

To Retain or Not Retain: A Review of Literature Related to
Kindergarten Retention

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Abstract

Will students who have not mastered kindergarten skills benefit from another year of kindergarten before going into grade one? It has been suggested that there is no other topic in education that has such a wide difference of opinion as those researchers who do not advocate retention and those who are convinced that a child should be given another year to grow and mature. This paper reviews some literature illustrating divergent views regarding kindergarten retention.

Studies suggest that there is no reliable proof that grade retention is beneficial. Some researchers have concluded that allowing a child to repeat kindergarten provides a stronger foundation for essential skills needed for future grades, while others argue that retention has many negative consequences. Researchers cite studies which support their own particular point of view.

This topic continues to be an important topic of discussion for educators and policymakers. With so many disagreements among researchers, educators can agree that kindergarten is crucial to the development of a child's education and that is essential to carefully consider the decision to retain or to promote children in kindergarten.

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Introduction

The issue of whether to promote or retain students dates from the beginning of school systems in this country in the early nineteenth century. During the nineteenth century, students were assigned to grades based on their age. Promotion to the next grade was contingent upon their mastery of subject matter. Students were required to repeat the grade if mastery was not achieved.

Recommendations such as *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983), the report by President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education, and the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) encouraged schools to adopt more rigorous standards and higher expectations and that promotion practices should be guided by the academic progress of students rather than by age. More recently, the Common Core State Standards express what is expected of students at each grade level.

Children enter kindergarten at vastly different stages of readiness. Often teachers recommend another year in kindergarten for those students who are struggling to master kindergarten skills. In elementary schools across the country, grade retention is often viewed as an effective alternative to social promotion. Retention is even more accepted in early childhood classrooms in an effort to build a stronger foundation for the upcoming, more challenging school years and to prevent failure in those grades (Zepeda, 1993). The decision of whether a child should remain in kindergarten arises annually. Teachers, parents, and administrators have the burden of deciding if a child should be promoted to grade one without having successfully demonstrated understanding and mastery of kindergarten skills or if it is beneficial for that child to have more time to learn required skills and increase self-confidence.

The Problem: Would Another Kindergarten Year Be Beneficial?

In order to determine if repeating kindergarten is academically beneficial, there are numerous factors to be considered: Would another year in kindergarten actually bring the child up to grade level? How likely is he or she to catch up if placed in a grade one classroom where new skills will be building upon skills students should have already learned? Would the child be a candidate for receiving special education services? If so, would repeating kindergarten be beneficial at all? The decision about whether a student needs special education services or needs to repeat kindergarten always requires very special consideration.

For decades studies have been conducted that compare success in grade one of low-performing students who repeated kindergarten to that of low-performing students who did not repeat kindergarten (Hong & Yu, 2007). The benefits of repeating kindergarten as compared to promoting low-performing students to grade one (social promotion) has been hotly disputed for years. Recently, however, the practice of holding children back in kindergarten has become increasingly popular (Jimerson, 2001). Opponents argue that retention discourages students whose motivation and confidence are already weak and that promotion affords weak students an opportunity to advance through the next year's curriculum (Peterson & Hughes, 2011).

Because students enter kindergarten at vastly different stages of readiness, some master kindergarten skills with relative ease while others struggle to master those skills. Especially in

early childhood classrooms, retention is viewed as a way to build a foundation and prevent failure in the more challenging future school years (Hong, G. & Yu, B., 2008). Teachers and administrators have the burden of recommending retention or not, and parents face the decision of whether their child should remain in kindergarten another year. The recommendation by teacher and principal has long been accepted as being both valid and reliable indicators of a student's readiness for grade one (Teisl, Mazzocco, & Myers, 2001; Sudkamp, Kaiser, & Moller, 2012; Mashburn, 2005).

The educational community has very strong and varying views on retention of kindergarten children. Some school systems support retaining kindergarten children if they have not mastered the appropriate level of mastery, while others do not permit kindergarten retention at all. There are strong arguments for both positions

Historical Overview

The issue of criteria for promotion of students dates from the beginning of school systems in this country in the early nineteenth century. Prior to this time, students in the small public schools experienced neither promotion nor retention as they advanced through texts and assignments with the teacher at their own pace. However, as larger schools replaced the one-room schoolhouse and instruction became more of a group process and less of an individual process, the issue of promotion or retention became an educational and social issue. Schools generally adopted promotion based on meeting grade level standards as the way to help students meet expectations (Labaree, 1982).

During the nineteenth century, students were assigned to grades based on their age. Promotion to the next grade was contingent upon their mastery of subject matter. Students were required to repeat the grade if mastery was not achieved. Retention was seen as the way help students meet the educational goals (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). Estimates are that as many as half of students were retained at some point during their first eight years (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983).

According to Ayers (1909), an example of the effects of early retention and later drop-out was seen in the grade distribution in Tennessee in 1906. There were 149,656 pupils in grade one. This number dropped to 86,380 in grade two and 75,328 in grade three. Due primarily to students dropping out, the number of students in grade eight had decreased to 10,697 (Ayers, 1909).

The popularity increased for grade retention as the practice for remediation and a way to help students who had not met grade level expectations. However, in the early twentieth century, a movement began to reduce retention. In Ayres's (1909) book, *Laggards in our Schools*, he saw the primary function of schools as giving an education to the maximum number of children. He wrote,

What is the function of our common schools? If it is to sort out the best of the pupils and prepare them for further education in higher schools, then the most rigorous system, with the severest course of study and the lowest percentage of promotions and the highest percentage of retardation, is the best system. But if the function of the common school is, as the author believes, to furnish an elementary education to the maximum

number of children, then other things being equal that school is best which regularly promotes and finally graduates the largest percentage of its pupils (p. 199). The result of this movement was that retention was used more sparingly, and social promotion became the more common practice (Owings & Magliaro, 1998).

Information provided by The Westchester Institute for Human Services (1998) demonstrates that the practice of retention has been common for many years. It was found that 15 to 19 percent of students in the United States were retained each year in the 1990s.

Research Supporting Retention in Kindergarten

By the late 1970s, there was general public perception that some things were deficient in our educational system. The backlash against social promotion was intensified with *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983), the report by President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. After finding several trends it considered disturbing, the Commission recommended that schools adopt more rigorous standards and higher expectations and that promotion practices should be guided by the academic progress of students rather than by age.

In the late 1990s, President Clinton, in his State of the Union Addresses, called for an end of social promotion, describing it as a bad practice (Clinton, 1997). For example, he said, Raising standards will not be easy, and some of our children will not be able to meet them at first. The point is not to put our children down, but to lift them up. Good tests will show us who needs help, what changes in teaching to make, and which schools need to improve. They can help us to end social promotion. For no child should move from grade school to junior high, or junior high to high school until he or she is ready (para. 36).

The effort to improve standards and decrease social promotion was put into law with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). Signed by President Bush, the law had the goal that every child would perform at or above grade level by 2014. It was based on the belief that high goals, high expectations, and strict standards will result in success for students. Assessments are to be used for promotion or retention decisions for all students.

More recently, the Common Core State Standards express what is expected of students at each grade level. Developed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers (2010), the standards focus on core conceptual understandings and procedures. By adopting the standards beginning in the lower grades, teachers have the time to teach core concepts and procedures well and to give students the opportunity to master them.

During the past decade, there has been much emphasis placed on the accountability of teachers. For this reason, there has been an increase in the practice of retaining children in the early grades of their schooling. Johnston (2000) reported in Chicago “between 1995 and 1997, the number of 1st graders who were retained rose from 1,133 to 2,078, the study found, while the number of 2nd graders retained more than doubled from 662 to 1,398” (p. 3).

Graydon, Jimerson, Kundert, Nickerson, Pletcher, and Schnurr (2006) conducted a study to determine the effects of retention, the students' perspectives on retention, effective intervention strategies, and demographic characteristics of retained students. Although these researchers acknowledged that other research has had results to the contrary, they concluded that when student needs are addressed, the intervention of retention can be effective. However, the teaching techniques and interventions used by the teachers were important to the success of students. Researchers were encouraged by the findings (Graydon et al., 2006).

Chen, Hughes, Thoemmes, and Kwok (2010) conducted a study in three urban Texas school districts analyzing the relationship between retention and high stakes testing. The sample consisted of children at risk of retention, and subsamples were made by students that had been retained and students that had not been retained. After having administered the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills in Math and Reading, the researchers input all of the data, analyzed the results, and determined that there was a positive association between grade retention and achievement. This research is contradictory to much of the previous research which has been done regarding retention. The positive findings challenge the conventional research (Chen et al., 2010).

Hong and Yu (2007) found that despite many negative reports, they believe that repeating a grade can be beneficial and prevent future failure for a struggling student. However, they pointed out that children who spent another year in kindergarten would have actually learned more in the areas of math and reading if they had been promoted. In contrast, they found that the negative impact of failing grade one remained constant (Hong & Yu, 2007). This suggests that retention may be a better option for struggling students.

Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) suggested that grade retention is generally considered a last resort option. However, they concluded that repeating a grade can be beneficial for a low-performing student. According to Cannon and Lipscomb's report, students can significantly improve their grade-level skills during their repeated grade.

In view of recent efforts for educational reform, retention and promotion decisions have become even more complex. With varied results regarding retention along with the push for accountability, many states are pushing for low-performing students being held back (Robelen, 2012). According to Robelen, Oklahoma is one of many states that recently determined that third graders should be held back if they do not meet expectations on the state standardized test. Several other states are considering the same measure. One supporter stated that one reason for this is to force teachers and parents to place a greater focus on intervention and put an end to social promotion. Kindergarten and grade one teachers are also feeling the pressure to provide the necessary educational foundation early, and they are, therefore, considering retaining more students that are on the border of success (Robelen, 2012).

Does repeating a grade really help low-performing students? Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) sought to answer that question with their report, *Early Grade Retention and Student Success: Evidence from Los Angeles*. To further complicate the matter, Cannon and Lipscomb found that retention can be effective and students who repeat grade one or two can significantly

improve their grade-level skills. It was noted, however, that grade retention should always be considered as a last resort.

Does the timing of retention matter for underperforming students? Greenburg (2019) examined the fifth grade performance of students who were retained in first, second, or third grade. Results indicate that students who were retained within these early grades seemed to be performing at similar levels across academic outcomes in fifth grade. There was no difference in mathematics scores between students who were retained early or late. This lack of differences suggests that early retention is not associated with longer-term success in mathematics compared to later retention, and that late retention is not harming students more than early retention. However, students who were retained between kindergarten and second grade scored higher on fifth grade reading examinations than students who were retained for the first time in the third grade.

Educator Attitudes toward Retention

Tomchin and Impara (1992) studied teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward the necessity of grade retention for students in grades K-7. Teachers overwhelmingly stated that retention is an acceptable practice. One of the reasons given for such a belief was preventing the low-performing student from facing everyday failures in a grade that is too difficult, while another was that retention motivated students to work harder at learning the material. The teachers who participated in the 1992 study felt that students may need to be retained for reasons such as poor academic performance, immaturity, and/or low ability to complete or master the work. Furthermore, the teachers who completed the survey agreed that retention in grades K-3 was not harmful for students, while there was much disagreement from the same teachers regarding retention in grades 4-7. Feathers (2020) found that teachers with a graduate degree significantly favor retention over teachers with a bachelor's degree.

Typically, educators tend to believe that grade retention should take place in the early years of a child's formal education (Range, Pijanowski, Young, & Holt, 2012). Range, Pijanowski, Young, & Holt found the vast majority of educators believe that retention is best for students who perform low academically, but they also believe that retention works best if it occurs in the early years of a child's schooling. Teachers and principals alike suggest that having children repeat a grade in the early years of their schooling helps prevent future failures in upper grades (Range, Pijanowski, Young, & Holt, 2012). They also suggest that there is significant increase in students' self-esteem when they are retained in early grades, especially when the retention takes place in kindergarten (Appleton, J., Burns, M., Jimerson, S., & Silbergliitt, B., 2006). Retention is thought to provide the student more time to grow, develop, mature, and learn (Dong, 2009; Gay, 2002).

Hernandez-Tutop (2012) found that many teachers disregard much research that states that retention is not an effective answer to achievement. Hernandez-Tutop found that repeating a grade hurts the self-esteem of students. Even still, retention is viewed by many teachers as the best option for helping students improve self-esteem and academic performance (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011). Hong and Raudenbush (2005) found that very few teachers would argue against retention. Young, et al. (2019) conducted a study of preservice teachers and found that

they considered that retention is appropriate in cases where students get inadequate support from home, show immaturity in the classroom, or have low achievement in mathematics.

A study by Smith (2008) concluded that teachers continue to retain students as a remedy for academic failure. Additional findings indicated that teachers in general disagreed with the notion that retention failed to improve achievement, failed to inspire students to work harder and behave better, and failed to develop students' self-concept and social adjustment.

There has been little research done regarding the elementary principal's beliefs about the benefits of retention. However, Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) determined that principals have very similar views about retention to those of teachers. Most principals reported low academic performance and immaturity as two dominant factors in having a student repeat a grade (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011). Interestingly, principals also stated that lack of parental support was another contributing factor to a low-performing student possibly needing to repeat a grade (Murray, Woodruff, & Vaughn, 2010). Generally, both teachers and principals view retention as having a positive impact on a child's self-esteem if the retention takes place in kindergarten, grade one, or grade two (Range, Pijanowski, Young, & Holt, 2012). In his study Feathers (2020) reported that despite research showing retention as negative practice, both teachers and principals significantly favor grade retention as an effective intervention strategy.

In her study of rural school districts, Moore (2017) found that retention is used frequently as an intervention tool. There were two primary reasons given by administrators for retaining students: (1) students needed more time to mature to the level of their peers, and (2) students were academically more than two grade levels behind peers. Administrators indicated that social maturity was a big contributor to a student's readiness for a formal education.

No Child Left Behind (2002) placed much more accountability on the schools and the teachers. This basically put a halt to the practice of sending a student to the next grade level without having met the academic expectations for that grade (Frey, 2005). Putting an end to social promotion is the goal of many educators and policymakers.

The Westchester Institute for Human Services (1998) states that most educators and researchers believe that neither social promotion nor retention is a solution for struggling students. They conclude that neither grade retention nor social promotion has any academic or social advantages to students. It is suggested that teachers use multiple assessment measures for decision making about student progression. Another suggestion is making sure that teachers have the skills needed to raise expectations for student learning. They go on to say districts should make every effort to attract and retain only the most qualified teachers. Smaller class sizes would also be beneficial, as well as using block schedules. Lastly, it is suggested that schools should consider being "redesigned". They should consider providing more extended contact between students and teachers, where the teacher spends multiple years with the same students (The Westchester Institute for Human Services, 1998).

Educational Standards as Reasons for Advocating Retention

Educational standards are constantly increasing, and teacher accountability is on the rise. If students do not master the standards, it is not uncommon for teachers to retain low-performing students for another year of the same grade. Research indicates that 30% to 50% of students will be retained at least once by the time they enter the ninth grade (Jimerson, 2001).

The kindergarten curriculum is becoming more and more difficult. This phenomenon is not new, however. Even twenty years ago, Shepard and Smith (1988) reported that 85% of principals in their research placed kindergarten academic achievement at a high priority because of the escalating curriculum. Policy makers are still increasing early childhood demands, according to teachers (Hong & Yu, 2008). This strenuous curriculum is one reason teachers feel compelled to retain low-performing children, resulting in the practice of retention becoming increasingly popular (Anderson, n. d.).

Bracey (2006) reported that kindergarten requirements are very different than they were in the past. Shepard and Smith found kindergarten skills to be escalating considerably (Shepard & Smith, 1988). The policies were found to contribute to an increase in students needing another year in kindergarten as well as a change in teaching methods (Shepard & Smith, 1988).

Because of the rigorous curriculum, teachers will likely request that struggling students repeat the grade (Bracey, 2006). They don't want to send a child into grade one unprepared. They prefer that the student repeat kindergarten in order to build a stronger foundation of essential skills. Furthermore, increased teacher accountability has educators concerned that it might appear as if they did not teach the curriculum appropriately.

Until recently, the majority of students who are retained are held back at the request of either the teacher or the parents. Yet, there is increasing concern that policy-makers are leaning toward retention of students based on test standards (Penfield, 2010). Although *No Child Left Behind* (2002) does not make mention of test-based retention, many large school districts in several states are using high-stakes tests as a determining factor in retention, with little to no regard for classroom performance or teacher input. This is viewed by many as unfair and inappropriate (Leckrone & Griffiths, 2006).

Though teachers might not be happy with the trend, high-stakes testing is certainly becoming a determinate in who should repeat a grade. Because so much emphasis has been placed on accountability since the original implementation of *No Child Left Behind* (2002), school districts are beginning to require students to demonstrate mastery of a grade level in order to be promoted to the next grade.

States such as Texas and Florida go a step further by requiring that all grade three students must pass high-stakes testing in order to advance to fourth grade (Chen et al., 2010). These tests are aligned with the state curriculums. The pressure to do well on these tests could result in retaining more students that are low achieving when they are in primary grades.

Research Supporting No Benefit of Kindergarten Retention

Studies have shown three different outcomes of retaining children in kindergarten: negative outcomes academically and socially, no significant differences due to retention, and outcomes that favor retention. However, very few studies have shown results that are favorable toward retention (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005).

In the early 1990s, a study was conducted by Meisels (1993). He examined the practice of retention in kindergarten through grade eight. During his study, he found there were a significant number of studies that had been conducted that favored retention as long those students were provided with remediation programs. Nevertheless, many students demonstrated that retention did not help them function at grade level. Meisels's findings concluded that there was a negative association between retention and race, gender, and school outcomes. He found that certain groups of children are often retained due to factors beyond their control. Boys, small for their age, students young for their grade, immature students, and/or minorities were disproportionately retained. Based upon Meisels' study, it was concluded that retention has substantially more negative effects than positive ones and should only be used in rare cases.

A study conducted by Child Trends Databank (2012) looked at children who repeated grade two, and they found test scores were virtually the same for repeaters as they were for non-repeaters. The trend for retention at the time of the study was around five percent (Child Trends Databank, 2012). The reasons for retention, according to this data, include not only the parental level of education but also socio-economic status, race, parental education, region of the country in which the child lives, and the poverty level of the neighborhood (Child Trends Databank, 2012).

Even thirty years ago, the topic of who needed retention was one of much controversy. Retention is often viewed as the cure for children who are not ready for the rigors of grade one; however, most of the research in the early 1990s indicated that there was little to no benefit for the practice of retention. Zepeda (1993) conducted a study to determine why some schools were retaining so many children each year while other schools had a very low retention rate. It was found that teachers in schools with a low rate of retention used more developmentally appropriate teaching methods than those with a higher rate of retention. Additionally, the retained children were more likely to come from lower-income families, female-headed households, had no previous preschool experience, and are an ethnic minority or a language minority (Zepeda, 1993).

Mantzicopoulos (1997) examined the issue of early retention and whether it would yield positive, long-term results. Specifically, he conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of kindergarten retention and whether or not it provided any positive, long-term academic and behavioral outcomes for children with attention or behavioral problems. Much of the attention focused on the reasons for early retention, the most popular school of thought being the gift of time (Mantzicopoulos, 1997). A sample of students was collected consisting of 40 children (25 retained and 15 promoted). They were chosen from an original group of 62 students based on the variables of school, sex, cohort, age, at-risk status, reading ability, and math ability. Instructional practices of the teachers were not examined. After analyzing the data,

Mantzicopoulos (1997) concluded that early retention of children in kindergarten was not an effective intervention for children with behavior difficulties.

In a similar study, the effectiveness of early grade retention was researched by Appleton, Burns, Jimerson, and Silbergitt (2006). They based their study on the premise that most research has overwhelmingly concluded that retaining a school-aged child is an ineffective practice and a potentially harmful one. However, these authors conducted research on the basis that early retention in school could possibly be an exception to the rule. Generally speaking, research has failed to support retention. However, the researchers stated that retention before grade two should be considered an early intervention or a preventative measure. They hoped to answer the question “Is retention in early grades (kindergarten through grade two) linked to better short-term and long-term outcomes than retention in later grades (third through fifth)?” (Appleton et al., 2006). The results of the study concluded that early retention did not support the idea that repeating a grade in the early years of schooling (kindergarten through grade two) would provide the expected advantages academically. The data failed to support retention (Appleton et al., 2006).

A large scale study conducted by Viadero (2005) determined that schools could possibly do more harm than good by making low-performing students repeat a grade. This was a study that concluded that retention is not a particularly helpful policy for children. Students who were retained were compared to students who had similar characteristics who went on to grade one. After two years in kindergarten, it was found that the retained children were approximately half a year behind those students who were promoted. The researcher concluded that had the children been allowed to go to grade one, they would have learned more than they did by spending two years in kindergarten (Viadero, 2005).

The U.S. Department of Education (2000) performed research looking into three sets of students: those who were held back in kindergarten, those who started kindergarten late (redshirted), and those who started kindergarten on time. They found that students who were held out of kindergarten for a year performed as well as those who started kindergarten on time. On the other hand, children who were required to spend two years in kindergarten performed significantly worse than their classmates on all of the five indicators. It was also interesting to note that initially grade one and grade two students who had spent two years in kindergarten were more likely to get negative feedback from their teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Just two years later, however, there was no negative feedback evident between the teachers and the students who had been retained. Delaying entry into kindergarten and retention in kindergarten are both similar in that they both intend to give children the gift of time. In either case, the positive effects appeared to be short lived (Dong, 2009).

Jimerson (2001) compared the effects of grade retention on a child’s socio-emotional adjustment and the effects of social promotion. He admits that grade retention is widely practiced, but it does not help children to catch up. He suggests that there is no reliable proof that grade retention is beneficial and those teachers who suggest retention are doing so without valid research. Furthermore, he stated that students who are retained are far more likely to become drop-outs rather than completing high school. Jimerson stated that the opposite of retention is not social promotion. He advocated using possible alternative remedial strategies

such as early reading interventions, behavioral modifications, direct instruction, and parental involvement. Byrnes and Yamamoto (2008) also encouraged alternate strategies saying that there are better and more effective means of improving academic and social skills of students. Lane (1999) is also an advocate of interventions rather than quickly making a child repeat a grade. They each encourage teachers to explore other options before retention.

Bracey (2006) performed a longitudinal study in Washington, D.C. on their schools, their retention policies, and the performance of their kindergarten students. Some schools allowed students to be retained in kindergarten based on academics and some schools did not. Schools that permitted retention were typically suburban schools with a small group of minority students. They had smaller class sizes, parental support, and more order to the classrooms. As a result, reading achievement was higher in these schools.

Bracey (2006) also found that schools that had more students being retained were the opposite of the schools just discussed. These schools had fewer teachers, fewer support staff (such as ESL), lower teacher salaries, lower daily attendance, and fewer services for children with special needs. According to these principals, these schools made fewer attempts to reach out to parents, put less emphasis on language and math goals, and were less open to new ideas and methods. It was found that those who were struggling at the end of kindergarten but were still going to be placed in grade one scored higher in reading and math at the end of kindergarten than those who had already determined that they would repeat. Furthermore, at the end of grade one, Bracey's (2006) results were even more extreme. The retained children were further behind their counterparts who were promoted than they were at the end of kindergarten. From this research, Bracey concluded that repeating kindergarten leaves most children even further behind.

Proponents of a state policy requiring an exit exam at grade three, for example, state that they are not necessarily opposed to retention if it is needed (Robelen, 2012). However, they do not feel that it is fair to make such a decision based on a test score. Florida has implemented this type of testing program. In the first year of the program's implementation, the number of students retained spiked from 6,400 to 27,000. Since that time, the number of students being retained in grade three has had a steady decline. It was argued that the proper way to prevent students from being retained is to simply adequately fund all the grades, provide smaller classrooms, provide adequate teacher and staff development, and implement early interventions for struggling children (Robelen, 2012).

Who is at Risk for Retention?

There could be various reasons for teachers to request that a student repeat a grade. The article, *Children Who Repeated a Grade* (2007), provided by Child Trends Databank, discusses the effects of a parents' educational level to that of young children. It was found that parents who did not complete high school were seven times more likely to have a child in school who repeats a grade than those children whose parents hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Child Trends Databank also stated that grade retention has a direct correlation to a child's socio-economic background. These children also display more negative attitudes towards school, have more behavior problems, have lower achievement, and attend school less frequently.

Furthermore, the article also stated that children who were retained in early grades were also more likely to drop out of school.

Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) found that certain groups of children are more likely to be retained than others. Studies in the past have pointed to age, gender, socioeconomic background, race, and ethnicity, but they found it noteworthy to mention that many students also have multiple risk factors for retention. Yang (2018) found that retention rates for students with disabilities are much higher than that for students without disabilities. There are no significant differences in academics and behavior when comparing retained kindergarten students with disabilities to their promoted peers except in mathematics.

The results of a study by Hinojosa, M., Hinojosa, R., Bright, and Nguyen (2019) indicate that children with adverse childhood experiences, such as economic hardship, parental incarceration, neighborhood violence, and witnessing domestic violence, experience higher rates of retention than students without adverse experiences.

Data provided by The Westchester Institute for Human Services (1998) further demonstrates that the practice of retention has been common for many years. It was found that 15 to 19 percent of students in the United States were retained each year in the 1990s. Tanner and Galis (1997) provided five main reasons a child might be retained: to give a child an extra year to grow, to enhance self-esteem, to create homogeneous classrooms by grouping students with like abilities, to motivate students to work harder, and to give the immature student a year to mature and grow. These are some of the same reasons a child might need to repeat a grade provided by today's teachers (Anderson, n.d.).

Theoretical Considerations

Significant theories of retention were set in place by child psychologist Lev Vygotsky (Kozulin, Ageyev, & Miller 2003). Vygotsky (as cited in Gauvain, M. & Cole, M., 2005) wrote that much of a child's learning is based on the *zone of proximal development*, which states that children will gain new knowledge by building upon previous knowledge and understanding. Vygotsky defined the zone of proximal development as being between instruction and development. In other words, the zone of proximal development is the distance or range between what a learner can do with help and what a learner can do without help (Kozulin, Ageyev, & Miller, 2005). Through a process of practicing, growing and maturing, students progress from a state of needing guidance to complete a task to being able to work independently. An educator's job is help students gain knowledge in such a way that allows them to perform skills independently.

Redshirting – An Option to Prevent Retention

In Cannon and Lipscomb's (2011) study, an interesting part of the report discussed "redshirting" children, the practice of allowing a child to start school a year late in order to give that child more time to grow and mature. It was found that redshirted children have less likelihood of being retained. Cannon and Lipscomb concluded by stating that the students who repeated grade one or two can achieve meaningful gains in the repeated year.

Many parents are opting to delay the start of kindergarten for their children in an effort to give them another year to grow and mature. According to Katz (2000), redshirting is a new trend in response to the increasingly higher standards being placed on kindergarteners. Teachers have been reported as saying that nearly 50% of students are not ready for the current kindergarten curriculum. Katz stated that these teachers claim that nearly half of their students lack important skills such as following directions, academic skills, and working independently. This sort of information has many parents redshirting their children. It is unclear whether redshirting helps children once they enter school. The research to this point is inconclusive (Katz, 2000).

In their study, Hong and Yu (2008) reported that parents tend to view redshirting as a much more suitable alternative to their child potentially failing a grade in the future due to a lack of maturity or a low understanding of the skills. They stated that there is much less social stigma attached to a child who has chosen to repeat kindergarten in an effort to get ahead than that of a student who is forced to repeat a grade due to behavioral or academic issues (Hong, G. & Yu, B., 2008). Furthermore, many teachers encourage parents to keep an open mind about a child entering kindergarten, remembering that their child may possibly need a second year of kindergarten in order to gain self-esteem and academic readiness.

In a study of parents' and teachers' views on the psychosocial adjustment of students with and without a history of early grade retention, teachers evaluated students lower than did the parents in terms of behavior, social, and school competence. Both parents and teachers considered that retained students were lower than non-retained students in social and school competence (Anastasiou, A. I., Papachristou, E. M., & Diakidoy, I. N., 2017)

Parents are aware that students in kindergarten today have a far greater rigor than they did when they were in school (Bracey, 2005). Higher expectations placed on kindergarten children have led many parents to the decision to redshirt their kindergarten-age children, especially children with late birthdays or low readiness (Frey, 2005). Delaying entry into kindergarten is an option that appears to be much more suitable to parents than the possibility of a failure in a future grade.

Many kindergarten teachers are calling for their state governments to change the required minimum age for entering kindergarten (Shepard & Smtih, 1988). Cook and Kang (2020) report on the effects of a change in the latest date by which a student must turn five in order to enter school in North Carolina. The latest birth date changed from October 16 to August 31. Those born between the old and new cut dates who would have been the youngest in their classes were now the oldest in their classes. Standardized test scores in the third and fourth grades indicate that the test score gaps between white and black students narrowed, and the gender gap changed to favor girls. Another effect for the students born between the old and new cut dates was that redshirting was nearly eliminated.

However, the results of a study of school entrance age in rural Virginia schools did not indicate a relationship between entrance age and academic achievement in literacy skills (Brower, 2020).

The U.S. Department of Education (2000) reported that the trend in kindergarten is to push back the age when children can be enrolled in kindergarten. Teachers reported to be happy with this measure. Research was conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 2000 to look into the characteristics of students who entered kindergarten at a delayed age or experienced kindergarten retention in an effort to improve their adjustment and performance in school. It was reported that more boys experienced a delayed start in kindergarten than girls. Children with a birthday later in the year were also more likely to be held out of kindergarten for another year. Parents who opted to have a delayed entry in kindergarten for their child received less negative feedback from teachers on two out of five indicators (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Summary

Retention is a serious decision. In order to determine what is in the best interest of kindergarten students who are struggling to master kindergarten skills, much debate and discussion has taken place for many years. There has yet to be a determination in whether or not retention is the best solution. Many researchers have concluded that allowing a child to repeat kindergarten provides a stronger foundation for essential skills needed for future grades (Chen et al., 2010), while others argue that retention has many negative consequences (Jimerson, 2001). Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber (2003) argue that negative findings towards retention are often overstated, while positive findings are usually understated (p. 19). It is generally agreed that careful attention should be given to the decision to retain or promote children in kindergarten.

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