Retention in the schools

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Abstract
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Retention In the Schools

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Submitted to the

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The demands for higher education have led educators to examine their schools' curriculum and standards for academic promotion. Also, it has caused educators to look at grade retention, both advantages and disadvantages and its alternatives.

... Rather than relying on forced social promotion, schools can and do offer students who need an additional learning time a variety of helpful options, including remaining in the same classroom with the same teacher another year. The key to success of these extra-time programs is making informed decisions about the specific needs of individual children- and then determining which programs best meet those needs (Grant, 1997, p. viii).

Also, social promotion, another education issue, has come into focus. Schools are using social promotion as a way to redress lax standards in schools. The practice of promoting students regardless of academic achievement is in disrepute (Shepard and Smith, 1989). The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) recommended that "placement and grouping of students, as well as promotion and graduation policies, should be guided by academic progress of students and their instructional needs, rather than rigid adherence to age" (Shepard and Smith, 1989, p.2).

Background of the Study

Jim Grant (1997) defined grade level retention as providing additional learning time for children. Other educators hold different views concerning retention.

In order to understand current practices of grade retention and the alternatives to retention, it is helpful to know of the influences great educators and their beliefs have had about retentive practices. Looking at the history of education provides us with insight concerning the influence of these educators.

The concept of the graded school started in Prussia. The Quincy Grammar School of Boston, which opened in 1848, is credited as the first school in the United States to
become completely graded (Olivia, 1992). The establishment of the first graded school, the Quincy School, is credited to John Philbrick. John Philbrick became its first principal. He worked hard to convince the Boston School Board of the wisdom of applying Horace Mann's ideas on pupil classification (Spring, 1990). Horace Mann wrote in his Seventh Annual Report that "the first element of superiority in a Prussian school and one whose influence extends throughout the whole subsequent course of instruction, consists in the proper classification of the scholars" (Spring, 1990, p. 137) John Philbrick, along with Horace Mann and others thought that youngsters might be taught more efficiently if they were sorted and graded. Instead of being mixed, they could be divided largely on the basis of chronological age (Olivia, 1992).

An outgrowth of the graded school was the self-contained classroom. Primary school teachers of the graded school were no longer required to master all the subjects of all the grades but only those subjects in the grade in which they taught.

The development of the graded school helped establish the concept that certain knowledge and skills be learned, not according to the child's growth and development, but by the end of certain grade levels. This in turn brought about retention. "Retention became an issue in public education once school systems began to organize their pupils into grade levels in order to allow teachers more homogenous student grouping in which instruction could be addressed" (Johnson, Merrel, Stover, 1990, p. 333). School readiness and grade placement was based solely on the age of the child (Olivia, 1992). In the book Retention and Its Prevention (1997), Jim Grant made a similar comment:

All school entrance and grade placement decisions will be based solely on the number of candles on each child's birthday cake. Each child will then have no more than 180 days to learn the material required for promotion to the next grade level. And, all children will proceed through the grades at the exact same rate, regardless of the individual needs or differences. Any child who takes more than 13 years to go from kindergarten through 12th grade is a failure (p. 1).
This *lock-step* method or *Prussian* way of teaching is what Horace Mann brought to the United States back in the 1840's. Each student was expected to learn at exactly the same pace as every other learner (Grant, 1997). Horace Mann was a powerful force in the education system. His beliefs played a large role in education. He founded the *Common School Journal* (1839) to deal with issues as they arose and to reach teachers, members of school boards, and the public. Mann also was elected as the Secretary of the State Board of Education in Massachusetts. During his term (1837-1848), Horace Mann worked hard to improve education. Mann and the Board were not satisfied with the condition of the schools. In 1839 the legislature passed a law that required every district to extend the school term to six months. Also, laws were passed which required state and local taxes to help fund the public school. In addition, additional funds were raised and used to develop normal schools. With more normal schools, teachers were better prepared to teach, for Mann believed that schools could only be as good as the teachers. He fought for an expanded curriculum in order to prepare children better for the future (Good & Teller, 1973).

With the expanded curriculum came more responsibility, not only for the teacher, but also for the students. The students were required to learn more material but were not given more time in which to learn the material. Curriculum changes, along with the introduction of the graded school system played a large part in grade retention. In addition, it brought about the social promotion that is seen in today's schools.

Grade failure rates are as high as they were in the 19th century, before the days of social promotion: Although annual statistics show only about a 6 percent annual percentage rate for retention, year after year that produces a cumulative rate of nonpromotion greater than 50 percent... (Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Horace Mann not only helped change many aspects in education, but he also influenced many others. One of these men was John Dewey (1859-1952). He was born the same year that Horace Mann died. The educational views and proposals of Dewey and his disciples were the guide to a widespread progressive movement in the schools
during the first half of the twentieth century (Good & Teller, 1973). Dewey believed that pupils should have the freedom to choose for themselves. If they were guided, rather than taught by teachers, pupils would accept the responsibility for learning. Teachers were to encourage pupils to learn using all of their senses. Teachers were not taskmasters. This child-centered school was to be a laboratory where new ideas were encouraged. John Dewey's ideas were also the ideas of Francis Parker and Charles William Eliot. All three men believed that the Progressive School would be the... "schools of the future in both America and Europe" (Good & Teller, 1973, p. 380).

The Progressive Schools of the early 1900's can be seen today in educators' fight for developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom, especially the early childhood years. "Apparently many young children are unable to conform to the rigor that highly academic kindergartens often require. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has labeled such academic classes as developmentally inappropriate for young children" (Bergin, Osburn, Cryan, 1996, p. 152). An appropriate response by the schools would be to scale back on the academics and structure the curriculum to meet the needs of the individual children. But with the demands given to the schools today, this response does not always happen (Bergin, et al., 1996).

Both ideas, the graded school and the Progressive School have had an impact on schools today. Attention is being focused on alternatives such as the multi-age classroom and developmentally appropriate practices. These ideas are being considered as alternatives to grade retention.

In looking at recent history of retention, one can see that the number of children retained increased during the 1980s. The reason for this can be seen in a comment by Smith and Shepard (1988). "The educational reforms of the 1980s call for promotion from grade to grade on the basis of the mastery of grade-level curriculum or objectives" (p. 307). This increase included kindergarten. This is hard to imagine considering the
history of kindergarten as a place to play and socialize (Bergin, Osburn, Cryan, 1996). But in the academic rigor of school, children are unable to conform. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has taken a position that such academic classes are inappropriate for young children and that schools should be scaling back on academics and fitting the curriculum to the needs of students. Instead, schools continue to expect children to fit the curriculum (Bergin, Osburn, Cryan, 1996; Grant 1997; Shepard & Smith, 1989). Shepard and Smith discussed a similar thought in a 1988 study of teachers' beliefs and practices.

Another school of thought (e.g., Ilg, Ames, Haines, & Gillespie, 1978) suggests that individual differences in maturational readiness be the basis for progress through grades; children, regardless of age, should be protected from curriculum that is too advanced for their levels of readiness (Smith & Shepard, 1988, p. 307).

This paper will examine grade retention to see if it is in the best interest of the child. It will look at the advantages and disadvantages of retention. It will also look at alternatives to retention that schools have, or could have in their educational system. Finally, it will look at factors that need to be examined when considering a child for grade retention.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature concerning grade retention in schools. In order to achieve this, the following questions will be addressed:

1. Why is retention used in schools?
2. What are the problems involved in using retention?
3. How can retention help students succeed in school?
4. What aspects in education have affected retention?
5. What factors increase the chance of a child being a candidate for retention?
6. What factors must be evaluated when considering a child for retention?
7. What are the alternatives to retention?
Need for the Study

Grade retention is a prevalent and controversial practice in education (Reynolds, 1992). The current increase in policies that permit the retention of young children for a second year in a given grade are being looked at from two different views by school reformers. Some reformers advocate promotion from grade to grade strictly on the basis of achievement. Children who pass tests should be promoted; but those who fail the tests should be retained. Other school reformers say that retention is not good for children. According to evidence, retention has negative effects on achievement and adjustment (Smith & Shepard, 1987).

Clearly a major contradiction exists between the policies of school reformers and the available evidence. There is a need to investigate all aspects of grade retention: advantages, disadvantages, alternatives, factors to consider when retaining a child, why retention is used in the schools, and aspects in education that have had an effect on retention.

Finally, because teachers are heavily involved in the decision of retention, educators need to understand what factors other than achievement or competence influence teachers when they decide whether or not to retain a child (Bergin, Osburn, Cryan, 1996).

Limitations of the Study

The literature reviewed for this study was mostly limited to materials available from the University of Nebraska at Omaha library. There were two professional books available from Loess Hills Area Education Agency. Modern Learning Press also provided a professional book on retention. Also, articles that were reviewed contain limited studies because retention practices are poorly documented. There are no standardized and reliable national longitudinal data because grade retention has been a local or state issue (Shepard & Smith, 1989).
Definitions of Terms

To have a clearer understanding of this paper, the terms used in this paper will be defined in the following way:

**Academic intervention**: A program designed to help children improve in academics. Remedial math and remedial reading are two programs currently used in many schools.

**Academic promotion**: Children are promoted to the next grade because they have successfully completed the academic requirements for their grade. These children may or may not be physically or socially ready for the next grade.

**Developmentally appropriate practices**: Curriculum programs that take into account the nature of young children, the developmental stages of young children and their needs, and how young children learn best.

**Environmentalism**: A belief that the development of school readiness is "amenable to influence by parents, teachers, and other forces in the child's environment" (Smith & Shepard, 1988, p. 314).

**Grade retention**: A child spends an additional year in the same grade often with the same teacher. It is also considered grade retention when a child, who is of the appropriate age to begin kindergarten, does not start to school.

**Immature**: A child who is less developed physically, socially, or both as his/her same aged peers.

**Independence level**: The level which a child is able to work on his/her own without assistance from teacher, aide, or other student.

**Junior first grade/ Pre-first grade/ Transitional kindergarten**: A year in school that comes between the traditional kindergarten and the traditional first grade. The object is to ease the transition from kindergarten to first grade.

**Multi-age classroom**: A classroom where children are not all the same ages. Curriculum in this classroom corresponds to the readiness of the child, not the age of the
child. For example, a 6 year old and an 8 year old could be working on addition facts to ten.

**Nativism:** A belief that "the development of a child's school readiness is an internal, organismic process unrelated to environmental intervention" (Smith & Shepard, 1988, p. 314).

**Pre-kindergarten:** A year before kindergarten when a child attends a developmental program to help better prepare him/her for kindergarten.

**Remediationist:** A belief viewed by teachers that "all children legally eligible for school as teachable, if they are given enough appropriate opportunities at home and in the classroom" (Smith & Shepard, 1987, p. 132).

**Social promotion:** A child is promoted to the next grade even though he/she has not successfully completed the academic requirements of the previous grade. He/she is promoted in order to stay with the same-aged peers.

**Wrong grade placement:** This occurs when a child is placed in a grade based solely on the child's age without considering factors such as readiness to learn. This often results in a "significant number of children adjusting badly to school because they are not yet ready to succeed in a particular grade" (Grant, 1997, p. 7).
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Retention in Schools

"Grade retention is one of education's most common educational interventions for the unprepared student. A recent report found that approximately 6% of all school-age children are retained each year (CPRE Policy Brief, 1990)." (Hagborg & Masella, 1991, p. 310). Why is retention used in the schools? There are many reasons given by experts why retention is used. One prevalent reason is teachers' beliefs. In a 1987 article, Mary Lee Smith and Lorrie A. Shepard, stated that "a sizable proportion of teachers expressed beliefs we labeled as nativist. These teachers viewed development as physiological unfolding in a series of stages, governed by an internal timetable" (p. 131). The age at which children are able to maintain attention, or are ready to discriminate sounds, is based on their developmental age. Teachers felt that students should not be pushed, therefore they cut back on instruction and provided another year to develop by retaining children or placing them in transition programs prior to first grade.

A sharp contrast to the nativists is the remediationists. "These teachers viewed all children legally eligible for school as teachable, if they are given enough appropriate opportunities at home and in the classroom" (Smith & Shepard, 1987, p. 132). Remediationists worked individually with the unready child, arranged for tutoring and remedial work. Yet these educators maintained high expectations and varied the type of instruction to meet individual learning styles. They also felt that retaining a child was giving up on that child. These . . . "differing sets of beliefs among teachers helped to explain the inconsistencies in retention practices" (Tomchin & Impara, 1992, p. 219).

In spite of these beliefs, nativist and remediationist, it is still founded that . . . "all teachers strongly supported the retention of some children" (Schultz, 1989, p.126). Why? Tom Schultz (1989) said that "since teachers cannot compare the possible
outcomes of both promoting and retaining a 'given child, they tend to focus on the gains made by children who are retained" (p. 126). He further argued that some proponents of retention simply felt that repetition of the standard curriculum, coupled with additional maturity, would produce greater success. Smith and Shepard (1988) found the following:

Considering the rich diversity in teachers' beliefs about readiness and their retention practices, there is remarkable unanimity of sentiment, even among those who rarely retain, in favor of adding a year to the pupil's career, when the pupil lacks either the competence or the maturity for the next grade (321-322).

In this same qualitative study, Smith and Shepard (1988) concluded these findings:

1) Teachers' beliefs about developing readiness fall along a dimension of nativism. 2) Teachers' beliefs about developing readiness are related to retention practices. 3) Teachers' beliefs about retention diverge from beliefs of parents and from propositional knowledge. 4) Teachers' beliefs about developing readiness and retention practices are related to school structures (p. 307).

The last finding by Smith and Shepard points out another reason why retention is used for. Retention is a serious issue for schools and how a school is structured affects how retention is viewed. This finding is evident by the following statement:

This last analysis (of schools) demonstrated that retention practices are related to, and form an integral part of school structure-how teaching and learning opportunities are organized, both formally and informally. The official district curriculum set a formal organizational context for teachers' beliefs and practices... Teachers' use of retention and beliefs in the nativist theory of development may have been a response to inappropriately difficult and standardized curriculum and to rigid school organization and severe standards for academic performance and behavior (Smith & Shepard, 1988, p. 329).

Teachers express concern about curriculum that mandated retention. They believe that the curriculum was to blame for students' failures. The curriculum constrained a teacher's flexibility to make appropriate content related decisions. Teachers know that not every child can meet grade level standards the first time through the curriculum. (Tomchin & Impara, 1992) But, "for educators seeking to appease public concern about low standards, retaining rather then promoting a child conveys the message that standards are
being upheld" (Schultz, 1989, p. 126). In addition, retaining a child helps teachers and administrators maximize test scores by reducing the number of children who appear likely to be unsuccessful, if promoted. The practices of the assessment and retention of young children have been influenced by mandates from school policies and messages received from the public. The behaviors and beliefs of the teachers and administrators have also been contributing factors (Schultz, 1989).

Retaining students in grade is often used as a means to raise educational standards. Schools are under considerable political pressure to maintain acceptable high levels of grade retention as proof of high standards. "Mandating a change in school policy (e.g., prohibiting retention) would certainly affect the number of retentions, this change alone would be unlikely to change teachers' beliefs about their students or the nature of their classroom interactions" (Tomchin & Impara, 1992, p.220). School districts should be required to follow and document the fortunes of those students they retain over a number of years. This action could be used as a recourse to legal sanctions (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Retention is a serious issue for administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Although students have been retained since the days of the one-room schoolhouse, (Bucko, 1986; Labaree, 1984) the debate over the effectiveness of retention continues. . . However even practitioners question its effectiveness (Tomchin & Impara, 1992, p. 200).

Problems Involved in Using Retention

"Retention is one of the current reform packages that does not work" (Smith and Shepard, 1987, p. 134). In a meta-analysis of the effects of nonpromotion by Holmes and Matthews 1984, who examined measures of academic achievement, personal adjustment, self concept, and attitude toward school, negative effects were noted for non-promoted students (Bergin,1996). This was also found to be true in studies by other educators, such as Smith & Shepard (1987), Schultz (1989), Hagborg (1991), and Dawson (1991).
In taking a closer look at the negative effects of retention, one can see similarities. However, most agreed that retention is a greater detriment when done after third grade.

Academic achievement is one problem when considering retention. Smith and Shepard (1987) found "the average negative effect of retention on achievement is even greater than the negative effect on emotional adjustment and self-concept" (p. 346). In a 1992 study, Reynolds found that a negative relationship existed between retention and later academic achievement in reading and math (Bergin, et al., 1996). Critics found that no evidence existed that delayed school entry or any form of retention will lead to sustained levels of academic achievement. "The retained students displayed early academic achievement advantages, which "washed out" by the third grade after the retention year... found that retained students had lower IQ scores, lower achievement scores, and lower grades" (Hagborg, et al., 1991, p. 310). Students who are struggling need a more engaging curriculum that involves them in solving meaningful problems. Reexposure to the same material through the same methods does not always remediate deficiencies. The available evidence on the effects of grade retention suggests that it does not improve academic achievement. Johnson, Merrel, and Stover (1990) concluded from their investigation that the "early use of grade retention was not effective as an academic intervention" (p.337).

Self-concept, attitude, and personal adjustment of the student were also found to be negative in students who had been retained. Although teachers believed this to be true, the effect varied according to the student's age in which he or she had been retained.

Teachers believe that retention in grades 4-7 is more harmful to a child's self-concept than retention in grades K-3; is more likely to permanently label a child; and is less likely to give immature students a chance to catch up (Tomchin & Impala, 1992, p.204).

Students who are retained, no matter how sensitively teachers and parents handle the retention, believe they are being retained because of some failure on their part. The effects of retention can be traumatic to children who are retained and the retained children did worse academically in the future, with many of them having dropped out of school.
altogether (Shepard & Smith, 1989). On follow-up studies of social adjustment, attitudes
toward school, behavioral outcomes, and attendance, students who had been retained
more poorly than matched control groups (Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Benefits of Retention

Despite all the negative evidence of retention, educators and administrators
continue to uphold the idea that retention is the best for some children. As stated early by
Tom Schultz (1989), "all teachers strongly supported the retention of some children"
(p.126). Supporters of retention explained that it gave retained students an extra year to
catch up and permitted their placement with developmentally appropriate classmates. But
teachers beliefs in the positive outcomes of retention is based on limited information,
having observed students immediately after retention and not looking at the long term
effects (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Therefore, some educators say a decision-making
procedure needs to be developed in order to decide which children will most likely benefit
from retention. Still, retention is being used, so it is important to look at the benefits.

A benefit of retention is that children perceive themselves to be more competent
when they do apply themselves and succeed. Studies have shown that children with good
self concepts do better in school. "The impact of being successful at academic tasks after
retention can help students develop a positive self concept" (Tomchin & Impara, 1992, p.
211). Teachers were in agreement that retention does not permanently label students.
Also, they agreed that retention can be a positive step because it prevented students from
facing daily failure in the next higher grade. Children did not perceive retention as a
negative experience.

Smith and Shepard (1988) found other benefits of retention in qualitative study on
teachers' beliefs on retention:

Among the benefits mentioned by teachers in the interviews. . . an extra year
provides time for the child to mature, moves a child from the bottom of his
age appropriate class to the top of the class in which he is retained, makes the child a leader, prevents a later and more painful retention, and prevents deviant behavior later in life (p. 322).

Some of these teachers qualified their endorsement of retention by stating that it is beneficial only for children who are immature. They said that children with low academic ability, low motivation, or handicaps, retention would not solve the problem. Other teachers had other preferences to retention, such as a transition program or a developmental 2-year kindergarten program. Although these types of programs were considered a form of retention. Also, many educators believe that retention in first grade is more effective than retention in kindergarten. When asked for any risks involved in retention, the teachers said that few exist and that these risks were minor and temporary (Smith & Shepard, 1988).

Obviously, a major benefit of retention is improvement in academics. In a study by Sandoval and Fitzgerald (1985), information about academic performance of students in a junior-first program was positive. When compared to their peers: "Those children placed in the junior-first program or retained early in the elementary grades had better high school grades and made better academic progress" (p. 170). Teachers believe that retention is necessary for future success in school. Also, retention helps students build a strong foundation in fundamental skills.

Also, parents have a significant influence on their child's perception of retention. It is extremely important that parents remain sanguine about the results of their child's need for a second year in a grade. When interviewing parents on the advantages of retention, Smith and Shepard (1988) found parents to share similar views as teachers.

Asked to name the advantages their children received because of retention, parents repeated those indicated by the teachers, such as improved self-confidence, prevention of failure, and that "going over the same stuff gives her an advantage over the other kids" (p. 323).
Aspects in Education That Have Effected Retention

Controversy over testing was an issue in the 1980's and is still an issue today. There was a growing trend in the 1980s to use test results as a screening instrument to retain children or to place them in a junior-first grade or developmental first grade.

During the 1980's the policy community became convinced that declining levels of school performance stemmed largely from two factors: low standards of achievement and educators' low expectations of students. Policy makers saw the principal of social promotion—that is the advancement of students from grade to grade regardless of their achievement—as misguided, and suspicion regarding the motives and judgments of education grew (Schultz, 1989, p. 126).

Therefore, policy makers had to develop approaches that gave educators data they needed to lessen negative consequences, such as retention or social promotion, for young children. Strategies suggested for educators of young children were to postpone testing until children were better able to cope and results were more reliable; limit testing to samples of young children; and develop approaches to assessment that reduced the stakes for teachers and children (e.g., alternative methods of retention assessment). By using alternative methods of assessment, such as teacher observation, samples of student work, and student performance in classroom settings, teachers would have documentation of a child's ability beyond test scores. Other ways teachers can better help their students achieve is to change their style of instruction, grouping of students, and classroom management style, in order to meet today's more diverse groups (Schultz, 1989).

A second aspect in education that is even more prevalent in schools today is the issue of money. How much does retention cost? Can the dollars saved by not retaining to reallocated to more effective alternatives? In a 1990 study by Shepard and Smith, they estimated that U.S. school districts spend nearly $10 billion a year to pay for the extra year of schooling. But educators find it difficult to redirect savings from students not retained to more effective instructional programs. So if extra money already exists to support remediation along with retention, then educators should ask why students cannot receive the extra help in the context of their normal grade placement.
To have any hope for more dramatic improvements in student learning, schools will need to make some major changes. Changes such as more support and opportunities for teachers to work together in addressing the problems of the hard-to-reach children; curriculum reforms designed to involve children in meaningful learning tasks that provide both the context and the purpose for acquiring basic skills (Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Factors That Increase a Child's Chance of Being a Candidate for Retention

There are many factors that increase a child's chance of being a candidate for retention. One factor commonly cited by teachers in making retention decisions is the child's level of maturity or independence. This factor was found to be true even when a child showed high levels of academic performance. The level of maturity was found to be more of a factor for teachers in the primary grades than in the middle grades (Bergin, 1996; Reynolds, 1992; Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

A second factor used for retention decisions was the age of the child. Although DeMeis and Stearns (1992) findings did not support the popular notion that children who are younger experience more academic or social difficulties, they found that entrance age of a child is a poor predictor of a child's future success in school. Yet DeMeis and Stearns wrote that: "Younger age of school entrance is also cited as a cause of early academic and social differences that eventually result in long-term problems" (p.20). In an attempt to solve this age issue, schools have looked at solutions such as rolling back the entrance date or having a child wait a year before entering school. These solutions may not be in the best interest of the child. Gifted students need to be in school, as do students who are handicapped, or children who come from homes that provide limited stimulation (DeMeis and Stearns, 1992). It is important to note that age is not given as much weight as academic performance in making retention decisions.

Gender is a third factor considered in retention. In a 1992 study, Reynolds found that boys were more likely to be retained than girls. The justification for this is the research data showing that boys tend to mature slower than girls. However, basing
retention solely on gender is discrimination and should be avoided. Included in the study on gender and retention were children who misbehaved. Children who misbehaved were more likely to be retained than children who behave themselves. Many teachers make false assumptions that boys misbehave more than girls. Also, when results were tallied, younger boys had lower achievement scores (Grant, 1997).

Academic achievement is a fourth factor that influenced a teacher's decision to retain. Some teachers retained low-ability students, assuming they could benefit from the repetition of material; whereas other teachers promoted low-ability students despite poor performance. If the child does not have the ability, what is the point of keeping him or her back (Tomchin & Impara, 1992)?

Other less significant factors that influenced retention of primary children included effort put forth, home environment, size of the child, and child's self esteem. Middle school teachers looked at: a) reasons for student failure; b) factors influencing retention decisions; c) anticipated consequences of retention; and d) responsibility of teachers to remediate student problems. "Whereas specific skill deficiencies are often associated with primary retention, factors such as motivation, behavior, absenteeism, and work habits become increasingly important in teachers' assessments of older students" (Tomchin & Impara, 1992, p.219). One can see that the grade of the child effects how a teacher looks at a child when considering them for retention. Also, children are retained in arbitrary and inconsistent ways. The decision to retain is not an objective act, but quite subjective (House in Smith & Shepard, 1989).

Factors to Evaluate When Considering a Child for Retention

Jim Grant, author of Retention and Its Prevention (1997), discussed what parents and educators need to look at when considering a child for retention. Some of these issues were discussed when we looked at factors that increased the chance of a child being retained. The factors, Grant suggested to be evaluated were the following:
1. Chronological age: A child who is close to the cut-off date for school entrance is more likely to be in the wrong grade and to end up being retained as a result. At the other end of the spectrum is the child who is already one year older than his or her classmates. This child should not be retained.

2. Gender: Research data showed that boys tend to develop more slowly than girls. That's why boys are more likely to be retained than girls. They are also more likely to receive other types of interventions and support services.

3. Physical Size and Ability: Besides affecting sports, a child's physical development can also affect a child's ability to read and write, complete tasks, pay attention, and perform certain mental functions. These children are often incapable of succeeding in a particular grade, unless they have more time to develop.

4. Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Problems: This area seems to be more of a concern for teachers while parents worry more about the academic issues. Teachers look seriously at the cause of these problems. If the child is "acting out" because of problems at home or some type of medical problem, then retention will only enhance these problems. But if these problems are caused by the wrong grade placement, then retention would be an effective solution.

5. Prematurity and Low Birth Weight: There have been many studies that show that these problems are linked years later to developmental delays, poor performance in school, and inattentiveness. These children often need another year to develop while also receiving additional support.

6. Exposure to Environmental Hazards: Pre-natal exposure to tobacco smoke, alcohol, illegal drugs, as well as post-natal exposure to them, may result in physiological problems that can affect a child's growth, development, and school performance.

7. Learning Disabilities: Often when a young child has an undiagnosed learning disability, he or she will appear to be developmentally young. Therefore, it is necessary to
look at other information when making a decision about grade retention. Retention is not the right choice for a child whose only problem is that he or she is learning disabled.

8. Attendance: Many schools consider this an important factor when considering grade retention. In fact some schools, mandate retention if the child has missed 15 or more days. Sometimes this is necessary to help the child catch up or to recover from a trauma. Other times, though, retention may prove to be ineffective. It just may give the child another reason to avoid school.

9. Linguistic Differences: Children who are learning English as a second language may have trouble learning enough to be promoted to the next grade. If this is the child's only problem, than he or she should not be retained, but placed in an ESL program. If this problem is joined with another problem, such as being developmentally or chronologically young, then the child would benefit from a second year in the same grade.

10. Poverty: This can lead to a variety of educational problems. Often, children who have grown up in poverty have not been exposed to the experiences that lead to academic success. These children become likely candidates for retention. Alternative solutions for these children are accelerated learning and extended school days.

11. Grade Levels and Alternative Programs: Schools need to do their best to match the child's learning style with the appropriate teaching style. This needs to be considered not only for the primary grades, but the upper grades as well.

12. The Child's Attitude: If a child is adamantly opposed to being retained, he or she will probably be at-risk for a variety of problems. For the most part though, a child who is chronologically or developmentally young, is rarely opposed to being retained. The adamantly opposed child should not be retained.

13. Parental Attitudes: As mentioned before, this is one of the most important considerations because it has the largest impact on the child. If one or both of the parents is opposed, then retention will not create a successful, well-adjusted child. The parents need to be supportive for retention to do the child justice.
14. Academic Performance: This is considered to be the most obvious factor in a retention decision. But it can also be quite misleading because academic performance is more likely to be a symptom rather than a cause. If a child's poor academic performance is determined to be the result of wrong grade placement, retention can help. But, if other factors are causing poor performance, then the problems need to be identified and remediated.

Of children retained, who is it most or least likely to benefit? Grant (1997) gave some recommendations to help parents and educators make the right choice. Learners who *may not* benefit from retention include the following: Low-ability students, lazy/unmotivated students, emotionally disturbed students, bored students, transient and high absentee students, *streetwise* students, students suffering from multiple, complex problems, students who have low self-esteem, students who have unsupportive parents, and students who are already one year older than their oldest classmates. He also included those students who would *most likely* benefit from retention. These students were the following: Chronologically young children, late bloomers, average and high-ability children, children who have supportive parents, and small children. Grant recommends having parents fill out a retention checklist. This helps inform their child's teacher of problems they might otherwise know about.

**Alternatives to Retention**

Once the decision to retain has finally been made, teachers and parents still have work to do. They first need to look at their options and select the one that best meets the child's needs. According to Grant (1997) the options from which they might choose, include the following:

1. Another Year With The Same Teacher and Curriculum-This approach works well when the child has a positive relationship with the teacher. It also eliminates the time used getting to know one another at the start of the year.
2. Moving Sideways In the Same Grade- This is when the child spends another year in the same grade but with a different teacher.

3. Repeating a Grade at a Different School- When a child needs an entirely different school setting, then a new school arrangement is advised. However in small communities this is not always feasible.

4. A Year of Home Schooling- This is much more popular and acceptable now. Home schooling is sometimes a good idea, providing there are supportive parents who are able to meet the child's educational needs.

5. An Additional Year In a Multi-age Program- This is sometimes considered an alternative to retention. This approach is good for children who want to stay with the same teacher and some of their classmates.

But what does one do when a teacher has decided retention is not in the child's best interest? "Given the limited likelihood of success of retention, educators should consider alternative interventions with a stronger record of success" (Hagborg, et al., 1991, p.315). These alternatives include remedial instruction, peer tutoring, multi-age classroom, cooperative learning, mastery learning, summer school, teachers from two successive grades working cooperatively, junior first or transitional first-grade, readiness programs, and before and after school programs (Bergin, et al., 1996; Smith & Shepard, 1987, 1988; Schultz, 1989; Reynolds, 1992; Sandoval & Fitzgerald, 1985; Johnson et al., 1990; Grant, 1997).

It is important to remember that "retained children and those at risk of retention may not benefit equally from alternative programs" (Reynolds, 1992, p.117). However, studies (Reynolds, 1992, Smith & Shepard, 1988, Schultz, 1989) on retention have found the alternatives to be more successful than retention. Coupled with these alternatives being more successful than retention is the cost. Such alternatives are found to be less costly to the school district (Smith & Shepard, 1987; Grant, 1997).
CHAPTER III
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this review of the literature was to examine retention to see if it was in the best interest of the child. The review looks at the advantages, disadvantages, and alternatives of retention. Finally, the review investigates the factors that need to be examined when considering a child for retention. The review of the literature addresses seven questions to accomplish this purpose:

1. Why is retention used in schools?
2. What are the problems involved in using retention?
3. How can retention help students succeed in school?
4. What aspects in education have effected retention?
5. What factors increase the chance of a child being a candidate for retention?
6. What factors must be evaluated when considering a child for retention?
7. What are the alternatives to retention?

The review of the literature begins by looking at why retention is used in schools. It says that "Grade retention is one of the education's most common educational intervention for the unprepared student" (Hagborg & Masella, 1991, p.310). In our schools today, approximately 6% of all school-age children are retained each year. One prevalent reason for using retention is teachers' beliefs. Smith and Shepard (1987) found that a large number of teachers believe that children's development is a physiological unfolding in a series of stages, governed by an internal timetable. Because of this teachers felt that a child should not be pushed, therefore they cut back on instruction and provided another year for the child to develop. Teachers that held these beliefs were labeled as nativists.
On the other end of the spectrum were the *remediationists*. Teachers with this label believed that all children legally eligible for school are teachable. These teachers worked individually with the child and provided tutoring and/or remedial work.

In spite of the differing beliefs of teachers the review shows that all teachers supported retention of some children. This was because teachers cannot compare the possible outcomes of both promoting and retaining a given child, therefore they focus on the gains made by the children who are retained.

Curriculum was also given for a reason why schools use retention. The curriculum constrains the teacher's flexibility to make appropriate content related decisions Teachers knew that not every child could meet grade level requirements. So to appease public concern about low standards, they retained the child rather than promote him/her. This enables schools to uphold their high standards.

Developing a school policy that prohibits retention was also looked at in the review of the literature. This change alone will unlikely alter teachers' beliefs about their students or their classroom interactions.

The problems involved in retention was the second question examined. The review shows several negative aspects of retention. One problem is academic achievement. The negative effect of retention on achievement was greater than the negative effect on emotional adjustment and self-concept. Evidence does not support that retention would help sustain higher levels of academic achievement. Students that are struggling need a more engaging curriculum, not a repeat of the previous year. Retention was not found to be an effective academic intervention.

Other negative aspects of retention were self-concept, attitude and personal adjustment of the student. Students who are retained, no matter how sensitively teachers and parents handle the retention still believe that they are being retained because of some failure on their part. Although the effect of retention can be traumatic, the review shows
that early grade retention was less traumatic and was less likely to permanently label a child than retention in grades 4-7.

Benefits of retention were also examined in the review. A significant benefit is that children perceive themselves to be more competent than promoted children. Studies show that children with good self-concepts do better in school. A second major benefit of retention is academic achievement. Students who were retained, when compared with their peers, made better academic progress. Other benefits were retention prevents failure in the next higher grade, provides time for the child to mature, and moves a child from the bottom of the class to the top of the class.

There was a growing trend in the 1980's to use test results as a screening instrument to retain children. Therefore strategies were developed to give educators the data they needed to lessen the negative consequences, such as retention and social promotion. Postponing testing until children were better able to cope, limiting testing to samples of young children and developing alternative methods of assessment, such as teacher observation, portfolios, and student performance in the classroom were some of these strategies.

Money was also cited as an issue that has affected retention. Retaining a child costs the U.S. school districts nearly $10 billion a year. But educators find it difficult to redirect savings from students not retained to more effective instructional programs.

Assessment and money are two critical aspects that have affected retention. However to have any hope for improvement, schools will need to make major changes. Some changes cited include support and opportunities for teachers to work together in addressing the problems of the hard-to-reach children, and curriculum reforms designed to involve children in meaningful learning tasks that provide both the context and the purpose for acquiring basic skills.

Question five discussed factors that increase a child's chance of being a candidate for retention. Some of the more significant factors include:
1. Level of maturity- this was found to be more of a factor for teachers in the primary grades.

2. Age of the child-studies do not support the belief that younger children experience more academic or social difficulties. Also, many of these children need to be in school in order to receive the needed stimulation they are not receiving at home.

3. Gender-boys are more likely to be retained than girls. The justification for this is that boys mature slower than girls.

4. Academic achievement-some teachers retain low-ability students, assuming they can benefit from the repetition of material, whereas others promote low-ability students despite poor performance.

There are several factors to evaluate when considering a child for retention. Jim Grant, author of *Retention and Its Prevention*, gives a list of fourteen. They include: chronological age; gender; physical size and ability; social, emotional, and behavioral problems; prematurity and low birth weight; exposure to environmental hazards; learning disabilities; attendance; linguistic differences; poverty; grade levels and alternative programs; child's attitude; parental attitudes; and academic performance. Along with this list of factors to consider, Grant discusses who *may or may not* benefit from retention. He finds that learners who have low ability, are lazy/unmotivated, emotionally disturbed, bored, suffer from multiple, complex problems, have low self-esteem, unsupportive parents, or are a year older than their oldest classmates will not benefit from retention. On the other end of the spectrum, students who are chronologically young, are late bloomers, are average or high-ability children, have supportive parents, or small in stature will benefit from retention.

The last section of the review looks at the alternatives to retention. It tells about options available to teachers who retain a child. These options were:

1. Another year with the same teacher and curriculum.

2. Moving sideways in the same grade.
3. Repeating a grade at a different school.
4. A year of home schooling.
5. An additional year in a multi-age program.

This section also discusses alternatives to consider when retention is not in the best interest of the child. The following alternatives were found to be more successful than retention, although all children did not benefit equally from these programs. They included remedial instruction, peer tutoring, multi-age classroom, cooperative learning, mastery learning, summer school, teachers from two successive grades working cooperatively, junior first or transitional first-grade, readiness programs, and before and after school programs.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn from this study:

1. Despite the negative evidence presented in the literature review, retention is still the best answer for some children.
2. The benefits of retention can outweigh the problems if retention is handled correctly.
3. Until there are more longitudinal studies done, some teachers will continue to believe that retention is the best for some children.
4. Because of the difficulty of doing studies comparing outcomes of both promoting and retaining a given child, teachers will continue to focus on the retained child.
5. Alternatives to retention should be seriously considered. Though all children do not benefit equally from these alternatives, they are less costly and can be very effective.

Recommendations

After reviewing the literature and looking back at my nineteen years of teaching, I recommend that if a child has at least average or above average ability, is less mature or
independent than his/her peers, is young for their grade, and has positive and supportive parents, then retention should be strongly considered if the child is struggling. Also, I recommend that additional studies concerning retention be conducted to understand this topic better.
REFERENCES


