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Research on the effects of grade retention and its implications for educators

Richard Allen Krone
University of Northern Iowa

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Research on the effects of grade retention and its implications for educators

Abstract

Grade retention in the United States is an issue that has been with us since the 1840s. It is an issue that deals with the concepts of liberal student promotion standards vs. promotion based on the competency of strong minimum standards of achievement. Today after one hundred and forty-five years of discussion and debate the issue remains highly contested and emotional. Many research articles have appeared as well as reports supporting an opinion or describing local practices. The issue remains unresolved and volatile.

RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF GRADE RETENTION
AND
ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

A Research Paper
Presented to
the Department of School Administration
and Personnel Services
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Master of Arts in Education

by
Richard Allen Krone

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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education,

Norman McCumsey

7/16/83
Date Approved

Director of Research Paper

7/22/83
Date Approved

Robert Krajewski
Second Reader of Research Paper

Norman McCumsey

7/16/83
Date Received

Graduate Faculty Adviser

Robert Krajewski

7/22/83
Date Received

Head, Department of School
Administration and Personnel
Services

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Grade retention in the United States is an issue that has been with us since the 1840's. It is an issue that deals with the concepts of liberal student promotion standards vs. promotion based on the competency of strong minimum standards of achievement. Today after one hundred and forty-five years of discussion and debate the issue remains highly contested and emotional. Many research articles have appeared as well as reports supporting an opinion or describing local practices. The issue remains unresolved and volatile.

Grade retention in the United States costs taxpayers millions of dollars annually and affects hundreds of thousands of students. Grade retention, or nonpromotion, is the practice of placing a student who has been in a given grade level for one complete school year, back to repeat that grade level the following school year. The annual cost of grade retention in the 1971-72 school year was between 739 and 903 million dollars. Retention rates for this country as a whole are not published. Some states do not keep records of retention and those that do collect statistics keep them private. Through surveys in the year 1971-72 the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare estimated that 1,007,539 elementary and secondary students were retained.

Retention is practiced throughout the country. The rates of retention vary among states and between minority and nonminority students (Jackson, 1975). Jackson states, "The rates are particularly low in Minnesota, Oregon, and Utah; the 1971-72 rates in these states for minority and nonminority pupils respectively, were 0.7% and 0.4%, 0.7% and 0.5%, and 0.7% and 0.2%. In contrast the rates were particularly high in the District of Columbia (8.2% and 2.4%), Louisiana (7.9% and 3.6%), and Mississippi (9.3% and 4.8%)."

At the turn of the century Superintendent W. H. Maxwell, of the New York City Schools published material on retention which began to awaken the educational community to the conflict that existed in standards for nonpromotion. Some educators at that time were seen favoring very rigid achievement practices for promotion while other educators began believing in more liberalized views toward promotion. Ayres (1909) pointed out that nonpromotion had become synonymous with failure. Students not passed onto the next grade were considered dullards or failures. Educators that support tough achievement standards for promotion base their reasons on the following points (Coffield & Blommers, 1956):

1. If no minimum standards are maintained for promotion, children will lose respect for scholarship and the quality of their school work will degenerate,

2. Failure or the fear of failure leads to frustration which results in a thwarting development,
3. Individual differences are of such character as to make the imposition of a single minimum standard completely incompatible with the aim of universal education,
4. There is very little evidence to show that ultimate mastery of school work is enhanced as a result of grade retention,
5. A failed pupil represents an added operational cost which cannot be justified in terms of the negligible gain in mastery which accrues from repetition,
6. The imposition of minimum standards tends to increase pupil variability in the upper grades with respect to age, interests and physical and social maturity, and accentuates the problem of dealing with individual differences at this level.

Until the turn of the century retention rates in urban areas varied from 9 to 32 percent (Keyes, 1911). Various policies of promotion required students to master skills on grade level before being advanced. Since the turn of the century retention statistics have declined to a national average of 5.5 percent (Gorton & Robinson, 1970). Why does it appear that the attitudes on grade retention have become more liberalized? What effect does retention have on children? Would it not be true that if a student were

having difficulty at one grade level he would continue to have problems if promoted to the next level? Does the repetition of a grade level reduce the learning difficulties of a student? Does the literature on retention develop any valid conclusions?

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to discover if there was evidence to support grade level retention of students. Specifically what are the academic and social effects of nonpromotion on students?

The study attempted to answer the following question; Does research support the concept of nonpromotion in school?

Importance of the Study

Since the establishment of grade levels in the school systems of the United States there has been the inherent problem of placing slow students in a position to fail. Theoretically students had to master the course requirements at one grade level before being promoted. Instruction was set for the average student meaning that the student with a low I. Q. would certainly have difficulty. During the course of the 20th century a great deal of research was conducted on the problems of nonpromotion. Educators began using a system of continuous promotion where an attempt is made to keep students of like age together. Today in the decade of the 1980s a strong controversy over the education practice of nonpromotion and continuous promotion is being conducted. Due to declining achievement test scores a cry

for a "back to basics" movement and competency testing is being sounded. Educators must be aware of what the literature on retention has to say about its effects on students if they are to promote and conduct meaningful educational programs in their school districts.

Limitation of the Study

Jackson (1975) performed an exhaustive review of literature on retention and discovered the majority of studies were not empirical. He divided the body of literature into three groups. Group one studies compared students promoted under normal circumstances to students retained. Studies done in this fashion were found to be biased toward practicing continuous social promotion because they only examined students who were retained for academic or social adjustment problems. Research that formed the second group of Jackson's study was based on comparing students with themselves after retention. Lacking controls to counteract other factors that influence growth these studies tended to support grade retention. Experimentally designed studies made up the third group. Only three studies could be found that attempted controls. Investigators of these studies were; Cook (1941), Klene & Branson (1929), and Farley (1936). Since the early 50s little research on nonpromotion has been conducted. Readers must be aware that studies done on retention may be contaminated by researcher bias. Although much of the research done on nonpromotion may have external threats of validity it merits study by educators who need

to understand past practices of grade retention so they can plan for future student promotion policies.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Promotion Practices and Achievement

Studies that have been performed on achievement of retained students show that they do no better than students of like ability who are promoted. After Ayres reported in 1909 that 16 percent of the nation's students were being retained, educators became concerned as to what effect the practice of nonpromotion had on children. After seven years of study Keyes (1911) discovered that of children not promoted in a system of 5,000 students: 20 percent did better academically, 39 percent displayed no change, and 40 percent did worse than before retention. Buckingham (1926) found similar results. He studied the achievement of several thousand students who had not been promoted. Only 30 percent of the students retained actually did better academically after repeating a grade.

Grace Arthur (1936) conducted a study that compared sixty first grade students with that of nonrepeaters of the same mental age. Intelligence quotients of the subjects ranged from 56 to 117, with a median of 84. Of the sixty subjects nineteen were girls and forty-one were boys. The average repeater in the group studied learned no more in two years than did the average nonrepeater of the same age. Arthur asked if it might have been "wiser to postpone the teaching of reading until the individual was mature enough intellectually to profit by it." She did not find

evidence that proved retaining children was beneficial to academic growth. It was not possible to estimate how the subjects might have done if they had not been promoted.

In a study of first graders who were retained and matched with first graders who were promoted, Chansky (1964) found both groups continued to be underachievers. Sixty-three children in Ulster County, New York, were used as subjects of this study. Thirty children who might have been retained but were considered "good risks" were promoted to second grade. Thirty-three pupils were retained, twenty-six were boys and seven were girls. No attempts were made to affect the instruction during the school year. Classroom teachers were not made aware of the research being carried out. Significant differences were found on vocabulary and reading scales of the California Achievement Test favoring those promoted following a year's work.

Matching pairs of students continued to be a way to investigate how students might be affected if retained as compared to retention. Dobbs and Neville (1967) matched thirty pairs of first and second grade children using the following characteristics: "a) race, b) sex, c) socio-economic level, d) type of classroom assignment, e) age, f) mental ability, and g) reading achievement." Each matched pair of students were made up of a once-retained first grader and a never retained second grader. The

researchers compared the gains between the two groups and reading and arithmetic achievement scores.

The researchers discovered that both reading achievement gain and arithmetic achievement gain of the promoted group was significantly greater than that of the retained group. This study suggested that continued promotion would be more beneficial for students. From their study, Dobbs and Neville, suggested alternatives that could be used to keep students from being placed in jeopardy of retention. The suggestions included: "ungraded classes, achievement or ability grouping, remedial reading, and smaller class enrollment with teachers who believe in individualized instruction."

During the Depression Farley (1933) attempted to gather more information concerning the effect of retention upon academic achievement. Approximately 400 academically low students were included in this study using children in grades two through five. All children were administered intelligence tests and the Stanford reading and arithmetic test. Subjects in each group were matched on the basis of intelligence, mental age, and chronological age. At the end of the term one child was promoted and the other retained. Promoted groups showed greater achievement in all cases except one. Fourth grade repeaters did slightly better in arithmetic than did their counterparts.

Coffield and Blommers (1956) found from their research that slow learning children who repeat a grade and slow

learning children who are promoted perform at about the same level when their performance is measured in the same higher grade. "Superintendents of three hundred and two Iowa school systems,.. were asked to identify from pupils enrolled in grade seven, 1953-54, who had experienced failure once after second grade." Those students (147) were matched with a pupil who was a promoted classmate. The following is a summary of the findings:

1. Failed pupils typically gain approximately only six months in educational progress during the repeat year and still fail to achieve the norm for the grade involved.
2. Failed pupils typically gain approximately one year and three months in educational progress during the two years following failure and still fail to achieve the norm for the grade involved.
3. During the year following failure, the educational progress of failed pupils is typically about four to six months less than that of matching promoted pupils.
4. The educational progress of failed pupils during the two years following failure is not significantly greater than that made by promoted matches during the single year spent in the next higher grade.

These researchers believed from their findings that nonpromotion of students could be justified. However, it also appeared that there is no appreciable gain made by the

student retained as compared to the promoted student. It was felt by Coffield and Blommers that if the only purpose of retention is to gain educational achievement it might be hard to support in light of their findings.

Farley, Frey, and Garland (1933) found that students with low I. Q.s who were retained in more than one grade were not doing as well in their school work as children of the same ability who were kept with children their own age. Non promotion appeared to be more harmful than helpful.

In a study conducted in Long Beach, California, Klene and Branson (Bocks 1977) matched academically low functioning students who were retained in grade on the basis of sex, mental age, and chronological age. Half of the students were promoted and half were not. Based on achievement scores on standardized tests the researchers concluded that potential repeaters profited more academically from promotion than did students who were retained.

How does retention affect achievement in the language arts? Worth and Shores (1960) attempted to shed light on this question. Sixty-six low achievers who had been retained in third grade were matched with low achievers who had been promoted to fourth grade. The matching was based on sex, intelligence, chronological age, and achievement test scores from the California Achievement Test. In summarizing their findings the writers concluded, "the results of this study suggest that in a school system

where a relatively rigid system of grade placement exists low achievers in the language arts are likely to do as well when they are promoted as when they are not promoted." A better solution would appear to lie in the development of individualized instruction.

There is evidence that nonpromotion does not contribute to greater achievement, but is likely to have detrimental effects, including phases of work in which previous performance was adequate (Meussen, 1952). This writer questioned the assumption that students retained in a grade because of academic failure would show improvement as a result of their repeating. Meussen reviewed the records of all seventh and eighth grade students in Allegan County, Michigan, who had been retained. Students were retained in a grade if they received marks of D or F in two or more subjects. In comparing grades the repeaters earned the second time it was discovered that four out of five students still were not passing.

In 1948 the Phoenix School District Number One changed from a district that routinely failed students to a system of continuous promotion that tried to keep students of like age together. The reason this district went away from a rigid policy of achievement for promotion was due in part to "a large bilingual school population and a large group of underprivileged children who were held back because of low academic performance" (Hall & Demarest, 1958). It was felt that this rigid policy of grade promotion based

on academic achievement was harming the students physical, social, and emotional development. Hall and Demarest studied achievement scores of students from 1946-47 through 1955-56. The Iowa Every Pupil Achievement Test was administered every spring.

The average age of children in fourth grade was nine years and two months in 1955-56 compared with nine years nine months in 1946-47. The average age of sixth graders was eleven years two months in 1955-56; in 1946-47 it was twelve years and two months. Although the average ages of the students dropped the reading achievement scores did not decline at grade level over this ten year period. This study supported research of continuous promotion.

Saunders (1941) summed up an extensive survey of studies into the effects of nonpromotion upon school achievement as follows:

....it may be concluded that nonpromotion of pupils in elementary schools in order to assure mastery of subject matter does not often accomplish its objective. Children do not appear to learn more by repeating a grade but experience less growth in subject-matter achievement than they do when promoted. Therefore a practice of nonpromotion because a pupil does not learn sufficient subject matter in the course of a school year, or for the purpose of learning subject matter, is not justifiable.

Promotion Practices and Social-Personal Development

It is believed by many educators that schooling has a strong effect on the social and personal development of children. Social immaturity is a subtopic of this section. Immaturity is often suggested as the main reason for the retention of pupils. Literature relating to this topic tends to support the concept that retention may be harmful to the emotional growth of children.

Anfison (1941) conducted a study that tried to determine how personal and social development is affected by promotion policies. He matched 116 pairs of junior high students on school attendance, chronological age, sex, intelligence, and socio-economic status. One member of the matched pair had been promoted regularly and the other child had repeated some previous grade. The Symonds-Block Student Questionnaire and the Bell School Inventory were used to measure personality adjustment. About six thousand students were used in this study.

Over the years statements have often been put forth saying that failure is extremely destructive to a child because of damage to the child's personality with respect to retention. Anfison (1941) in his findings stated that the regularly promoted students were significantly better in their social and personal development. He suggested that the wisest educational plan "would be to set up a curriculum in which careful consideration would be given to individual differences." Pupils would work on materials

adjusted to their level of ability and rate of growth.

Sandin (1941) used tests, ratings, and interviews to study the social, behavioral, and emotional implications of retention. He discovered that nonpromoted children tended to choose friends from grades higher than theirs were identified by peers as children who associated with older kids, and were not chosen by peers as working partners. Nonpromoted slow progress students tended to think of their younger classmates as inappropriate companions. Teachers rated retained students less favorably than normally progressing students.

Sandin (1941) also reported, "children who had previously been failed said that their parents had been angry, that they had been spanked, or that they had been lectured on the need for studying." Mention was made by some nonpromoted students that failure was a negative topic thrown at them by siblings.

The question left by Sandin was, to what extent children who might have been retained according to grade standards, but who were actually promoted, show a better picture of adjustment than those who were held back? Goodlad (1954) attempted to find an answer to this question. One hundred children were selected from ten schools in one school system. The pupils were divided into two groups and attempts were made to balance the ratio of boys and girls who were nonpromoted first graders and the second group was made up of promoted second graders. Both groups

were matched for; "mental age, chronological age, achievement, and all children spending their second year in school."

This study suggested that repeating a grade is detrimental to social and personal development of boys and girls. Goodlad (1954) reported that the children promoted were rejected less by classmates for very best friends. Non-promoted students were accepted to some degree by classmates at the beginning of the year. As the year progressed classmates began to react negatively to the nonpromoted students, Goodlad recommended that schools use policies that accept continual progress and then provide for individual needs.

The trend of these studies continued to show detrimental effects to personal development of children during their educational progress. Morrison and Perry (1956) found that there was a low degree of social acceptance by children to nonpromoted students who were older. For his thesis Morrison studied 177 fifth and sixth grade children in Santa Barbara, California. The purpose of his paper was to discover what effects nonpromotion had on students with respect to age differences and acceptance by younger classmates. From analyzed data it was clear that average children were not well accepted by their peers in class.

Perry did a similar study in Sacramento, California. He studied 568 students in grades four through eight. Perry came to a similar conclusion, children who are older than their classmates have little opportunity for social

acceptance. These studies add to the body of evidence that claims a program of continual promotion would be more beneficial to the total development of the child.

Results of the majority of research done in the 30's, 40's, and 50's showed that nonpromotion is not good for the social and personal development of students. In 1968 a study of twenty-seven elementary students was conducted in Cheshire, Connecticut. Chase (1968) examined only those students who were retained on the basis of immaturity. She concluded that children who are required to repeat a grade because of immaturity demonstrate no emotional or social difficulties and may result in improved grades.

Finlayson (1977) in 1973-74 and 1974-75 conducted a study on the effect of nonpromotion on the self-concept of pupils in two suburban schools near Philadelphia. The sample during the first year included first grade students attending the selected schools. All first grade pupils (568) who had not been retained were included in the first year. The second year research focused on groups of non-promoted, borderline, and promoted pupils. Each group contained twenty-five students. These pupils' self-concepts were measured four separate times. The instrument used was the FACES Scale. The scale contained 18 questions about feelings toward family, school, friends, and self.

Over the testing period of the second year the non-promoted students continued to increase their self-concept scores significantly. Borderline and promoted students

dropped slightly but not significantly. As self-concept was reported to be satisfactory of all groups nonpromotion did not negatively affect the self-concept of the retained students.

White and Howard (1973) found that retention did affect the self-concept of students. Failure to be promoted calls attention to personal inadequacies as a student to parents, teachers, and peers. The authors conducted research on the following hypothesis: "Failure to be promoted will be associated with a negative self-concept among elementary students. Those students who have failed to be promoted more than once will have a more negative self-concept than those who have failed to be promoted only once."

The subjects of this study were 332 girls and 292 boys in sixth grade. The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale was used to measure self-concept, of the students studied 84 percent were never retained. The results proved students retained had lower self-concepts than students who hadn't been retained. Moreover, double repeaters had even lowered measured self-concepts.

A large part of a student's self-concept hinges on his ability to do well in academic achievement. Thomas and Paterson (1964) focused a study on self-concept of ability in school. The study tested three major hypothesis:

- 1, Self-concept of ability in school is significantly and positively related to academic performance of student,

2. Self-concept of ability in school is differentiated into specific self-concepts which correspond to specific subject areas in the school program.
3. Self-concept of ability is significantly and positively correlated with the evaluation that one perceives significant others to hold one's ability.

The subjects were 1,050 seventh grade students in an urban school system. It was discovered that even when I. Q, was controlled there was a significant and positive correlation between self-concept and performance of academic performance. The image held by school personnel concerning a student's academic performance does affect the child's self-concept.

Promotion Practices and Motivation

Since the turn of the century educators have worked to reduce the number of students being retained. Many different methods have been employed to reduce the number of failures in our public schools. Some educators feared that students would sense this continuous promotion policy as a signal to let up in their studies. It was believed by some that the threat of failure must be maintained to guarantee that children would continue to work hard. Viele (Goodlad, 1954) argued for the abandonment of continuous promotion programs, claiming that children would not put forth their best effort when they knew from the onset that they would be promoted at the end of the year.

Otto and Melby (1935) conducted a study to discover whether students threatened with retention throughout a semester would attain acceptable achievement levels as good as students who were told for a semester they would be in the next higher grade the following semester. This study involved 352 pupils and 18 classroom teachers in northern Illinois. The classes used for this research were taken just as they were found. Each teacher of an experimental group told their students several times during the semester that they would be promoted. Other than these announcements no alterations were made in the teaching situation. It was learned that students who were told they were going to be promoted did as well on achievement tests as did students who were threatened with failure.

Ernestine Godfrey (Bocks, 1977) conducted a study using retention as a motivator to maintain good achievement scores. This study used 1,200 students in grades six and seven. Again it was discovered that if students knew they were going to be promoted there was no sign of a drop in achievement scores.

Kowitz and Armstrong (1961) conducted a study of two schools A and B who had different retention policies. School A had a high retention rate of students. This school believed a student had to achieve near grade level to be promoted. School B had a more flexible promotion policy based on what it believed was in the best interest of the student academically and socially. It was found

that there was a larger group of students in school A with higher reading achievement scores than school B. When retention was used as a penalty for poor achievement, a larger proportion of students showed gains, and a smaller proportion showed no change. Upon further investigation the researchers compared the group of retained students from school A with a like group from school B who would have been retained in school A. Little difference was found in the reading achievement scores of these two groups. This lead Kowitz and Armstrong to conclude that the threat of retention caused higher achievement scores by students who would most likely not be retained but had no effect on students scores who were endanger of failing.

Promotion Practices and Teacher/Parent Attitude

School plays an important role in the total development of the child. In the school setting the person who has the greatest affect on the child would be the classroom teacher. Miller, Frazier, and Richey (1980) developed a survey instrument to assess teacher awareness of nonpromotion policy. The subjects of this study were 150 elementary, secondary, and special education teachers. Sixty-nine percent of all teachers indicated that they had requested a student be retained. Eighty-one percent of the teachers stated that their schools did not have a policy for retention. Most teachers felt that the individual child's self-concept and attitude toward retention should be considered in the nonpromotion issue. This study discovered that teachers

generally agreed that retention does not promote mastery of subject matter and it might damage a pupil's self-concept, yet most teachers surveyed favored retention. The conclusion was that teachers appear to practice retention even though most of the literature has shown very little benefit gained from nonpromotion.

A study by Caplan (1973) indicated that more than academic achievement may be considered when retaining girls. Subjects of this study were fifty students in grades one, two, three of an urban public school system. Half of the children were repeating a grade and the other half had been promoted. When report cards were compared girl repeaters had significantly more disruptive classroom conduct than promoted girls. Caplan concluded that teachers appear to decide whether or not to promote girls partly on the basis of behavior and not just achievement,

From Finlayson's (1977) study came answers to questionnaires from teacher and parental perspectives on grade retention. The results of these questionnaires are as follows:

Teacher Perspectives--

1. Approximately 75 percent of the pupils recommended for nonpromotion were viewed by their teachers as manifesting a positive self-concept prior to the fact of nonpromotion.
2. Teachers viewed the self-concepts of the children recommended for nonpromotion as either remaining

stable or becoming more positive during the first school year in every case,

3. Twenty-one of the 25 nonpromoted children were viewed by their teachers as manifesting a positive self-concept in the classroom after non-promotion.
4. Teachers viewed the self-concepts of the non-promoted children as either remaining stable or becoming more positive.

Parents Perspectives--

1. More than half of the responding parents stated that their child liked school more than he had the previous year,
2. More than half of the nonpromoted youngsters were viewed as going to school more easily than the last school year,
3. An overwhelming majority of parents viewed their nonpromoted child as being more confident and successful in school during the repeated school year.

Russell and others investigated the attitudes of parents and students toward retention (Meussen, 1954). Approximately 2,000 pupils from rural and urban California, and 1,200 parents were surveyed. About one third of the students had been retained. In general parents and students expressed favorable attitudes toward nonpromotion. Parents and students held positive thoughts for teachers. It was

reported that pupils who were retained and their parents held more critical opinions of the school. It was concluded that retention created a less favorable attitude toward school among parents of the nonpromoted.

Summary

Research studies reviewed in this chapter dealt with retention from different points of view. They indicated the following: a) there is little or no evidence to demonstrate that retention enhances academic achievement, b) early studies gave evidence that nonpromotion of students harms their social and personal adjustment, c) threat of retention does not motivate students to try harder to gain higher achievement scores, and d) teachers favor the use of retention even though the literature of retention seriously questions its benefits.

The bulk of research completed on retention took place in the 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's. There has been a reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade promotion is more beneficial than grade retention for children. Yet educators continue to practice a policy without benefit. Several researchers have suggested alternatives to retention. These options were: nongraded classes, smaller grouping using individualized instruction, and remedial reading programs.

Chapter 3

DISCUSSION

Evaluation of the Literature

Seventy years ago researchers began presenting the educational community with overwhelming evidence that retention has few if any positive values for children. Even though this is true many schools in America continue to practice policies of nonpromotion believing it ensures the immature will mature and students will try harder and be rewarded for their successful efforts. Perhaps the policy of failing a student is followed for one of the following reasons: 1) teachers lack knowledge or ability to individualize instruction, 2) maybe teachers, school administrators, and parents are unaware of what the literature has revealed, or 3) educators may not be aware of possible alternatives.

From the literature it is obvious that in this century the concept of continuous promotion has gained momentum. Percentages reveal that fewer students are being retained in the second half of the century than the first half. Still, in 1972 over one million students were retained at a cost of hundreds of millions of additional dollars to the American taxpayer. The argument over whether to retain or promote a child does not become a discussion of facts but more a discussion of ethics (Anderson, 1969). Educators in a position to make or influence promotion policies will have to base their

decisions on the following criteria: 1) available conclusions from research, 2) local school practices (past and present), and 3) community sentiment.

The studies reviewed support a conclusion that retention is not a viable procedure to use with academically low performing children. The evidence from research failed to support the belief that students can overcome low achievement scores if they are given a year to grow by using retention. Reports have demonstrated that in many cases after retention students either remain the same academically or actually exhibit lower achievement performance. Throughout the literature on academic achievement it was revealed that the retained student never achieves as well as matched students who were promoted.

With respect to social and personal growth it has been demonstrated that for the majority of students retention provides no positive emotional benefits! Studies pointed out that nonpromotion can cause low self esteem for the student failed. It was proven that regularly promoted students were significantly better in social and personal behavior. Retained students did not associate with their classmates but preferred to be with students of their own age and interests. Children who were not promoted had a low level of acceptance by their younger classmates and were not picked by the younger students to be their close friends.

Teachers and administrators, who have tried to use the fear of failure as a motivator for those students who have academic difficulties can arrest their threats. Studies performed on this topic refuted the idea that failure will cause the low achieving student to do better. Rather than threaten, many researchers have suggested educators should develop sound methods of meeting a student's individual needs.

Does research support the concept of nonpromotion in school? The answer to this question is no. From this review this researcher was unable to uncover a substantial body of evidence to justify the act of retention. Those educators who retain pupils do so on traditional practice and without valid information to support their position.

It was pointed out in the limitation of this study that much of the literature developed on this topic is subject to researcher bias and external validity threats. Given this criticism, this author believes it is very important to note that proponents of retention have not put forth a body of research to support their position. They have appeared to acquiesce to those researchers who oppose nonpromotion. Educators need to use alternatives to retention if they are to help students meet their unique individual needs.

Alternatives for Retention

What alternatives can be proposed for implementation in place of grade retention? Some of the more popular

suggestions from the review of literature were; 100% promotion plan, remedial reading, transition rooms, and non graded education. This author will briefly summarize these programs. It is hoped this information will encourage further investigation on the part of the reader.

The 100% promotion plan is not new. It has been promoted as an alternative since educators began wrestling with options to grade retention. The idea behind this plan is to promote everyone. Research has been used to support this plan. Proponents claim that students will fair no worse under this plan than retention since it has been proven there is very little or no gain in achievement scores of retained students as compared to promoted students. This policy is not popular with educators or this author. The problem with this alternative is that it only deals with the surface of a student's difficulties. It sets no real course of action to help the pupil overcome his academic inabilities.

One certain way of keeping children from failing would be to work with them individually. Classroom teachers have difficulty finding time to work with students on a one-to-one basis. Over the years a developing trend to help students was reached with the remedial reading room. In a remedial reading room a properly trained teacher can diagnose the individual needs of the student and provide materials for that student to improve his learning skills. Input from federal monies also provided for similar programs, such as learning disabilities and remedial math rooms. This type

of program allows a student to improve his weakness and remain with his peers. In the author's opinion this is one of the most beneficial programs educators can offer as an option to retention. In the long run it would be much more cost effective than retention.

The graded school organization has never worked as well as theory assumed it would. Childrens' learning rates differ so widely that it became a perplexing problem for educators when deciding who should be promoted and who should be retained. One of the most difficult children to place was the student who wouldn't benefit from promotion yet had skills that would keep him from benefiting from retention. Trying to solve this dilemma educators created the transition room. For example, if a kindergarten child was not ready for first grade but was to mature in social skills for kindergarten he would benefit in attending a class between these two grades. It was believed in creating this type of room that a child had time to mature. Due to a declining enrollment and additional cost there has been a decline of transition rooms over the last decade.

The nongraded school was developed as an organizational plan that was centered around the student. The nongraded school centers its curriculum to individual learner needs, allowing pupils to advance at a speed commensurate with their learning style. This program supports the concept of continual educational progress. No one needs to be viewed as a failure in this system. Anderson (1967) lists

seven conditions which characterize nongraded programs:

1. Suitable provisions are made in all aspects of the curriculum for each unique child,
2. Successive learning experiences of each child are pertinent and appropriate at the moment,
3. Each child is constantly under the right amount of pressure,
4. Success, with proper rewards, is assured for all learners under most circumstances,
5. Grade levels are absent along with promotion-retention policy,
6. A grading system consistent with the philosophy that each child is unique replaces the A-B-C-D-F report cards,
7. The teachers must do more sophisticated curriculum planning, evaluation, and record keeping,

Research studies before the 1970's conducted to evaluate nongraded programs were poor. Thus little research has been acquired to determine how effective this type of program might be. It is viewed by many theorists as the best alternative to the graded retention policy because it does the most to recognize the necessity of adapting the school to the child rather than the child to the school,

Suggestions for Further Study

This study reviewed the literature on grade retention to discover if there was a preponderance of evidence that supported the nonpromotion of students. The literature

concluded that there was no validity for retention, It should be noted that the major body of knowledge on retention is forty years old. New and more rigorously controlled research on retention is needed, Many social changes have taken place over the last four decades and it would be wise for educators to conduct studies on failure in light of these social changes, Moreover, research is needed to determine the true effectiveness of the aforementioned alternatives.

Chapter 4

CONCLUSION

The earliest schools in America had no grade levels. Teachers moved students along in their studies with respect to their growth in achievement. Graded organization of schools was first implemented in the United States by J. D. Philbrick in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1848 (Walker, 1973). The graded school was looked on as a solution to the inefficiencies of the one-teacher, one-room school. Graded structure lead to a definition of limits. It was assumed that students now had to master certain established criteria before they could be promoted to the next level, Passing a grade became equated with the concept that certain levels of knowledge and skills were mastered by the child.

By the turn of the century some educators began to realize the public schools had a high retention rate of pupils. Policies of nonpromotion were far from being standard. Reasons for nonpromotion differed from city to city, school to school, class to class. Retention was being inconsistently applied everywhere.

The first half of this century witnessed educators studying the effects of retention on achievement and student growth. In general studies concluded that retention was not in the best interest of the individual child. After retention most students do not show improvement in achievement scores or self-concept evaluations. Also it was

discovered that retention does not work as a motivator for those students most likely to be retained,

Did research support the concept that nonpromotion is beneficial to the child? The answer was no. Positive alternatives that allow a child to develop at his pace with respect to his learning style are needed. Educators need to develop school systems that promote success not failure. Schools need to be fitted to the student.

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