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AUTHOR Hagborg, Winston J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study investigating teacher and student attitudes toward grade retention. Questionnaires were completed by elementary, middle, and high school teachers (N=37), and high school students (N=62). The student population was organized into two groups: (1) grade repeaters; and (2) a control group composed of an equal number of nonrepeaters. Grade repeaters were asked about their own retention experiences and the experiences of acquaintances; the control group was questioned only about acquaintances. Teachers were asked to rate the effectiveness of retention on students they had taught. Information was then integrated with previous studies. Results suggest that across all groups, scholastic benefits of retention were viewed as exceeding emotional benefits; grade repeating students recalled considerable distress at the time of retention, but over time most came to view it as an academically positive event; both teachers and students were doubtful about the reported benefits of retention, and it is suspected they would prefer a different approach. Teacher and student attitudes are displayed in tabular form. (Contains 15 references.) (LL)

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Teacher And High School Student Grade Retention Attitudes

By

Winston J. Hagborg

Chatham Central Schools

Chatham, NY

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Abstract

Grade retention attitudes were examined among teachers ($N = 37$) and high school students ($N = 62$) using a questionnaire. Grade repeating students were found to report more favorable perceptions of the scholastic benefits resulting from retention than either Middle School grade level teachers or a control group of students. Across the five groups studied, retention was viewed as offering greater scholastic benefits than emotional benefits. Questionnaire responses were integrated with student interview information along with previous studies to offer a possible interpretation of the apparent contradiction between student reported distress at the time of the retention with their later more favorable view of the retention experience.

Teacher and High School Student Grade Retention Attitudes

Retention continues to be a common educational practice, with an estimated 6% of all school age youngsters retained each year (Berger, 1990, May 13). While reviewers of the literature have often noted its ineffectiveness (Holmes, 1989; Jackson, 1975), advocates of the practice report on its value and support its continued use (Ames, 1980; Owen & Ranick, 1977). Despite the extensive literature on retention, the attitudes of people directly involved in the practice are often overlooked. In one of the few available studies, Byrnes (1989) surveyed parents and educators regarding grade retention and found wide support for the practice.

Along with parents and educators, students are obviously central to grade retentions, yet their attitudes have been rarely examined. High school students with a history of grade retention have presented favorable attitudes regarding the practice based both on personal interviews (Ogden, 1971) and questionnaire responses (Sandoval & Fitzgerald, 1985). In contrast, Byrnes (1989) used personal interviews with elementary school age children during their grade retention year, and she found that 84 percent of the students reported feelings of distress (e.g., bad, sad or upset) about their retention. Also, she concluded that retained students were far more doubtful about the possible benefits of retention than surveyed educators and parents.

The present study sought to investigate both teacher and student retention attitudes, extending the earlier work of Sandoval and Fitzgerald (1985). To date a direct comparison between teachers and students, using the same attitude measure, has not been conducted.

Method

Teachers and Students

All subjects were drawn from a single school district with an enrollment of approximately 1300 students. Teacher participation was voluntary and anonymous, depending on teacher completion of a questionnaire which was placed in their school mailbox. Fifty-two teachers (47%) returned the questionnaires, with 6 questionnaires with only written comments and 9 questionnaires (3 Middle and 6 High School) indicated they were unaware of which of their students had a history of grade retention and thought it would be impossible for them to judge its possible effectiveness. Thus, 37 teachers (34%) participated in the study. Participating teachers provided the following background information : years of teaching ($M = 14.48$, $SD = 7.07$); teaching assignment, special education/remedial - 7 (19%) and regular education - 30 (81 per cent); school building assignment, Elementary [k - 4]- 18 (48%), Middle [5 - 8] - 12 (32%), and High [9 - 12]- 7 (19%); and number of students retained ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 4.91$). This sample is roughly comparable to district-wide teacher characteristics pertaining to years of teaching experience ($M = 11.26$) and percentage of special education/remedial teachers (18%); however, Elementary School teachers were over represented, as they comprise only 32% of the school district's teaching staff. The over

representation of Elementary School teachers is attributed to their greater familiarity with the practice of grade retention, as most retentions occurred at the lower grades.

The grade repeating students were high school students with a history of at least one grade retention prior to ninth grade and excluded pre-first participates. The retained students had been retained on average 7.33 years ($SD = 2.33$) prior to the study. These 31 students were matched by gender, grade level, and same English class (equivalent track) to 31 non-repeating students to form a control group. This is identical to the procedure reported by Sandoval and Fitzgerald (1985).

Measures and Procedures

The retention attitude instrument was drawn from the earlier work of Sandoval and Fitzgerald (1985). The 4 question measure requests respondents to rate on a 6 - point Likert scale (1 - Yes, much better to 6 - No, it was harmful) the effectiveness of retention pertaining to school work (scholastic benefits), making friends (social benefits), feelings about oneself (emotional benefits), and its overall effect (overall benefits). Grade repeaters were first asked about grade retention for students they had known (acquaintances) and then about their own experiences with grade repeating, while control group students were questioned only about their acquaintances. Teachers were asked to recall students they had taught and to rate separately the effectiveness of both pre-first participation and grade retention.

Results

Teacher and student retention attitudes are displayed in Table 1. For grade repeaters only their ratings for acquaintances is shown. Among grade repeating students, there was not a significant difference between their ratings of their own retention experience and ratings of retained acquaintances. Using one-way ANOVAs, the five groups were compared on each of the four questions, and only one question (scholastic benefits) was statistically significant. Follow-up planned comparisons found that grade repeating students rated the scholastic benefits of retention more favorably than Middle School teachers ($F(1, 94) = 5.55, p < .02$) and control group students ($F(1, 94) = 6.40, p < .01$). A comparison between Elementary and a combined group of Middle and High School teachers approached, but was not statistically significant ($F(1, 94) = 3.24, p < .07$). However, other comparisons were not significant.

Insert Table 1

To analyze the pattern of question responses across the five groups, a 5 (Group) by 4 (Question) ANOVA with repeated measures on the Question factor was computed. Main effects for Groups was not significant ($F(4, 94) = 1.89, p = .11$), for Questions was significant ($F(12, 282) = 6.11, p < .001$), and for Groups X Questions Interaction was not significant ($F(12, 282) = 1.06, p = .39$). Follow-up planned comparisons among the four questions revealed that Question 1

(scholastic benefits) received a more favorable rating than Question 3 (emotional benefits) ($F(4, 94) = 2.52, p = .03$).

Teacher ratings comparing the effectiveness of pre-first and grade repeating was collected from 13 Elementary School teachers. The two educational practices did not receive significantly different ratings on each of the four questions. (See Table 2). Also, collected teacher background characteristics did not significantly correlate to any of the teacher retention attitude questions.

Insert Table 2

To explore in-depth student perceptions of grade repeating, the authors interviewed 15 grade repeaters drawn at random. Regarding their initial reactions to retention, 3 students retained in the early grades (k - 3) reported they could not recall their feelings from that earlier time, while the other 12 students described stressful memories (e.g., "I was upset...lost friends...very unhappy...kind of upset"). While not directly questioned, 4 students noted that they were to blame for the retention (e.g., "I deserved it...I was stupid...it was my own fault"). Pertaining to scholastic benefits, student reactions were both positive (e.g., "took school more seriously, tried harder...brought up my grades...got caught-up") and less sure of the value of retention (e.g., "probably helped...didn't do much of anything for me...I guess it helped in a way...didn't fail again"). On the matter of social-emotional benefits, most students

emphasized that they were doing fine at present and that retention did not substantially effect them (e.g., "met a new set of better friends...I always get along well with people...little bit better, more friends in this class"). Only 2 students indicated a desire to be with chronological age classmates (e.g., "still wish I didn't fail...wish I was with my class"). When asked whether retention helped or hurt them, students were divided, with several students indicating it helped them (e.g., "better in sports...for my own good"), while most students were unsure (e.g., "no big deal...neither helped or hurt...good chance it helped me, they say it did"). Despite mixed feelings about retention, 13 of 15 students were supportive of retention where it is "necessary" and thought it provided students with additional assistance to "catch-up" and an opportunity to make a better set of friends.

Discussion

Across the five groups, the scholastic benefits from grade retention were viewed as exceeding the emotional benefits, especially among grade repeated students. The perceived scholastic benefits from grade repeating is disputed by a sizable literature (Hagborg, Masella, Palladino, & Shepardson, 1991; Holmes, 1989; Niklason, 1984; Jackson, 1975); however, several studies have found early academic benefits for retained students (Elliget & Tocco, 1983; Owen & Ranick, 1977) and educators and parents continue to view it as effective practice (Byrnes, 1989). One study provided a possible explanation for these contradictory findings, Peterson, DeGracie, and Agabe (1987) followed retained students for several years, they

reported that retained students did demonstrate early academic gains which "washed out" after two years. Thus, the positive perceptions of grade retention among teachers (Byrnes, 1989) and even some students may in part be related to their experience during the early portion of that retention year. Teachers may be less aware of those retained students progress in later years, when those early benefits may have disappeared.

The finding that elementary school teachers did not rate pre-first placements as significantly more effective than grade retention is consistent with research which has concluded that these practices do not differ in effectiveness (Dawson, Rafoth, & Carey, 1990; Gredler 1984).

This is now the third study to report that grade repeating students, when followed-up in high school, hold generally positive attitudes about their retention experience and the educational practice in general (Ogden, 1971; Sandoval & Fitzgerald, 1985). These findings would appear to contradict Byrnes (1989) study documenting student distress regarding retention. However, the present study's student interviews revealed a possible explanation for this apparent inconsistency. Interviewed students most often recalled their considerable distress at the time of the retention, which was also found by Byrnes (1989); however, as the years passed, most retained students came to view their retention as an academically positive event. Teachers find the decision to retain a student a difficult one (Byrnes, 1989; Carstens, 1985), but once it is made they have an investment in the belief that retention is a

positive experience for students. This study's findings suggest that grade repeating students may have a similar investment, though it was not a chosen experience nor even one they were initially comfortable with. Furthermore, children tend to believe that adults act in their best interests, and if adults did this and adults say it was helpful, then in time children conclude that it was probably helpful.

Previous studies have concluded that both educators (Byrnes, 1989) and high school age students (Sandoval & Fitzgerald, 1985) are supportive of the practice of grade retention. The present authors view question averages in the 3 to 4 range as mixed ratings, indicating doubt about the practice in the sphere described by the question. Thus, both teachers and students are viewed as doubtful about many of the purported benefits of retention, and it is suspected they would prefer a different approach.

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Table 1

Teacher and Student Attitudes Towards Grade Repeating

Effects of Grade Repeating	Teachers			Students		
	Elementary (<u>N</u> = 18)	Middle (<u>N</u> = 12)	High (<u>N</u> = 7)	Repeaters (<u>N</u> = 31)	Control (<u>N</u> = 31)	F
Scholastic Benefits	M 2.38	3.17	3.14	2.16	3.03	2.64*
	SD 1.20	1.07	1.21	1.39	1.13	
Social Benefits	M 2.89	3.17	3.29	2.87	3.43	.54
	SD 1.32	1.03	1.38	1.54	1.22	
Emotional Benefits	M 2.89	3.25	3.71	3.45	3.87	1.42
	SD 1.57	.97	1.38	1.69	1.48	
Overall Effect	M 2.72	3.25	3.14	3.03	3.83	1.87
	SD 1.18	1.14	1.06	1.80	1.39	

* $p < .05$ $df = (4, 94)$ Note. Lower numbers indicate more affirmative answers.

Table 2

Teacher Attitudes Towards Grade Repeating and Pre-First ($N = 13$)

Questions	Grade Repeating		Pre-First		t^*
	M	SD	M	SD	
Scholastic Benefits	2.43	1.13	2.16	1.43	.45
Social Benefits	2.14	1.67	2.65	1.58	.75
Emotional Benefits	3.14	1.77	3.03	1.64	.15
Overall Benefits	3.00	1.92	3.26	1.91	.32

* t -test correlated sample ($df = 12$)