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Practice what you preach : a look at retention research and classroom practice

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Practice what you preach : a look at retention research and classroom practice

Abstract

This literature review examines the subject of grade level retention. A comprehensive overview of the history, trends, and current practices involving retention will provide the background to the research base. Looking at the common reasons students are retained and the short and long-term effects of retention decisions will help answer the question of whether retention research guides school practice. Alternative solutions that can be implemented in lieu of grade level retention or social promotion practices will also be addressed. The majority of grade level retention and social promotion researchers found the practices of retention and social promotion to be unfavorable. Yet there were some researchers that provided a reasonable doubt that those practices may benefit some students.

PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH: A LOOK AT RETENTION RESEARCH AND
CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Each spring, teachers of young children are faced with the possibility that some students are not ready to move on to the next grade. The parents of these children are informed of this through report cards, student assistance team meetings, and parent teacher conferences. The deficit may be academic, social, or both. The reality of making decisions about retention is life changing for the child and his/her family (Juel & Leavell, 1988). Many factors should go into the decision process and the choice to retain or not to retain students should not be taken lightly (Westbury, 1994).

Rationale

The question arises regarding how teachers, administrators, and parents go about making the decision to retain or promote a child. Grade level retention, especially in the lower elementary, is used in the U.S. schools as a way to give children time to mature and gain academic skills needed to meet the rising standards and demands of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Tanner & Combs, 1993; Shepard & Smith, 1989; West, Meek, & Hurst, n.d.).

The topic of grade level retention is a very serious subject for those that it affects, and with the NCLB Act pressuring schools to increase performance and reduce below grade level readers, retention is one of the solutions used by schools (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005).

The gap between what a majority of research claims regarding the lack of efficacy of retention and what is being practiced in U.S. schools gives cause for further

examination (Tanner & Combs, 1993; Tanner & Galis, 1997). While much of the retention research claims that retaining struggling students is an ineffective practice (Akridge, 1937; Fager & Richen, 1999; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Jackson, 1975; Kline, 1933; Otto & Melby, 1935; Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Saunders, 1941; Shepard & Smith, 1988, 1989; Tanner & Combs; Tanner & Galis), schools continue to use retention as a solution to low achieving students (U.S. Department of Education 1999, 2006; Tanner & Combs; Tanner & Galis). Yet, there is some research that shows potential benefits to grade level retention, which may confuse educators during the retention and social promotion process (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003). Educators cannot afford to continue to retain in an effort to better meet student's needs without research supporting the practice of retention (Owings & Magliaro). Owings and Magliaro further argue that if a body of research exists on the subject of retention, then this research should guide practice.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the trends and current practices involving retention. The paper will also present the possible risks associated with retention and the long-term effects (both positive and negative) when retaining or socially promoting a student. Additionally, the paper will also address alternative solutions that can be implemented in lieu of retention or social promotion practices.

It is important to note that not all states or districts have retention policies in place (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). In a survey by the Department of Education (1999), 86 percent of school districts reported having a written policy on retention and

student promotion. When a district does not have a policy to follow, the decision to retain is in the hands of the administration, parents, and/or teachers.

One concern from the literature is the belief that a single policy can be put into place to predict which students would benefit from retention (Westbury, 1994). The conclusion that retention will or will not benefit students is not clear. Westbury explains that without clear indicators to predict which students would ultimately benefit from retention it would be better to “establish practices to benefit the majority of students” (p. 249). It is the intention of this paper to seek the practices that would benefit the majority of low achieving students facing possible retention.

Terminology

For the purposes of this paper, the following terms are defined based upon their use within the related research and review of the literature.

Grade retention: The practice of not promoting students to the next grade level upon completion of the school year (Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland & Sroufe, 1997).

Looping: The process of moving a teacher with a class of students for two or more years of schooling (Burke, 1997).

Overage: Children who are a year or more older than what is typical for the grade in which they are placed (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003).

Red-shirting: A term used to describe the unready child. It is the practice of delaying entry to kindergarten in order to provide time to mature and grow before facing the demands of school programs (Carlton & Winsler, 1999).

Retained: A term synonymous with failing. Having to repeat the same grade over again (Frey, 2005).

Social promotion: The practice of sending students to the next grade level despite not meeting district grade-level expectations (Frey, 2005).

Research Questions

The literature review is driven by the overarching question: Does retention research guide school practices? The questions further guiding this review are:

- What is the history of retention and have the trends changed?
- Why are schools retaining students?
- What are the short-term and long-term effects of retention?
- What are the alternatives to retention and social promotion?

CHAPTER II

Methodology

This review of literature is to evaluate how prior research has influenced current retention trends, and to inform parents and educators about grade level retention and the impact it has on student achievement. It is important that parents and educators work together to make an educated decision regarding the choice to retain or promote each individual child (Jimerson, Woehr, & Kaufman, 2004). Because each individual presents different challenges and strengths, it is important to note that a single answer cannot be applied to all students (Westbury, 1994).

Method to Locate Sources

This literature review was developed using an electronic search of databases. The educational databases searched were the following: Academic Search Elite (EBSCO), Education Full Text (Wilson), Emerald, ERIC (EBSCO), Expanded Academic ASAP (Thomson Gale), JSTOR (Journal Storage Project), Library Literature and Information Science Full Text, PsycInfo (Silverplatter), and UNISTAR. A combination of keywords were used in order to ensure a wide range of studies were included. The searches were based upon the following keywords and combinations of these words: *retention, promotion, grade-level, history, rates, trends, short-term effects, long-term effects, policies, practices, overage, non-promotion, held-back, red-shirting, entrance age, same-age comparison, same grade comparison, achievement, delayed kindergarten entry, drop-out, self-esteem, homogenous grouping, motivation, and Census Bureau*. The initial search for retention in the above educational databases yielded 103 records. Of the 103 records, only full-text articles were included.

Method to Select Sources

The sources were selected based upon the following criteria. The author and reputable sources were the main considerations in the selection process. Authors that were referenced in other articles and books as well as multiple pieces the author may have contributed to the subject of retention were included. In examining the sources, educational journals that were referred by cohort professors and professionals in the education field were sought out. Some of the highly recommended sources were the following journals: *The Reading Teacher*, *Communiqué*, *Review of Educational Research*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Reading Research Quarterly*, and *Journal of Learning Disabilities*.

While there were no guidelines in place for specific dates of publications, articles were sought that were both “pre” and “post” No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in order to determine trends in response to the higher performance demands of NCLB. Additionally, articles from 1930-1950 were chosen to show the history of retention and the similarities between retention research in the 1930s and in the current day.

Procedures for Analyzing Sources

The literature review sources were analyzed for inclusion using the following procedures. First, the sources needed to be directly related to the purpose of looking at past and current trends and grade level retention practices. The sources also needed to address one or more of the following: short and long-term effects on student achievement, self-esteem, motivation, maturity, and dropout rates. It was vital that sources provided actual data, and not just commentary and other reviews. Finally, sources were sought out that not only followed the trends of retention but also challenged them.

While reading the articles and books, the procedure for analyzing the source was focused on the following questions.

- Does this source help answer any of the research questions? Does it provide a new or previous perspective?
- Will this information help guide school retention practices?

CHAPTER III

Literature Review

This review will address the overarching question of whether retention research guides school practice. First, the review will show the history and trends of retention and social promotion in the United States. Additionally, past and current retention rates along with grade level retention spikes, will be addressed. In an attempt to understand why retention is still considered as a solution for low achieving students, the review will look at the most common reasons students are retained and the effects of those decisions. Finally, the review of literature will address the alternatives to retention and promotion.

History and Trends

Owings and Kaplan (2001) report that grouping students into grades did not become common until around the 1860s. They explained that in order for students to be promoted, they had to master specific content in order to go on to the next grade. By the 1900s, it was becoming more difficult for students to reach the mastery levels and gain promotion. By 1904, it was reported that 81.7 % of students who entered school between 1900 and 1904 dropped out before the ninth grade (Owings & Kaplan).

Grade level retention has been part of American education long enough to have at least five published reports dated before 1930 (Jackson, 1975). “The problem of pupil failure or non-promotion in school has been a crucial issue in school administration throughout the history of elementary education in the United States” (Otto & Melby, 1935, p. 588). Dating back to the 1930s, researchers began reporting negative effects of retention on achievement (Kline, 1933; Otto & Melby). The main negative effects reported were that retained students had a higher tendency to dropout than that of non-

retained peers and nonpromoted students made smaller academic gains than that of their promoted peers (Akridge, 1937; Alexander, et al., 2003; Jackson; Kline; Otto & Melby; Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Saunders, 1941). Another concern was the threat of lowering standards in an effort to reduce the number of failing students (Akridge; Otto & Melby).

Otto (1951) explains that when children repeat a grade, boredom inhibits their development. "Repetition of grades has no specific educational value for children" (p. 128). He contends that a child's educational growth is greatest when there is forward progress through the grades. Another issue with retention that Otto reports is in the makeup of the class, which can affect the instruction within the class.

Classroom instruction tends to be pitched at or below the median of the class. If the class is overloaded with repeaters, the average level of instruction tends to be lower than if the class has only its normal share of slow growers. (p. 128)

Otto also found that retained students made smaller gains than that of their promoted peers.

The pendulum switched during the 1960s and 1970s when social promotion was encouraged (Frey, 2005; Jackson, 1975; Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Petracco, 1999; Roderick, 1994). The belief was that by keeping failing students with their same aged peers, this social promotion would benefit their psychological and social welfare and they would catch up with their peers in maturity and in motivation (Owings & Kaplan). Petracco attributed the switch in retention procedures as a predictable swing each decade, "growing or declining based on the educational and

political climate of the time” (n.p.). By the 1960s retention rates were approximately 10 percent and during the 1970s social promotion was common (Petracco). While the retention rates declined, the gap in the academic levels between students in the same grade increased (Petracco).

By the beginning of the 1980s, the retention pendulum began to swing back. This was in part due to the reduced public confidence in schools and poor student achievement as reported by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (Griffiths, Stout, & Forsyth, 1983). The report placed the nation *at risk* and school systems began implementing stricter policies on promotion and retention (Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Petracco, 1999; Roderick, 1994).

In the 1990s, perhaps the largest sustained effort by a school district to end social promotion was instituted by the Chicago Public Schools (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005; Russo, 2005). The policy required all third, sixth, and eighth grade public school students to attend summer school and possibly be retained if they did not meet test-score cutoffs on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (Russo). In 1998 alone, there were 15,000 students retained in Chicago’s elementary schools (Russo). In an effort to end social promotion, California, Florida, Texas, Oregon, North Carolina, and New York began implementing the same strict policies similar to that instituted by Chicago Public Schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Retention Rates and Trends

Since no retention data are formally gathered at the national level, grade retention rates are merely estimates based upon surveys of children’s age in relation to their grade

(Alexander, et al., 2003; Frey, 2005). Thus, when data for retention is presented, the estimate is based upon the number of overage students in a given grade level.

The Census Bureau monitors children's grade levels in relation to their age. These surveys are used to determine the approximate retention rates in the United States (Alexander, et al., 2003; Owings & Kaplan, 2001). If the survey shows students are overage for their grade, then those students are counted as retained. A valid reason for having overage students in a particular grade level could be caused by children who met the cut off date (the last day a child can turn 5 or 6) for school entry but whose parents delay entry for a year, sometimes called *red-shirting* (Alexander, et al.; Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Frey, 2005). These late starters would be counted in the Census Bureau as being overage, but it is not because they were retained in kindergarten. According to Alexander and colleagues, two-thirds of first grade overage enrollments can be accounted for with delayed kindergarten entry. The other one third may be truly retained students.

Alexander et al. (2003) also found that retention trends spike throughout a school career. The trend begins with a major spike in first grade, with another increase in middle school (6th-8th), and in ninth grade with peaks as high as found in first grade. It seems that these are the transition grades where students find the most challenges adjusting to the social and academic changes. It is in these grade levels that students are retained most frequently (Alexander et al.).

According to recent Census Bureau data, the U.S. Department of Education (2006) found the following:

Between 1995 and 2004, the percentage of youth ages 16-19 who had ever been retained decreased; high school dropouts were more likely than high

school completers to have been retained in a grade at some point in their school career” (p. 62).

The census data also shows that in 1995, 16 percent of students in the U.S. were retained. Retentions dropped to 12 percent in 1999 and to 10 percent in 2004. (p. 62)

According to the Census Bureau data (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) from 1995 to 2004, a higher percentage of black, male, low income, English speaking, K-5 students, living in none or one-parent homes in the South, continue to be retained more than their counterparts. While the percentages decreased for each characteristic category from 1995 to 2004, the characteristics remained unchanged.

Why do schools retain?

Many educators are retaining children as an early intervention (Tanner & Galis, 1997). Tanner and Galis also report a lack of student achievement as the number one reason for retention. In a national study of 880 elementary school teachers, it was found there were five common reasons given for retention: an extra year to learn, self-esteem, homogeneous grouping, motivation, and maturity (Tanner & Galis). In the following sections, each of the five reasons will be explored further for its potential short and long-term effects as well as what the literature is showing in each of these areas.

An extra year to learn. One of the most common reasons teachers retain students is, “retention gives a student an extra year to master material that was unlearned the first time in that grade” (Tanner & Galis, 1997, p. 108). Advocates of retention contend that social promotion puts an unprepared child into a position to fail (Fager & Richen, 1999).

Those advocates further contend that holding a child back will improve the child's ability to meet the academic demands of that grade level (Fager & Richen).

Opponents of retention stand behind the research that retention does not help children academically or socially (Fager & Richen, 1999; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Shepard & Smith, 1989). They contend that the short-term effects of retention cloud the long-term effects and that children who are retained actually learn less than if they would have been promoted.

In a national survey of teachers, it was Tanner and Combs (1993) who found that 58.8 percent of first and fifth grade teachers believed retention prepares a student for the following grade and allows underachieving students time to catch up (Tanner & Combs, as cited in Fager and Richen, 1999). Retaining for grade preparation is done mainly due to insufficient alternatives for students who do not meet the minimum competencies in main academic areas (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Yet, according to Darling-Hammond (1998),

Students who are held back actually do worse in the long run than comparable students who are promoted, in part because they do not receive better or more appropriate teaching when they are retained, and in part because they give up on themselves as learners. (p. 18)

Hong and Raudenbush (2005) found that children who are retained are at risk of stagnant cognitive development through their retained year. They further contend that instead of forcing children to start over in a grade level, they should be exposed to more

meaningful, challenging, and intellectual content. “In general, at-risk children promoted to the next grade level seemed to have a better chance of growth acceleration” (Hong & Raudenbush, p. 220).

Jimerson, et al. (1997) compared low-achieving, retained students with low-achieving promoted students. In this study, it was found that the two groups did not differ significantly on two measures of intellectual functioning at the age of 64 months and again at the end of third grade. Jimerson et al. further reported that while retained students do show lower cognitive ability than *normal* aged peers, they did not differ from the group of equally low-achieving promoted peers.

From a developmental perspective, Shepard and Smith (1988) found that unreasonable demands placed at the kindergarten level are to blame for the high number of kindergarten retentions. They argue that retention and second year programs (such as transitional rooms) have the same intentions as individualized instruction and do not benefit the second year student. In 1987, Shepard and Smith studied 40 extra-year (retained or transitional room) children with 40 children in a control group from a school that did not practice kindergarten retention. When the students finished first grade, the extra-year group showed a one-month gain in reading. Further, there were no apparent differences in mathematics, and teacher ratings of behavior, attention, or maturity. Ultimately, Shepard and Smith (1988) found an extra year to grow did not boost achievement.

From a social constructivist view (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005) it is believed that all children bring some level of knowledge and abilities into the classroom. If all children

bring something of value into the room, then educators should provide instruction to meet the varied knowledge and abilities of the children in their classrooms.

The short and long-term improvements of retained students are questionable. Schwager, Mitchell, Mitchell, and Hecht (1992) found that anecdotal evidence of short-term gains is what legitimizes the practice of retention. When retention is used as a response to low achievement, the belief is that something is being done to help the child (Schwager, et al.). Schwager et al. explains this further by defining the level of instruction and support given to a low-achieving or at-risk child, "In some school districts, remediation efforts before retention are considered part of normal classroom processes for students. In others, retention itself is considered to be a sufficient intervention" (p. 424).

Jackson (1975) questions the justification of retaining a student who is deemed academically not ready to move to the next grade. While he acknowledges that when a student is having academic difficulties in one grade those difficulties will likely continue to the next grade, he questions how retention will reduce these difficulties. He states,

Very seldom is there any substantial special help provided to repeating pupils; instead, they are recycled through a program that was inappropriate for them the first time and that may be equally inappropriate and of less interest to them the second time. (p. 614-615)

Jackson concluded that there is no evidence to indicate retention is more beneficial than promotion for students who are having academic difficulties.

The results from the first two years of Chicago's strict retention policy efforts were mixed. Roderick, Bryk, Jacob, Easton, and Allensworth (1999) looked at the "most

controversial aspect of the promotional policy: the decision to retain students” (p. 166).

The results were far from hopeful.

Only one-fourth of retained eight graders and one-third of retained third and sixth graders in 1997 made *normal* [italics added] progress during the following school year, meaning that they stayed in the school system, were again subject to the policy, and passed the test cutoff the next May.

(Roderick et al., 1999, p. 166)

This tough approach to end social promotion has left many questions still unanswered (Roderick et al., 1999). Roderick et al. found that the retained students had very poor gains during the additional school year and summer of instruction. It was also found that students who were retained once and later met the cutoff, remained at-risk for future retention. This indicated that the test score increases were not followed by improved performance the next year (Roderick et al.).

Westbury (1994) compared the achievement and ability of retained elementary students with that of continuously promoted, but similar matched (gender, school entry achievement, grade, and programming) elementary students. In her study, Westbury concluded that grade retention was ineffective for improving achievement and ability. The study found “neither positive academic gains nor negative academic losses” (p.247) between the compared groups. Westbury explained her findings further by explaining the two outcome measures from the study – ability and achievement. Westbury compared achievement, which “measures stored knowledge”, with ability which “measures the potential for learning” (p. 247). She deduced that while an extra year of schooling may

increase achievement in the short-term, the extra year would not increase the “fixed or innate capacity for learning” (p. 247) for long-term lasting effects.

Self Esteem. A second common reason given by teachers for retention was that “students who are retained do so well academically in the retained year that their self-esteem is enhanced” (Tanner & Galis, 1997, p. 108). Alexander and colleagues (2003) proposed the following:

Parents, classmates, and teachers all know who repeaters are. Teachers and parents may not be as blunt in communicating their feels as are classmates, but if parents doubt repeaters abilities or if teachers resent having them in their classes, children likely sense such feelings. (p. 166)

Alexander et al. (2003) then studied the possible effects of retention by gathering information from children about their attitudes towards school, about themselves, and how well they do academically over a period of eight years. They found that there was little reason to think repeaters suffered any emotional distress from retention. In fact, Alexander et al. claimed those children’s attitudes about themselves and their academic ability improved after retention and sustained throughout their elementary years. The only negative reports Alexander et al. found showed up in the eighth grade, and they felt the middle school transition was a better explanation of the negative indicators.

An opposing view of how retention affects self-esteem came from Jimerson et al. (1997). These researchers found that while no academic differences between retained and low-promoted groups were evident, there were significant emotional health differences between the two. The retained students were “characterized as being significantly less confident, less self-assured, and less engaging than their academically similar peers”

(Jimerson et al., p. 20). Teachers reported the retained students as less popular, and less socially competent than their counterparts. Jimerson et al. continued to conclude that short and long-term effects following retention, found retained students showed lower rankings on emotional health and self-esteem ratings, and exhibited behavior problems by sixth grade. Equally, low-achieving promoted students remained stable in the same areas.

Another concern regarding self-esteem is that of student perception. Roderick (1994) found that students who are retained tend to be older than their new classmates, which may cause them to feel different and become discouraged. Roderick found this perception especially important during the adolescence years when the views of their peers are forming, and they are developing their own sense of identity.

Also citing negative self-esteem, Frymier (1997) compared 20,959 students from 85 communities who had been retained with children who had not been retained. The students were compared on 23 risk factors involving personal pain, academic failure, socioeconomic situations, instability of the family, and family tragedy. Frymier found that children who had been retained were twice as likely to be more at-risk on each of the 23 items being compared than those who had not been retained. Under the risk item *self-esteem*, 22 percent of retained students in fourth, seventh, and tenth grade reported low self-esteem as opposed to 9 percent of students who had not been retained in those same grades (Frymier).

Homogeneous grouping. A third reason given by teachers for retention was “retention helps to create homogeneous classes by keeping students with the same ability and achievement together in the same grade” (Tanner & Galis, 1997, p. 108). Taking lower functioning children and creating a more homogeneous classroom (students of

similar ability and achievement), not only harms the less able children but also does nothing to help the able and gifted learners (Bredekamp & Shepard, 1990).

Bredekamp and Shepard (1990) explain that when homogenous grouping takes place, a new average becomes the new normal. With a diverse group of students, there are high, low, and average students. When the low students are taken out of the equation, it allows teachers to increase the academic demand for the class, which creates a new low. When teachers challenge students beyond normal grade-level expectations, inappropriate academic demands are placed on students. This results in an escalating curriculum, which is one of the main reasons for retention (Bredekamp & Shepard; Shepard & Smith, 1988).

Shepard and Smith (1988) continue to compare the homogeneous grouping of students due to retention in reference to the trends of *tracking* and *transitional rooms*. These trends tend to increase a watered down curriculum and overpopulate a classroom with low socioeconomic students (Shepard & Smith). The homogenous grouping that the transitional room creates limits the academic possibilities students would otherwise be exposed to in a traditional classroom (Shepard & Smith). Additionally, teachers who appear to have lower expectations for homogeneous groups spend too much time covering much less material (Carlton & Winsler, 1999).

Otto (1951) also explains the downfalls of homogeneous grouping in terms of instruction. He claims that when a group is homogeneous in ability, specifically of low-ability learners, the level of instruction is lower than if a more diverse group was present. Otto further argues that,

It is illogical to expect a group of children of the same age to show highly similar “statures” in any of a group of attributes, including previous attainments of development during a given year in the academic areas. Any kind of a comparative working system applied to the whole class is simply incongruous and inconsistent with the facts about human nature. (Otto, p. 128)

Motivation. The fourth reason given by teachers for retention is “the threat of retention motivates students to labor more diligently at their school work” (Tanner & Galis, 1997, p. 108). Darling-Hammond (1998) reported, “Children fear retention so much that they cite it No. 3 on their list of anxieties following only the fear of blindness and death of a parent” (p. 18).

Jacob and Stone (2005) reported that teachers and principals found retention policies to be a positive influence on student motivation. Sixty-seven percent of teachers and 72 percent of principals agreed or strongly agreed that the threat of retention motivated students to work harder in school (Jacob & Stone). In addition, Jacob and Stone also reported positive effects on parental involvement. Almost 90 percent of principals and 75 percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that retention policies have made parents more concerned about their child’s progress. They further reported an increase in positive instructional efforts. Eighty-seven percent of principals and more than 80 percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the retention policy had boosted the school’s instructional efforts (Jacob & Stone).

Otto and Melby (1935) claimed that every child needed to know that failing was an option. In their study conducted from 1933-1934, Otto and Melby set out to discover

whether or not the threat of failure was a motivator for students to work harder. Otto and Melby ultimately found that children who did not have the fear of failure (were told they would all be promoted to the next grade) did as well on achievement tests as children who were constantly reminded that they had to do well or suffer possible retention.

Maturity. The fifth common reason given by teachers for retention is “retention gives the immature student a year to grow and mature thus insuring success in learning” (Tanner & Galis, 1997, p. 108).

Educator’s definitions of immaturity are not clear (Carstens, 1985). Based upon the Gesellian theory of development (which openly recommends retention), it proclaims, “physical maturation is a prerequisite for the mastery of academic tasks in the classroom” (Carstens, p. 55). The theory provides an explanation for the concept of overplacement as rationale for retention,

Should assessment of a child’s physical, social, mental, and chronological age indicate that the child behaves more like a child a year younger than the child’s chronological age peers, retention is recommended as an adjustment for this overplacement in grade level. These children are not expected to *catch up* [italics added] to chronological age peers; their rate of development is expected to continue. (Carstens, p. 55-56)

Jimerson et al. (1997) agrees the main reason children continue to be retained, especially in the younger grades, is due to immaturity. Yet, Jimerson and his colleagues contend that the initial levels of immaturity continued despite the intervention of another year for them to mature.

When to Retain

In a guide written to help districts evaluate their retention policies and practices, Anderson (1998) reports on a study where different types of children actually benefited from retention. Those children were said to have mastery of some academic skills, had good self-concepts and social skills, had involved parents who were supportive of retention, had grade level difficulty that was due mainly to lack of exposure, and ultimately were provided a varied curriculum and method of instruction during the retained year. Those characteristics are different from the typical retained student who has parents with low educational expectations and are less committed to parenting, showed lower achievements in all assessments and received low ratings from their teachers on self-concepts and social skills, and high on emotional and behavioral problems (Bracey, 2006; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). The difference between the characteristics of the typically retained student and the type of child Anderson claims would benefit is unparallel.

Alternatives to Retention.

Owings and Kaplan (2001) maintain, “retention and social promotion are expensive failures” (p. 7) and conclude that alternatives must be tried in an effort to reduce retention rates. Many researchers support this claim (Aidman, 1997/1998; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Dawson & Rafoth, 1991; Fager & Richen, 1999; Frey, 2005; Jimerson et al., 2004; Otto, 1951; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Pipho, 1999; Ruzzo, 1999; Shepard & Smith, 1989; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Wagner, 1999). “To truly embrace the idea that *all* children can learn to high standards requires that every student has the chance to learn the content and the best possible opportunity to achieve to high

standards” (U.S. Department of Education, p. 5). The following strategies have been suggested as approaches to offer students an opportunity to achieve and to reduce retention and social promotion: intensify learning, expand learning options, seek skilled teachers, provide professional development, assess students effectively, and intervene early (U.S. Department of Education).

Intensify learning. In an effort to ensure students are held accountable for their academic performance, the U.S. Department of Education (1999) proposes that schools intensify learning by taking advantage of research-based practices. Some of these practices include the following: flexible student grouping, looping, cooperative learning, tutoring, and reducing class size. The Department of Education further contends that if highly qualified teachers put these practices into place, they will provide all children with a rich curriculum and momentous learning experiences that will increase academic achievement. These practices are further defined in the in the following approaches as suggested by the Department of Education.

Expand learning options. Creating a learning environment that reflects the diverse population of students in schools requires educators to acknowledge that not all children learn in the same way, or in the same time (Otto, 1951). Otto further claims,

There is very little that schools can do about altering any child’s evolving growth pattern. If normal resources and good teaching prevail, the slow grower as well as the fast grower will partake of the curriculum ... at the rate at which the individual ...can utilize it. (p. 128)

Darling-Hammond (1998) offers additional ways to expand learning that involve reorganizing the class structure. Multiage classes (children of different ages are grouped

in a single classroom) and looping (the process of moving a teacher with a class of students for two or more years of schooling) are two expanded learning options that can provide children the flexibility in learning styles, pace of learning, and teacher relationships that are needed to grow at their own pace (Darling-Hammond). It has been found that “children in multi-age classrooms show academic progress over time that equals or exceeds that of their peers in same-age classrooms” (p. 20).

The practice of looping offers many academic and social benefits for students (Burke, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1998). One benefit of looping is that teachers are essentially more effective, have fewer behavior problems, and higher achievement when they know their students well, understand the way they learn, and allow the students time to achieve their goals (Darling-Hammond). A social benefit of looping or multi-age classrooms is reducing the apprehension students have at the beginning of the school year (Burke; Darling-Hammond). Burke and Darling-Hammond both agree that the community and bond between student- teacher, and parents-teacher grows through the practices of looping and multi-age classrooms. A potential downfall of these practices is the personality conflicts that can occur between the student and teacher. Burke reported that the occurrences of this conflict are similar to the traditional classroom and should not be a reason to discourage the practice.

Another way to reorganize the class structure and expand learning options is to reduce class sizes in the primary grades. The Department of Education (1999) reported that classes fewer than 20 children can improve academic achievement and is extremely beneficial for low performing students. However, the Department of Education cautioned that small class size alone does not guarantee student success; small class size needs to be

combined with professional development and other intervention strategies to be successful.

Highly Skilled Teachers. Darling-Hammond (1998) defines the highly-skilled teacher as, “teachers who know how to use a wide range of successful teaching strategies adapted to diverse learners” (p. 19) and she further contends that highly skilled teachers are “the most important alternative to grade retention” (p. 19). Darling-Hammond backs that statement by referring to a report by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future:

Teacher expertise has been found to be the most significant determination of student success, accounting for as much as 40 percent of the difference in overall student performance. Students who have highly effective teachers three years in a row score as much as 50 percentile points higher on achievement tests than those who have ineffective teachers for three years in a row. (p. 19)

Darling-Hammond (1998) does maintain that in order for skillful teaching to take place, districts must provide teachers with the opportunities to learn. She further recommends that teachers be provided with ample time to plan together, learn strategies, observe good practices, and participate in ongoing professional development.

Professional Development. In a study, Ferguson (1991) reported, “every additional dollar spent on more highly qualified teachers netted greater increases in student achievement than did less instructionally focused use of school resources” (Ferguson, as cited in Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 8).

Furthermore, Darling-Hammond (1997) details the documentation of the National Assessment of Educational Progress regarding the correlations between reading achievement and the qualifications and training of teachers. It was reported that students of teachers who were highly qualified do better on reading assessments. In addition, a correlation was also noted between high levels of professional development and the usage of approaches to reading and writing that are associated with stronger achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

Shepard and Smith (1989) also contend that schools need to be committed to adapting the curriculum and provide a wide range of instructional practices to meet students' needs. They argue that schools "with appropriate curriculum and collegial understandings among teachers and principals make retention unnecessary" (p. 4).

Assess students effectively. The role that assessment plays in instruction is key in meeting students' academic needs. The Department of Education (1999) addressed the issue of testing and assessment in regard to retention and promotion. In an effort to raise accountability and put an end to social promotion,

No single assessment tool is sensitive enough to capture all the relevant information related to identifying what the needs of particular students are, how those needs are best addressed, and when difficulties have been adequately overcome. State or district assessment need to be used as one of a variety of indicators. Consideration must also be given to the role of teacher judgment and the inventory of assessments teachers and tutors use every day to monitor the continual progress of students. (p. 19)

Darling-Hammond (1998) further explores the idea of effective assessment, “Ensuring that students get the specific help they need requires rich information about what they know and can do as well as how they learn” (p. 21). Standardized tests give very little information about the learning style and abilities of students (Darling-Hammond). In order to get the detailed information needed in order to teach more effectively, educators need to use and/or develop assessments that are performance based (such as portfolios, research projects, samples of work, oral presentations) as well as teacher observations (Darling-Hammond).

Intervene early. Owings and Kaplan (2001) identified interventions that would most likely have the greatest impact on school success. The programs are categorized by birth to age three, preschool, and kindergarten and elementary programs (Owings & Kaplan).

From birth to age three, placing children in developmentally appropriate environments will provide them with the necessary cognitive stimulation (Owings & Kaplan, 2001). The U.S. Department of Education (1999) reports that all states have some type of birth to age three programs. Some programs begin in the hospital with opportunities for follow-up home visits and access to support services to assist with parenting responsibilities (Department of Education). Another federally funded program designed to provide early intervention is Head Start. The Department of Education claims that funding for Head Start has been expanded to serve birth to age three and has even reached out to women who are pregnant.

High-quality early childhood and preschool programs nurture the growth, development, and learning of young children (Department of Education, 1999). When

young children attend preschool, their developmental progress can be monitored and early interventions can be put into place if needed (U.S. Department of Education). Recommendations by the Department of Education for preschool programs are to include instruction “designed to stimulate verbal interaction, enrich children’s vocabulary, provide practice with sounds, develop knowledge of print, and instill motivation for early reading” (p. 30).

Interventions during kindergarten and early elementary grades include programs such as Reading First, Title I, Reading Recovery, and Success for All. Reading First provides funding to qualifying schools to make resources available to assist struggling readers (Shanahan, 2005). The program is concentrated mainly in kindergarten through grade three and the focus is on five elements of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Those elements were identified by the National Reading Panel as key to reading success (Shanahan). Also federally funded is Title I. Reading First is technically part of Title I but has different eligibility requirements. Both are meant to provide early reading intervention (Shanahan).

Reading Recovery is an early-intervention program designed for the lowest scoring first graders in the areas of reading and writing (Ruzzo, 1999). The program teaches young, struggling readers strategies that will help them become better readers (Ruzzo). Those who qualify for Reading Recovery attend daily 30-minute lessons for a maximum of 20 weeks. Ruzzo reported that the training process for teachers is often too expensive for districts to implement. The cost for training one teacher is \$17,000, and is a yearlong training process. Despite the high cost and extensive training required to

implement the program, Ruzzo claims that Reading Recovery “reduces the number of costly special education and remediation programs” (p. 32).

Success for All is a program that emphasizes individualized tutoring for improving reading skills in the early elementary grades (Wagner, 1999). In Success for All, tutors work one-on-one with struggling readers in 20-minute sessions. The tutors are certified teachers, with experience working with disadvantaged students who reinforce the classroom curriculum, but ultimately, the one-on-one attention makes the program successful (Wagner, 1999).

The U.S. Department of Education (1999) further contends that in order for the recommended strategies to be successful, there must be school accountability. Schools must have the leadership, resources, and community support to move forward with a plan to prevent academic failure (U.S. Department of Education). Implementing the strategies alone will not guarantee academic success.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusions and Recommendations

Grade retention, flunking, being held back, and red-shirting all refer to students repeating their current grade level because they did not achieve a desired grade level expectation. Social promotion sends those same children to the next grade level while acknowledging the children did not achieve the desired grade level expectation. Is either practice supported by research? In an attempt to answer this question, the literature review sought out the history, trends, and current practices involving retention. The review also looked at the effects of choosing retention as a solution to struggling students. Furthermore, alternatives to the practices of retention and social promotion were examined closely.

Conclusion

The review of literature found some opposing views on the topic of retention, which made it difficult to derive one single answer or solution. While the majority of grade level retention and social promotion researchers found the practices of retention and social promotion to be unfavorable, there were some researchers that provided a reasonable doubt that those practices may benefit some students. The reasonable doubt came from teacher and principal views, and a few researchers casting doubt on other researchers' claims. This contradicting information keeps retention and social promotion practices alive. Without clear, consistent, and reliable research stating its overwhelming negative effects, the option to retain or socially promote will continue in schools.

The review also found that students who are retained are not limited to low achievement. Giving extra time to learn, allowing time to grow and mature, enhancing

self-esteem, providing motivation, and creating homogeneous groups were identified as the most common reasons why teachers retain students. The theory that retention will provide students an extra year to master material unlearned the first time may seem logical, yet research shows that retained children do no better than their promoted peers in the long term. The second reason for retention, allowing time to mature, did show positive results when students were retained. However, researchers cautioned that retaining students for the purpose of maturation would only show gains in maturation. Any academic benefits had to be due to an already innate ability to learn. Furthermore, it was found that a student's immaturity continued despite the intervention of another year at the same grade level.

Retaining students in order to enhance self-esteem found conflicting results. Alexander, et al. (2003) proposed children's attitudes improved after retention and was sustained throughout the elementary years. Yet, the majority of the research cited negative self-esteem and an increase in maladaptive behaviors following retention.

While teachers, parents, and principals believe the threat of retention motivates students to do well (Jacob & Stone, 2005), other research found retention to be a significant source of anxiety (Darling-Hammond, 1988; Otto & Melby, 1935). Furthermore, in a study by Otto and Melby, retention was not a motivator for students to work harder.

Lastly, using retention to create a more homogenous group of students disrupts the much-needed diversity in a classroom. Researchers' claim that homogeneous groups tend to create a watered down or escalated curriculum, an overpopulation of low socioeconomic students, and low teacher expectations (Bredenkamp and Shepard, 1990;

Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Otto, 1951; Shepard & Smith, 1988). A watered down curriculum occurs when the classroom is full of retained students and otherwise low academically skilled children. The curriculum is geared towards their current performance level, not expected grade level benchmark. Teacher expectations are most likely too low. An escalated curriculum occurs when low achieving students are retained and what remains in the promoted group are the higher achieving students. The teacher then focuses instruction to the higher performing students, despite the grade level expectations. Teacher expectations may possibly be too high for an average student, which creates a new low in the classroom. Ultimately, there is a division of abilities and performance no matter how high or low the students are in the specific grade.

Homogeneous grouping skews that natural division of students.

Where does this leave the struggling student? Socially promoted? While the majority of research does claim retention to be an ineffective practice, the alternative of social promotion is also not encouraged. What options does this leave the educator and student?

Throughout the literature, researchers maintained that additional alternatives must be tried in an effort to reduce retention rates. The main alternatives suggested were the following: intensify learning, expand learning options, seek skilled teachers, provide professional development, assess effectively, and intervene early. These alternatives all had something in common. The most successful alternative would be research-based practices taught by highly skilled teachers, supported by committed schools, with early intervention programs in place. No single alternative or strategy is able to guarantee student success; it is the combination of all alternatives that provides the best outcome.

However, it was noted that highly skilled teachers are “the most important alternative” (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 19) and in order for research-based programs and interventions to be successful, a highly skilled teacher needs to implement them within a school environment that supports such programs.

Limitations

Tracking the past and current trends of retention is limited by the lack of formal national retention data. Researchers must rely on Census Bureau surveys of children’s age in relation to their grade level. With numerous factors besides retention and social promotion accounting for these overage students, the retention data is merely an estimate.

Another limitation is the ability to prove that the suggested alternatives will actually be successful. What determines success? What is the desired outcome? Is it to have everyone meet all grade level expectations? Is this a reasonable goal?

Recommendations

Further research needs to examine the areas where reasonable doubt still exists. Can struggling students catch up? How is self-esteem affected by retention and social promotion? Can academic success be predicted by kindergarten readiness (age or maturity)? In addition to the reasonable doubt cast within the main reasons educators retain, the literature addressed some benefits of retention limited to certain characteristics of children. The difference between those who benefit from retention and those who do not benefit were academic skill, self-concept, social skills, family support system, and opportunity. In essence, a student of average ability, with good self-esteem and social skills, a strong family support system, with the opportunity for research based teaching during the retained year have the most to benefit from a year of retention. Yet, most

students who are retained are of low ability, with poor self-esteem, weak social skills, and limited family support.

The Department of Education (1999) proposed five alternatives to retention: intensify learning, expand learning options, seek skilled teachers, provide professional development, assess students effectively, and intervene early. The proposed alternatives lead to another area for further study, to find ways to provide those alternatives to all schools, not just the most needy. If those alternatives are truly ways to reduce grade level retention, equal access should be granted to all schools.

More concisely, in order for research to guide school practice, all schools should have some type of intervention program (ex: Title I, Chapter I, Reading Recovery, Success for All, Reading First, Head Start) available to them. Not all struggling students come from low socioeconomic areas, which means not all schools qualify for funding. The programs should not be dependent on socioeconomic status (specifically the number of families on Free and Reduced Lunch) yet be based upon student need.

In addition, if highly skilled teachers are truly, “the most important alternative” (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 19) to retention, the Department of Education needs to look at the training being provided to preservice teachers. Teachers should be coming out of their preparation schools with the knowledge and ability to teach the wide range of students they will ultimately be teaching. Specifically at the lower elementary level, teachers are trained to teach all subject areas. In order to be considered “highly skilled” those teachers should be able to teach all subject areas to students requiring remedial support all the way to those requiring an academic challenge. Equal access to highly skilled teachers is a struggle for teacher shortage areas. Some incentives (student loan

forgiveness, sign-on bonus, home buyer rates) are in place to entice teachers to teach in shortage areas, but more needs to be done to ensure all schools receive highly skilled teachers. Ultimately, if all teachers were highly skilled, then finding a highly skilled teacher would not be contingent on salaries and special incentives.

Realistically, preservice teachers cannot be taught everything they will need to know over their entire teaching career. District wide professional development opportunities need to be in place in order to maintain high levels of instruction. Professional development needs to focus on research-based initiatives proven to benefit students.

Schools should also have policies in place to assist struggling learners. Those policies should align with the interventions proposed by the Department of Education. In order for such policies to be in place, all educators and administrators should be knowledgeable with the current grade level retention and social promotion research before writing the policy. The policies should support the struggling student at the earliest stage possible. A solid policy would not only state if grade level retention is supported, but also list the specific initiatives (alternatives) that should be applied to the struggling student. This type of policy would give the student, parent, teacher, and administrator a guide for what options the child has and what steps need to be followed in order to intervene early, intensify instruction, and expand learning options. Student assistance teams, a group of highly skilled teachers and administrators, would monitor struggling students on a regular basis to ensure that the proper alternatives are being provided to the struggling student. The policy would better guide the decision making process.

In conclusion, educators need to be better informed regarding what the research has found regarding grade level retention. The information needs to be shared at the district level and with parents through retention policies. Furthermore, in order for the alternative strategies and interventions to be successfully implemented, more professional development needs to be provided so that all schools have highly skilled educators, are teaching research-based programs, and have the support of early intervention programs.

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