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A review of the research concerning grade retention of elementary students

Abstract

Grade retention of elementary students has long been a topic of controversy. Parents, teachers, administrators and students have had varying degrees of concern with this issue. At this particular time in history, with our present emphasis on the accountability of the educational system, we again see a focus of attention on this aspect of school management.

A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH CONCERNING GRADE RETENTION
OF ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Michael J. Schaffner

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This research paper by: Michael J. Schaffner

Entitled: A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH CONCERNING GRADE RETENTION
OF ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

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

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Grade retention of elementary students has long been a topic of controversy. Parents, teachers, administrators and students have had varying degrees of concern with this issue. At this particular time in history, with our present emphasis on the accountability of the educational system, we again see a focus of attention on this aspect of school management.

Six areas concerning grade retention will be addressed in this paper:

1. Possible academic advantages or disadvantages of grade retention.
2. Type of student that seems to benefit most from retention.
3. Type of student that benefits least from retention.
4. Effect of retention on the student's self-concept.
5. Timing of retention of the student in relation to grade level.
6. Criteria that may be used in deciding on the retention of a student.

Possible Academic Advantages or Disadvantages of Grade Retention

There are many possible reasons for retaining a child but according to Nikalson (1984) "The main reasons for retaining children continue to be to remedy inadequate academic

progress and to aid in the development of students judged to be emotionally immature" (p. 487).

In reference to academic progress Kerzner (1982) reported that retention had significantly improved the academic performance of the forty-one children in the first three grades and had not made a significant change in the performance of the fifteen fourth and fifth graders studied. Williams (1985) also found that academic performance was increased through retention mainly in the primary grades. The research indicates that if any academic advantage is to be gained it is at the primary level.

More results from the research indicates more academic disadvantages and advantages. Nikalson (1984) says, "Academically most children who have been retained have not profited, but have actually experienced less growth following retention than have matched children who have been promoted" (p. 285). Finally Holmes (1983), after measuring retained student achievement in reading, language arts, and arithmetic says:

If, as is the purported 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 attempting to catch up. (p. 6) Walker (1984) found "a deterioration in achievement and I.Q. from fourth through sixth grade in children who had been retained in the first or second grade as compared with nonretained children" (p. 2). He also states that seventy percent to ninety percent of high school dropouts had failed one or more grades in the elementary school.

Walker maintains that until definitive research exists to support retention it seems inadvisable to retain children at all. He states further "if unavoidable, it should be done at the kindergarten level when factors such as peer relations and academic expectations are not yet clear and there is more time to remediate any potentially negative effects" (p. 5).

Finally, there is some evidence to support an academic advantage when a student is retained because of immaturity. Johnson (1984) states "While most studies show that grade retention does not bring significant gains in achievement, results are sometimes more positive when students have been retained because of immaturity" (p. 67).

Type of Student That Seems to Benefit Most From Grade Retention

While it appears that there is little support for retention of any students, there does seem to be some research

that indicates a certain group of students might find some benefits in being retained. Stiles (1983) points out that:

The identification of students who would benefit retention must be made on an individual basis. The studies reviewed offered no definitive evidence that a strict policy of social promotion or retention is preferable. No rigid policy will suffice when the multitude of variables affecting student achievement is considered. (p. 40)

Stiles goes on to list several factors which seemed to be associated with successful retentions:

1. Parental support for the retention
2. Chronological or developmental immaturity
3. Normal intelligence
4. Good social and emotional adjustment
5. Average academic skills
6. Average achievement between 1.0 and 1.9 years below grade level and a progress rate less than half of normal (first grade, 0.3 years below level, second grade, 0.7 years below level). (p. 40)

More criteria for a successful retention are listed by King (1984):

The child who benefited most from retention was a normal child--one who had no abnormally low intelligent quotient, no emotional disturbance or perceptual handicap, but who

was not as mature for school work as his/her chronological age would indicate" (p. 96).

It appears then that grade retention tends to be most beneficial for students who are low achievers and immature. Unfortunately retention frequently occurs for children with learning, behavior, and health problems. It is the responsibility then of the school instructional staff to correctly and effectively decide which children would benefit most from grade retention.

Type of Student That Benefits Least From Retention

Research indicates that there are five types of students who are least likely to benefit from retention. They are described as (a) the slow learner, (b) the learning disabled child, (c) the child with a history of delinquency, (d) the child with a transient history, and (e) the child with emotional and/or neurological problems.

Slow learners are defined as children who have I.Q. scores which fall into the eighty to eighty-nine range and who learn at a slower pace than brighter children.

Learning disabled children are described as children of average intelligence who have special learning difficulties which interfere with the attainment of average levels of achievement. Retention is ineffective for these children, for it fails to address the necessary alterations in the

instructional techniques provided and in the increased time required by these students.

Delinquent children rarely benefit from retention. Many studies have suggested a strong correlation between delinquency and little success in school.

The transient student can not be expected to benefit from retention because the transiency is likely to continue.

The child with emotional and/or neurological problems will almost never benefit from retention. If a child is unable to concentrate on the material, is distractable, or overactive, retention will be of little benefit. Repeating the same material will not rid the child of his/her emotional and/or neurological problems.

Effects of Retention on the Student's Self-Concept

Much has been written concerning this aspect of retention. While it seems evident that there is some conflicting research on this topic, most of the literature seems to indicate that retention does not have as negative an effect on children as some opponents believe.

On the negative side, a survey reviewed by Yamamoto (1980) found that children in grades four through six rank being retained as a highly stressful event. It was ranked third out of twenty items on a Child Stress Scale--just below losing a parent and going blind (p. 6-8).

On the positive side, Nikalson (1984) found that "measured changes in personality following retention have not been dramatic" and "Parents and teachers have been of the opinion that retention does not damage a child's self-concept" (p. 492).

In a study of promoted and nonpromoted students Finlayson (1977) found that "after nonpromotion, the nonpromoted group of pupils continued to increase their self-concept scores significantly, while scores of the borderline and promoted groups dropped slightly, but not significantly, during the second year of the study" (p. 206). Finlayson offers as a possible explanation of his findings the fact that the self-concepts of promoted pupils may become less positive as they progress through the primary grades. He reasons that as the promoted students interact with their environment more, they develop a more realistic self-image than they had earlier. The retained pupils, on the other hand, gained in self-concept, perhaps because they felt more competent within a more familiar environment (p. 206).

Another researcher from the Gesell Institute of Human Development, Louise Bates Ames (1981), supports retention as not having an adverse affect on self-concept. "Both teachers and parents report that repeating is usually not accompanied

by emotional or social difficulties and, in fact, tends to result in improved grades" (p. 37).

Bossing and Brien (1980), also find that much informed opinion in research contradicts the common belief that immature children's self-concepts are harmed by retention and the equally common belief that threat of retention acts as a motivating force.

Timing of Retention of the Student in Relation to Grade Level

There is general agreement in the research that timing of retention is crucial. Stiles (1983) found:

The earlier in a student's career the retention occurs, the more effective it will be academically and less damaging socially. Students in the primary grades gained more from retention than those in the upper elementary. First grade students showed greater gains than second and third grade students. (p. 40)

In a study sponsored by the National Institute of Education (1981), researchers found that "Among the findings of recent studies are that retention appears to have a beneficial effect on students in the elementary grades and that the self-concept of promoted and retained students are virtually the same, again in the elementary grades" (p. 41). Please note the reference to a positive effect on

self-concept. Ames (1981) mentions another important factor concerning timing--behavior age:

Using a child's behavior age as the basis for placing him in school is a parent's best bet. If a mistake has been made, and the child has no special academic or emotional problems which must be dealt with in more complicated ways, repeating is the parents' very best solution. And if it must be done, the earlier, the better. (p. 37)

It appears that the optimum time for retention is below third grade. If a student is a candidate for retention after third grade perhaps other alternatives need to be explored. These might include pull-out programs such as Chapter I for reading deficiencies or even Resource Room support for the learning disabled.

Criteria That May Be Used in Deciding on Retention

There are two publications that have appeared that are designed to help educators decide between promotion and retention for individual students. Lieberman's (1980) "decision-making model for in-grade retention" is simply a list of factors that should be considered before making a decision to promote or retain. He says, "The factors themselves are not weighted because it is the individual student who must give weight to the factors" (p. 40).

The factors include child factors, child's attitude toward promotion; family factors such as transiency, language spoken in the home, and age of siblings; and school factors such as the attitudes of principal and teacher toward retention and availability of personnel and special education services.

Light's Retention Scale is quite similar to Lieberman's list except that each of nineteen factors is scored and a composite total is computed. The final score is to be used as a guideline only.

This Retention Scale has been the recipient of some criticism. Sandoval (1982) found that totals from this scale along with measures of reading achievement, mathematics achievement, and self-concept taken at the time first grade nonpromotion was being considered, were used to predict nine separate outcome measures of academic, emotional, and social status at the end of the repeated first grade. In none of the stepwise regressions did the Light total add to the prediction of outcome in the children repeating the first grade. Sandoval concluded "The previous study (Sandoval, 1980), and the present one together indicate that the psychometric use of Light's Retention Scale is totally untenable" (p. 313).

It is important to note that there is no magic formula for determining to promote or retain a student. Many factors

must be considered with input from all parties involved assimilated into the process.

It is also important to note that there are alternatives to retention. Walker (1984) makes these major suggestions:

1. Develop good kindergarten screening programs to prevent the necessity of retention.
2. Provide sufficiently flexible programming in your schools to offset the need for retention and to account for individual differences particularly at the kindergarten and first grade levels.
3. If retention is unavoidable, do it early or not at all.
4. Collect local data on retained or retainable children and develop local norms using factors identified in the research.
5. View the retention prone child as you would any other exceptional child, i.e., provide the same thorough identification, follow-up and due process policies to these children. (p. 5).

Summary

There does not appear to be total agreement in the research concerning grade retention. This is especially magnified when discussing academic advantages and disadvantages. One must assume then much more research needs

to be done, although this is an emotional issue and perhaps a consensus may never be reached because of built-in biases.

Perhaps alternatives other than grade retention need to be explored more thoroughly. As mentioned previously, pull-out programs such as Chapter I and Resource Room support would be more appropriate for some students. These programs coupled with individualized remedial help would probably be a viable alternative to retention.

It is important to remember that in our system of "mass education" that we try to keep in mind the individual student's needs. This especially becomes important in our present climate with "accountability" the watchword. Some students may benefit from retention but educators should not be discouraged from doing this because of accountability guidelines. Educators must always concern themselves with the student's best interests first.

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