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## Classroom environment and teachers' beliefs: The effects of retention and transition room instruction on student reading achievement

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CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT AND TEACHERS' BELIEFS:  
THE EFFECTS OF RETENTION AND TRANSITION ROOM INSTRUCTION  
ON STUDENT READING ACHIEVEMENT

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

Carla Rae Coleman  
University of Northern Iowa  
September 1993

#### ABSTRACT

Coleman, Carla Rae. M.A.E., University of Northern Iowa, August 1992. CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT AND TEACHERS BELIEFS: THE EFFECTS OF RETENTION AND TRANSITION ROOM INSTRUCTION ON STUDENT READING ACHIEVEMENT.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate gains in reading achievement made by students retained in first grade or placed in a pre-first transition room. In addition, the study examined the instructional environment of the retained and transition room students. There were four major questions which guided the study: (a) Do students in rural schools retained in first grade or placed in a pre-first grade transition room demonstrate improved reading performance during their final year in first grade when compared to their reading performance during the transition or retained year as measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills? (b) If rural first grade students or transition room students experience growth in reading achievement in their final first grade year, is the achieved level maintained over the next two years? (c) Do rural students placed in a transition room or retained in first grade experience similar growth in reading achievement as students with similar first grade Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores but who were not retained? (d) What is the instructional environment for transition and retained students in rural schools?

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills reading subtest was used to measure the students reading achievement. A t test was used to compare the individual students scores to determine reading growth. A teacher belief interview was used to elicit the teachers' beliefs and practices. The interviews were qualitatively analyzed using a constant comparative method to develop categories.

The retained and transition room students showed significant reading improvement on the ITBS reading subtest during their final year of first grade. However, they did not maintain the growth shown during their final first grade year over the next two year. There was no significant difference in reading achievement between the retained or transition room students and the socially promoted students on their third grade ITBS reading subtests.

All of the teachers interviewed believed that retention was beneficial. Maturity and the age of the student was stated as the things most often considered when making a decision about retaining a student.

Reading instruction included skills and phonics taught from the basal, writing activities related to reading or other curriculum areas, and choice of reading books.

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This Study by: Carla Rae Coleman

Entitled: CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT AND TEACHERS' BELIEFS: THE  
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has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the  
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of compulsory education, there has been extensive debate focused on the most effective method or program to teach students reading, writing, and arithmetic. These skills in these areas have been considered to be the basic academic skills necessary to achieve in school. The desirable outcome of education is for students to progress through a curriculum and meet expected standards within a certain time period (Rosenshine, 1981). In this context, achievement is seen as the ability to succeed or complete an academic task to the level required by the person giving the task. "Being successful involves acquiring new skills, becoming fluent in their performance, generalizing performance across situations, and adapting acquired behaviors to novel but related tasks" (Lentz & Shapiro, 1986, p. 347).

The ability to read is extremely important in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. These new reading skills and knowledge acquired are often measured and evaluated. Reading achievement has been assessed in a variety of ways. Moore (1983) presented an historical overview of the measures used to assess reading achievement.

Oral examinations were the means of assessment from colonial times until the middle of the nineteenth century. These examinations consisted of students memorizing and reciting passages without any regard for reading comprehension. Then in the mid-1800s, written examinations were used in place of the traditional oral examination. This method was preferred because it emphasized students' understanding of a passage which was actually comprehended, rather than just memorized. Yet, educators still had one main concern with the use of written exams to measure reading achievement: they could be interpreted differently by different educators. In response to this criticism, standardized tests were developed in the early 1890s. These standardized tests contained identical items, were given under identical conditions to avoid bias, and provided criteria for marking and comparing students' scores.

Standardized testing is still the predominant means of measuring student reading achievement in the United States (Linn, 1986; Moore, 1983; Routman, 1988). Administrators and teachers often use standardized tests to measure student achievement, evaluate school programs, and place students in special programs. Currently, more than 30 states require school systems to test students before they graduate from high school, before they are promoted from one grade to another or both (Thompson, 1979). This movement toward

stricter student promotional standards has developed because of declining achievement scores on standardized test received by students (Labaree, 1984). As the concern for stricter promotion standards grows, the number of students retained or placed in transition programs has also continued to grow (Holmes, 1983; Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983). The assumption is that retention or spending an extra year in a transition room will provide students with the time needed to develop the appropriate skills to achieve at a grade level standard (Gredler, 1984; Sandoval & Fitzgerald, 1985).

"Historically, grade retention has been in use almost since the beginning of compulsory education. Liberally applied at first, retention rates had reached as high as 52% by the early 1900s with 70% of children being over age for their grade" (Walker, 1984, p. 1). Retention continued to be common practice until concerns about its adverse effects on the child's social and emotional development began to surface in the 1930s (Sandoval & Fitzgerald, 1985). This concern about the child's well-being lead to social promotion. Social promotion is the practice of promoting students to the next grade even though they have not mastered the skills at their present grade level (Rose et al., 1983). However, the practice of social promotion has become increasingly unpopular in the past few years because it is believed to be one of the causes of declining achievement scores

(Lehr, 1982; Shepard & Smith, 1989). This concern, that social promotion is not effective, has led to an increase in the number of students retained each year (Labaree, 1984; Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Another factor affecting student performance is classroom environment (Lentz & Shapiro, 1986). Specifically, the way reading instruction is conducted within the classroom affects student achievement (Barr, 1984). Research has shown that students' academic performance is influenced by teachers' beliefs and instructional practices as well as their knowledge or ability (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986). More importantly teacher beliefs are not only observable through classroom practices (Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd, 1990), but teachers' practices can be more clearly delineated and defined through a discussion of their beliefs (Richardson et al., 1990).

#### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to evaluate gains in reading achievement made by students retained in first grade or placed in a transition room. In addition, the study examined the instructional environment for transition and retained students. The following questions were asked:

1. Do students in rural schools retained in first grade or placed in a pre-first grade transition room demonstrate improved reading performance during their final year in first

grade when compared to their reading performance during the transition or retained year as measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills?

2. If rural first grade students and transition room students experience growth in reading achievement in their final first grade year, is the achieved level maintained over the next two years?

3. Do rural students placed in a transition room or retained in first grade experience similar growth in reading achievement as students with similar ( $\pm 10$  NCE) first grade Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores but who were not retained?

4. What is the instructional environment for transition and retained students in rural schools?

#### Importance of the Study

This study is significant because the information obtained may be useful in assisting school personnel and parents of rural districts in making an informed decision about whether or not to retain students or place them in a transition room. The use of first graders for this study is also of value because retentions typically occur in lower elementary grades (Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Niklason, 1987).

This study is also important because it goes beyond test score comparisons and actually investigates what type of instruction the student received during the retained year. The study also examines the relationship between classroom

environment and reading achievement. If it is found that some teaching approaches were common to classrooms where retained students showed academic growth, the information obtained could be helpful in developing more appropriate instruction for all retained students.

#### Assumptions

1. The instructional environment of the second year in first grade can have an impact on student achievement in subsequent school years.
2. The ITBS reading test is an accurate measure of reading achievement of first grade students.
3. Answers provided by the classroom teacher to a belief interview are an accurate measure of the instructional environment.

#### Limitations of the Study

1. The study is limited to pre-first grade transition students and first grade students in five predominantly rural schools in the Midwest; therefore the results may not be generalizable to all pre-first and first grade students.
2. The study is concerned with students retained in first grade or placed in a pre-first transition room so the results may not be generalizable to students retained in other grades.



3. The belief interviews are retrospective, which may limit the teachers ability to recall information related to instructional practices.

#### Definition of Terms

The following terms are directly related to this study. These definitions are based on their use for the purpose of this study.

**Achievement:** The ability to succeed or complete a given task to the level required. Mastery of a set of specific skills and objectives, usually as a result of planned instruction or training (Cadigan, Entwisle, Alexander & Pallas, 1988).

**Belief interview:** Open-ended and specific questions designed to learn more about someone's values and practices (Richardson & Valdez, 1991).

**Instructional environment:** Intellectual, social and physical conditions within a classroom that influence the learning situation.

**Iowa Test of Basic Skills:** A standardized test used to measure student achievement in the areas of word analysis, vocabulary, reading, language, work-study, and mathematics for students in grades kindergarten to ninth grade (Hambleton, 1987).

**Retention:** The practice of requiring a student to remain in the same grade for a second year because of poor academic

performance (Jackson, 1975; Lehr, 1982). This practice includes having students repeat the same grade to aid in the development of social and emotional skills or because of parental request (Jackson, 1975; Walker, 1984).

**Rural:** A sparsely settled area centered around agricultural interests.

**Social promotion:** The practice of promoting students to the next grade with their classmates even though they have not mastered the skills at their present grade level (Rose, et al., 1983).

**Standardized achievement tests:** A test designed to provide a systematic sample of individual performance, administered according to prescribed directions, scored in conformance with definite rules, and interpreted in reference to certain normative information (Mitchell, 1987).

**Transition room:** Special classrooms developed for low achieving students diagnosed as being "at risk" of failure. Students are given special treatment, and placed back into the regular classroom setting the following year (Leinhardt, 1980). The transition room in this study was before first grade.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review examines four areas related to the effectiveness of retention and transition rooms in increasing reading achievement. In the first area, the history of retention and retention rates is discussed. This section also examines the effectiveness of retention in increasing reading achievement. The second area is concerned with the use of transition rooms for students experiencing academic difficulty. The third area focuses on the policies and standards being set by school systems that require students to meet certain levels of achievement before being promoted to the next grade. The final area addresses the classroom reading environment and its influence on achievement.

#### Retention

The current controversy surrounding the quality of American education has led educators to reconsider many educational issues. One of these issues is that of social promotion versus retention for students who are performing below grade level (Johnson, 1984). Historically, grade retention was widely practiced as early as the 16th century in British schools (Hess, 1978). With the introduction of graded classes in the United States in the early 19th century, the United States followed many of the educational

practices of the British. One of these practices was the use of retention to correct academic deficiencies. Retention was so common in the 19th century that it has been estimated that approximately one out of every two children was retained at least once during their first eight years of school (Rose et al., 1983).

The practice of retaining students to improve academic achievement continued until the early 1930s, when concerns arose regarding the effect retention could have on students' social and emotional development. Social promotion became the norm from the 1930s until the early 1960s (Sandoval & Fitzgerald, 1985). The basic philosophy of social promotion was that children's social and emotional development would be damaged less if they were passed on to the next grade. These students were then ability grouped for instruction and provided with remedial help as needed (Rose et al., 1983).

However, in the 1960s, with the decline of standardized achievement test scores, came the criticism that social promotion was the reason many students were leaving school with inadequate skills (Lehr, 1982). During the late 1970s and early 1980s many schools established minimal competencies for graduation or promotion in response to public demand for higher standards (Thompson, 1979). These competencies were established to ensure that students had adequate academic skills upon graduation. "As more and more states move toward

minimum competency testing throughout the grades, the practice of nonpromotion will increase as one consequence of students failing to meet competencies" (Sandoval & Fritzgerald, 1985, p. 164).

Educators who favor retention claim that retention remedies inadequate academic achievement and that such retention aids in the development of social and emotional skills (Jackson, 1975; Walker, 1984). Since the mid-1970s, however, the main reason for retaining students has been low academic achievement (Lehr, 1982). The rationale is that students will not benefit from instruction at the next higher grade if they have not mastered the material at the grade level just completed (Jackson, 1975).

The majority of parents and educators believe that retention in a grade level is essential in assuring student achievement (Byrnes, 1989; Byrnes & Yamamoto 1986; Shepard & Smith, 1989). However, research in the field of education has strongly disagreed with the practice of retention (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Smith & Shepard, 1987). Niklason (1987) compared academic growth of retained students with children with similar academic skills who were recommended for retention but were promoted. His results supported the majority of past studies that found retaining students did not serve the intended purpose of improving student achievement.

A summary of the results from approximately 25 studies on the effects of retention on school achievement indicates that, on the average, promoted pupils make gains of 8-12 months in a year while retained pupils make gains of only about 6 months. That is, it often takes two years for the retained child to learn what the promoted child learns in one year. Looking at individual progress, roughly 85% of promoted pupils as compared to 35% of retained pupils are found to be achieving at a normal rate. (Rose et al., 1983, p. 206)

Despite the research refuting the effectiveness of retention, many schools continue to retain students in increasingly large numbers. The rate of retentions appears to vary from state to state and school to school. Walker (1984) found that during the 1971-72 school year one fifth of elementary school males had been retained at least one year (twice the rate found for females), and that the retention average in the first grade was between 12% to 28% and that over 1 million children were retained during a typical school year. Children who were retained were more likely to be Black or of Hispanic origin, living in a family below the poverty level, coming from a homes where the head of the household had less than 12 years of education, and living in the southeastern region of the United States (House, 1989; Rose et al., 1983).

Jackson's research (1975) also revealed that there was a noticeable difference in retention rates among states. Rates of retention in Minnesota, Oregon, and Utah were particularly low; the rates in these states for minority and nonminority pupils, respectively, Minnesota retained 0.7%

minority student and 0.4% nonminority, 0.7% minority students and 0.5% nonminority students were retained in Oregon, and Utah retained 0.7% of its minority students and 0.2% of its nonminority students. In contrast, some states retained significantly higher numbers of minority students as compared to nonminority students. The District of Columbia retained 8.2% minority students as opposed to 2.4% nonminority students, Louisiana retained 7.9% to 3.6%, and Mississippi retained 9.3% to 4.8% .

In examining the research on the rate of retention by grade levels, it can be seen that retention of first graders is much more common than that of other grades (Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Niklason, 1987; Rose et al., 1993). The assumption is that early retentions will not have the same negative effects as later retentions (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Another reason given for retaining at the first grade level is that students have only been in school for 2 years, so the gap between the students present level of achievement and their current grade placement is smaller and should be easier to correct than if the students are promoted to the next higher grade and fall further behind their peers (Cadigan et al., 1988).

Dobbs and Neville (1967) conducted a study on the effects of nonpromotion on the achievement of retained first graders matched with promoted second graders. They matched

the children on race, sex, socio-economic level, type of classroom assignment, age, mental ability, and reading achievement. A test of the gains in means between the promoted and nonpromoted students indicated that both the reading and math achievement of the promoted group were significantly greater than the gains demonstrated by the nonpromoted group.

Jackson (1975) conducted a review of 44 studies on the effects of grade retention. The studies he examined were divided into three categories by study design: (a) studies comparing retained students with those of promoted students, (b) studies comparing the outcomes of retained students before and after their retention, and (c) experimental studies that compared outcomes of groups of potential retainees who were randomly assigned to repeat or be promoted. He concluded that there was no reliable body of evidence to suggest that grade retention was any more beneficial than grade promotion for students experiencing serious academic difficulties. Jackson stated, "This conclusion should not be interpreted to mean that promotion is better than retention but, rather, that the accumulated research evidence is so poor that valid inferences cannot be drawn concerning the relative benefits of these two options" (p. 627).



A meta-analysis of research on the effect of retention on achievement in reading, arithmetic, and language arts was conducted by Holmes (1983). Eight studies were selected for the meta-analysis. Each of the studies: (a) presented the results of original research of the effects of retention on the achievement of elementary pupils in the areas of reading, arithmetic, and/or language arts, (b) contained sufficient reported data to allow for the calculation or estimation of an effect size (defined as the difference between the mean of the retained group and the mean of the promoted group, divided by the standard deviation of the promoted group), and, (c) compared a group of retained pupils with a group of promoted pupils matched on achievement test scores. Three separate analyses were conducted. In the first, effect sizes were used to assess the effect of retention on reading achievement. Similarly, in the second and third analyses, effect sizes comparing arithmetic and language arts were computed.

The results of the analyses indicated that the promoted group achieved higher scores in all three academic areas. Overall 43 effect sizes were calculated in the area of reading achievement from the data obtained from seven studies. The mean of these 43 effect sizes showed that the retained pairs were scoring on the average  $-.46$  standard deviation units lower than the matched promoted pupils. Five

studies yielded data from which 44 effect sizes were calculated to measure the effect of retention on language arts achievement. The mean of these was computed at  $-.36$ , indicating that the promoted pupils outscored the retained pupils by  $.36$  standard deviation units.

Holmes (1983, p. 4) concluded,

If, as is often the reported case today, retention of pupils is accomplished with the intention of improving the academic achievement in the basic skills of these pupils, the research does not seem to support this practice. It seems that retained pupils fall behind during the year that they are retained and spend the rest of their academic careers in vain attempt to catch up.

The most common reason given for retaining students is to improve academic performance (Niklason, 1987). However, the research results indicate that retention is not effective in improving student achievement.

#### Transition Rooms

As an alternative to nonpromotion, a large number of schools have established transition rooms for young children considered unready to meet the demands of first grade (Schultz, 1989). The object of "transition" or "junior first grade" is to ease the transition from kindergarten to first grade. The hope is that by spreading the kindergarten and first-grade curriculum over three years it will provide the extra time these students need to master readiness skills (Sandoval & Fitzgerald, 1985). Another goal of the program

is that it will give children time to mature and develop the social and academic skills needed to succeed in first grade (Leinhardt, 1980). One of the main reasons given by school personnel in support of transition rooms is that these transition classrooms reduce school failure (Gredler, 1984). However, these programs appear to be no more effective in improving student performance than retention. Gredler reviewed seven studies which compared transition room children with children who had been socially promoted to first grade. He concluded that "transition room children either do not perform as well or at most are equal in achievement levels to transition room-eligible children placed in regular classrooms" (p. 469).

May and Welch (1984) conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of transition rooms. Subjects were selected based on the scores the children received on the full Gesell Developmental Test. This screening test is designed to measure the students developmental age which is then used to determine school "readiness." The philosophy is that students will not be successful in learning until they have reached a certain stage of development. The first group of students were identified as being developmentally immature on the Gesell screening test and assigned to spend three years in school before second grade. These students were coded BAY (Buy A Year). The second group were children who were also

identified as developmentally immature, but because of parent request were not placed in a transition room. These students were coded OP (Over Placed). The final group was made up of children who tested as developmentally mature. They were coded TR (Traditional).

The results of the study indicated that at the end of kindergarten there was a significant difference among all three groups on the Gesell Developmental Test. There was also a significant difference among all three groups when the test was readministered at the end of first grade.

In addition the children in the TR group scored significantly higher on the third-grade New York State Pupil Evaluation Program reading test than did the BAY group. There was no significant difference between the BAY and the OP children, or between the TR and OP children. On the Stanford Achievement Test there was a significant difference between the TR and BAY groups. But there were no significant differences between the TR and OP groups or between the OP and the BAY groups.

While the BAY children were approximately a year older than the other two groups of children at the time the test were given, they did not do as well on these measures. It appears that the extra year of school did not help the BAY children's scores on these standard measures.

Leinhardt (1980) studied the effectiveness of transition room placement in the Pittsburgh public school system. His research involved minority students, many of whom were African-American. The study compared the reading achievement of students eligible for placement in a transition room but who were integrated into regular first grade classrooms with the reading achievement of students who were placed in self-contained transition rooms. The children eligible for the transition room but placed in the regular first grade classrooms were divided into two groups. One group was taught using an individualized reading program, and the other group was taught using traditional basal materials. The third group of students in the transition room was taught using an individualized reading program.

The results of the study indicated that transition-eligible children placed in the regular first grade class taught with the individual reading program out-performed the students given traditional basal instruction. The results also indicated that these students out-performed students who were also taught with the individual reading program but who were placed in the transition rooms.

The amount of reading instruction differed greatly between the two settings. Students in transition rooms received an average of 2.5 hours a week less reading instruction than children placed in the regular class and

less reading material was covered in the transition rooms (50.4 lessons vs. 26.8 lessons).

As stated previously, one of the most common reasons given for placing students in a transition room with smaller teacher/student ratio is to reduce school failure (Gredler, 1984). However, the research results indicate that students placed in these transition rooms do not out-perform students placed in a regular first grade classroom. In fact, the opposite appears to be true (Leinhardt, 1980; May & Welch, 1984).

#### Retention Standards and Policies

Many school systems in the United States have been under increasing pressure from parents and taxpayers to set higher academic standards for students (Toch, 1984). Critics argue that one way to insure that students meet these higher standards is by requiring them to demonstrate a minimum level of competence before being promoted to the next grade (Labaree, 1984; Toch, 1984). Standardized achievement tests, norm-referenced tests, or criterion-referenced tests are typically used to determine whether or not a student has met the standards set by the school system. Concern over this criticism has led some school systems such, as New York City, Chicago, Baltimore, Milwaukee, Richmond, and the District of Columbia, to adopt more stringent standards for student achievement (Labaree, 1984).

Pinellas County Schools in Florida instituted a promotion/retention policy in the fall of 1977 (Elligett & Tocco, 1983). The policy was developed to meet four objectives. First, that students would not be promoted if they would be better served by retention. The concern was that students given a number of social promotions would continue to fall farther and farther behind academically. However, the policy also stated that no student would be retained in the same grade twice and that no student would be retained more than twice in grades one through five. Second, the district would establish a uniform criteria for promotion or retention for all the elementary and middle schools. Third, because of the stiffer promotion standards, students would be better prepared for the minimum competency test mandated for all 11th graders. Finally, the new policy was intended to assure that a high school diploma had meaning and value.

The policy implemented included a uniform standard for promotion at each grade level and provisions for overruling that standard if a students' test scores were invalid or when other factors such as age made special placement more appropriate. Minimum scores were established, ranging from 1/2 a year deficiency at grade one to 1 1/2 years at grade five.

Prior to the implementation of the new policy in 1978, 4% of all elementary students were retained. In 1978, retentions rose to 12%. During the next 2 years the retention rate dropped to 7% for elementary students. In 1981 and 1982 retention rates remained between 6% and 7%. In grades sixth through eighth, the retention rate was 3% in 1977 prior to the implementation of the new policy. It increased to 7% after the policy's implementation in 1978. It continued to increase to 9% in 1979. By 1981 the retention rate decreased to 6%. In 1982, 7% of all sixth through eighth graders were retained.

The results of the study indicated that the academic performance of retained students in Pinellas County had substantially improved between the year prior to retention and the year following promotion. The study found a median decrease in deficit of 6 months in reading comprehension and of one year in mathematics computation (Elligett & Tocco, 1983).

Greensville, Virginia, implemented a promotion/retention policy in the fall of 1973 (Owen & Ranick, 1977). The goal of the Greensville school system was to end social promotion and implement an achievement-based promotion policy. The program was based on the philosophy that grades should reflect solid achievement, that students should master prerequisite skills before being promoted to the next higher



grade, and that the diploma should represent achievement rather than attendance in school.

The results of the achievement-based promotion program given were quite promising. "Students who were scoring in the bottom 20-30% in the nation three years ago now score in the top 50-60%. Third-graders scores have gone from 33% to 50% in reading, fifth-graders from 25% to 60% in math, and seventh-graders from 26% to 64% in reading" (Owen & Ranick 1977, p. 533).

Despite the growth in achievement, local African-American parents became disenchanted with the program. A suit alleging discrimination against the Greenville County school system, filed in 1965, was reopened in May 1980 because the Africa-American parents felt that the achievement-based policy discriminated against their children.

Among the allegations contained in this petition were the following: 1) in the within-grade ability groupings, which stemmed at least in part from test scores, black pupils were disproportionately represented in low ability groups, and pupils tended to be locked into the "low" track; and 2) black pupils were disproportionately retained or "half-promoted," and "half-promoted" pupils subsequently found it difficult to catch up to the level of their classmates. (Cates & Ash 1983, p. 137)

Cates and Ash (1983) examined the retention rates and the achievement data of all students who were sixth and seventh-graders in the district in the spring of 1980 to determine if African-American students were unfairly discriminated against in terms of promotion. They collected

data on the ability group and grade in which each student was placed from 1973-74 to 1979-80. They found that approximately two-thirds of the Anglo students had been promoted annually, while about half of the African-American females and one-third of the African-American males had been promoted consistently, during their years in the system.

In this situation, an analysis of data on students placement provides evidence against the charge that African-American students were locked into low-ability groups. Students experienced considerable amount of movement among all three ability levels. Fewer than 5% of African Americans and 1% of the Anglo students remained in low-ability groups every year.

Moreover, the results of the study indicated that African-American students had advanced considerably in achievement from the spring of 1974 to the spring of 1980. African-American students average achievement gains on the grade equivalent SRA composite scores were well over twice those of Anglo students.

These finding suggest that both Anglo and African-American students appear to have benefited from the emphasis on promotion through achievement. However, the experience of African American students was not as positive as the experience of Anglo students.

While the results of the Cates and Ash study indicated the students benefited academically from the retention, it is not known if the students would have demonstrated similar growth if they had been socially promoted. Also the study does not control for other factors such as maturation and changes in instruction that could also be responsible for the growth in achievement.

In 1981 a new school board took office in Greenville County, Virginia. Under this new board's direction, an agreement between the parents and the school was negotiated that phased out special classes for students given half promotions. In addition, it eliminated the use of standardized achievement test scores in determining if a student should be retained or promoted. The board also agreed to design policies to insure better racial balance in classes and ability groups. These agreements, negotiated between the two parties, were signed by a federal court judge in the form of a consent decree. This decree effectively ended the promotion through achievement program in Greenville, Virginia. Discrimination in placement decreased because of the decree, while social promotion increased to avoid confrontation.

New York City established the most test-bound and inflexible standard for promotion in 1981 (Labaree, 1984). The program set up "promotional gates" at the end of fourth

and seventh grades. Students were required to pass the California Achievement Test (CAT) in order to move on to the next grade. Of the students who took the test in April 1981, 17% of the fourth graders and 26% of the seventh graders failed to meet the minimum standard. These students were then placed in small remedial classes where they received special instruction in language and math.

To determine the effects of the Gates program on student achievement the Gates students were compared to a control group of non-Gates students. After adjusting for the differences in pretest scores, the students retained under the Gates program experienced no net gains in CAT scores in excess of the gains experienced by the non-Gates students who were retained or socially promoted under the old system.

The goal of promotion standards and 'promotional gates' is to increase student performance. However, given that accumulated research evidence shows no significant difference in achievement between students who were retained and students who were socially promoted, school administrators need to consider the options before implementing higher promotion standards.

#### Classroom Environment and Reading Instruction

Instruction methods texts often cite environment as a key factor in successful student achievement. In her text Transitions, Routman (1988) stated that the emotional climate

and tone of the classroom established by the teacher may well be the most significant factor in the success of a reading-writing classroom. Students must feel trusted, respected and supported for maximum and pleasurable learning to take place. They must be given time to try out new ideas, to take risks and make changes in their reading and writing.

Fuchs and Fuchs (1986) pointed out that there has been a shift in the view of learning from one focusing only on the students' inherent abilities to one that considers the importance of the instructional environment on student achievement. Students must be adequately engaged in academic activities to make adequate progress (Rosenshine, 1981).

Barr (1984) argued that when planning instructional activities teachers need to consider how students will interact with the environment and determine the appropriate social arrangement for instruction.

Academic performance in the classroom is a function of more than a pupil's knowledge or ability, it may also be influenced by a teachers' beliefs and instructional practices (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986). Children acquire knowledge by interacting with the world or the environment around them (Morrow, 1989). Teachers need to be aware of this link between student learning and their environment and then organize the environment so that learning can occur effectively (Lentz & Shapiro, 1986).

The debate over which is the most effective method for teaching reading has been going on for years. Up until the mid-1900s students were taught to read using the alphabetical method. This method gave way to two alternative approaches. The first approach stressed sound-symbol correspondences. The second one emphasized teaching children to read by having them learn whole words (Barr, 1984). Arguments about which of these methods, the "phonics" approach or the "look and say" approach, is the most effective has waged for years without any final conclusion.

However, in recent years this debate has been overshadowed by a new debate. The new debate is between those who see reading as best taught in a "bottom-up" manner and those who prefer a "top-down" approach to teaching reading. In the bottom-up approach children are taught from part to whole. The psychology behind this approach is that once children learn the parts they will be able to put the parts together to make meaning (Wray, 1989). Supporters of the bottom-up approach believe in a pre-planned, finely graded and cohesive sequence of phonic instruction (Nugent, 1984). Stott (1981) argued that children should be taught to use both phonic knowledge and the context while reading. He argued against the over-stressing of context in reading supported by the advocates of the top-down approach because

it is unhelpful for beginning readers who lack the background and word knowledge of fluent readers.

In contrast, in the top-down approach children are taught from whole to part. They begin with meaningful units of language and then later focuses their attention to individual words or parts of words (Wray, 1989). The major contributors to the top-down approach to reading have come from the field of psycholinguistics. Psycholinguists view reading as a meaning-getting, predictive and interactive process. Smith (1984), Goodman (1986) and Cambourne(1988) view reading as a meaning-getting process that begins inside the reader's head (Wray, 1989). Studies of young readers have shown that when they read they try to make sense of their reading (Clay, 1969; Weber, 1970). Goodman (1986) stresses that language is easy to learn if it is meaningful and services the needs of the child. He also argues that when children look at smaller units of language, like words and phrases, they need do to so in the context of real language.

### Conclusion

Current nonpromotion statistics, competency testing and new state legislation all contribute to the complexity of the retention-promotion debate. Yet research reveals that there is little conclusive evidence that retention is any more effective in improving student achievement than social

promotion. Educators need information in order to determine if retention is in the best interest of the student who is experiencing serious academic difficulties. The proposed study addressed the reading achievement issue.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the reading achievement of students retained in first grade or placed in a transition room. In addition, the classroom environment was examined to determine if it had a relationship to reading achievement. The following questions guided the study:

1. Do students in rural schools retained in first grade or placed in a pre-first grade transition room demonstrate improved reading performance during their final year in first grade when compared to their reading performance during the transition or retained year as measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills?

2. If rural first grade students and transition room students experience growth in reading achievement in their final first grade year, is the achieved level maintained over the next two years?

3. Do rural students placed in a transition room or retained in first grade experience similar growth in reading achievement as students with similar (+/-10 NCE) first grade Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores who were not retained?

4. What is the instructional environment for transition and retained students in rural schools?



## CHAPTER III

### DESIGN OF STUDY

This study was designed to examine the effectiveness of retention and/or transition room placement of first graders on reading achievement. Both quantitative and qualitative research procedures were used. The content of this chapter includes: (a) identification of the population, (b) description of the instruments used, (c) the procedures employed in the study, and (d) the method for data collection and analysis.

#### Subjects

The subjects of the study consisted of seven first grade teachers and 46 students from five different elementary schools in a Midwest state. The 46 students were divided into two different groups, each containing 23 students. Group one consisted of 23 students either retained in first grade or placed in a pre-first transition room. Group two was comprised of 23 students from the same school as the retained or transition room students and with similar scores on the ITBS but who had not been retained. All students were from rural communities in the Midwest. Students and teachers were coded to ensure anonymity of the schools, teachers and students.

### Instruments

The instrument used to measure reading achievement was the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) reading subtest. The scores used were normal curve equivalent scores (NCE). They were equal ability interval scales so that scores could be added, divided, and compared between tests and across grades. NCE scores range from 0-100. An NCE score of 50 in first grade (denoting an average achievement level) is equivalent to an NCE score of 50 in second grade and in third grade. When the NCE score increases, this means the student has improved in academic standing. Research suggests most retention decisions are based in part on some form of standardized test (Elligett & Tocco, 1983; Owen & Ranick, 1977). Districts administer ITBS to evaluate whole school and individual student achievement. Many districts use the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to evaluate students for retention. The ITBS is an achievement test designed to measure fundamental skills in the areas of word analysis, vocabulary, reading, language, work-study and mathematics for students in grades kindergarten to ninth (Hambleton, 1987). Only the reading subtest was used for this study.

The teacher belief interview was used to elicit teacher beliefs and practices. Teacher belief interviews are based on the understanding that teachers are knowing beings whose knowledge influences their actions: "Knowledge, then, forms a

system of beliefs and attitudes which direct perceptions and behaviors" (Richardson et al., 1990, p.35). These beliefs consist of statements of one's own knowledge declared by the individual.

The belief interview was adapted from an interview form used in other research that effectively elicited teachers practices and beliefs through the interview process (Richardson et al., 1990; Richardson & Valdez, 1991). The interview contains both open ended and specific questions designed to learn more about ones instructional values and practices.

Pilot interviews were conducted to examine if the wording of the interview questions were precise enough to elicit complete and accurate answers. The ordering of the questions was also investigated to determine if the question order limited the teachers' responses. After administrating the pilot interviews, it was concluded that some of the questions should be reordered to allow for more teacher explanation of their pedagogical practices.

The Teacher Belief Interview (see Appendix A), is divided into four general categories: (a) background information about the teacher and school, (b) questions about the teaching of reading, (c) questions relating to the teaching of writing, and, (d) questions about retention. There are three questions under each of the first three

categories and 10 questions under the category on retention. The interviews were conducted on an individual basis. The interviews were tape recorded, and then transcribed for analysis. The data were coded to insure anonymity.

#### Procedures

A list of retained and transition room students and their scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) were obtained from the Area Education Agency representing that rural community. Each retained or transition room student (generically labeled as retained) was matched with a socially promoted (non-retained) student having similar scores (+/-10 NCE) on the ITBS reading subtest. In addition to matching students by scores, they were also matched by gender.

Four scores for each of the retained (retained and transition room) subjects were collected: (a) score for the original first grade year or transition year, (b) score for the final year in first grade, (c) score for the second grade year, and, (d) score for the third grade year. Three scores were obtained for each student in the socially promoted group: (a) the score for the first grade year, (b) the score for the second grade year, and, (c) the score for the third grade year.

Letters were sent to the principals of the schools involved in the study asking for the names of the teachers who instructed the retained students during the final first

grade year. Phone calls were made to the teachers to arrange the interviews. The interviews were taped and ranged in length from 1 hour to 1 1/2 hours. Key points made by the teachers were written at the time of the interview. The teachers were asked to describe and explain the teaching practice and materials used during the year in which the designated subjects were in their classes. In addition teachers were asked their beliefs and opinions regarding various reading and retention issues.

#### Data Analysis

A  $t$  test was used to compare the individual students scores from one year to the next to determine if there was an increase in their reading achievement. A  $t$  test was used to determine if the individual students maintained the scores in their reading achievement made during the retained year over the next two years. A  $t$  test was also used to analyze the differences between the reading scores of the retained and the socially promoted students.

The teacher belief interviews were taped, and then transcribed (see Appendix B). Questions labeled "specific" in nature, eliciting specific and concise factual data about the teachers and the teaching environment, were analyzed quantitatively. The answers from the open-ended questions on the teacher belief interviews were qualitatively analyzed using categorical schemes to determine the instructional

environment of the retained or transition classrooms. Chunks of dialogue from the belief interviews were coded using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The procedures were as follows. All of the interviews were read. Then each interview was analyzed using a constant comparative method to develop categories. These categories were abstracted from the teachers' responses to the open-ended questions. The coding system then became the list of abstracted categories (see Appendix C). Text labeled with these abstracted categories were then analyzed in a reflective, constant comparative method to develop constructed categorical statements. These constructed statements then became the data results reported in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER IV

## RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to evaluate gains in reading achievement made by students retained in first grade or placed in a transition room. In addition, the study examined the instructional environment for transition and retained students in rural schools. Four major questions guided the study. The results concerning each question are presented in this chapter.

Do students in rural schools retained in first grade or placed in a pre-first grade transition room demonstrate improved reading performance during their final year in first grade when compared to their reading performance during the transition or retained year as measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills?

A  $t$  test was performed to measure the difference between the subjects' reading subtest scores on the ITBS during their first grade or pre-first transition room year compared to their final year in first grade. Table 1 presents the normal curve equivalent (NCE) scores received by each student on the ITBS reading subtest and the difference between the two scores.

Table 1

A t test Comparison of ITBS Reading NCE Scores Between First Grade or Transition and Final Year in First Grade

	First grade or transition room score	Final first grade year score	Difference
Subject 1	20	37	17
Subject 2	17	40	23
Subject 3	29	50	21
Subject 4	26	59	33
Subject 5	20	23	3
Subject 6	43	61	18
Subject 7	20	27	7
Subject 8	37	37	0
Subject 9	34	67	33
Subject 10	13	59	46
Subject 11	37	59	22
Subject 12	23	59	36
Subject 13	31	71	40
Subject 14	29	52	23
Subject 15	13	37	24
Subject 16	20	54	34

(table continues)



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	First grade or transition room score	Final first grade year score	Difference
Subject 17	29	42	13
Subject 18	37	57	20
Subject 19	37	40	3
Subject 20	42	67	25
Subject 21	34	71	37
Subject 22	37	76	39
Subject 23	39	67	28
Mean	29	52.7	23.7

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Note.  $p = .0005$

This table indicates that the students improved significantly on the ITBS reading subtest from their first grade or transition room year to their final year in first grade ( $t = 8.96$ ,  $df = 22$ ,  $p = .0005$ ).

If rural first grade students and transition room students experience growth in reading achievement in their final first grade year, is the achieved level maintained over the next two years?

A  $t$  test was conducted to determine if the individual students maintained the increase in their reading achievement made during the retained or transition year over the next 2 years. Table 2 presents each students' ITBS reading subtest NCE scores from their final year in first grade and their third grade year.

Table 2

A t test Comparison Between Final Year in First Grade and Third Grade Reading NCE Scores

	First grade	Third grade	Difference
Subject 1	37	30	-7
Subject 2	40	14	-26
Subject 3	50	35	-15
Subject 4	59	66	7
Subject 5	23	47	24
Subject 6	61	49	-12
Subject 7	27	16	-11
Subject 8	37	30	-7
Subject 9	67	66	-1
Subject 10	59	61	2

(table continues)

	First grade	Third grade	Difference
Subject 11	59	66	7
Subject 12	59	53	-6
Subject 13	71	61	-10
Subject 14	52	37	-15
Subject 15	37	40	3
Subject 16	54	59	5
Subject 17	42	45	3
Subject 18	57	54	-3
Subject 19	40	30	-10
Subject 20	67	66	-1
Subject 21	71	47	-24
Subject 22	76	59	-17
Subject 23	67	63	-4
Mean	52.7	47.57	-5.13

Note.  $p = .025$

This table indicates a significant difference between the first grade and third grade NCE scores ( $t = -2.21$ ,  $df = 22$ ,  $p = .025$ ). The retained and transition room students did not maintain the growth in reading achievement

made during the retained year or transition room year over the next 2 years.

Do rural students placed in a transition room or retained in first grade experience similar growth in reading achievement as students with similar (+/-10 NCE) first grade Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores but who were not retained?

A t test was conducted to measure the mean difference between the transition room or retained students, generically labeled in this table as retained, and the socially promoted students. Table 3 presents the first grade and third grade means for both groups and the difference between the means.

Table 3

Comparison of ITBS Reading Subtest Mean Scores of Retained and Socially Promoted Students

	First	Third	Difference
Retained Students Mean	52.70	47.57	-5.13
Socially Promoted Students Mean	52.74	50.83	-1.91

Note.  $p = .05$

The table indicates that there was no significant difference in reading achievement between the retained or transition room students and the socially promoted students ( $t = -0.943$ ,  $df = 44$ ,  $p = .05$ ).

What is the instructional environment for transition and retained students in rural schools? A teacher belief interview was used to elicit teacher information about the classroom environment. The answers to questions labeled "specific" in nature, eliciting specific and factual data about the teachers and the teaching environment, are reported quantitatively.

On the average, the teachers interviewed have taught for 24.2 years. The teachers ranged in teaching experience from 4 years to 38 years. Five of the classrooms were self-contained and two of the classes rotated students for English, social studies and science but each of the teachers taught reading. The average number of students per class ranged from 16 to 25. The number of students in the schools ranged from 138 to 800. The grades in the buildings ranged greatly. Three buildings had students from kindergarten through twelfth, one building was kindergarten through fifth, two were kindergarten through third, and one building was kindergarten through second. On the average, the students were in school for 6 hours and 45 minutes each day. Of that time, the teachers estimated that they spent two and a half

hours on reading and writing per day. All seven of the teachers ability grouped for reading instruction. In addition they all used the same basal reading series, Houghton Mifflin. One teacher also used the Heath basal series with her lower readers. Each of the teachers stated that they do change students from one group to the other if they see the need.

In response to the questions on retention, all teachers agreed to some extent that retention was effective. Three out of the seven teachers said, "yes" retention was beneficial (Teachers A, B, G). Teacher C said, "In a lot of cases, not always." Teacher D stated, that it "Depends on the child." Teacher F responded, that "For some kids, it's really beneficial." Teacher E said, that "In some cases very beneficial." When asked what they consider when recommending students for retention, maturity level or social behavior was mentioned by six out of the seven teachers. Five out of the seven teachers also stated that the student's age was considered when making the retention decision. In addition, parental wishes, student ability, physical size, attention, and how the student felt about retention, were also considerations that teachers made when deciding if a student should be retained or not.

On the average, 1.5 students were retained in each of these buildings a year. If students were retained they would

not have the same teacher the following year in six out of the seven buildings. Six out of seven teachers stated that the retained students received some kind of special services, such as Chapter 1 Reading, during the retained year. The teachers perceived the parents to be supportive of their child's retention in all but two cases.

The results of the open-ended questions on the teacher belief interview are presented in two ways. First, each teacher's responses are reported separately through constructed categories (see Appendix D). These constructed categories were developed from teachers' responses regarding reading, writing and retention. Results are supported with examples from each teachers' interview. Second, all seven interviews were summarized from the constructed categories into global statements about reading, writing and retention. These global statements are discussed in relation to the information obtained from the ITBS t test results and the information provided from the questions labeled specific.

Teacher A:

Reading:

Students need to read from a wide variety of books. "I use a lot of outside reading with my first graders."

Reading is learning the skills. "They begin with consonant sounds at the beginning then in first grade we

introduce them at the end. Our vowel sounds aren't introduced until second semester."

Home environment and reading are important to a student's literacy development. "I think a lot of it is home life and parents doing things together. Reading: if children are being read to, it makes a great deal of difference. But I think, of everything, reading with children makes a big impact."

Writing:

Sharing of writing is important. "I think the children get ideas from one another, too, when they are sharing stories." In regards to a collection of students' writings made into a book. "This book we have available for them so they can read what they have written and also what the other children have written."

Writing is important. "I like to have them write as much as possible."

Children need to learn the correct mechanics of writing. "Then we also use Daily Oral Language and I think that children, we just do a couple of sentences to begin the day or sometimes to begin the English period. I think in doing that, they are more aware of capital letters at the beginning and the correct punctuation at the end."

In writing, ideas are more important than mechanics. "Grading something that is a creative writing piece; I'm not



worried about that, because at the time, the ideas they use are more important than good capitalization and punctuation."

At the beginning of first grade, students do not have many writing skills but they develop during the year. "They just can't write anything. They can't think of anything. So many times we'll do a class story." "It's surprising how at the beginning of the year so many of them write what we have written on the chalkboard but as the year goes on they might use parts of it but they do their own thinking."

Writing stories is difficult for children because of the spelling and vocabulary. " . . . except maybe sentences on their pictures but not as far as stories. Vocabulary, the spelling of the words in first grade is difficult for them and they need a lot of help with spelling and finding out where you are going to find words to spell."

#### Retention:

Having a retained student do well academically influences a teacher's view of the effectiveness of retention. "I would say that she is probably an average student, at least, and if she didn't have this second chance she would probably have been in the bottom part of her class."

Students who are retained do well academically and feel good about themselves. "Many times they do a terrific job and they remain in the top reading group most of the time."

It gives them a chance to feel good about themselves, to be successful."

The parents' and the child's view of retention influences how successful it will be. "Yes, I think retention works if parents are behind it." "If the child feels the reason he was retained was because he was stupid and he can't do it, it is not going to work."

Teacher A viewed reading as learning the skills but she also stated that children needed to read things other than the basal. When discussing writing, Teacher A believed that first graders had a difficult time writing at the beginning of the year because they lacked the skills needed. Yet, when evaluating students' writing she was more concerned with their ideas than with the mechanics. In regards to the topic of retention, she felt that parents were vital in making the retention successful. Teacher A believed that students who were retained did well in the future.

Teacher B:

Reading:

Basal skills are important in teaching reading. "We felt Houghton Mifflin was the best out there for the skills." "The skills are kind of built into the Houghton Mifflin so we just kind of go by the book."

Reading instruction needs to be different for students with different abilities. "Houghton Mifflin, that is our

main series, and then we have Heath. We usually use Heath for the low group." "This past year I did a lot with putting my middle and top groups together with literature."

Students need to be given time to read what they want to read. "We have what is called SQUIRT in our school right now, Super, Quiet, UnInterrupted, Reading Time, where the kids can read what they want."

Writing:

Reading and writing are intermixed. "A lot of my writing lessons that I have been doing lately are after reading a book or reading part of a book, something to go along with that."

Writing can be incorporated into other curriculum areas. "It is usually related to something and now it relates to all different kinds of curriculum areas."

Students need to be allowed to take risks with their writing. "I think it is really important for them when they get into school to not have teachers cramp their style as far as writing. That they let them do their own thing and not be worried about spelling or the format of it."

Evaluation is looking for growth. "What I do is save writings from the beginning of the year, so we have kind of a portfolio. So the kid can see the growth and the teacher can see the growth."

Retention:

Parents' feelings about retention affect how the child views the retention. "We feel like if the parents are really going to be negative, it's not good for the child." "I think a lot of it is the parent's attitude, too."

Having retained students do well academically influences the teacher's view on the effectiveness of retention. "Then there was one year, many years back, there was about eight that we retained but it was all because of maturity. Some of those kids ended up . . . like now are in the gifted and talented program. It did them wonders."

Teacher B related that skills are important in the teaching of reading and that she goes by the book. Yet, she also stated that she does some literature activities with some of her students. When discussing writing she mentioned that the writing her students did was often related to something that they had read. When evaluating her students' writing she looked for growth over time. Her view of retention was positive because of the growth she had observed made by some of her students.

Teacher C:Reading:

Textbooks are important in reading and language arts instruction. "Well, actually, we have phonics books that go right along with our reading, which I really like. Also we

have Houghton Mifflin spelling. It correlates well with our reading."

Students need the chance to read back what they have written. "As far as my daily journals the reason I don't do them every day like the other first grade teacher in our building does is I like to have them read them back to me."

Home environment is important in a child's literacy development. "Actually the literacy I believe actually comes from home background." "From their home environment, that's definite, no other way."

#### Writing:

Writing is a process. "Then we talk about in English, we have our sloppy copy, you know, then we have our copy. I think there were several sloppy copies before we made the permanent copy."

Many writing activities are text-based. "So within our Houghton Mifflin English books there are actually three books that we have to do. It takes a lot of time. We do the sloppy copies and then put them together."

Students do not have enough skills at the beginning of the year to write. "At the beginning of the year they just . . . some of them can't write anything. They can not even think about how to spell 'school' or 'I went on a vacation.' They have no idea. They don't know what a 'v' is or how it ends."

As the year goes on students are able to write more. "Before long they'll have the beginning sound, the vowel, another letter and the ending sound." "So it is really wonderful to see the growth."

Retention:

Retention is beneficial when it is done early. "At my level it's good to give them another chance, right then and there." "I think the biggest item I would consider is their maturity level."

Having a retained student do well influences a teacher's opinion about retention. "I just told her mom over and over it was just like her sister walked in that first grade room that second year." "I also recall another little gal that I had asked and visited with the parents if she could go back to junior first and I had her the next year and it was really something the growth that I had seen."

Retention has declined in popularity. "A lot of the parents they just . . . Retention is not as popular as it used to be."

Teacher C mentioned using textbooks in all of the language arts areas. She stated that first graders did not have very many writing skills at the beginning of the year but these skills developed as the students learned letter-sound relationships. Teacher C believed that retention was beneficial if it was done early. Students experiencing

academic success with retention influenced her opinion about the value of retention.

Teacher D:

Reading:

Good reading instruction involves hierarchical skills. "I had to do all the pre-reading skills, like teaching them the alphabet, the letters of the alphabet and the beginning sounds." "Then I would keep them in both groups to be sure they covered everything until they got caught up with that top group."

Reading materials need to be controlled for vocabulary. "Kind of companion books that went along with your reading series using the vocabulary but making up different stories, you know, so that they could use the same vocabulary."

When teaching reading, phonics is important. "Well we looked at it, we liked the phonics in it." "I think probably the phonics part was the main draw for most of the elementary teachers."

Students need to read just for fun. "Then lots of times I'd get our old readers out, like old Dick and Jane books and some other little books that I had. We'd read those just for the story, for the fun of it together."

Parents are important in helping to develop their child's literacy. "In reading, I think if they see their

parents read or they have been read to, I think that helps them a lot."

Writing:

The importance of having students write has increased in the past few years. "Then the last couple years when we were talking about that whole language, I probably spent the first 20-25 minutes on getting them started on writing something."

It is easier for students to write about their own experiences. "It was just about their own experiences mainly. They were best at that." "I was really more pleased with their writing about their own selves rather than making something up."

When teaching writing students need to work on form. "I wanted complete sentences by the end of the year." "We worked on capital letters and periods and question marks but that didn't always happen but we did talk about it."

The desire to write begins early. "Well I think from the time they are little, pre-school, 3 years old, they start wanting to write."

Retention:

The child's age needs to be considered when retaining a student. "I don't think they should be retained after they are in first grade. I think it is really difficult for them to go on to second grade if they don't have any of those basic skills that they need in first grade."



Children who are retained do well at the beginning of the year but then they begin to fall behind. "They start out in the top group and they're sailing along at the beginning of the year and they feel pretty good about themselves until about January or February and then it hits them again. You can see them really begin to struggle again."

Students are not always positive about retention. "I think it did bother him a little bit." "If they're teased a lot I think it is really hard for them."

Teacher D's view of reading was skills based with a strong emphasis on phonics instruction. However, she did mention that she had her students do some reading just for fun. When discussing writing, she talked about how the teaching of writing has changed over time and that first grade students now write more than first graders in the past. On the topic of retention, she stated that students should be retained when they are young. Teacher D did not view retention as always being positive because students often did well at the beginning of the year but then often began struggling again by the middle of the year.

Teacher E:

Reading:

To teach reading you need a basal that provides the skills. "We use Houghton Mifflin and I'm really very pleased with this reading series for the lower elementary." "It has

good stories and good literature but it has a logical approach to teaching reading and the emphasis is really on helping kids to decode new words." "We are accepting their approach for teaching phonics incorporated in with the reading but I feel I need a good basic reading series to work with."

Reading instruction needs to be different for students with different abilities. "They are still ability grouped because one group will have more detailed instruction than the other group." "The more capable group will have more assignments in the reading/writing connection, more enrichment kinds of things." "I really like it when I can teach the groups together that way and just enrich with one group and reinforce more with skill."

Parents need to support their child's reading efforts. "I sort out books from my first grade library and those go home for home reading. I think it is really important for the parents to hear their kids read, but I also think that it's important for the child to get the message that mom and dad think it's important."

Home environment is important in a child's literacy development. "Of course it starts from early on...the experiences that they have within their home."

Writing:

Textbooks provide many writing activities. "We do reading/writing connections that come from our basic reader. The other thing toward the end of the year: The kids dearly love the creative writing masters that we use that come with our Houghton Mifflin English."

Sharing of student writing is important. "We always read those. We always share them with the class." "They want to share it with the class."

Writing ideas can come from other curriculum areas. "It might be something that stems from a science thing that came up in our Weekly Reader that the students were interested in." "Something current in the news; they're into the space exploration kinds of things."

Retention:

Children who are young or immature benefit from an extra year of school. "I do feel we need to do it when children are young." "A lot of times I look at the kids who are struggling and I look at their birthday and right then and there, so often they are the young ones that just need some more time. They don't seem quite as ready."

Parents are an important factor in how a child views retention. "In our school we really do not retain or place in a pre-first if the parents are opposed to it." "I think

that depends so much on how the parents accept it. If they consider it a failure, then the kids will consider it a failure."

Teacher E stated that she needed a good basal series to work with and that phonics and skills were important in reading instruction. She also mentioned that her instruction was different for the two different ability groups. Students in the low group spent more time on the skills whereas the high group spent more time on writing and enrichment-type activities. When discussing writing, she mentioned that a lot of the writing activities that the students did were from either the English text or the reading/writing connection that went with the reading series. Teacher E felt that retention was beneficial if the student was young or immature.

Teacher F:

Reading:

Reading instruction is based on the skills and phonics in the basal reader. "It's within the curriculum basically, the teachers' guide." "Basically, Houghton Mifflin covers the phonics."

Reading and books are important to a child's literacy development. "I think people in education are well aware if children are exposed to books." "The best thing they could do for their kid was make books available to them." "Are

they taught the joy of listening to a story?" "Let them see you reading, hear you reading."

Home environment influences a child's literacy development. "I think a lot of it has to do with before they ever think about school."

#### Writing:

Students can write for many different reasons. "A lot of our writing centers around either the reading curriculum or a special event, holiday or something of that nature." "They do journal writing."

Writing is a process. "They have to edit and read it to a friend and have a friend suggest some ways they could improve or something they should add to it or something they should delete."

When students write, their ideas are more important than the mechanics. "I just don't want to stifle any creativity; anything that they show to me. I might give them suggestions but I don't really get into the punctuation because I just really think it's going to stifle the kid." "I guess at that point it's more their ideas and thoughts rather than the structure."

#### Retention:

Age and maturity level need to be considered when retaining a child. "A lot of it is maturity and I look at

their age first. If a kid is one of the oldest in the classroom I'm probably not going to suggest going back a grade."

Having a retained student do well influences a teacher's opinion on retention. "It happened that the little boy I sent back I happened to have in my room again this year and I was so pleased that he didn't go on because he was a top-notch leader. It just thrilled me to think that giving him that year to grow and to mature helped him that much."

Parents' feelings about retention are very important and may influence how the child feels about it. "If you don't have the parents' support I think you're fighting a losing battle. If the parents don't believe in it, that feeling is going to spill over to the children."

Students who are retained are positive about it. "I don't think there was a kid who hung their head, walked in and said I was in pre-first. It was a positive kind of thing." "I've not ever seen a negative."

Teacher F followed the skills and phonics in the basal when teaching reading. She also stated how important it was for students to be exposed to variety of books and for parents to make books available to their children. Teacher F had students write in journals, in connection with something they read and for special events or holidays. The students used the writing process and were evaluated more on their

ideas than their form or mechanics. Retention was viewed positively by Teacher F. She felt that students who were young or immature demonstrated much growth and became good students after being retained.

Teacher G: (This interview was conducted on the telephone so the teacher's comments are not exact quotes.)

Reading:

Reading instruction is based on the skills and phonics in the reading book. "Phonics is taught from the reading book. Have charts, have a definite pattern, beginning sounds then ending sounds. Spend a lot of time on decoding." "Go through skills, beginning and ending sounds. Use charts, cards and workbooks to teach reading."

Children have to reach a certain stage to begin reading. "Need certain stage to be ready to read. Children have to want to read."

Writing:

Students have to be able to read before they can write. "At the beginning of the year they don't write as much, need to start reading first."

Writing can be related to other curriculum areas. "We do some writing in science program. Have had students write grandparents letters for Grandparents Day."

### Retention:

Students who are retained do well academically.

"Usually at the beginning of the year they are doing well."

It is important not to make retained students seem different. "Teach so that students don't stand out as different." "Don't want to make them feel different."

Teacher G stated that children had to reach a certain stage before they can begin to read. Her reading instruction was based on the phonics and skills provided in the basal reader. Teacher G had students do some writing in science and for special events. She felt that students who were retained did well academically and that it was important not to make the retained students stand out or feel different.

### Summary

All seven of the teachers talked about reading in terms of phonics and skills instruction. Their teaching experience averaged 24.2 year. This suggests that the teachers had considerable experience teaching reading skills using a basal reading series. In addition, they maintained a reliance on basal skills lessons as an important part of their reading instruction. This intense skill instruction may explain the significant reading growth on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills of the retained and transition room students during their final year in first grade. Specifically, reading presented in traditional basal reading lessons and the skills and phonics



concerns of the teachers are similar to those reading skills tested through the ITBS.

Each of the teachers ability grouped for reading instruction. In addition, some of the teachers talked about how the instruction was different for the students in the different ability groups. High ability students were given more reading, writing and enrichment-type activities, whereas the low ability group spent more time on skills instruction. This extra time spent on skills may also help explain why the retained students (typically placed in low group) demonstrated significant improvement on the ITBS reading subtest.

The teachers also mentioned that students need to be exposed to a wide variety of books and to read for fun. Research in the field of reading supports these beliefs. Smith (1978) stated that children learn to read by reading and that they need the opportunity to read books of their own choosing. This may have had an impact on their reading improvement during their final first grade year and may have also had an impact on helping them maintain reading achievement similar to that experienced by the socially promoted group.

In terms of literacy development, the teachers in this study felt that home environment and reading to children were two of the things that helped children the most in becoming

readers. On the average, the teachers interviewed spent 2.5 hours every day on reading and writing instruction. The fact that the teachers in these schools spent so much time on reading and writing could explain why the students who were retained were able to continue making similar progress in their reading as the students who were socially promoted.

When talking about writing, many of the teachers stated that most of their writing activities were related to what they were doing in reading and in other curricular areas. Perhaps the direct skills instruction provided in reading had an impact on students' immediate testing. In addition, another area that could have helped the students reading was that the students were provided with many opportunities to write in response to what they had read. When evaluating student writing, the teachers in this study were more concerned with what the students had to say than how they spelled or punctuated what they wrote.

Overall, the teachers felt that retention was beneficial. Four out of the seven teachers interviewed gave an example of a retained student that performed well academically after retention. This fact that the teachers viewed retention as being effective and that the retained students in these schools did better than retained students in other studies suggests a connection between teachers'

beliefs about retention and the academic performance of the retained students.

In their answers to both specific and open-ended questions, five out of the seven teachers related parents' influence to retention success. The teachers believed that parents' feelings about the retention did influence their child's feelings about the retention. The reading success experienced by the retained students suggests that parents', teachers', and students' attitudes and beliefs about retention affect the results of retention.

In addition to the impact of parents', teachers' and students' beliefs and feelings about retention, instruction and assessment play important roles as well. The teachers discussed very different ways of teaching reading to their students. One of the ways discussed was the reading/writing connection and exposure to a variety of books. On the other hand, they discussed the importance of specific skills instruction. Both these ways of instructing can explain the students' results on the ITBS. First, the intensive instruction in skills may have influenced their final first grade ITBS scores, which were significantly better than their first set of ITBS scores and therefore significantly better than the scores of the socially promoted group. While this significant change was not maintained over time, this group of retained students was able to maintain similar achievement

as the socially promoted group. These results are different than results from other retention studies. The impact that retention usually has on students is negative, usually they do not achieve as well as students who were socially promoted. However, retention for students in this current study was positive. They initially experienced significant improvement in reading when compared to the socially promoted students. Over time their improvement declined but they still maintained the achievement level of the socially promoted students.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter presents: (a) a restatement of the problem, (b) related research, (c) design and procedures, and (d) findings of the study. Conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further research are also presented.

#### Restatement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to evaluate gains in reading achievement on The Iowa Test of Basic Skills reading subtest made by students retained in first grade or placed in a transition room. In addition, the study examined the instructional environment for transition and retained students in rural schools.

#### Related Research

Four areas of research relevant to the study were identified and reviewed. The first area focused on the history of retention and studies that involved retained students. The second area examined research on transition rooms and their effectiveness. The third area that was reviewed was research on retention policies and standards set by schools. The final area of research examined was on classroom environment and reading instruction.

### Design and Procedures

The 46 students and seven first grade teachers who constituted the population in this study were from five different elementary schools in a Midwestern state. The students were divided into two groups. Group one consisted of 23 retained students who had either been retained in first grade or placed in a pre-first grade transition room. Group two was comprised of 23 socially promoted students from the same schools as the retained or transition room students and with similar scores ( $\pm 10$  NCE) on the ITBS but who had not been retained.

The instrument used to measure the students' reading achievement was the ITBS reading subtest. Four ITBS reading subtest scores for each of the retained and transition room students were obtained from the Area Education Agency representing that rural community. Three scores from the ITBS reading subtest were also obtained for the socially promoted group. These reading test scores were used to match the students. A  $t$  test was used to compare the individual students' scores to determine if there was an increase in their reading achievement during their final year in first grade. A  $t$  test was also used to measure if the students maintained their scores in reading achievement made during their final first grade year over the next two years. In addition a  $t$  test was used to analyze the difference between

the group means on the ITBS reading subtest of the retained or transition room students and the socially promoted students.

A letter explaining the purpose of the study was sent to the principals of the schools involved in order to obtain the names of the teachers who instructed the retained students during the final first grade year. A Teacher Belief Interview was used to elicit the teachers' beliefs and instructional environment. All the interviews were conducted in each teachers' rural community, except one which was conducted on the phone. The interviews were taped and then transcribed. The results of the interviews were analyzed using a constant comparative method.

#### Findings of the Study

The results of the data analyzed indicate that students who were retained or placed in a pre-first grade transition room showed significant improvement on the ITBS reading subtest during their final year in first grade. However, the students did not maintain the growth made during the retained or transition year over the next 2 years. There was no significant difference in reading achievement in third grade between the retained or transition room students and the socially promoted students.

All seven of the teachers interviewed talked about reading in terms of phonics and skills instruction. They

also mentioned that they do more skills instruction with low ability students. In addition, the teachers stated that students need to be exposed to a wide variety of books and to read for fun. The teachers felt that the home environment and parents reading to children were important to a child's literacy development.

Many of the writing activities used by the teachers were related to what the students were reading or what they were studying in other curricular areas. Teachers felt that when students are writing, the ideas that they write about are more important than the mechanics that they use.

All of the teachers in the study believed that retention was beneficial, especially for young and immature students. Teachers felt that parents played a critical role in making the retention successful. The teachers believed that parents' feelings about the retention did influence their child's feelings about the retention.

### Conclusions

The following conclusions are based on the findings of this study:

1. Students retained in first grade or placed in a pre-first transition room demonstrate a significant improvement in reading performance during their final year in first grade.



2. Students retained in first grade or placed in a pre-first transition room did not maintain the level of growth in reading achievement made during the retained or transition year over the next 2 years.

3. There is no significant difference in reading achievement at the end of third grade between the retained or transition room students and the socially promoted students.

4. The reading and writing instruction received by the retained and transition room students during their final first grade year was a combination of reading/writing process, exposure to a variety of books, and intense instruction in reading skills and phonics. The reading skills lessons were organized around the skills outlined in the reading basal. The writing instruction was connected to reading or other curricular areas.

#### Implications

The following implications are suggested by the conclusions of this study:

1. The instructional environment can have an effect on retained or transition room students' reading achievement. The type of instruction (reading basal skills or reading/writing connections) will affect students' reading achievement, especially if instruction more closely relates to the type of assessment. The amount of time that is spent on reading instruction will also influence reading

achievement, with a greater amount of time providing greater improvement. The number of students in the class may also affect student achievement. Smaller numbers of students within a classroom often means more time for individual instruction, teacher contact, and more opportunities for student input.

2. The way in which a teacher instructs reading is related to the beliefs the teacher holds. If teachers believe that children learn how to read from basal readers then they will teach from a basal reader. In addition, having retained students perform well in assessment following intensive skills instruction reinforces teachers beliefs that skills instruction is beneficial.

3. Retention is effective when parents, teachers and the student believe it will be beneficial. When the expectations of the parents, the student and the teacher are that retention will be beneficial and help the student improve, the expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy and retention is effective.

4. Higher achievement scores through intensive skills instruction may not be maintained over time. Intensive skills instruction may be a short term remedy and may not be effective for long term gains in literacy development.

### Recommendations for Further Research

Results from the present study indicates that further research in the following areas appears warranted:

1. Replication of this study with students from non-rural schools.
2. Replication of this study with more retained and socially promoted subjects.
3. Replication of this study with additional interviews conducted with the teachers who instructed the students during second and third grade.
4. Replication of this study using a different measure of reading achievement.

Overall, retention is beneficial when parents, teachers and students believe that retention is effective in improving reading achievement. While intensive skills instruction does have a short term positive impact on student reading achievement, this improvement is not maintained over time. However, retention involving ability grouping, skills instruction, and instruction involving the reading/writing connection is equally as effective in the long run as social promotion.

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## Appendix A

## Teacher Belief Interview

## Background:

\* Number of years teaching--what grade levels--type of classroom setting--average number of students--size of school --grades in the building.

\* What time does school start and end? How much time would you estimate is spent on reading and writing each day?

\* Have you taken any classes after finishing your bachelors degree? If so, what are they?

## Reading:

\* What do you use for reading instruction? Why did you choose this? Does your school use a basal reading series? If so which one(s)?

\* How do you address phonics instruction in your classroom? Does your school or district have a policy on how phonics is taught?

\* Grouping---Do you group for reading instruction? If so, how do you form your groups? (Testing, what type? Teacher before? ) Do you change groups? Do you use whole group instruction in reading?

**Writing:**

\* What type of writing do your students do? How do you handle writing instruction in your classroom? How do you plan a writing lesson and what do you include in it?

\* How do you assign stories to write? If a student is assigned a story to write, what does the student have to do to get the finished story turned into you?

\* What types of writing do you assign to students? How do you evaluate their written work?

**Retention:**

\* If a student in your class is not doing well what do you do? (Special services, home contacts, retention?)

\* If a student is recommended for retention what things are considered? (Test scores, teacher observations, parental attitude, maturity, age, size?)

\* Do you believe retention is beneficial?

\* If a student is retained in your building, will the student have the same teacher during his/her retained year?

\* How is instruction designed for students who have been placed in a transition room or repeated first grade?

\* How many students on average do you retain a year?

\* Of the students retained how many receive special services? If so, what kinds of services do they receive in the classroom and/or outside the classroom?

\* Were the parents supportive of the retention?

\* How do you feel that the student felt about the retention?

\*What beliefs do you hold about how students develop their literacy?

## Appendix B

## Transcribed Interview

R: What do you use for reading instruction?

T: Houghton Mifflin that is our main series, and then we have Heath as a supplemental. We usually use Heath for the low group. All this stuff is changing with this whole language stuff so it's not as set in concrete as it was before.

R: Why did you choose that series?

T: We felt Houghton Mifflin was the best out there for the skills and with the other series it had easier vocabulary level for the students.

R: How do you address phonics instruction in your classroom?

T: The skills are kind of built into the Houghton Mifflin so we just kind of go by the book.

R: Does your district tell you how phonics should be taught?

T: Not as such. We pick the materials and that's what we go by. Our Chapter 1 teacher does a lot with phonics, too.

R: Do you use some of the phonics out of Heath too or just the Houghton Mifflin?

T: It's built into both books so we use it with all the different levels. Now with the whole language I've been doing more with using books and trying to pick skills from those things. So this was the first year I attempted that, so it's a big change but I think the kids like it better.

R: Do you group for reading instruction?

T: Yes we do. We use three groups. This past year I did a lot with putting my middle and top groups together with literature.

R: How do you form your groups?

T: The kindergarten teachers give us recommendations so that's where we start at. Then we change if we feel the need.

R: Do you change groups?

T: For some we may change right away, for others maybe it's not until three fourths of the year is over before they change, but yes we do.

## Appendix C

## CODING SYSTEM FOR BELIEF INTERVIEWS

Reading

Basal

Grouping

Teacher's Expectations for Students

Skills/Phonics

Environment

Age

Student Reading

Popularity

Writing

Types of Writing

Assessment

Student Writing

Mechanics

Spelling

Sharing

Writing Process

Reading/Writing

Retention

Teacher's View

Parents' View

Child's View

Maturity

Age