worse at any of those skills the first time they do them."

This study builds on an emerging body of research suggesting that repeat student-teacher matches can boost achievement. A study in 2018 [found that the benefits of repeated student-teacher matches were greatest for students of color](#), possibly because teachers see more potential in students once they know them better. (Research has long shown that white teachers [have lower expectations](#) for students of color, which [can become a self-fulfilling prophecy](#).)

Wedenoja said she hopes this research will help administrators and teachers as they work to determine next year's class assignments. While figuring out the best combination of students and teachers is "an incredibly complicated and difficult task," she said, these findings can be another tool in coming up with the right formula.

"While these effects are not large, ... it's important to contrast with their costs and their potential scalability," said Kraft. "I think there's a lot of promise here, at least from a financial perspective. This is a very low-cost intervention as long as schools and districts are able to support teachers who effectively transition from grade to grade."

Starting the year ‘ready to learn’

Earlier this month, Education Week [surveyed teachers on social media about their experiences with looping](#). Several teachers said looping allowed them to hit the ground running in year two since they had already established relationships and expectations.

“Students came in ready to learn and I entered a year full of energy, understanding of my students’ abilities, and able to pick up where we left off the prior year,” wrote Laura McKean on LinkedIn.

But teachers noted some challenges, too. “[T]he students got too comfortable. They also got annoyed with each other and sometimes with me,” wrote Neil Konitshek on LinkedIn. “Overall, it’s a good thing as a teacher can better serve the students. However, be prepared in year two as the ‘honeymoon’ definitely wears off.”

While the researchers acknowledged that looping won’t be a “silver bullet,” and that it requires teachers to master new academic content and pedagogical skills, they said it can facilitate stronger student-teacher relationships at a time when students might be in need of emotional support. Kraft also noted that for many teachers, looping is a rewarding experience, which could help mitigate [some of the burnout teachers are experiencing](#) this school year.

Wedenoja said she was inspired to do this study in part because of her “extremely positive” experience in a looped classroom in elementary school.

“It was nice coming into a classroom at the beginning of the year and not being worried that something would go terribly wrong,” she said. “It’s a nice way to start a year—taking some of that beginning-of-the-year nervousness off.”

Likewise, Kraft said having his high school English teacher two different years made an impact.

“In my second year [with her], we had a relationship where I didn’t want to let her down,” he said. “I wanted to do my best work because she believed in me, and I wanted to live up to her high expectations.”



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