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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether retention is an effective method for remediating low-level readers. It was hypothesized that there would not be a significant difference in reading test scores of low level readers between those who were retained in second grade and those who were promoted to third grade. The Metropolitan Achievement Test was used as a pretest in second grade. Students who scored less than the 50th percentile on the total reading score were selected as subjects. Of the 20 students in an urban elementary school, 3 were retained in the second grade, and 17 were promoted to the third grade. The Metropolitan Achievement Test was administered again in the subjects' third grade year. The national percentile for the total reading score was used to compare the retained and nonretained students. As hypothesized, there was not a significant difference in reading scores between the retained and nonretained subjects. A major limitation was a very small sample size. (Contains 38 references and 2 tables of data; a table of data is attached.) (Author/RS)

Retention and its effect on low level readers

by

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Abstract

It was hypothesized that there would not be a significant difference in reading test scores of low level readers between those who were retained in second grade and those who were promoted to third grade. The Metropolitan Achievement Test was used as a pretest in second grade. Students who scored less than the fiftieth percentile on the total reading score were selected as subjects. Some of these students were retained in second grade and some were promoted into third grade. The Metropolitan Achievement Test was administered again in the subjects' third grade year. The national percentile for the total reading score was used to compare the retained and non retained students. As was hypothesized, there was not a significant difference in reading scores between the retained and non retained subjects. A major limitation of the study was a very small sample size.

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Introduction

Grade retention or nonpromotion is the practice of requiring a student to repeat a year of academic instruction at a particular level (Jackson, 1975). The reasons for nonpromotion typically seem to be lack of academic achievement or lack of maturity or appropriate social behavior for a given grade level. Grade retention is referred to by many names; repeating a grade, being left back, failing, flunking or euphemistically as "a year to grow." Regardless of the term being used, it always means the same thing. The child is repeating the whole course of study for that year, rather than just isolated subjects.

As with many aspects of education in the United States, certain trends come and go with the passage of time. Grade retention is one of these trends. Prior to the middle 1800's, grade retention was not an issue, due to the highly individualized structure of schools. Students progressed through the curriculum at their own rate. Retention became an issue in public education once school systems began to organize their students into grade levels (Johnson, Merrell & Stover, 1990), which came into practice in the United States near the end of the Civil War (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). Students were then expected to complete various levels of the curriculum simultaneously. Frederick Medway (1985) further describes the trend in education leading to the rise and fall of retention rates. At the beginning of the twentieth century, grade standards were the rule and the average retention rate for all grades was 16%. In the early 1930's schools

became more flexible with retention guidelines and gave more consideration to the needs of the child. During this time the retention rate ranged from 4-5%. In the 1960's "social promotion" became the norm. Rather than failing the grade, students were promoted and grouped homogeneously and given individualized remedial instruction. The social promotion policy seemed to lead to a significant drop in achievement test scores and to an increase in the number of students reaching high school who were unable to meet minimum competency standards. It is not surprising then that the pendulum has swung back to the other end of the retention spectrum.

The exact number of students who are retained in a given year is not known. However, the United States Bureau of the Census gathers data on the number of students below the modal grade for their age group, either due to a delayed start of schooling or due to retention. Beginning in the late 1970's, the number of children below their modal grade rose dramatically. This coincides with the increase in popularity of minimum competency testing programs. A recent estimate indicates that approximately 2.4 million students are retained every year in the United States (Shepard and Smith, 1990).

There is much confusion as to which children should be retained and for what reasons. A national policy regarding the retention or promotion of students does not exist. Indeed, even within a given school district a retention policy may not exist. In a survey of schools in South Carolina, nearly half of the school

districts surveyed did not have a policy for retention (Medway, 1985). When a policy does exist, it seems to be subjectively enforced, depending on the beliefs of the teachers or principals.

Regardless of the increasing rate of retention, Jackson (1975) has reviewed the research on retention and concluded that there is no evidence that retention was more beneficial than promotion for students with academic difficulties. Holmes & Matthews (1984) state that there is no advantage and some disadvantage to retention. Further, the authors state that in addition to greater social and emotional problems such as lower self-esteem and behavior difficulties, retained children have lower rates of academic achievement.

In light of the discrepancy between the current policies on retention and the body of research available, it is clear that this is an issue that requires further study.

Hypothesis

To provide additional evidence on this topic, the following study was undertaken. It was hypothesized that there would not be a significant difference in reading test scores of low-level readers between those who were retained in second grade and those who were promoted to third grade.

Procedure

One urban elementary school, containing grades kindergarten through fourth grade participated in the study. Subjects were selected based on their national percentile ranking on the Metropolitan Achievement Test, which was administered in April of the second grade year. Students who scored below the fiftieth percentile on the total reading score were included in the study. Twenty students were identified.

The subjects were then divided into two groups. One group was not retained in second grade (NRET). There were 17 subjects in this group. The other group was retained in second grade (RET). There were 3 subjects in this group.

The third grade Metropolitan Achievement Test was administered in April of the subjects' third grade year. The total reading national percentile score was obtained for each of the subjects. This is the data used for comparing the retained and non-retained students.

Results

The results of the pre-test administered in second grade are shown in Table I. The mean difference between the RET and NRET subjects was 12.73.

Table I: Mean, Standard Deviation and t of Samples
Pre-test Scores (second grade)

Sample	M	SD	t
RET	15.33	12.74	1.46
NRET	28.06	14.11	

However, there is not a significant difference between the samples based on the t score of 1.46.

In Table II the results of the post-testing in third grade are shown. The mean difference between the RET and NRET was 15.17. Again, this was not

Table II: Mean, Standard Deviation and t of Samples
Post Test Scores (third grade)

Sample	M	SD	t
RET	16.50	21.56	1.52
NRET	31.67	17.30	

a significant difference based on the t score of 1.52.

Although the RET group showed an improvement of 1.17 percentile points, this was a much smaller gain than the NRET difference of 3.61 percentile points. Therefore, the hypothesis that there would not be a significant difference in reading test scores of low-level readers between those who were retained in second grade and those who were promoted to third grade was proven to be true in this study.

Conclusion

In order for retention to be shown as an effective method of remediating low-level readers, a much greater gain in the total reading score would have been necessary. Other alternatives to retention need to be explored by school districts in order to better help these low-level readers.

A major limitation of this study was the small sample of retained students. Many of the students who were retained were consequently placed in special education classes or transferred out of the school and further data was not available. In order to support the findings of this study, a much larger sample would need to be obtained.

It is clear that the issue of retaining students requires further study and the results need to be brought to the attention of school administrators. Despite the overwhelming evidence provided by countless studies on the effects of retention, it is still a widely accepted practice across the United States.

Related Research:

Retention

"Children who fail to attain levels of competence appropriate to the grades in which they are enrolled are recycled through the standard curriculum, after which, it is assumed, they will have attained grade-level competence and can go on to the next level, the next standard body of content, and so on." (Smith & Shepard, 1987, p.130)

The practice of retaining children in a grade which they have completed affects an enormous number of students in the United States each year. Estimates of the national retention rate range from 15 – 19% (Smith & Shepard, 1987). These estimates are based on counts of overage students from 1985-1986 U. S. Census Bureau data and fluctuate due to differences in school entrance ages and transiency (Schwager, Mitchell, Mitchell & Hecht, 1992). It is estimated that by the ninth grade, approximately one-half of all students have failed at least one grade (Shepard & Smith, 1990). In large urban districts, more than 50% of students who enter kindergarten are likely to be retained at least once before they graduate or drop out (Feldman, 1997).

Retention costs school districts, and therefore taxpayers, unknown amounts (Walker, 1984). Jackson (1975) estimated that the cost of retention in the 1971-1972 school year was 739-903 million dollars. More recently, Shepard & Smith (1990) place the estimated cost of extra years of schooling due to retention at nearly $10 billion per year.

More importantly, we must remember that children who are retained pay a cost as well. These children pay with a year of their lives (Smith & Shepard, 1987), in addition to possible continued academic, social and emotional problems

(Foster,1993). When asked about the emotional cost of retention, children ranked failing a grade only slightly more stressful than going blind or having a parent die (Bracey,1986). Compared to low achieving children who are promoted, retained children have more problems related to emotional and social functioning, more conduct problems, lower self images and negative attitudes toward school (Holmes & Matthews, 1984, Walker, 1984). As early as the 1930's educators were aware of the damaging effects of retention on the social and psychological development of students (Haberman & Dill, 1993). In addition, the tendency to drop out of school before graduation is increased for students who are overage for their grade (Smith & Shepard, 1987).

Despite this high emotional cost, there is an even higher negative effect on achievement than on emotional adjustment and self-concept (Smith & Shepard, 1987). Reviews of the research on retention conducted by Jackson (1975) and Holmes & Matthews (1984), concluded that although children make progress in the repeated grade, they do not make as much progress as their counterparts who were promoted. Holmes & Matthew (1984) stated that the academic achievement of retained students measured .44 of a standard deviation below the academic achievement of promoted students. Children who repeat a grade are consistently worse off than those who are promoted (Smith & Shepard, 1987).

Retention and the possible beneficial or detrimental effects have been heavily studied in the United States. Medway (1985) suggests that nearly 100

studies have been conducted, dating as early as 1911. That number has surly increased, since there seemed to be a proliferation of studies which took place in the late 1980's following the dramatic rise in retention rates of the early 1980's.

A typical study compared elementary and junior high students who were retained with matched counterparts who were promoted. Both groups showed academic progress, but the promoted students made greater gains. Eighty five percent of the promoted students were at a "normal rate" of achievement, compared with thirty five percent of the retained students achieving a "normal rate" (Medway, 1985).

A study on the effects of early grade retention was conducted by Johnson, Merrell & Stover (1990). Subjects were divided into three groups: those who were retained in kindergarten or first grade (RET), those who were recommended for retention in kindergarten or first grade but were not retained (NRET), and those who were never recommended for retention (NORM). The standardized test scores from the Metropolitan Achievement Test, which were administered in the fall of the students' fourth grade year, were compared. The results showed that there was no significant difference in achievement between the RET group and the NRET group. However, both of these groups were lower than the NORM group, indicating that neither retention nor social promotion were supported by the study. The authors concluded that early grade retention was not an effective academic intervention.

Another study examined the effects of kindergarten retention on achievement and affective outcomes at the end of first grade (Shepard and Smith, 1987). Subjects were matched based on the results of kindergarten readiness tests. The control subjects were equally young and scored equally low on readiness tasks as the retained subjects. The control subjects differed only in that they attended a school that rarely practiced kindergarten retention. Comparing first grade scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), there were no differences between the control group and the retained group in the area math as well as on teacher ratings of reading, math, social maturity, learner self-concept and attention. The retained group scored slightly higher on the CTBS reading test, but showed that they were only 1 month ahead of where they would have been without the extra year of school. The authors concluded that an extra year does not give at-risk students a boost.

May and Welch (1984) studied the effect of an extra year before the level of second grade, which may have taken the form of placement in a pre-kindergarten class, retention in kindergarten, holding a student out of kindergarten for a year or placement in a pre-first grade class between kindergarten and first grade. The subjects were divided into three groups based on the results of the Gesell Screening Test administered prior to beginning kindergarten. Group A showed developmental immaturity and was given an extra year before second grade. Group B showed developmental immaturity and was recommended for an extra year but followed the normal grade progression.

Group C showed developmental maturity, was placed in a typical kindergarten and followed the normal grade progression. Analysis of scores took place between second and sixth grades because the developmental placement occurred prior to second grade. Scores were taken from the third grade New York State Pupil Evaluation Program (PEP) test in reading and math and from the Stanford Achievement Test full battery for second, fourth and sixth grades. Results indicated that although Group A was almost a full year older due to the extra year, they did not do as well as Group B and Group C. It appears that the extra year did not help Group A and actually hurt them since their promoted peers in Group B had better scores.

In their study of 16,623 public school students, Meisels & Liaw (1993) noted students who had repeated a grade showed significantly lower grades and test scores when compared to students who did not repeat a grade.

All major reviews of studies on retention seem to conclude that "retention is an ineffective way of increasing children's school achievement and promoting their personal adjustment" (Medway, 1985, p.24). However, Jackson (1975) reviewed the bulk of studies on retention and concluded that most of them are flawed. Studies that compare the achievement and adjustment scores of promoted and retained students are biased toward promotion because retained students most likely have more difficulties than those who are promoted. Studies that compare outcomes of students before and after retention are biased

in favor of retention, since they do not control for possible improvements caused by factors other than retention. The author suggested that the only unbiased design is to take students who are having difficulty and randomly assign them to promotion or retention. Despite the criticism of the study designs, Jackson's review concluded that there is no evidence that retention was more beneficial than promotion for students with academic difficulties.

Clearly, the bulk of available research on retention shows no advantage and some disadvantage for affected students (Holmes & Matthews, 1984, Walker, 1984). Despite the results of the body of research on retention, it remains a widely used practice in American schools. Some educators and the general public continue to view retention as necessary and beneficial and to be on the increase due to new promotion requirements based on minimum competency testing (Thomas et.al.,1992). Retention policies are popular. In a survey regarding retention, 72% of the citizens questioned said that promotion policies should be more strict, though there was no indication of familiarity with the policies that were currently in effect (Gallup, 1986).

Retention practices are poorly documented. No national longitudinal data exists, because retention has always been a state or local issue. However, data that does exist clearly shows the dramatic increase in retention rates, beginning in the late 1970's. Medway (1985) reported the following statistics. In the two year period of 1976-1978, the number of children enrolled below their modal

grade doubled and quadrupled. The city of Atlanta reported that 18% of first graders were not promoted into second grade in the fall of 1981. This was four times the rate of the previous fall, 1980. Seattle reported holding back more than 1,100 elementary school students in 1983 because of a new policy barring social promotion.

There are a variety of causes for the increasing retention rate. Medway (1985) suggests that more and more districts are making promotion contingent on mastery of grade level objectives, causing retention rates to climb markedly. Schools have instituted so called minimum competency testing in order to restore credibility in public schools. For students who don't meet standards, the most convenient and most widely used remedy is in-grade retention. Medway continues by indicating the "no win" situation that schools are caught in, being asked to balance the demands for educational accountability with the knowledge that curriculum repetition helps very few students. Shepard & Smith (1990) note that without a simple way to explain to the public that at-risk students are more likely to learn and stay in school if they are promoted, schools will continue to sacrifice the best interest of individual children in order to appease popular demand. Thus, retention serves the needs of the school, rather than the needs of the children (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1993). However, Lehr (1982) argues that "the reason for imposing or changing school policy should be that it benefits students, not that it quiets criticism" (p.237).

Thus, one of the main reasons for the rise in retention rates is political in nature, due to public pressure on schools to show accountability for their students' achievement, or lack of achievement. This, in turn, has led to an increased use of standardized testing for accountability purposes (Haladyna, Nolan & Haas, 1991). Standardized testing is more widespread today than at any other previous time in our history, and it is also more widely accepted by the public (Meisels, 1992). This has increased pressure on schools and school districts to raise test scores. Unfortunately, this pressure may lead to unethical practices (Haladyna, Nolan, Haas, 1991). High stakes primary testing may encourage the use of retention, transitional or extra year programs or placement in special education classes. Such practices are egregiously unethical, if they are motivated by the desire to increase achievement test scores (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1993).

The pressure to increase test scores and show accountability is greatest for low achieving schools. These schools may operate under the threat of state sanctions for low scores on minimum competency tests (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1993). Does this drive the decision to retain children? Consider the following statements from an elementary school principal which were made in an audio taped interview:

"Third grade is a crucial grade for us because that is where we do the state basic skills [test], and if we have a large number of kids who fail the basic skills, the school board, the public, the superintendent say, 'Hey! What's going on over there?'

Now we may say, 'Well yeah, we have some kids that are having some problems but nonpromotion is not the answer. We can deal with them on their level, even though they are called third graders but are still reading on a second-grade level.'

We found that we were punished for doing that. Our recent test scores have been made public in the last 3 years. So we have changed our philosophy. We no longer treat kids for what is best for them individually."

(McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1993, p.21-22)

The pressure for accountability may not always cause such a blatant push toward retention. Teachers may respond to the demands for accountability in a subtler way. Knowing that they are held accountable for the achievement test scores of their class, teachers begin to worry about the ability of the students when they come into their class in September. A first grade teacher who knows that her students will be tested on a standardized reading test in May is worried about whether they have mastered pre-reading skills when they enter her class in September. This expectation is communicated directly or indirectly to the kindergarten teacher (Shepard & Smith, 1986). This may result in the kindergarten teacher feeling more pressure to retain low achieving students.

This pressure on early elementary teachers has lead to the proliferation of various programs that are in essence, different methods of retaining children. These programs provide an extra year for students who are not ready for first grade, such as pre-kindergarten, developmental kindergarten, or pre-first grade (Shepard & Smith, 1986). Another method which is thought to increase the

chance of success is for parents to "hold out" children from kindergarten. This occurs when children who are at the legal age to begin kindergarten but may be among the youngest who are eligible, have their entry into kindergarten delayed by their parents to give them a competitive advantage (Smith & Shepard, 1987). All of these extra-year practices are, in effect, retention. They all sacrifice a year of the child's life in order to accommodate to the curriculum of the school. Remember the saying, "If it walks like a duck and sounds like a duck, it's a duck!"

Shepard and Smith (1986) note that proponents of these extra-year programs argue that time itself is the best cure for developmental differences and these advocates are likely to discount the research on nonpromotion because an extra year early in the school experience is intended to prevent failure later on. The authors argue that extra-year programs are effectively like repeating kindergarten, even when the curriculum is altered.

These extra-year programs exist because their perceived success is powerful. Teachers are almost always able to name specific children whom they recommended to be held back, who subsequently did well in school. The problem with this reasoning is that the teacher or parent has no way of knowing how the child would have performed had he followed normal grade level placement (Bredekamp & Shepard, 1989). Meisels (1992) argues that these extra year trends have not been examined sufficiently for iatrogenic effects. That is, unintended negative effects. The author continues by stating that these

practices may alter the inner well being of a child and may reduce their chances for success in life.

Several studies have addressed the academic performance of these extra-year students. Mantizicopoulos & Morrison (1992) state that although a retained child may have an advantage during the second year of kindergarten, that advantage is not maintained beyond kindergarten. Shepard & Smith (1986) note that participants in these extra year programs show no academic advantage over equally at-risk students who did not receive an extra year of schooling.

Dennebaum & Kulberg (1994) conducted a study to examine the relationship between extra-year programs and later school achievement. Subjects were 95 fourth and fifth graders, who were divided into four subgroups. Group A (25 subjects) had been retained in kindergarten, Group B (28 subjects) had been placed in a transitional class before first grade, Group C (17 subjects) had been recommended for retention or placement in transitional classes before first grade, but followed normal grade progression and Group D (25 subjects) followed normal grade progression without any teacher reservation. Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT) scores were used as a measure of school achievement. The results indicated that although they received an extra year of schooling, the performance of Group A children was significantly lower on standardized achievement measures than their grade mates. Additionally, retention appeared to damage achievement when compared to Group C, those

who were recommended for retention, but went on to first grade anyway. Children in Group B who were place in transitional classes appeared to be performing better than the retained children, but did not perform any better than those who were recommended for placement in a transitional class who followed normal grade progression. Therefore, the extra year did not appear to help these children academically and this study refutes the assumption that holding a child back will improve future achievement.

The issue of "holding out" has been exacerbated by the downward press of academic curriculum and grade level expectations (Shepard & Smith,1986, Spodek, 1985). The kindergarten curriculum has become a fast-paced academic experience. The curriculum of learning readiness, which was once addressed in first grade, is now addressed in kindergarten (Smith & Shepard, 1987). This shift in kindergarten curriculum may in part be due to parental pressure. Parents of children who have been enrolled in preschools with academic curricula put pressure on schools to increase the pace of kindergarten so that the year will not be wasted for their children (Smith & Shepard, 1987).

This more challenging curriculum, in turn, promotes the practices of "holding out" or changing district kindergarten entrance cut-off dates. A child, who might have been in the older half of a kindergarten class in 1958, might currently be among the youngest in the class (Shepard & Smith, 1986). Being the oldest does not insure academic excellence or other forms of success, and

yet this myth persists (Bradekamp & Shepard, 1989). Teachers seem to approve of these practices and may even encourage parents to hold a child out, hoping to reduce the difficulties of teaching an academically diverse group of children. Unfortunately, these practices will only make kindergartens more heterogeneous rather than more homogeneous (Shepard & Smith, 1986). Children whose parents work or cannot afford private preschools may not be able to hold out their child. These children are not likely to perform as well as older, held out students (Smith & Shepard, 1987).

It should be noted that this youngness problem is relative and that holding out or raising the entrance age is only a temporary solution (Shepard & Smith, 1986). There will always be someone who is the youngest in a class (Smith & Shepard, 1987). While the youngest child may have a slightly lower level of achievement than the oldest child, this difference does not seem to be significant. Shepard and Smith (1986) found that on first grade reading tests, the difference between the oldest and youngest students was about 9 percentile ranks. More importantly, they found that by third grade there was no distinguishable difference between these children.

How does this issue of "holding out" relate to retention? Children seem to be "held out" in order to prevent failure, and thus retention, later in a child's schooling. A study by May & Welch (1984) examined whether delayed school entrance reduced later elementary school retentions. Of 279 held out students,

6% were later retained. This figure is lower than the district retention rate of 12.8% for retentions in kindergarten through fifth grade during the same time period. The authors suggest two explanations for the lower retention rate. Teachers may be more likely to try other interventions or remedial strategies before retaining these children, who are already a year older. The parents of these children may be reluctant to permit retention since their children began school 1 year after they were eligible chronologically.

An alternative to excluding children from school on the basis of entrance age would be to begin individualized remedial instruction at the kindergarten level, or even earlier for children with high retention risk profiles (Walker, 1984).

Clearly, retention is a strategy that is being employed throughout schools in the United States. Who are these children that are being retained, and for what reasons? The incidence of elementary school grade retention seems to vary between minority and non-minority students, between states, between school systems and even between schools within a single district (Walker,1984). In 1982, 38% of African American children were overage for their grade level (again, this is the only measure we have to gauge retention rates) by age 13, compared to 23.4% of White children (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Failures and retention rates have increased for all groups since 1975, but the number of overage students has increased at nearly twice the rate for blacks as for whites in the past 15 years (Medway, 1985). A substantial portion of our poor kids (20%

of kids in America are poor) can't read as they should (Feldman, 1997) and this undoubtedly leads to high retention rates among these children. Census Bureau reports indicate that children are more likely to be below their modal grade if they are Black or Hispanic, the household head has less than a twelfth grade education, family income is below the poverty level, they live in a southern state and they are male (Medway,1985). May, Kundert & Brent (1995) report that 82% of children who are either held out or retained are boys.

Abidin, Golladay & Howerton (1971) suggested this profile for a child who is at a high risk of being retained:

1. male
2. significantly lower academic achievement
3. somewhat lower IQ
4. parents who are unwilling or unable to intercede by contesting the retention
5. minority status
6. low socioeconomic status
7. working mother
8. poor early readiness skills
9. July to December birthdate
10. late maturation
11. high activity level

Meisels and Liaw (1993) conducted a study to determine which children are being retained. They examined data from 16,623 White, Black and Hispanic students in public schools. The results showed that minority students were

retained in significantly higher proportions. Of the children who repeated a grade at least once, 29.9% were Black, 25.2% were Hispanic and 17.2% were White. Boys outnumbered girls, 24% to 15.3%. In terms of socioeconomic status, 33.9% of repeating students were from the lowest level, while only 8.6% were from the highest level. Children who are retained early, between kindergarten and third grade, were more likely to be white and female. The students who had never been retained were more likely to come from upper or middle class families, have highly educated mothers and be female.

What particular characteristics make these children candidates for retention? Medway (1985) suggests that many students are recommended for retention because they are socially immature. It is assumed that, given another year in class, they will catch up.

Mantizicopoulos & Morrison (1990) studied the characteristics of at-risk children in transitional and regular kindergarten programs. The authors examined demographic, cognitive, achievement, perceptual, visual motor and behavioral characteristics of children who were divided into three groups. Group A were children who were placed in a transitional pre-kindergarten program, Group B were children who were placed in a regular kindergarten program and were recommended for promotion into first grade and Group C were children who were placed in a regular kindergarten and were recommended for retention in kindergarten. The children who were retained in kindergarten tended to be

younger than their peers, have lower achievement test scores, have higher incidence of behavior problems and were judged to be less popular with their peers.

Dauber, Alexander & Entwisle (1993) found that retainees demonstrated poorer test performance, were rated by their parents as being less able to do school work, received lower first quarter conduct marks and were more likely to have changed schools between kindergarten and first grade.

Bergin, Osburn & Cryan (1996) conducted a study to determine what characteristics of a child would cause a teacher to recommend retention. Teachers evaluated hypothetical kindergarten student profiles and were to recommend retention, placement in a transitional class or promotion to first grade. Student profiles were all equally successful with academic work but differed in terms of behavior, independence, and birthdate (either Aug. or Feb.). The results showed that males and females were equally likely to be recommended for retention or transition. Children with August or February birthdays were also equally likely to be recommended for retention or transition. Children who were described as not being independent were significantly more likely to be recommended for retention or transition. There was a tendency for older teachers to be more likely to recommend retention or transition. The most common reasons that teachers gave for recommending retention or promotion were low independence and low maturity. Other reasons included young age of

student, overly protective mother and low level of confidence. The authors found the results disheartening, in that 34 teachers recommended retention or transition, despite the fact that the hypothetical children all met the same academic requirements. Further, the authors suggest that while less independent behavior may be more challenging to the teacher, it is not reason enough to retain a child.

What are teachers' beliefs about retention and its effects? Policies of grade retention persist despite all of the negative evidence because teachers and parents cannot conduct controlled experiments. Without controlled comparisons, retention looks as if it works (Doyle, 1989). Smith & Shepard (1987) point out that tacit knowledge, or knowledge which is gained from personal experience with real kids in classrooms, is misleading in regards to retention. The authors give this example as evidence of this erroneous knowledge. Consider a fictitious student "John", who was a struggling student and was retained. During his retained year, he "shines". The teacher absorbs this information and concludes that retention was beneficial. This coincides with the research on retention in that retained children do make progress. Consider a second fictitious student "Jim", similar to "John", except that he was promoted. "Jim" might struggle a little, but by the middle of elementary school, research shows that the two students will most likely be identical in performance and social adjustment. Teachers do not gain this information about retention and therefore, their thinking about retention is incorrect.

Nearly all retained children do make progress in the repeated year. The problem is that it is impossible to know whether or not those same children would have made equal progress if they had been promoted (Medway, 1985). Teachers may accept any improvement during the repeated year as proof that retention works (Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Teachers tend to exaggerate the perceived benefits of retention, by thinking that it will bring a child from the bottom of the class to the top of the class in which they were retained (Smith & Shepard, 1987). Because of the nature of education, children move on to other grades and other schools, which limits the feedback that teachers receive about the progress of their former pupils. Smith & Shepard (1987) conducted a study in which none of the teachers who were questioned about retention could remember a single instance in which a child had been hurt in any way by being retained. This does not coincide with what the parents or affected students reported in the same study. This is also at odds with the bulk of the research on retention.

Many teachers do realize the deficient nature of retention. They know that retention most often results in a student repeating the same grade with the same material and the same instructional strategies. Without sufficient alternatives to social promotion or retention for students who do not meet grade level requirements, the teachers are faced with the dilemma of choosing between the lesser of two evils (Feldman, 1997).

In the event that a teacher recommends a student for retention, how is the final decision made? What evidence is used to justify this drastic strategy? The teacher's recommendation for retention is usually based on a student's classroom grades, standardized test results, the teacher's assessment of the student's achievement, and occasionally on behavior (Medway, 1985). However, in the absence of exact standards, class grades can vary greatly. One teacher might emphasize mastery of material, while another might emphasize the effort made by the student (Feldman, 1997). Without systematic, consistent criteria and procedures for retention, an atmosphere exists which encourages abuses of grade retention as an educational alternative (Walker, 1984).

School district policies on retention vary greatly. Feldman (1997) reports on a national survey conducted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) regarding student promotion policies. Promotion policies were collected from 85 school districts across the country, including the 40 largest districts. The results show that many districts put explicit limits on retention. One half of the districts restrict the number of times a student can be retained. Some districts forbid the retention of limited English proficiency students or learning disabled students. However, most districts do not have agreed upon standards defining exactly what students should know at each grade level. The survey also found that although teachers often make the decision to retain a student, they do not have the final say. In the majority of the districts, the final authority rests with the principal.

Some districts allow the parent to make the final decision. The survey concludes that despite restrictions on retention, it is used as often as can be.

The amount of work involved in retaining a student also varies greatly. A study conducted by Schwager et. al. (1992) investigated the possible correlation between the amount of work involved in a student's retention and the rate of retention. The reasoning was that if staff have to spend extra time and effort to comply with district retention procedures or plan remedial strategies, they are likely to be cautious about the number of students they recommend for retention. The study found that the amount of work varied greatly, including simple parent notification of retention, requiring a formal parent conference, mandating student referral to a Child Study Team or requiring a plan for specific instructional support in the form of and Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), written learning plan or remedial plan.

Lieberman (1980) suggests that since some children do benefit from retention, schools should develop elaborate decision making procedures for selecting those likely to benefit. Smith & Shepard (1987) reject this idea as bad advice, noting that educators are not accurately able to predict which individuals will benefit.

Still another method of selecting retainees is suggested by Medway (1985). He suggests that the decision should be a team effort, involving the

principle, teachers, counselor, parents and a school psychologist. The child's age, attendance patterns, opportunity to attend kindergarten or preschool and family attitudes toward school and retention should be considered.

Taking this information into consideration, it is easy to see why retention rates vary so dramatically, even within a given school district (Walker, 1984). What is clear to many educators is that "neither retention nor social promotion is the answer – if the answer we're seeking is getting kids to achieve." (Feldman, 1997, p.8) In an analogy comparing education to medicine, it seems as if "radical surgery is performed to treat the symptom, rather than considering therapy to deal with the problem." (Johnson, 1984, p.68)

Even when retention is employed as an educational strategy, children who are retained without any extra help or different programs often continue to do poorly (Feldman, 1997). Medway (1985) suggests that the teacher must provide a special program if the retained student is expected to succeed.

What alternatives to retention are there? "Workable solutions will depend on teachers, rather than policy makers and on programs that respond to children's individual differences in readiness." (Shepard & Smith, 1987, p.85) There is a failure on the part of administrators to develop and support alternative remedial programs for children at risk of failure (Feldman, 1997). Educators must change their mindset in order to view individual student differences as

hypotheses used to construct individual programs rather than as deficits used to justify retention (May & Welch, 1984). "We need to take an 'intensive care' approach to students who are falling behind – well before we're at the point of promotion or retention decisions – by quickly identifying these students and concentrating every possible resource on getting them back on track quickly." (Feldman, 1997, p.8)

The use of before and after school programs, instructional aides to work with target children in regular classrooms and peer tutoring are all more effective than retention (Shepard & Smith, 1990). Cincinnati's reform efforts include immediate intervention, such as providing students with in class, small group instruction or multi-age grouping and also offering tutoring and summer school (Feldman, 1997). The estimated $10 billion spent on retention each year would go a long way to pay for remedial programs, summer schools, classroom aides or reducing class size to help at-risk students learn (Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Allington (1992) describes 3 programs that have been proven to effective in accelerating the progress of low achieving children. Each of these programs originated in schools with high concentrations of low-income children. Each one provides all children with sufficiently intense, personal and high quality instruction. All of these programs can be funded by redirecting sources that already exist.

The first of these programs is Reading Recovery, which was developed by Marie Clay in New Zealand. Reading Recovery is designed to accelerate the literacy development of children who are having difficulty learning to read. The lowest achieving first graders participate in an intensive daily 30 minute individual tutorial until they develop self monitoring skills and reach the average achievement levels of their classmates. The average Reading Recovery student makes enough progress in 12-14 weeks to be discontinued from the tutorial. The majority of these discontinued children show normal development after release and progress satisfactorily without further assistance. Dyer (1992) notes that the effectiveness of this short term intervention, combined with reductions in retentions and referrals to child study teams, seem to make Reading Recovery very cost effective for helping low-achieving students.

The second program described by Allington (1992) is Success for All. This program is designed to ensure that all children successfully develop reading and writing proficiency in the early grades. The program stresses the importance of ensuring school success in the primary classroom. Students receive additional instruction as soon as they need it. School resources are used creatively. The goal is to have all children reading on grade level by the end of third grade with no retentions or referrals to special education. Students are grouped by reading levels across age levels for the core reading and language arts curriculum. There is an emphasis on at home reading every night. A reorganization of school staff provides reading tutors for children experiencing

difficulty. During a daily 90 minute reading session, tutors serve as additional teachers, thereby reducing class sizes during this time. Each school has a family support team that includes a parent liaison and a social worker.

Success For All has been implemented in the Baltimore City schools, as well as other urban districts. Although the program goal of all children reading on the third grade level was not met in the Baltimore schools, the reading achievement of these students was much higher than those who attended comparison schools.

A final alternative to retention described by Allington (1992) is Accelerated Schools (AS). The goal of an Accelerated School is to have at-risk children achieving at their grade level before going to middle school. This goal is accomplished through a process of community inquiry to redesign elementary schools. In AS projects, curriculum and instructional decisions are the responsibility of teachers. Classroom teachers are viewed as the primary change agents, since they spend more time with at-risk students than anyone else in the school. However, administrators, parents, teachers and other staff members comprise a steering committee and various task forces. The steering committee is responsible for the general reform of the school, while task forces address specific issues.

Over 100 AS schools are in operation in 16 states. The AS process is estimated to be a 6 year effort for transformation from a traditional elementary school into an Alternative School. Since no Alternative School has been in operation for 6 years, no evaluations have been completed as to the effectiveness of this program. However, it can be noted that the AS schools in operation have seen a significant reduction in retention rates.

It seems clear that retention, which most often means repeating the same curriculum material again, is a crude and ineffective way to remediate a child who is failing (Shepard & Smith, 1990). There will never be a single approach that is appropriate or effective for all children (Medway, 1985). Haberman & Dill (1993) suggest that educators must discard that ideology which sacrifices individual needs and differences to a one-size-fits-all methodology. Somehow, the educational community needs to come to terms with the broad academic heterogeneity that exists, without the need to sort, label, track or retain. These practices may meet the needs of our school systems, but they do not meet the needs of our children (Smith & Shepard, 1987).

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Appendix

NRET Sample

Student	Pre-test	Post Test
1	44	68
2	24	46
3	47	34
4	27	31
5	17	3
6	42	35
7	12	19
8	32	44
9	38	44
10	20	31
11	28	19
12	46	34
13	32	6
14	20	24
15	47	63
16	21	33
17	8	15

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