



'Looping' With Students Boosts Learning, Especially for Kids of Color, Study Says

By Brenda Iasevoli on March 29, 2018 4:28 PM

Elementary students matched with the same teacher two years in a row show improvement in test scores, according to a new study.

Economics professors Andrew Hill of Montana State University and Daniel Jones of the University of South Carolina conclude in the study that "looping," in which an entire class moves to the next grade with the same teacher, results in a slight but significant increase in student achievement. Even students assigned to a teacher for the first time experience gains when a large



number of their classmates are with that teacher for a second school year. (Here an elementary teacher from Arkansas makes a case for this practice, which he says is largely underappreciated.)

The researchers looked at students in grades 3 to 5 in North Carolina between 1997 and 2013 who were assigned to the same teacher two years straight. They measured the effect of students spending a second year with the same teacher using math scores on standardized tests given at the end of each school year. The estimated gain from students spending a second year with the same teacher ranges from .02 to .12 test score standard deviations. That's equivalent to an average student's score increasing by one or two percentiles, from say the 50th to 51st percentile. (The authors focused on math scores, but the appendix show that students also demonstrated an increase in end-of-year reading scores, though the gains were slightly smaller.)

The benefits of repeated student-teacher matches were greatest for students of color, the study found. The reason, the authors suggest, could stem from the fact that most teachers are white, and when a white teacher works with students whose backgrounds and cultures may be unfamiliar there is more to gain from a longer period of getting to know one another. Once teachers know a student better, there's a greater chance they can adapt lessons to the student's particular learning style. Another possibility is that teachers may see more potential in students once they know them better, leading to higher expectations.

Spending a second year with students appeared to benefit teachers too, in particular those deemed lower-performing.

The researchers also say the results explain why specialization, in which teachers serve as experts in a particular subject like math, science, or reading, has been shown to have negative effects on achievement. The implication is that students spend less time with teachers who only specialize in one subject, resulting in a less

familiar relationship. This Education Week article explores the ups and downs of specialization, also known as platooning, in elementary schools.

In the end, the authors advise against schools assigning elementary teachers to a single subject like math or reading. The research shows the importance of allowing teachers to spend more than one school year with an entire class in order to better meet individual students' needs and boost their achievement. As the researchers note, having teachers loop is a relatively low-cost measure that requires no legislative approval.

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