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Grade retention : its impact on students

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Grade retention : its impact on students

Abstract

Grade retention has been a heated topic in education for a number of years. Research has shown there are a variety of factors that put students at greater risk for retention. While studies found some students who were retained showed academic improvement, others did not. Retention was also found to have a negative impact on social and emotional adjustments. Students were more successful when retention was paired with additional programs. Schools need to aggressively implement programs to eliminate the need for retention. Principals and teachers must connect research to classroom practice.

Grade Retention: Its Impact on Students

A Graduate Review
Submitted to the
Division of Elementary Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

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Abstract

Grade retention has been a heated topic in education for a number of years. Research has shown there are a variety of factors that put students at greater risk for retention. While studies found some students who were retained showed academic improvement, others did not. Retention was also found to have a negative impact on social and emotional adjustments. Students were more successful when retention was paired with additional programs. Schools need to aggressively implement programs to eliminate the need for retention. Principals and teachers must connect research to classroom practice.

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Introduction

Grade retention affects many students each school year. "Every year approximately 2.3 million American students are held back ('retained') in their grade" (Dawson & Rafoth, 1991, p. 1). This number is on the rise. "Tougher academic standards have led to an increase in school retentions. This discrepancy between research and results and present practice deserves attention" (Nikalson, 1987, p. 340). As retention rates rise, teachers need to find ways to help their students become successful.

Purpose

Educators and parents need to make informed decisions about their child's' education. These decisions, including retention and other academic alternatives, are important to student success and should be research-based. This review of literature provides information to help educators better understand grade retention and its ramifications. Using research to guide retention practices will provide students with the best chance of success.

However, research related to grade retention provides mixed conclusions. Cunningham and Thompson (2000) reported: Advocates of retention have maintained that it sends a message to all students that weak effort and poor performance will not be tolerated, and that it gives lagging students an opportunity to get serious and get ready for the next grade. Opponents have argued that retention discourages students whose motivation and confidence are already shaky, and that promoted students gain an opportunity to advance through the next year's curriculum, while retained students go over the same

ground and thus fall farther behind their advancing peers. (p. 1)

Educators and administrators need to use research to make the best educational decisions for each student.

Definition of Retention

The goal of retention is to give students who are not ready for promotion an extra year to develop appropriate academic skills. "Grade retention is the practice of requiring a student who has been in a given grade level for a full school year to remain at that level of a subsequent school year" (Jimerson, 2001, p. 1). Grade retention is aimed at students who need the extra boost in their academic and social skills.

Research Questions

This review of literature focuses on three important questions related to grade retention:

1. What are the risk factors for students who are identified as candidates for retention?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of grade retention?
3. What are alternatives to grade retention?

Methodology

Sources of Information

The ASK ERIC and Educational Full Text databases were used to identify articles for this review. Additional full text articles were printed from internet sources. Other articles were obtained from the Rod Library at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls.

Criteria for Selecting Articles

Articles for this review were selected based on their

ability to empower educators to improve student success through the use of grade retention. Articles were selected from a variety of educational journals. Information was gathered from many different authors. The credentials of the authors were examined to ensure only credible data was included in this review. The date of publication was the final criteria used in the selection of articles. Only articles published in the last fourteen years were included.

Analysis and Discussion

Risk Factors

Research has identified several predictors that put students at-risk for retention. Risk factors for grade retention range from family issues to student characteristics. Educators need to keep these factors in mind when considering retention for their students.

Family life is a risk factor that may lead to retention. The educational level of parents has a big impact on their perceptions of their children. McCoy and Reynolds (1999) state:

Children are also more likely to be retained when their parents view them as being less capable. When children are rated as less capable by their parents, expectations of success decline; consequently, teachers' recommendations for retention often go unchallenged and alternatives to retention are not pursued. (p. 274)

When family expectations are lower, students are more likely to be unsuccessful in school. These students are easy targets for grade retention. Uneducated parents are more likely to side with the teacher rather than stand up for their child.

Gender is another factor that puts students at risk for

grade retention. Males are retained much more frequently than females. "Nationally, by high school, the retention rate for boys is about ten percentage points higher than girls" (Cunningham and Thompson, 2000, p. 2). Boys tend to struggle more than girls in school. Foster (1993) reported "...in 1982, 29.9 percent of males by the age of 13 were below their expected grade level compared to 21.9 percent of females" (p. 6). This study demonstrated that in some cases boys are academically lower than girls. Classroom environments should provide all students with an opportunity to be successful.

Race also contributes to students being identified for grade retention. Foster (1993) reported "...in 1982, 38 percent of African American children were overage for grade level by the age of 13 as compared to 23.4 percent of white children" (p. 5). These statistics can be traumatic to minority students and parents. As the number of minority students being retained climbs, so does the number of minority students being separated from their peer group.

When considering grade retention, the age of the student can be a determinant. In kindergarten and first grade, the youngest children are more likely to be held back. Peel (1992) reported on the teachers' views of student retention. Few teachers specifically indicate age as a reason for retention, but data shows that date of birth impacts both retention rates and teacher's views of readiness. Shepard and Smith (1986) stated "... we also found that first graders who were in the youngest three months of their class scored on average at the 62nd percentile in reading compared to the oldest three month children who were at the 71st percentile" (p. 79). This research implies that age is a big factor in

teachers recommending retention.

Students who have frequently moved from school to school are another population of students who are at high risk for retention. Rumberger (2002) stated "...one national study of third-grade students found that frequent school changes were associated with a host of problems, including nutrition and health problems, below grade-level reading scores, and retention in grade" (p. 1). Rumberger also states that these students have many social problems and can not adjust to the pressures of new districts.

Retention is an issue for students who are unable to meet classroom expectations. "The students most targeted for retention are those who teachers feel have not mastered grade level material or who appear to be too young to be successful in the next grade" (Dawson and Rafoth, 1991, p. 1). Teachers may turn to retention when students are not successful in the classroom.

In summary, the majority of students fall into one or more of the risk factors identified above. Although retention is sometimes based on academic needs, the age and gender of a student may also play a role. Family issues and race are additional issues involved in retention.

Advantages of Student Retention

Few studies provide specific advantages of grade retention. Furthermore, when retention was successful, it was often paired with other supportive programs. Retention should be carefully monitored in order to create success for the students. Cunningham and Thompson (2000) reported:

A few well-designed studies have found that retained students do better academically and feel better about

themselves and about school during the first three years after retention. Consistent with the Chicago findings reported here, the biggest advantage was found in a district that identified students early, attempted to avoid retention through remediation, and gave special assistance to retained students. (p. 2)

Interventions are important for retention to be successful.

Retained students are just as likely as non retained peers to obtain an acceptable score on achievement tests.

Foster (1993) stated:

Holmes also examined the characteristics of children who participated in retention studies showing beneficial results. He found that the children were systematically more able than a traditional population; that is, all children, both retained and promoted, scored average or above average on standardized achievement measures. (p. 3)

For some children, retention allowed them to keep pace with their new peer group.

Research has shown immature students benefit from retention. "Scott and Ames reported that children retained due to immaturity, as measured by the Gesell School Readiness Test, experienced statistically significant improvement in academic performance as measured by grades" (Foster, 1993, p. 4). After repeating a year, young students obtained better grades.

Retention is most advantageous following a child's first year in school. "If retention might be expected to have benefits, it is in kindergarten. Children enter with widely varying maturity and background and are less likely to be

aware of the stigmatizing effects of being retained" (House, 1991, p. 41). Kindergartners who repeat a year suffer less consequences and benefit more from retention.

Although there are few advantages of retention, teachers still utilize it. "Retention rates are on the rise despite research demonstrating that the practice is not effective" (Mantzicopoulos and Morrison, 1992, p. 183). Teachers recommending grade retention should feel confident that it will provide a positive impact on student success. "For grade retention to be an effective educational policy, it must be shown to benefit children more than grade promotion or any other alternative program" (Reynolds, 1992, p. 101). Before recommending retention, educators must examine all the alternatives and decide if retention is the best option for the student.

Disadvantages of Student Retention

The majority of research studies found grade retention to have negative effects on students. These negative effects include academic achievement, social adjustments, attitude toward school, self concept, drop out rate, and cost. Teachers need to consider these disadvantages before recommending students for retention.

Students who have been retained do not make significant gains. Foster (1993) reported:

According to Smith and Shepard (1989), only small achievement gains were demonstrated by the retained groups after a retention year (less than 8 percentile points). Therefore, if the goal of retention is to enhance academic achievement, implementation fails to realize this goal. (p. 3)

Grade retention is not effective at increasing student achievement.

As well as not improving student achievement, retained students fall behind promoted classmates. Shepard and Smith (1990) stated "...children who repeated a grade were worse off than their socially promoted counterparts by about one-third of a standard deviation" (p. 346). These statistics should cause educators to pause and consider the ramifications of retention.

When achievement gains were noted, researchers warn the effects are not long lasting. Phelps, Dowdell, Rizzo, Ehrlich, and Wilczenski (1992) found:

For example, Holmes (1989) conducted a mega-analysis of 63 studies rigorously selected by variable and sample size criteria and found pronounced negative effects of retention on academic achievement. The analysis indicated that initial academic gains all but disappeared within two years among retained students. (p. 117)

Over time, the academic gains of retained students faded.

Although academic gain is often the reason for retention, research shows this is an unrealistic expectation. "In short, research has demonstrated that retention does not, on average, afford retained students a lasting academic or social advantage, nor does it appear to be an effective remediation strategy" (Meisels & Liaw, 1993, p. 70). As well as continuing to struggle academically, these students may have trouble coping with social relationships too.

Since peer groups are so important to students, social adjustment is a concern when recommending retention. "One of

the arguments against retention is that it has a negative impact on social relationships. When children repeat a grade, they are removed from their familiar peer group and placed in an unfamiliar one" (Connell and Pierson, 1992, p. 302). Students who are retained are forced to establish friendships within a new peer group.

Along with social adjustment, attitude towards school can be affected by retention. "On average, Holmes found that retained students do more poorly than matched controls on follow-up measures of social adjustment, attitudes toward school, behavioral outcomes, and attendance" (Shepard and Smith, 1990, p. 85). Students who are retained have a more negative attitude towards school than classmates who are promoted.

A student's self concept is affected by retention. Nason (1991) stated:

The effect of retention on a child's self-concept has been a topic of continued interest. Self-concept is strongly correlated with a student's scholastic and academic abilities, and contrary to popular belief, children do recognize that they are not making normal progress. (p. 302)

When students struggle academically, their self-concept is lower, this is compounded when students are retained.

Research findings show that retention can lead to students dropping out. House (1991) stated "... the most astounding negative evidence is that failing a grade is strongly associated with dropping out of school later" (p. 41). With drop out rate on the rise, closely looking at the effects of retention is important. Natale (1991) claims

retention may make a difference in rare occasions, but for the most part it is demoralizing and disruptive and it results in dropouts. A large number of retained students end up dropping out of high school. Roderick (1994) reported:

The strength of the association between grade retention and school dropout is impressive. In this study of one cohort of public school youths, nearly 80 percent of students who repeated a grade dropped out of school compared to only 27 percent of those who were never retained. (p. 730)

Almost eighty percent of retained students dropped out of school. This is a scary statistic that warrants attention from educators.

Cost is a factor in grade retention. "The practice of student retention is very expensive in terms of time, effort, and financial outlay" (Niklason, 1987, p. 341). Over time, retention creates a big deficit. "The annual cost to school districts of retaining 2.4 million students per year is nearly 10 million dollars" (Shepard and Smith, 1990, p. 86). Ten million dollars is a huge amount of money to spend on a practice that has not been proven to be effective.

Grade retention has many disadvantages. Few academic gains are obtained by non promoted students. When academic gains were noted, these gains quickly faded over time. Retention causes students to struggle with peer relations, their attitudes toward school, and their self concept. A school's costs and the student drop out rate rise when retention is used.

Alternatives to Retention

Educators have tried to determine ways to support

students besides retention. Some of these interventions include early childhood programs, engaging curriculum, summer school, before and after school programs, adding additional teachers to help with students who are failing, putting instructional aides in regular classrooms to help with targeted children, no-cost peer tutoring, and additional programs to enhance learning. Research for these interventions show positive achievement gains for many students.

One alternative to grade retention is successful early childhood programs. Holloman (1990) clearly defines a successful kindergarten program:

The key to a successful kindergarten program, one that meets the needs of all children, are the words developmentally appropriate. The idea of a developmentally appropriate activity has two dimensions: Is this activity suitable for a child this age, and is this activity right for this individual child? (p. 14)

Creating a classroom that is successful for all students is complicated, but researchers claim it is imperative for students to succeed. The success of a student in their beginning years of school can set the pace for the rest of their lives.

Quality instruction involving higher level thinking skills better prepares students for academic success. "There is reason to believe that struggling students need a more inspired and engaging curriculum, one that involves them in solving meaningful problems, rather than repetitive by-rote drills on basic skills" (Shepard and Smith, 1990, p. 86). An engaging curriculum produces more successful students

reducing the need for retention.

In addition to implementing early childhood programs and creating challenging curriculum, there are a variety of interventions schools can implement to assist students. "Remedial help, before and after school programs, summer school, instructional aides to work with target children in the regular classroom, and no cost peer tutoring are all more effective than retention" (Shepard & Smith, 1990, p. 85). Remedial help can be offered in a variety of ways. Teachers and students can assist children who are failing. "Unlike retention, each of these solutions has a research base showing positive achievement gains for participating children over controls" (Shepard and Smith, 1990, p. 86). Schools need to think about providing funds and staff for these alternatives to retention. Research supports the effectiveness of these programs.

Struggling students may require more instruction from teachers. Natale (1991) "... experts generally agree more individual attention must be paid to children-perhaps even having teachers draw up individualized programs for each child" (p. 18). Delivering individualized instruction to students will allow teachers to address each students instructional level.

Peer tutoring is an effective strategy to increase student achievement. It is also cost efficient for the school district. "Cross age peer tutoring, for example, where an average 5th grade student might tutor a 2nd grader who is behind in math, shows learning gains for both the target students and the tutors" (Shepard and Smith, 1990, p. 86). This strategy is a benefit for both children.

Students who are not successful with the minor alternatives listed above may require more serious interventions. Reynolds (1991) stated:

The following alternatives to retention are worthy of serious consideration as well as empirical verification: 1) Promotion with traditional remediation services; 2) Promotion conditioned on successful participation summer school; 3) Promotion with innovative special services such as individualized instruction, peer tutoring, and greater parent involvement; 4) Ungraded or partially graded elementary school program. (p. 118)

For some students, promotion plus an intense intervention is the best option.

A number of programs have been formed to help students succeed without being retained. Dawson and Rafoth (1991):

The Reading Recovery Program, developed first in New Zealand but now being implemented here in the United States, identifies at-risk students in first grade and employs intensive instruction to catch them up to their peers. Studies at Ohio State University have found that 90 percent of the students participating in this program reach or exceed the class average within 15 to 20 weeks- and never need remediation again. (p. 4)

Providing students with individualized instruction that targets particular skill deficits is effective. Reading Recovery students made significant academic gains and more importantly were able to keep pace with their peers over time.

Another effective program is the Primary Mental Health Program. Dawson and Rafoth (1991) describe it as an early

intervention program designed for students who have social/emotional problems. In school, services are provided by a social worker, psychologist, and intensively trained paraprofessional. This team does individual and group activities and crisis intervention. This program has proved to help reduce behavior problems and increase school competencies.

There are a variety of alternatives to retention. To ensure student success, schools should provide developmentally appropriate early childhood programs and create curriculum that involves higher level thinking skills. Struggling students can receive additional support with the classroom or beyond the school day. As a last resort, students may qualify for highly individualized types of instruction.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Retention is an important educational issue. "Of all the major issues in education, grade retention represents one of the clearest examples of noncommunication between research and practice" (Meisels & Liaw, 1993, p. 69). Researchers have not formed a clear consensus on the use of retention. This is a problem for teachers and schools as they work with struggling students to provide a productive environment.

Jimerson (2001) stated:

There is a concern that rates of retention may increase. For example, as "standards" and "accountability" assumed greater emphasis in education, President Clinton (1998, 1999) called for an end to social promotion, which many educational professionals interpret as a directive to retain low-achieving

students. (p. 1)

Without a clear direction based on research, educators struggle with the decision to retain students.

There are many factors that put students at risk for retention. Some issues such as academic achievement and self concept truly warrant a teacher's attention. Other issues such as gender and race are not valid in determining a student's eligibility for grade promotion. Reynolds (1992) comments:

Boys, poor and minority children, children who attend urban metropolitan schools, and misbehaving children are more likely to be retained than similarly performing grade-level peers. These findings suggest that retention policies are inconsistently administered and may often work against children from the most disadvantaged homes and schools. (p. 102)

Retention has a significant impact on students lives and it should be implemented in rare circumstances. Social promotion should be based on quality data, not student characteristics. When students are retained for the right reasons, they make academic progress. Connell and Pierson stated: (1992)

It appears that whereas retention is not a cure-all for below grade-level academic performance, students whose academic performance suggests that they should be retained, and who are retained, perform better two or more years later than students with comparable performance who are promoted. (p. 305)

For some students, retention is a positive experience. Unfortunately, for other students, being retained is a nonproductive choice.

There is a large body of research to suggest there are many negative effects related to student retention. "In 1975, Jackson summarized available studies and concluded that, "there is no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties" (Shepard and Smith, 1987, p. 346). As well as not increasing student academic achievement, retention may cause students to struggle with social issues. Mantzicopoulos and Morrison (1992) stated "...there is no achievement benefit in retaining a child in kindergarten or first grade and, regardless of how well the extra year is presented, the child still pays an emotional cost" (p. 184). Students who have a negative retention experience may suffer life altering consequences such as dropping out of school. Holloman (1990) found:

The research indicated that children who repeat a grade are worse off than comparable children who are promoted, and the negative effect on achievement was greater than the negative effect on emotional and social adjustment. The long term consequences of adding a year to a child's schooling increased the probability of the child's dropping out in high school. (p. 14)

Students may suffer academic, emotional, and social consequences from being non promoted.

Since retention is so often nonproductive, educators need to examine other alternatives. Phelps, Dowdell, Rizzo, Ehrlich, and Wilcsenski (1992) stated:

School personnel continue to struggle with educating low-achieving students. What are school policy-makers to

do with children who do not meet minimum competency requirements and require significant intensive instruction if promoted? The question is not whether students with inadequate academic skills need modification of curricula and specialized instruction, but how best to implement these services. (p. 121)

Retention has been shown to be non effective and therefore alternatives need to be pursued.

Overall the research suggests retention has very few advantages and numerous disadvantages. Schools need to base retention policies on this information. Principals and teachers should be aware of the issues surrounding retention so they can make the best decisions for students.

Schools need to take a proactive approach to retention. Classroom activities should be age appropriate to meet the academic and social needs of the children. "Comprehensive, preventive interventions that promote scholastic and social competence beginning in early childhood are promising approaches for addressing the needs of children and would benefit from larger-scale implementation" (McCoy and Reynolds, 1999, p. 296). Schools need to mandate these practices for each and every classroom so that the success of every student is guaranteed. If educational institutions do not listen to research, they are putting students at risk for failure. "Educational professionals, researchers, and politicians reviewing the efficacy of grade retention on academic success would benefit from awareness of the literature addressing the association between grade retention and dropping out" (Jimerson, 2001, p. 7). Students who are retained are more likely to drop out. This is an important

point for schools to consider.

Principals can be an important link between research data and teachers. Therefore, it is the responsibility of principals to ensure classroom practice and school policy reflects this information. Dawson and Rafoth (1991) reported:

As the instructional leaders of their elementary and middle schools, principals are in a position to help change school policies regarding retention and to promote effective alternatives to retention. They can begin to do this, first of all, by making retention research available to teachers so that they may make informed decisions on behalf of the students they teach.

(p. 4)

Informed teachers are able to make better decisions for their students.

It may be necessary for schools to implement new approaches to improve student success. Dawson and Rafoth (1991) stated:

Mastery learning, adaptive education, team teaching, cooperative learning, peer-tutoring- these and other technologies can help students of all achievement levels make academic progress. Principals should do whatever they can to bring these tested and effective instructional technologies into their classrooms. (p. 5)

Principals need to provide educators with time, training, and support to learn and implement new strategies in their classrooms.

It is the teacher's responsibility to take advantage of training opportunities. "Teachers must act on good information in order to make wise decisions, while keeping

children's best interests in mind" (Foster, 1993, p. 2).

Quality instruction results from teachers combining their knowledge of research and the abilities of their students.

Thompson & Cunningham (2000) stated:

Sound decisions require multiple assessments. The decision to promote a student should not be made on the basis of a single test, and especially not a single administration of a single test. Standards developed by several professional societies condemn use of a single administration of a single assessment to make any high stakes decision, instead encouraging the use of several sources of evidence in making such decisions. Therefore, provisions should be made for students to take accountability tests more than once if necessary and for local educators to use additional evidence in making promotion decisions. (p. 3)

Assessments offer additional information about students.

Teachers need to be cautious when recommending retention. Foster (1993) summarizes:

Retention increases the variability of developmental levels in the classroom, rather than reducing it. Retention is highly correlated with the likelihood of dropping out of school. And, finally retention is discriminatory in that the poor, minorities, boys and younger, smaller children are more likely to be retained than others. (p. 6)

Retention itself is not a solution, it must be paired with supportive programs. Natale (1991) stated "...educators have suggested everything from smaller class sizes to more parent involvement to evaluating the curriculum to find out how well

it is suited to students at various age levels. But overall, experts generally agree more individual attention must be paid to children-perhaps even having teachers draw up individualized programs for each child" (p. 18). To ensure success, teachers must meet the individual needs of each student.

Grade Retention is an ongoing educational issue that warrants attention. Schools need to provide principals and teachers with research on this topic. Classroom instruction should reflect this body of knowledge.

Appendix

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