Article

# Grade Retention and School Completion: Through Students' Eyes

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Abstract: *There are numerous factors associated with not finishing high school. The purpose of this study was to shed new light on one of them, grade retention, as seen through the eyes of retained dropouts themselves. Respondents describe three interrelated phenomena that characterized their trajectory from being retained-in-grade to subsequent premature exit. The article concludes with suggestions for concerned educational professionals to help redirect this trajectory toward more positive outcomes.*

The consequences of dropping out of school are dire. They include diminished lifetime earnings, increased likelihood of criminal incarceration, restricted access to further education, greater chance of dysfunction in family life, and curtailed opportunities for employment (Heubert, 2003; National Research Council, 1999; Office of Educational Research & Improvement, 1988). Clearly, educators do not wish such long-term costs and wasted potential for students. Yet U.S. Department of Education (1999) data suggest trends of increased numbers of dropouts during the past decade.

Moreover, recent statistical studies find that retention-in-grade is the single most powerful predictor of dropping out of school (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Lillard & DeCicca, 2001). It is even more powerful than parents' income or mother's educational level, two family-related factors long associated with student achievement and school completion (Heubert, 2003; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1990). U.S. Department of Commerce data indicate that "the number of young adults who had ever been retained increased from 11.1% in 1992 to 13.3% in 1995" (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995). Anderson, Whipple, and Jimerson (2002) estimate that between 5% and 10% of students are retained every year in the United States.

Previous efforts to quantify the relationship between grade retention and school completion indicate that dropouts are five times more likely to have repeated a grade than are high school graduates (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Students who repeat once have a 35% chance of dropping out, while students who repeat two or more grades have a probability of dropping out of nearly 100% (Smith & Shepard, 1989).

But numbers alone rarely tell the whole story. For that reason, our study sought to get underneath the statistics. We went directly to students, listened carefully, and probed for deeper understanding of the human side of the grade retention-school completion correlations. What is it about being retained that contributes to dropping out? What insights might the perspectives of early school leavers provide? What can be learned from examining the personal experiences of students who were retained and eventually dropped out of school?

It is uncommon for researchers to locate, pursue, and follow up on school dropouts (Fine, 1992). Similarly, though many educators' daily work involves frequent interactions with students, opportunities for extended conversations with those who have exited early (rather than graduated) are rare. This study synthesizes and analyzes 24 such conversations, to provide a student-centered look at issues and possible interventions associated with youth at risk of failure.

## Theoretical Rationale

Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) served as the theoretical framework for this research. This perspective views individuals as social products whose actions are influenced primarily by their own interpretations and meaning-making of the world around them. This framework assumes that all reality is subjective, and that a principal goal of research should be to draw out and study "what goes on in the heads of humans" (Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975, p. 55). Thus, instead of aspiring to (unattainable) universal or "objective" truths, symbolic interactionist studies seek to explore the multiple subjectivities and meanings that research participants voice for themselves. Consistent with this theoretical perspective, one of our study's strongest contributions to the extant knowledge base is that it surfaces and examines the personal side of early school leaving, including dropouts' feelings and emotions relevant to grade retention.

## About The Study's Methods

After meeting personally with the superintendents of 15 different upstate New York school districts, three agreed to allow data collection for this research. Letters of introduction were mailed to former students of those districts who met three selection criteria: (a) had dropped out of school during grades 9-12; (b) had done so in the recent past (that is, no earlier than five years prior to the start of the study); and (c) had been retained at any grade level K-12. A total of 24 students agreed to participate, and each was interviewed in-depth and in person, for a minimum of an hour and a half. The sample included 16 males and 8 females; 10 from an urban district with a multiracial, multiethnic population of 4,716 students; 10 from a rural-suburban district of 2,635 students; and 4 from a G.E.D. program of a multi-county rural district (termed a Board of Cooperative Educational Services). Approximately 9% of students in the urban district and 16% in the rural-suburban district were eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch, a proxy for low-income status. It is important to note that, though this information about districts contextualizes the study in general terms, participants' attendance histories typically involved multiple changes of school district.

Interviews centered on open-ended questions about school experiences and memorable events in students' lives. Participants had been informed that the study's intent was to improve future school practices, so most were eager to share. They knew they had been identified by their dropout status. Interviews explored related experiences, feelings, and reasons for the early departures. We did not reveal that invitations to participate also depended on grade retention. Nonetheless, in every case, interviewees brought the topic up themselves, allowing additional follow-up questions to elicit details. Of the 24 participants, virtually every grade level was mentioned at least once as the retention year, with most retentions occurring (in declining order of frequency) in grades 9, K, and 10. In this sample, five students had been retained once, 16 students twice, and three students three times.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. All field notes and interview transcriptions were coded conceptually, consistent with Miles and Huberman's (1994) definition of codes as "tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information in a study" (p. 56). Coded data were reread several times, including in-between interviews, to allow for improved focusing and continuous shaping of the research as it proceeded (Bogdan & Taylor, 1984; Guba & Lincoln, 1985). These constant comparative means of data collection and analysis enabled preliminary synthesizing and sense making of findings. A more comprehensive analysis was conducted after all data collection was complete, to focus on patterns of both recurring and "outlier" perspectives, experiences, interpretations, and feelings of participants.

To increase the trustworthiness and credibility of analyses, "member checks" and "peer examination" were used to triangulate emerging patterns (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam, 1998). We exchanged opinions and points of view in interpreting students' responses with colleague teachers and administrators experienced in working with school dropouts and potential dropouts. Whenever possible, second meetings with respondents occurred, during which time students read their interview transcripts, elaborated initial responses, and evaluated preliminary interpretations of data.

In what follows, we synthesize the most common patterns in participants' responses. Both participants' and school districts' anonymity are preserved throughout.

## Findings

Interviewees were forthright in taking personal responsibility for their problems in school and life. (The retrospective and volunteer nature of the study is likely related to such hindsight.) Respondents acknowledged and detailed the paths they took that fostered educational difficulties, including drug use, alcohol abuse, truancy, limited effort, "bad attitude," violence, gang membership, laziness, lack of cooperation, resistance to authority, and myriad other unproductive choices all too familiar to secondary principals. Clearly, major threats to adolescents' school success and health are the risk behaviors they choose (Resnick, Bearman, & Blum, 1997).

Our findings also confirm prior quantitative research showing strong correlations between retention-in-grade and early school leaving (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Lillard & DeCicca, 2001). Twenty of 24 students (83% of the sample) identified grade retention and its effects as the major factors in their eventual exit. But why? What was it about being retained that contributed to dropping out?

Student accounts of their experiences underscore three interrelated phenomena: (a) the unhelpful nature of the repeat year, academically; (b) social stigmatization by peers, primarily for being overage for grade level; and (c) their own immediate and longer-term emotional reactions to these academic setbacks and peer pressures.

### *The Grade-Retained Year*

According to students, not much changed the second (or third) time around. Retainees usually experienced the same assignments, instruction, textbooks, and tests they had failed the previous year. Often, students' teachers didn't change. As one respondent put it, "It was the same teacher, the same curriculum, the same seat, the same stuff over and over again." Several participants had the same subject teacher in high school for three or four consecutive years.

The redundancy of the classroom routine during the repeat year was alternately boring and frustrating. It didn't help retainees see or understand the content in ways different from the failed year. Often, teachers assumed students understood the schoolwork, because of the second or third exposure to lessons. Accordingly, some teachers provided fewer, rather than additional, explanations of subject matter or skills. At other times, teachers embarrassed students with remarks calling public attention to their retention; for example, "Surely you remember this from last year." Such comments were interpreted as demeaning, contributing to the retained year as being not only unproductive, but in some cases, counterproductive to students' engagement in school.

Overall, grade repeating failed to improve students' academic achievement. Participants reported continued lack of understanding and poor performance. Only one respondent recalled being helped individually and, thus, prepared to do better the next time around. This pattern of findings is consistent with Roderick's (1995)

research on grade retention. Her review of previous studies concluded that "repeating a grade provides few remediational benefits" (p. 1). Students got further and further behind their peers academically, due to both the obstacles they created for themselves (mentioned earlier) and the unrealized potential of repeating one or more grades.

### *Peer Response to Being Overage for Grade*

Compounding cumulative academic failure and more frequent than teachers' occasional careless remarks, were schoolmates' hurtful and demeaning behaviors. Retainees were targeted negatively by peers on two interrelated counts. On the one hand, for "being dumb," and hence, repeating the grade; on the other hand, for being older than classmates, a direct consequence of having been "held back" one or more years.

What did this targeting sound and feel like? Respondents described it as ranging from name-calling and teasing to verbal "put downs" and, in one interviewee's words, "being tormented" repeatedly. Participants in this study were mocked, picked on, bullied, ridiculed, and berated because of their age and retained status. Peers referred to them as "worthless," "loser," "the failure," "the big dummy," and, in the most pejorative of tones, "the oldest one" in class. As one interviewee summarized, "the other kids were always rubbing it in your face." For another respondent:

I got a lot of negative pressure from other students on my repeating. They would tease me, pick on me, all kinds of negative things. I can remember this one boy who just picked on me daily and it was like I would try to dodge him in the halls. He made me feel so ashamed to be held over, and he would pick on me. It was terrible.

A recurring theme was that being retained and overage in grade drew unwanted negative attention from other students—attention that followed retainees through their subsequent school years.

### *Cumulative Loss of Hope*

Participants vividly recalled their initial reactions to being required to repeat a grade. They spanned the emotional spectrum from anger, denial, and disbelief, to shame, upset, humiliation, and frustration with both themselves and their schools. Often the retention decision was viewed as unjust or illogical. As one retained dropout put it: "It made no sense to me that they'd made me repeat a whole year just because I failed two subjects in middle school." Another student recalled, "I don't know how I messed up kindergarten. I guess I didn't color in the lines." Another characterized it as "ridiculous" for his teachers to place him in eighth grade when he was 16 years old. A second-time retainee became "mad and furious" because he believed, from past experience, that repeating the year wouldn't benefit him and "the teachers would be too busy to help me."

Whether or not these assessments were warranted, participants' feelings of being treated unfairly or unhelpfully contributed to growing resentment, disillusionment, and exasperation with school. Sometimes their longer-term responses included increased "acting out" behaviors, exacerbating their difficulties in school. Other times it led to feelings of worthlessness, resignation, and withdrawal, internalizing the lowest expectations of teachers and schoolmates: "When you say you failed seventh grade, you feel like a failure. You failed, therefore you are a failure."

Respondents repeatedly spoke of being "worn down," "stressed out," "in a ditch," and of eventually coming to believe they could never "get out of that hole" to "get on track" at school. For the majority, this sense of futility led to loss of motivation, demoralization, and disengagement from both classes and peers who were experiencing some success in school.

### *Patterns as a Whole*

Taken together, the perceived unhelpfulness of the grade-retained year academically; the ensuing social stigmatization by other students for being "dumb" and overage; and interviewees' own sense-making of their cumulative academic failures and peer responses combined to eliminate any hope or desire for "fitting in" at school. Of course, as mentioned earlier, myriad other personal, family, and environmental factors also affected these students' trajectories. Yet these were the three school-centered phenomena that rose to the fore in this study.

For each respondent, there seemed to exist an internal commencement clock that began ticking upon entering ninth grade. Interviewees frequently mentioned the original date they should have graduated with their class, had they been on schedule age- and grade-wise. They became painfully aware how the retention years distanced them from their commencement mark, often in high school cultures in which identity was closely tied to projected year of graduation (e.g., membership in "the class of 2003," etc.). This awareness created additional pressures to leave, especially for multiple-year repeaters. As one participant explained:

> By the time I failed two grades, I mean, I didn't want to be in that situation. I'll be graduating with my little brother. He's two years younger than me, and that would be, like, total humiliation. I totally gave up and wanted to get out of there.

Another multiple-year retainee said she looked around at her high school classmates; they were 17 and 18 years old and ready to graduate. She was 20 and in 11$^{th}$ grade. It occurred to her that she "would never be able to step out on that stage and grab a diploma," so she left.

In sum, participants in this study affirmed that being overage for grade predisposed them to drop out of school. In simplest terms, they didn't fit in. They came to believe they never would. They lost hope. Ultimately, they exited.

## Practical Considerations for Concerned Educators

So, what might help? In this section, we first recap suggestions made directly by our informants; then we follow with recommendations commonly referenced in professional literatures.

Interviewees emphasized both alternatives to grade retention and suggestions for enhancing the quality of schooling more generally. Of most immediate value to educational professionals were students' reminders about ways to provide additional "time to catch up."

- Expand summer school opportunities, as an option in lieu of repeating the grade or course the following academic year. Re-

spondents suggested that success in summer classes was more likely, because students would typically be enrolled in fewer courses than during a regular school semester. In their observations, interruptions were less frequent and class size smaller in summer school, so that teachers could focus attention on individuals. Interviewees also noted that "students seemed more equal in summer school," because everyone in class had experienced failure.

- Extend the day so that blocks of time after school could be used for extra help, remediation, and tutorials, in lieu of grade retention. Again, the benefit cited most frequently here was increased one-on-one attention, often including the development of better personal relationships with teachers and other adults.
- Allow students to "double up" on courses failed at the secondary level, so that struggling students could either schedule a course with two different teachers during the same day or, for example, "take 9th grade English one period and 10th grade English the next." Clearly, these alternatives to grade retention are not typical in secondary school scheduling.
- Make Saturday school available, for the same reasons cited above for expanding summer school opportunities and extending the school day.
- Change unstructured study halls to devise better ways to use time. The retained dropouts in this study said they typically had one or two study hall periods per day. They also reported that most students didn't study during these times but, instead, "goofed around" or visited with friends.

## Additional Considerations

Certainly, support systems for students at risk of failure continually need updating, rethinking, and strengthening (Grant, 1997; Smink, 2001). While always challenging to find the financial resources and skilled staff necessary to expand prevention and remediation initiatives, this study suggests that existing efforts aren't reaching everyone. More one-on-one attention from caring adults in schools may promote connections that can interrupt the spiral of increasing alienation that accompanies course or grade failure and leads to hopelessness and withdrawal (Fine, 1992).

In concert with central office and other support personnel, school leaders can facilitate the professional development needed for teachers to continuously expand their repertoire of instructional strategies. Differentiating instruction, designing lessons that address different learning styles and multiple intelligences, and optimizing teachers' working relationships with classroom aides and school tutors, all hold promise for making teaching more helpful and less repetitive—even in those cases where it is students' second or third time in grade (Schargel & Smink, 2001).

Moreover, educational leaders need to insist and ensure that teachers' professional development is provided in ways that ***model*** varied instructional techniques (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). The latter include self-guided formats for learning, small study groups of colleagues, action research in classrooms, and other active learning strategies appropriate for adults (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989). If leadership delivers primarily sit-and-get lectures for their staff development programming, they unwittingly foster the overreliance on direct instruction and learner passivity that has characterized classrooms all too frequently (Nevills, 2003; Sarason, 1990).

One study group or action research strategy might involve adapting this study's methods. That is, perhaps existing staff development time could be used to have teachers conduct focus group interviews of former students retained in grade. Such direct exposure may deepen understanding of some of the onerous personal impacts this study and others' research have underscored. Yamamoto (1980) found, for example, that elementary students rated repeating a grade as more stressful than wetting in class or being caught stealing. The only two life events his interviewees said would be more stressful than being held back were losing a parent or going blind. Who knows what additional firsthand interviews by teachers might reveal and how powerful students' words might be in altering longstanding support for extant instructional and retention practices?

At a more systemic level, district policies on grade retention, dropout prevention, and alternative programming may need to be reshaped. Coupled with teacher and community service agency input, school boards and other educational leaders may be able to make the voices of retained-dropout students part of their institutional responses to system-wide problems of underachievement and disengagement (Fine, 1992). As this study demonstrates, high school dropout is not exclusively a secondary school issue.

We know that local leadership has considerable influence on the culture and feeling tone of schools (Deal & Peterson, 1991; Firestone & Louis, 1999). Nurturing environments of respect and "no put-downs" can help ameliorate the peer harassment and bullying brought to life in our respondents' stories. Districtwide expectations, adult modeling, policies, and practices related to character development towards acceptance of differences and appreciation of others can help build such environments.

## Summary

There are numerous correlates of dropping out of school. Some are family and social background factors, like low income and limited English proficiency. Some are personal, like individual student's health problems and dysfunction due to death of a loved one. Others are institutional factors, like grade retention, curricula, and school size (Wehlage et al., 1990). As Mann (1986) summarizes, "not finishing high school is a nest of problems" (p. 311), not easily understood, and complicated to resolve.

Many of these family, social background, and personal factors are beyond the purview of schools. Others are not. This study focused on a significant correlate, grade retention, that ***is*** within the school domains of policy and practice. We hope that this up-close-and-personal view of the relationship between grade retention and school completion lends additional perspective for educators grappling with the complexities of sustaining high standards while simultaneously "leaving no child behind."

The experience and viewpoints of teachers and administrators are readily accessible in schools. It may be valuable to consider these difficult issues through the eyes of retained dropouts as well. Neither statistics alone, nor any one group's perspectives, tells the whole story. Together, however, lies the potential for creative problem solving.

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