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ABSTRACT

Retention, the practice of requiring a child to repeat a particular grade, is often presented as the answer for poor academic or behavioral performance in school. To explore the effectiveness of this approach, the long-term impact of retention is discussed here. The paper focuses on students who were retained in kindergarten and these students' subsequent academic performance in the sixth grade. A review of the literature on grade retention reports the different strategies that are used by schools and surveys of the results that accompany retention. The review is followed by the statement problem: Does grade retention between kindergarten and first grade assist student learning in the student's future academic performance? For the study, 56 seventh-grade students were examined. One cohort was comprised of students who were retained in kindergarten, whereas the second cohort was promoted to the first grade after their year in kindergarten. The results show that, even with remediation, the retained students lagged a year behind their nonretained counterparts. The findings support the hypothesis that retained students had significantly lower academic achievement than their nonretained peers. (Contains 13 references.) (RJM)

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# The Long-Term Effects of Grade Retention

by: Thomas F. Balitewicz

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## Abstract

Retention has often been seen as the answer for poor academic or behavioral performance in school. Retention can be defined as a practice requiring a child to repeat a particular grade. This study was designed to investigate the long-term impact of being retained in kindergarten on seventh-grade students. The students' sixth-grade ISTEP reading, language and math scores were observed to determine academic progress. The hypothesis for this study was that retained students would score significantly lower on their ISTEP scores, than their non-retained peers. Results supported the hypothesis that retained students had significantly lower academic achievement than their non-retained peers.

## **Background of the Problem**

Grade retention has been a consistent dilemma in schools since the introduction of age-graded classes. The issue of grade retention has progressed even as far as national politics. In his State of the Union Address, President Clinton encouraged the retention of students who earn low test scores on standardized tests when he said that by examining these tests they will "help us end social promotion...for no child should move from grade school to junior high to high school until he or she is ready." Also, the issue of grade retention has become a regional issue in two ways. The first is the aggressive program initiated in the Chicago Public School System which basically prohibits social promotion. The second, which directly impacts local schools, is the decision by the Vigo County School Board not to fund the Transition Program for the 1998-1999 school year.

Vigo County, educators spend countless hours deliberating about their students' futures. Every school year, students who have not met the minimum standards for their present grade level and consequently, are recommended for retention. The Vigo County School Corporation provides little or no criteria for determining who should be retained. Therefore, there is little or no consistency in the criteria used by individual schools for retention, and many students are just promoted on a social basis. Also, many administrators follow the voice of the literature and research that champions non-retention and are unwilling to retain students.

Retention can be defined as the practice of requiring a child of

appropriate chronological age to delay entry into kindergarten or first grade (Dawson, Rafoth, and Carey 1989). In Vigo County, students retained in kindergarten enter a program called Transition. Students attending Transition classes in Vigo County are often placed in remediation classes based on their immaturity or academic deficiencies. Retention between kindergarten and first grade is justified by stating that "the student needs to be given the gift of time" (Gessell 1982), so there is no standard criteria that teachers use in Vigo County to place students in the Transition Program.

The issue of grade retention has been around since the 1840's, when schools started to assign grades to same-aged students. The introduction of graded classes initially sparked questions about creating standards for promotion to the next grade level. Throughout the years, these standards have varied and have fluctuated according to both time and geography. The retention rate during the 1800's was as high as 70% as compared to 7% today. Also, in 1909 the grade retention rate in a school district in Massachusetts was 7.5%, whereas in a district in Tennessee, the rate was an inflated 75.8% (Ayres 1909). Therefore, the grade retention rate has remained steady throughout the years, nor is it uniform throughout the all regions in the United States.

The public discourse on grade retention has fluctuated throughout the years, and as a result, so has the retention rate. During the 1930's, social scientists, educators, politicians, and social activists initiated a philosophy that supported the belief that grade retention could be

detrimental to children. They believed that grade retention might "stifle a student's emotional and social development" (Karweit 1982). In the 1930's, the retention rate was 25% and steadily declined for forty years, leveling out in the 1970's.

During the past three decades, thought concerning grade retention has fluctuated from one extreme to the other. In the 1970's, the philosophy of grade retention shifted to the idea that it was beneficial to students (Roderick, 1995). There were many people who believed that repeating a grade would improve academic performance (Holmes 1989). The idea of social promotion was especially questioned when A Nation at Risk was published in 1983. The hypothesis of A Nation at Risk was that "the cause of declining achievement in test scores was directly related to social promotion" (Roderick). The effect of A Nation at Risk was so significant that many school districts established standards for promotion and graduation.

There are different types of retention strategies in use. The students can be retained in some classes, but promoted in others. Another strategy is to retain and remediate the student. The remediation is a specialized program developed to assist the student in known deficiencies. The last type of remediation is when the student is "recycled" through the material meaning no form of remediation is offered. (Karweit 1982).

In the United States, more than 24 million students are retained

each year at a cost of \$10 billion to taxpayers (Shepard and Smith 1990). Also over 30% of 14-year-olds were enrolled in a grade below ninth grade, their modal grade level in 1992 (Roderick 1995). With such a large number of students affected by retention and the amount of money expended, many researchers have studied the merits and drawbacks of retention. There is a large body of research which has examined the impact of grade retention (Doyle 1989). There had been a myriad of studies on grade retention, and most of the literature suggests that retention is not an effective learning tool. However, there have been a few studies that have shown that retention has strong results in the year following retention (Peterson, Degracie and Ayabe 1987).

One of the largest studies on grade retention was a meta-analytic review of 63 research studies (Holmes 1989). In that study Holmes compared students that had been retained to children who had not. His findings were that retained students were almost one third a standard deviation behind their matched counterparts on achievement measures. This finding goes against conventional wisdom that suggests that by repeating a grade, students will be remediated through the same material again. In a similar study, Holmes again found that "non promoted students improved far less than promoted students" (Holmes 1989).

In an important study, Shepard and Smith (1989) have shown that grade retention has not shown a benefit, but that it is harmful. According to Shepard and Smith, "retentions do nothing to promote the achievement of the affected students...retention should be thought of as an educational

waste and denial of life chances." Shepard and Smith go on to point out that schools continue to retain students because they are unable to determine how the student would have progressed.

There are studies that support grade retention. In a study performed in the Mesa, Arizona School Corporation, Peterson, DeGracie and Ayabe (1987) discovered positive effects of retention. The researchers compared same-year and same-grade peers separately by grade. The students that were retained were given individual remediation. Their results indicate that "there was strong evidence that retention, coupled with remediation, was helpful, especially in the year following retention" ( Peterson et al. 1987). The researchers also discovered that both low-performing promoted and retained students were still performing below the average.

The longitudinal study by Baenan (1989) indicated that retention was effective for a short period of time. He studied 243 matched, retained, and promoted students for a five-year period. The retained students received additional remediation. For the first three years the results of his study favored the retained group over the promoted group. However, Baenan discovered that after three years, any positive effects faded and became a detriment to the students' education.

There have been numerous studies correlating the effect that retention has on the drop<sup>o</sup>ut rate. The evidence shows that retention in one grade increases the chances of dropping out by 40% to 50%. (Roderick



1995). If a student is retained in two grades the risk increases to a perilous 90% (Bachman 1985). Also "students drop out at higher rates if retained regardless of the age at which the student was retained" (Shepard and Smith, 1989). Roderick in her meta-analytic study indicates that there are "three aspects of retention experience that place students at risk." The first is that retention does not work as a remedial strategy and may exacerbate poor school performance. The second aspect is retention can affect a students' self-esteem, and consequently cause that child to feel not as capable as other students. The student being overage in a grade is the third aspect that Roderick discusses. Being overage in grade only increases the likelihood the student will feel frustrated in school (Roderick, 1995).

There have been some problems with the validity in many of these studies. Jackson (1975) reviewed 44 studies conducted from 1911 through 1973. He stated that there are three limitations to research on grade retention. The first and common problem in many different research projects is that the design is flawed. Jackson states that the second limitation is that "the studies fail to identify the bases of comparison or that they improperly combine and aggregate results that use different bases of comparison" (Jackson 1975). The final limitation of retention studies is that "they inappropriately combine studies that were based on different practices" (Jackson 1975). The example that Jackson gives is a meta-analysis that combines the effects of studies that combined programs where the student was recycled through the material again with studies that provided serious remediation (Jackson 1975).

Therefore, the major studies reviewing grade retention are inconclusive and may contain invalid conclusions. Also, the literature does suggest that with remediation, students that are retained see some limited benefit, but only for a short period of time. However, if students receive little or no remediation and are just recycled through the material, there will be no gain in academic performance.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The general problem researched in this study was: Is grade retention an effective strategy in the remediation of students? The more specific question to the problem is: Does grade retention between kindergarten and first-grade assist student learning in the student's future academic performance.

The hypothesis investigated in this study was: Retained students (RET) will score significantly lower on their ISTEP scores than their non-retained peers. (NRET)

### **Methodology**

The subjects that participated in the study were 56 seventh-grade

students from Sarah Scott Middle School in Terre Haute, Indiana. There were two cohorts of students. The first cohort was comprised of students that were retained in Kindergarten and placed in the Transition Program. These students were placed there for either academic reasons or a lack of maturity. The reason for their retention was not stated on their cumulative record. The second cohort of students was promoted to the first-grade after their year in kindergarten.

Describe population  
sell why it represents

These students were selected by reviewing each individual cumulative card. The promoted students were selected because they had been assigned to Transition but were never placed in the program and consequently promoted to the first grade.

The materials used in the research were the students cumulative cards and their sixth grade ISTEP scores. The Grade Equivalents (GE) were observed in reading, language, math and a total GE of the ISTEP. Then a two-tailed independent T-test was administered to compare the results of the two groups. The level of significance was .005.

## Results

The hypothesis was accepted. Table I illustrates the correlation between the retained and non-retained students ISTEP scores. As shown

the non-retained G.E. scores were significantly lower than the retained group. The largest gap can be observed in the reading GE. The retained students are at 6.3, whereas the non-retained scored at the 5.0 level. The standard deviation for the non-retained was 2.062 as compared to 1.875 for the retained group. The total score also shows the significance of the study. The non-retained students' mean GE was at the 6.3 level, whereas the retained students were only at the 5.2 level.

Table 1A  
Means of Groups

	X	<u>RET</u> s	X	<u>NRET</u> s
Reading	5.0	1.875	6.3	2.062
Language	5.3	2.048	6.1	1.849
Math	5.5	1.495	6.4	1.112
Total	5.2	1.475	6.3	1.460

Table II shows the level of significance of the retained and non-retained students. In language the level of significance was greatest with a .110. The non-retained group did their best in the math section with a t-value of -2.63. The total t-value was -2.96, and the total level of significance was .005.

Table II  
Statistical Test for Differences  
Between Groups

	t	sig.
Reading	-2.44	.018
Language	-1.62	.110
Math	-2.63	.011
Total	-2.96	.005

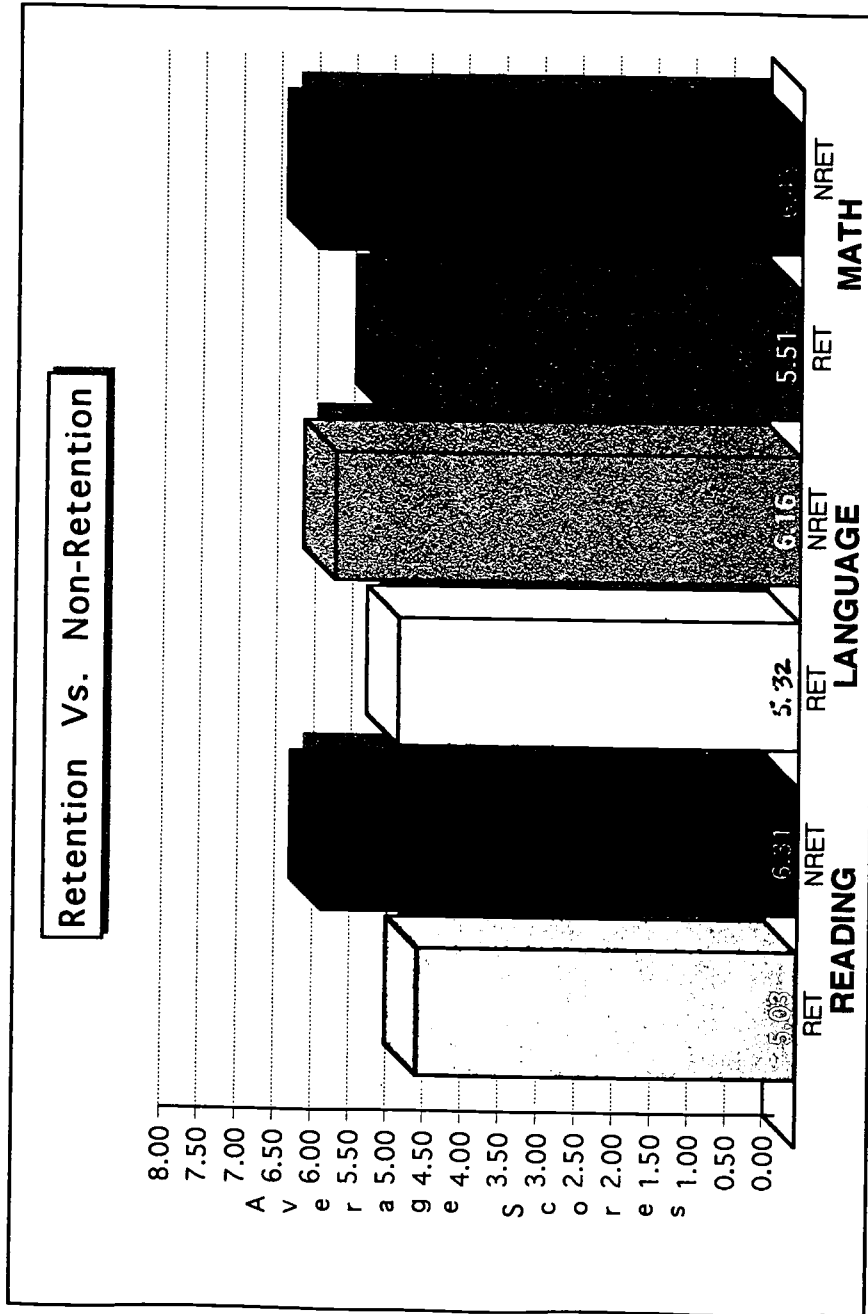
## **Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

The effects of grade retention in kindergarten were investigated in this study. The students' sixth-grade ISTEP scores were examined to determine the hypothesis. The students that were retained in Transition were behind in all three categories (reading, language and mathematics).

On average they were nine months behind their peers that were not retained. The reading scores of the retained students showed the largest variance of 13 months of school behind their non-retained counterparts.

The Transition program in Vigo County is not a "recycling program." Students are given remediation in subjects in which they may be deficient. However, even with remediation, the non-retained students in this study still an average of year behind in school. Therefore, the retention of the 28 students had a negative impact on their 6th grade ISTEP scores. The retained students are not only chronologically a year chronologically behind their modal peers, but they are also academically a year behind of their classmates who are a year younger.

The elimination of the Transition Program in Vigo County is not a good idea. The program needs to be overhauled. The evidence in this study suggests that the Transition Program is not effective in remediating students. Students should not be held back for a lack of maturity, because doing so not only leaves them a year behind academically but also places them in a less mature setting.



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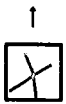
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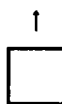
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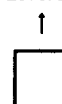
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