Retention in the new millennium

Pat Davison

University of Northern Iowa
Retention in the new millennium

Abstract
This study examined the effects of retention in regards to children's academic success. The features of retention, research and literature associated with retention, and the benefits and disadvantages were discussed. Guidelines were presented for teachers, along with the appropriate strategies to use in grade level retention. In addition, conclusions were drawn from literature and recommendations for the future facilitation of retention policies.
Retention in the New Millennium

A Graduate Research Paper
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts in Early Childhood Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Pat Davison
July 15, 2002
This research paper by: Pat Davison
Titled: Retention in the New Millennium

Has been approved as meeting the research requirement for
the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

Charles R. May
Director of Research Paper
July 8, 2002
Date Approved

Jill M. Uhlenberg
Graduate Faculty Reader
July 8, 2002
Date Approved

Rick Traw
Head, Department of
Curriculum and Instruction
July 15, 2002
Date Approved
Abstract

This study examined the effects of retention in regards to children’s academic success. The features of retention, research and literature associated with retention, and the benefits and disadvantages were discussed. Guidelines were presented for teachers, along with the appropriate strategies to use in grade level retention. In addition, conclusions were drawn from literature and recommendations for the future facilitation of retention policies.
Acknowledgements

A special note of gratitude is extended to my University of Northern Iowa Early Childhood Advisor, Dr. Charles May. Your positive and encouraging attitude and professional guidance was sincerely appreciated. Dr. Uhlenberg, UNI, Faculty Reader, thank you for your skills and most valuable suggestions in this research paper's ongoing stages. Ellen Neuhaus, UNI ROD Library's Distance Education Coordinator, your patience and technology information was excellent and utilized often.

A heartfelt thank you goes to my MAE Early Childhood, Cadre: Nancy Carper, Deb Metcalf, Rachel Morris, Toranna Wermes, and Vicki Zweibohmer. Your support and humor and understanding were an inspiration and delight always! Our study group time will be treasured and remembered fondly.

To my family, the love and support given these last few years was immensely appreciated. Scott and Hilary, you were so giving and caring during the late night studies. Your computer training was a valuable learning experience. Thank you for your devotion, respect and dedication to our family, during this educational journey.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION ....................................</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Study ........................................</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study ...........................................</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need of the Study ...............................................</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations .......................................................</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions ......................................................</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE ................................</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features of Retention ..........................................</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of Retention ..........................................</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantages of Retention ......................................</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 GUIDELINES FOR RETENTION ..........................</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Guidelines ...........................................</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention candidates should be individually addressed ......</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students need to view retention as a positive ................</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will be placed in a remedial program ................</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will be given new instructional information .......</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ..........</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary ............................................................</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions and Recommendations ................................</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES ..........................................................</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Research on grade retention has a long history. It is of particular importance today when strict grade-to-grade promotion standards are being imposed as part of education reform (Laberee, 1984).

When graded schools began to replace the one room schoolhouse in the mid-19th century, students were promoted on merit. This was based on an inflexible academic standard for each grade level. Approximately one half of all children were retained at some time during their first eight years of schooling (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983).

The purpose of education changed from educating the elite few to serving all students. Holding students in school and out of the work force was especially important during the Depression years (Lenna & Mitchell, 1955). In the late 1930s, the changing attitudes toward the role of school and the psychology of the individual prompted a shift toward an approach called social promotion (Anderson, 1960).
Although social promotion is often thought to be a phenomenon of the liberal 1960s, a broader purview reveals it to be an educational practice of the twentieth century (Shepard & Smith, 1989). A common practice was promoting all children to the next grade with their age peers, and those who needed it would then receive remedial academic assistance. Social scientists suggested retention might be damaging to the children's social and emotional development. Negative consequences of so many misfitting overage students were voiced as early 1909 (Ayers, 1909).

In the following few decades, retention policies and philosophies changed. This change was based on decisions of social maturity, student performance, classroom behavior, and teacher-parent demands (Plummer, 1984).

Educational reforms of the 1970s brought the famous malpractice case concerning Peter W. He was a high school graduate who sued the San Francisco Unified School District because of his inability to read. The case of Peter W. is remembered by educators as a symbol of their potential liability in promoting students without basic skills (Laberee, 1984). In the late 1970s, according to the U.S. Education Commission, nineteen states enacted legislation requiring that students pass a minimum academic competency test (1985). In 1978, the National Academy of Education
(NAE) panel warned that high school graduation tests were unworkable because of measurement limitations and because of the harmful effects on individuals with accumulated educational deficits (Willis/Dumont, 2001). NAE approved a set of critical competency points at selected lower grade levels for diagnosing individual student weaknesses and for pinpointing remediation needs. These competency points would be comparable to the educational standards and benchmarks of today's education system.

Improving education in the 1980s commanded popular attention because it linked economic crisis and the future U.S. competitiveness in the world markets. Employers complained that the high school diploma could no longer be trusted as a certificate of basic competence. Apparently, in 1983, according to the National Commission on Excellence in Education, many graduates cannot read or compute (Willis/Dumont, 2001).

The commonsense view of the 1990s and before was that students should repeat a grade to repair deficient skills. This action implies a particular conception of education, in which students would spend extra time learning the skills missed previously. It is presumed that fixed subject matter must be mastered in a certain grade level and that uniform progress can be standardized in all
subject areas; for example, all fourth graders are ready for fourth grade reading, math, local history, and in other subject areas (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

There are no national data on the number of children retained in grade each year or socially promoted. There is, however, a widely shared perception that the number of retentions has increased substantially as schools, especially in large cities, have installed achievement-based promotion policies. The best retention data comes from the U.S. Census Bureau using third grade students' ages of enrollment data. This data showed overage students were classified as retained students. This data also revealed that between the 1950s through 1985, retention was at an all time low in the early 1970s (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

A climb in the number of retentions began in the late 1970s, most likely because of competency testing. The process of retaining children was heavily practiced as early as the 1950s and is becoming prevalent again (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Repeating kindergarten is a very recent phenomenon. An extra year to mature or to acquire readiness skills is seen as a way to prevent subsequent stress and failure (Shepard & Smith, 1989). The retention decision comes from
parents, teachers and administration of school districts. This decision is very subjective and data are limited to help with this decision. The Wayne Light’s Retention Scale is an option which school districts may choose in order to participate in the retention decision.

Wayne Light’s Retention Scale ([LRS]; 1999) is an instrument used to score retention needs for parents and educators. It is a powerful tool that assists school professionals in making sensitive and often difficult decisions about promoting or retaining a child. Students between the ages of 6-18 years old can complete this assessment scale within 10-15 minutes. The revised edition of the late 1990s contains one of the most comprehensive literature reviews of grade retention ever compiled. The LRS is an economical tool; it is informative, it is easily administered, and it addresses 19 specific areas of concern. The following areas are included: child’s age and family dynamics, parent’s school participation, child’s emotional maturity, life experiences, level of intelligence, and a list of no retention factors. This reliable instrument has been a standard for thousands of districts throughout North America in making decisions based on the child’s situation and needs, to provide legal justification for retention decisions, to defend competency
standards of school staff, and to establish district-wide retention policies.

The following survey information and statistic data compiled some interesting retention information. The National Household Education Survey completed in November, 1977, a statistical analysis report, revealed five percent of the kindergarten students in the United States were retained in 1993 and six percent in 1995 (Willis/Dumont, 2001).

National statistics have not been collected on grade retention. Lorrie Shepard, professor of education at the University of Colorado, estimated that 5 to 7 percent of public school children, about 2 children in every classroom of 30, are retained in the U.S. annually. The 6 percent average annual rate, if calculated cumulatively, means that by ninth grade, approximately one half of all students in the U.S. have flunked at least one grade. Shepard and Smith stated that current grade failure rates are as high as they were in the 19th century, before social promotion and retention (1989). To understand this topic better, the following study was conducted.
Purpose of Study

This study will examine the literature pertaining to social promotion and grade retention, and its effects on kindergarten students. Also, guidelines will be developed for retention in kindergarten. The following questions are addressed to achieve this purpose.

1. What are the features of retention?
2. What are the benefits of retention?
3. What are the disadvantages of retention?
4. What are the guidelines of retention for educators and parents, and how do these guidelines affect decisions about grade placement?

Need for Study

Recent research revealed an academic trend in our kindergarten classrooms (Elkind, 1989). Because of this change from developmental practice towards academic driven kindergarten curriculum, retention issues need to be examined and investigated.

Limitations

Many needed studies are not available concerning retention/promotion, and access to other sources is limited. Literature availability provides general backgrounds and current information; many elements could
still be pursued. Secondary sources and dated materials or time gaps in subject matter are another obstacle.

**Definitions**

In the review of literature for this study, the term retention could refer to memory retention of information or grade repetition retention. Social promotion could explain social interaction of students or social promotion to the next grade. For this reason, clarification of the following terms will be defined:

**Retention**: The practice of having a student repeat a grade when academic criteria were not met (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

**Social Promotion**: The practice of promoting a student to the next grade level. This student may be given remedial assistance because academic criteria were not met (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

**Developmentally Appropriate**: The practice of implementing curriculum designed to meet students’ needs at their developmental stages (Elkind, 1989).

**Remedial Program**: A classroom designed for students who need additional corrective assistance in academic/social experiences. The program keeps data on individual student progress (Plummer, 1984).
**Academic Curriculum:** A course of study designed by a school district with lessons developed for a specific grade level. District and state mandates guide the decisions of academic excellence (Bredekamp, 1992).

**Competency Points:** A set of academic standards or guidelines that evaluates students' grade level competencies. These points may be known as grade level benchmarks (Bredekamp, 1992).

**No Retention Factor:** A classification of retention factors that are not calculated with retention value when using the Wayne Light Retention Scale (Light, 1999).
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Features of Retention

Students who are socially immature, academically challenged, and who are lacking school experiences are prime candidates for retention. Parents and teachers see an individual difference in children who are retention candidates usually two months into the school year or before kindergarten entrance (Laberee, 1984).

Retention also is more likely to occur among boys, rather than girls, and is more than twice as prevalent among African American students as among white students, according to both the 1997 Child Health Survey and the 1998 National Household Education Survey (as cited in Willis/Dumont 2001). A district's retention policies may differ between school buildings in the same school district or within the state (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

The testing tools given to students who may be retained range from: parent-teacher surveys, academic-standardized tests, and district/state rating scales. A parent-teacher request may also identify the retention candidate. A key factor in determining who should be retained comes from the type of program in which the
student is currently enrolled and how the curriculum is taught. Individual learning accommodations and modifications can assist in retention decisions.

There are so many reasons for districts to retain students, the Department of Education has issued a guidebook to assist and give direction, balance and equity among school districts. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has a handout with more retention data for professionals to utilize and share with families. The cost factor and program availability in creating alternative classes are the reality of student retention policies (Lawton, 1998).

An early grade shift of a movement away from rigid retention policies appears strongest in the early grades. Some states are backing away from controversial retention policies based on rigid test scores (Shepard & Smith, 1989). In Kentucky, the secretary of education, Jack D. Foster, was quoted as saying, "The development of kids at that age group of k-3 is very rapid and uneven, and their state feels that it was inappropriate to retain kids between the 1st and 2nd grade" (Lawton, 1999, 32).

There are many areas of uncertainty between social promotion and retention. The spectrum does not indicate the middle areas of retention; it cannot measure the
differences between social promotion and retention accurately (Karweit, 1990). The collective educational wisdom on the promotion-retention issue seems to cycle back and forth every few years, for there's a pendulum swing that is always going on, observed Nancy Karweit, scientist in educational research at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore (1990). In the 1970s, social promotion was in vogue. During the 1980s, the educational standards movement made retention more appealing. By the 1990s, school districts were revising policies to encourage social promotion. Now school failure guidelines provide prevention checkpoints, which may take the social promotion option out of the educational arena. A political movement for tests is on many campaign and political parties' educational agendas. Education officials need to consider policies on grade retention (Karweit, 1990). The options for student retention vary from: summer school programs, transition classes, extra instruction, before-or-after school programs and pullout programs (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

President Clinton's State of the Union Address in 1997 proposed a 10-point plan, which included voluntary national tests in reading and math to be created by the U.S. Department of Education. The get-tough stance of holding students back if they do not show they can do grade-level
work has become part of the ongoing movement for tougher academic standards for students nationwide. It reflects the thinking of a growing number of politicians, as well as many state and local education officials (Lawton, 1998).

Benefits of Retention

The public, educators and administrators believe that in the long run, retention is best (Dolan, 1982). In addition, teachers believe that retention at the kindergarten grade level is the safest. To assist the student at an early age is better remediation. Parents believe an extra year gives the kindergarten student time to mature. An academic boost for achievement assists a student’s growth and success. Self-confidence is improved with more familiar information (House, 1984).

Studies by Duhe, Green, Taylor, Frank and Dunlap revealed that retained kindergarten students showed a twenty-eight percent gain in reading between 1980-1985 (House, 1984). “A gift of time provided by developmental placement appears to be the only variable to account for the significant gains” (Bredekamp, 1992, 15).

Glass, McGraw, and Smith’s research concluded that repeat kindergarten students have a one month gain academically over where they would have been, had they been promoted (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Studies from seven out of nine masters theses in the 1980s had a positive focus on academic achievement as an outcome measure for retained
students (House, 1984).

Dolan also stated that a retention plan should be in place for kindergarten students before they repeat the school year (1982). A remediation plan for academic achievement is a must. Examples of this would be summer school, tutor assistance, extra instructional time, transitional classrooms, and before or after class work. Lower class sizes are beneficial during the retention year. Developmental instructional pacing of students at an individual rate works best. Training for teachers and parents on how to discuss retention with students is a positive step (Bredekamp, 1992). Retained students do better the year they repeat, which is a positive effect, but do not continue upward growth academically over time (George, 1993). The benefits of retention according to the literature, revealed that the negative or disadvantages of retention outweigh the positive attributes.

Disadvantages of Retention

Literature and data suggested the many negative effects of retention for the child. The negative attitudes toward self remain and continue to grow in subsequent years. The child retained can become an angry child with a stigma (House, 1991). Studies contend that children view retention as a punishment and experience emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness when not promoted. The National
Association of School Psychologists (NASP) had similar findings of the child's view of retention. The child's low self-esteem, disliking school and getting into trouble were the areas discussed by Willis/Dumont (2001).

Grissam and Shepard's study revealed the high school dropout rate of retained students is significantly higher. If students are retained twice, the likelihood that they will drop out is a virtual certainty. Retention has been viewed as the answer to the problem of what to do with students unprepared for the academic and social demands of the next grade (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

False teacher perspectives about retentions may occur. Some teachers believe the retained student will be at the top of the class automatically; less frustrated and not stigmatized (House, 1991). Research revealed that holding a student back without changing instructional strategies is ineffective. Some teachers believe that students who have been retained are in the category of limited potential. These teachers tend to have low expectations for the retained students in their classroom.

Teachers' beliefs about retention were inconsistent and were varied. Colleagues were ridiculed if students were improperly prepared or placed (Dumont/Willis, 2001). Study of retention scores may have been askew. Remedial programs
for retained students can be a good alternative, but the curriculum may be watered down and educational standards may be less challenging in some remedial programs (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Current progress cannot be compared to what students might have done. Other options can work better than retention. Student ability range needs to be accounted for. Structure of the school and rigid grade level tests do not take individual learning into the whole learner picture (Doyle, 1991).

Neither social promotion nor holding kids back without help are successful strategies for improving learning. Without regard to effort or achievement or lack of extra assistance, programs send a message to students that little is expected of them, that they have little worth, and that they do not warrant the time and effort it would take to help them to be successful in school (Feldman, 1999).

Decades of research indicate that retention, if not accompanied by effective interventions, fails to provide a long-term benefit for low performing students. The practices of retention were being questioned in the research literature as early as the 1940s, and hundreds of independent studies and research reviews since then have indicated negative findings (Dumont/Willis, 2001).
Identifying early those students who need additional help and requiring remedial instruction, more work with parents, more summer school are some important beginning interventions for educators to implement into their school systems. More school districts are planning to begin requiring students to prove proficiency in schoolwork before graduating to the next grade level, or from school. An estimated, 150,000 students are being held back in elementary and secondary schools (Feldman, 1999). Given a fresh push from the White House, an intense debate on school accountability is moving into our classrooms. In 1999, Feldman quoted the American Federation of Teachers, who took the position that retention is not the one-size fits all approach, but it does beat the social promotion option. The AFT believes social promotion should not be an option in education when academic accountability is being measured (Willis/Dumont, 2001). Grant (1999) stated that “Retention is good for some and poisonous for others” (i).
CHAPTER 3
GUIDELINES FOR FACILITATING RETENTION

Developing Guidelines

Teachers, parents and district views have changed in recent years pertaining to retention. They will be the positive force to help change guidelines of retention. They will focus on the needs and rights of the child and the academic success to which the child is entitled.

1) Retention candidates need to be individually addressed.

Students considered for repeating a grade level require an individual basis and needs assessment. Each student has his/her own levels of development (Bredekamp, 1992). This would be similar to a student in special education having an Individual Education Plan (IEP). For example, reading goals may be the first academic area to focus on. The school staff needs to decide the amount of measurable growth that is acceptable for the student’s grade level and set up a planned program to achieve the goal with school and home teamwork.

2) Students need to view retention as a positive intervention.

If students view retention as a punishment, their repeat year could have a negative effect (Willis/Dumont, 2001). The retention candidate would have opportunities to
advance to his or her original grade level when grade expectations are met. School guidance teams would intervene to discuss individual student self-esteem issues or to support the student with any concerns, which may arise as a result of grade repetition. Teachers, school staff, and parents would monitor the student’s individual needs to make the transition as positive and inviting as possible.

3) Students will be placed in a remedial program.

Retention students are often placed in a repeat program with no recommendations concerning an instructional program to strengthen skills. Students need to be given opportunities to learn from another program besides the repeat classroom. A Title I, reading program may be an option. Resource classrooms, or after school or before school programs, are ideal for retention students to soar and learn (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

4) Students will be given new instructional information.

Repeating grade levels should be an opportunity to learn the needed instructional information in a new format. Hopefully the students and their parents are given choices to keep the same teacher or experience a new teacher's style. The same teacher can give the student self-assurance and consistency and balance of expectations. A
new teacher would have a different style of teaching and presenting instructional materials. This could give a student the feeling of a new start and new challenges.
CHAPTER 4
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary
The intent of this study was to explore the effects of retention on students and to present guidelines for retention. This paper addressed four questions to accomplish this purpose:

1. What are the features of retention?

An important principle of retention is that all students have the capacity to acquire knowledge and skills, but because of immaturity or unreadiness for school the retention candidate developmentally is not able to succeed. Social challenges can interfere or distract these students from staying on task, or learning instructional goals at the same rate as their peers (Laberee, 1984).

These students usually lack experiences that would guide them academically to succeed. Information may be too difficult at this time because of maturation inadequacies.

Boys tend to be retained more than girls. African American students are retained more often than white students (Hauser, 1998). District policies and standards differ from school to school. Each school has its own regulations concerning retention models, rating scales, testing tools to assess a retention candidate (Lawton, 1999).
2. What are the benefits of retention?

Guidebooks have been developed by the Department of Education and the National Association of School Psychologist (NASP) as resources for making retention decisions. A strong decision from parents, educators, school staff and program enrollment determine the need for a student to be retained (Light, 1991). Wayne Light’s Retention Scale is one tool that assists some schools and families in making the best decision for their retention candidates.

Retention in the early grades is best. Kindergarten and first grade are among the safest times to retain students (House, 1984).

It is important to have retention plan in place for students, teachers and school staff before implementing this educational endeavor (Dolan, 1982). To not have a plan can be a cause for inappropriate decision-making.

Remediation goals may include a variety of options for the student. Students may be enrolled in a pullout program such as Title I Reading Program, resource room, tutoring assistance, or extra instructional time in a before-or after school program (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Lower class size, developmental instruction is most beneficial, according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s Susan Bredekamp (1992). The assessment tools to determine retention candidates and remediation goals are two components that can give
retention a positive outlook and a good start for all involved in the process.

3. What are the disadvantages of retention?

The negative outcomes still are evident for retention candidates. These range from peer interaction or teacher interpretations, to students perceiving retention as a punishment (Price, 1994). Many researchers believe students who are retained do not show enough growth to justify the negative impact on the individual student (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

4. How do guidelines affect decisions concerning student placement?

Student effort and achievement must be considered when determining the best choice for a student placement (Feldman, 1999). In 1999, Jim Grant stated simply, "Retention is good for some and poisonous for others" (i).

This study determined a set of guidelines is needed to give retention candidates a good start in their new program. First of all, a retention student will need to be individually addressed regarding their own needs and skills. The second guideline is students will be given positive views of retention (Willis/Dumont, 2001). The new program is not a punishment. It will be monitored by teacher, school staff, and parents. The third guideline is
remedial program placement will be a part of the retention component. Students need opportunities to expand their learning strategies (Shepard & Smith, 1989). The last guideline relates to the presentation of instructional materials; information will be in a familiar, yet an engaging new format.

Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from this study:
1. Retention is an option for school districts to utilize with opportunities for better learning.
2. Teachers, school staff, students and family members need to work as a team to make retention a workable solution.
3. Social Promotion is less accepted than retention due to accountability standards.
4. Retention policies differ from school to school.
5. Retention data varies and is limited.

Recommendations

Based on a review of literature, the following recommendations are suggested:
1. Retention should be done at an early age, such as kindergarten or first grade.
2. Early interventions and learning strategies must be well organized in retention implementation.
3. An assessment scale of retention is helpful in making the retention decision.

4. Student needs must be individually met.

5. Teachers must utilize many learning strategies to promote student growth in achievement areas.
References


