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The Effects of Grade Retention on Student Achievement

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**Hypothesis:** If students are retained then it will affect their academic, social, and psychological achievement in a negative way.

**Introduction**

One of the most important controversial policies in education today is the decision to retain students on the basis of their performance on standardized tests (Stone & Engel, 2004). With the push for high educational standards, more kids are facing the possibility of retention because they are not achieving test scores required for promotion (Schwab, 2004). There are arguments against education rules such as the No Child Left Behind Act in the United States which is meant to end social promotion, the practice of graduating failing students to the next grade to keep them with their peers. There are disadvantages of holding a child back and there are a number of states which tie grade promotion to performance on standardization tests (Goodman, 2004). The stakes are high for both the policy makers, who often champion its ability to whip low performing schools and students into shape and for the kids themselves, whose lives can be forever changed by promotion policies and legislation. The implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act has resulted in an upsurge in the retention of children who score poorly on achievement tests (Leckron & Griffith, 2006). The practice of making retention decisions on the basis of the results of a single test — called “high-stakes testing” — is widely condemned in scientific literature. Test authors generally advise that their tests are not adequate for high-stakes decisions (Goldberg, 2005). Grade retention has become increasingly controversial since the early 2000s education initiatives such as No Child Left Behind have pressed schools to meet certain standards defined by scores on standardize test (Alexander,
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2002). Retention is the practice of requiring a child to repeat a particular grade. It is often presented as the answer for poor academic or behavior performance in school. Students may be retained in a grade for a number of reasons including if they are judged not to have the academic or social skills to advance to the next grade (Bielick & Chapman, 2003). Retention is often used as a means to raise educational standards. Many believe that repeating a grade is an effective remedy for students who have failed to master basic skills. Students are taught the same information, the same kind of way, during their retained year. No modification are made and the students are expected to learn the skills the second time in a particular grade. However, when we look at something like retention in grade, there is a major incongruity between purpose and results (Brulle, 2005).

Thirty years ago first grade was for learning how to read. Now, reading lessons start in kindergarten and kids who “don’t crack the code” by the middle for the first grade get extra help. Instead of story time, finger painting, tracing letters and snack, first grades are spending hours doing math worksheets and sounding out words in reading groups. In some places, recess, music, and art are being replaced by writing exercises and spelling quizzes. Kids as young as six years of age are tested and retested again-some every ten days or so to ensure they are making sufficient progress. After school, there is homework, and for some, educational videos, more workbooks and tutoring, to help give them an edge (Tyre, 2006). In middle and high school the same things takes places from no longer have a break and continuing to take standardized test such as Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) and End of Course Test (EOCT) and Georgia High School Graduation Test. These test all play a vital role in each child’s life. The all starts with the primary schools and continues on until graduation.
Review of Literature

The Impact of Retention

The value of retaining low-achieving students is strongly debated among educators, politicians, and parents. Advocates of retention logically point out that promoting a child regardless of achievement puts an unprepared child out into the world. They maintain that holding a child back in the early grades can boost readiness and self-esteem by improving the child's basic skill foundation. In later grades, some hold that retention can be a consequence for low achievement, forcing students to be accountable for their academic work (Frey, 2005).

The latest efforts in reform and accountability, most of which are replays of misguided efforts enacted in the early 1980s, include once again the use of required minimum standardized test scores to end the practice of social promotion. Greater reliance is being placed on the use of single test scores in making all or a large part of the retention decision, despite the overwhelming consensus in the educational literature that retention of elementary and middle school students often produces negative results in academic achievement.

Recent research suggests that holding kids back is rarely helpful. In fact, it's often detrimental. A most recent report found that after one year, third graders who are held back aren’t better off compared with students who squeak by into the next grade. Sixth graders who repeated the grade fared worse than those barely allowed to advance, and almost 78 percent of eighth graders who were held back dropped out of school altogether. Young people disengage from school because they're learning the same thing in the same way over and over again. Nineteen states currently tie grade promotion to performance on standardized tests, and others are aggressively pushing to hold back more students despite the growing body of research showing the practice doesn't work. Policymakers need to find another solution. These are
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students with serious deficits. No one wants to advocate promoting someone who doesn't have the skills (Goodman, 2004).

Grade retention is a practice in which a student who has completed a particular grade of schooling is compelled to remain in that same grade in the subsequent school year. Grade retention rates in the United States are generally high, and though there are few estimates of retention for the national population, sources place the figure at somewhere between five and ten percent of students retained annually. Retention has been promoted by its advocates as the antidote for "social promotion"-the practice of advancing students even when they do not meet the required skills of their current grade. Why, proponents argue, let failing students continue to the next grade where, absent the requisite skills, they will be even more likely to fail? Critics counter, however, that there is no evidence that grade retention helps students in the long run and only mixed evidence that it helps even in the short run. Moreover, grade retention is one of the more expensive educational policies available and may come at significant cost to students' self-esteem and educational trajectories (Hill & Weiss, 2005).

The topic of retention has recently received extensive analysis and research. The results of this research are unequivocal. These studies find retention to be generally harmful in three critical domains, notably social adjustment, academic achievement, and avoidance of school dropout. When statistical procedures are implemented to randomize a control group (not retained) versus an experimental group (retained), the control group performs better on all the above categories.

When randomization procedures are used, experimenters can be confident that the two groups do not experience differences in risk factors and thus the only variable that would account
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for the difference is the experimental condition (that of retention). The following are summary statements of the research reported by the National Education Association:

1) Retention in grade has no academic benefit. At risk students who are promoted achieve as well or better than those children retained. 2) Retained students are worse off on all measures of personal and psychological adjustment, self-concept, attitude, and attendance. 3) Retained students are 30 percent more likely to drop out than not retained students. 4) Self-reports of children indicate that there is lasting hurt from retention no matter how young the age of the retention.

While Research indicates that while grade retention does not typically increase student performance, it is widely practiced in schools throughout the country. Arguments for retaining a child include immaturity, the belief that an extra year of schooling will produce successful academic outcomes, and the failure to meet criteria for promotion (Bowman, 2005).

Overall, retention should not be considered as a form of remediation. Even if no other strategies or interventions are imposed, the at-risk or academically delayed child is better off with promotion in respect to the above noted categories. This is why I feel that retention should not be used as a form of remediation unless schools have the extra support and assistance to help these students. We as educators cannot expect the parents to assist with helping the students at home. We have to provide the assistance the child needs at school to help them be successful when they have been retained.

Making students repeat a grade has not worked for 100 years, so why is it still happening? And why do government official, school leaders, and teachers persist in recommending retention as a remedy for low student achievement—even when researchers call it a failed intervention (Black, 2004).
Overall, neither social promotion nor retention leads to high performance. If the goal is to bring low performing students up to the higher standards now being asserted across the nation, neither retention nor social promotion is effective. In different studies, one or the other has been found to offer an advantage, but neither has been found to offer a large, lasting advantage, and neither leads to high performance (Brulle, 2005).

Retention is again on the increase due to the current emphasis on a return to academic standards and accountability and the use of performance on such standards as indicators for promotion or retention (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). The yearly rate of retention appears to be rising, perhaps spurred by higher levels of accountability and the proliferation of “zero tolerance” policies regarding achievement in schools. The Center for Policy Research in Education reported in 1990 that 6% of schoolchildren were retained each year. In 1992, the annual rate of retention in the United States had nearly doubled to 11.1%. By 1995, it had risen to 13.3%. The National Association of School Psychologists reported that grade retention has increased by 40% in the last 20 years (Frey, 2005).

The Role of Gender and Race in Retention

It has been estimated the approximately 2.5 million students are retained each year in the United States, with the highest rates found among boys- especially minorities, special education students and those who come from low-income families and live in the inner city (Black, 2004). This extra year of schooling is estimated to cost United States taxpayers over 14 billion annually. 15 to 20 percent of all students repeat at least one grade between the ages of six and seventeen. Nationally it is estimated that 5-10% of students are retained annually, which translates to over 2.4 million children every year that must complete an extra year of schooling. Research indicates that across the nation, 30% to 50% of students will be retained at least once by the ninth grade (Jimerson, 2001). This is an important point to me that if we know who are at the
highest risk for being retained lets help the solution before the problem arises. We need to have specialized mentoring groups assist in the schools with the students who are at high risk for retention such as the minority male special education population at an early age.

**Risk Factors in Retention**

Each year, five to seven percent of U.S. children are retained at grade level, on the assumption that retention is helpful for those who are immature and/or failing to achieve. Proponents also argue that in the long run the rate of dropout will be lower. However, research shows that none of these assumptions are valid. In fact, students who are retained one grade level have only one chance in fifty of graduating from high school. Those who are retained twice have virtually no chance of graduating (Student effort 2006).

Students at highest risk of being retained share certain characteristics:

- They tend to be boys.
- They tend to be African American or Hispanic.
- They are young and immature for their grade.
- They show developmental delays.
- They show attention, behavioral, or emotional problems.
- They are not proficient in English
- They have problems reading.
- They have changed schools often.
- They live in families with incomes below his poverty level.
- They live in single-parent families.
- They live with adults who are uninvolved in their education.
Retentions Social, Emotional, and Psychological Impact

It is important to investigate how grade retention can affect a retained student’s academic achievement. In spite of the design problems of many studies examining retention, the preponderance of evidence appears to indicate that retention is not consistently an effective strategy for remediation of academic problems (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). Retention is one of the most influential predictors of school dropout. Proponents of “ending social promotion” argue that promoting students who have not mastered basic skills sets these students up for failure later on and sends the message that achievement does not matter. Opponents argue that avoiding failure by failing students is a misguided approach and point to research evidence that retaining students does not help their achievement, negatively affects self-esteem, and increase their risk in dropping out (Stone & Engel, 2004). Being retained one time increases the risk of dropping out by 40-50% and being two grades behind increases the risk by 90%. The idea of giving a child another year to “catch-up” and develop needed skills sounds like a positive alternatives. However, research shows that outcomes for kids who are retained generally are not positive (Schwab, 2004).

Years of research have shown that retention limited academic advantages to students. According to the National Association of Psychologist (NASP), retention rates have increased over the last years as pressure to end social promotion as a result for satisfactory performance on the newly introduced standard-based assessments. This has become a new expectation for promotion to the next grade (Witmer, 2004).

In general, the convergence of research from the past century does not demonstrate academic advantages for retained students relative to comparison groups of low-achieving, promoted peers. It was reported that 54 studies showed negative achievement effects when
retained children went on to the next grade level. Of nine studies that reported positive short-term achievement effects, the benefits were shown to diminish over time and disappear in later grades (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003).

Longitudinal research also has failed to demonstrate an overall effect for grade retention as an intervention. Short-term mathematics skills have been noted, but high absenteeism and social-emotional ranking among retained children are a comparable group of promoted children. Moreover, grade retention is linked to increased risk of dropping out of school to the extent that grade retention has been “one of the most powerful predictor of school withdrawal” (Silberglitt, 2006).

Although it was originally designed to be a solution, retention became a significant problem. Research examining the academic achievement of students who have been retained over time reveals that within two or three years, students’ achievement was not any better than before retention, and their academic outcomes are poorer than their peers in the general population who were not retained. Other studies also support this finding. Reports indicate that retention can have a long lasting negative impact on youth. According to the literature, in most cases, there is a hefty price to pay for students’ grade retention. This is, it costs most students academically and affects society as well. For example, students who have been retained have reported being teased by their peers (Bowman, 2005).

Retention was once believed to help students gain academic ground, improve maturity, and build a stronger skill base. Now it is often considered more of a poison than a cure, and researchers point to the growing body of research supporting this view (Alexander, 2002).

The achievement of retained students, after repeating a grade, still lags behind the achievement of their peers, and retention also greatly increases the likelihood that a student will
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drop out of school. Being held back twice makes dropping out a virtual certainty. Retention disproportionately affects minority and economically disadvantaged students (Adelman and Taylor, 2006).

Neither grade retention nor social promotion is a recipe for narrowing the achievement gap or reducing dropouts. It is time for a policy that does not “wait for failure;” it is time for a policy that does not react in easy that end up being more punitive and corrective. Although it is unwise to suggest that students should never be retained, it is important for education personnel to be familiar with the accumulated research on retention and its alternatives (Adelman and Taylor, 2006).

Future improvements with Retention

As schools plan for alternatives to retention and social promotion, there are exciting possibilities ahead. By keeping abreast of the research on remedial and preventive programs, educators can offer students a variety of tested ideas that can build academic and social skills. Additionally, as schools collect and disseminate statistics on the usefulness of curious alternatives, more effective help can be offered to students nationwide. Over time, schools will be able to employ a variety of methods for preventing failure and offering targeted help before students become discouraged (Fager and Richen, 1999). There is no simple answer that meets the needs of each student. However, by modeling a willing effort to help all children reach their greatest potential, we also model our belief that all children can succeed at learning and at life.

When decisions are made to retain students in grade, the primary reason is to remediate academic difficulties. However retention is not an effective educational strategy for long-term improvement. Any small positives that have been seen with the retained students usually have sustained beyond a few years. In addition, retention has been associated with a variety of
negative effects, including academic failure, high dropout rates, and lower self-concept. Repeating a grade has been found to be the third most imagined event in a child’s life, surpassed only by going blind and the loss of a parent (Witmer, 2004).

The question must be asked, “What are the alternatives?” Early identification for prevention and intervention is essential, whenever a student is struggling. Several school-based supports have been found to be effective in assisting children with educational difficulties (Anderson, Jimerson, and Whipple, 2002).

**Reducing the Retention Rate**

There was a similar issue with retention on students in Chicago and a possible solution to reduce the retention rate was to adopt a program for lagging students to receive intensive help in their regular classes during the school year, and in after school and summer programs. Since research has found mixed benefits for programs aimed at social promotion, the practice of moving students to the next grade even though they have not achieved up to par.

Jennifer Slifer, an educator, suggests that another approach instead of retaining a student, why don’t we promote struggling students with an individualized education plan to help them catch up with their peers. Most struggling students do not meet requirements for special education but they do need assistance (Slifer, 2005). I completely agree with this research because if the students who are behind can better benefit from an individualized education plan even if they are not special education but still need more assistance-why not? The plan would be a great idea and then all students can be successful.

With the student’s best interest at heart, the new retention policies have led to better efforts to work smarter, more strategically, more personally and in greater collaboration with...
colleagues, students, and parents to prevent a child from falling. This will require doing whatever it takes to prevent failure.

With increases in the demand for educational accountability, it is especially important that we understand how accountability is influencing the ways that educators assist struggling students. Decision making that considers only grade advancement issues (retention vs. social promotion debate) focuses exclusively on placement, eliminating the impact of critical intervention variables. Educational accountability systems provide educators with an opportunity to design and evaluate interventions for targeted groups of students, which, if done, will add to our knowledge of evidence-based interventions. The most promising approach to increase educational outcomes for all students is for educators to use evidence-based instructional options and implement these options with instructional effectiveness and regularity (Picklo & Christenson, 2005).

It is critical that we examine the effects of student accountability on the availability of instructional options. With the introduction of No Child Left Behind, many people fear that retention practices and dropout rates will increase. Thus, it is important that we know whether student accountability systems provide the academic support that struggling students need. In future research, it may be particularly helpful to over sample schools that are known to socially promote students. If a larger number of schools that socially promote students could be obtained, then researchers may be able to examine the effects of retention practices on the availability of instructional options inferentially. Further attempts to gather more data will strengthen this study’s generalizability to the larger population as well (Picklo & Christenson, 2005).
I feel strongly about revising the retention policy and the different methods the schools can use to assist all students learn and be successful. According to the research and what I have seen in my classroom retention usually does not benefit the students but if the students could have their own Individualized Education Plan (even if they are not special education) to suit their needs more struggling students would be successful academically, socially, emotionally, and psychologically. Retention is not the cure for struggling students but personalized assistance and working together with the students can be efficacious.

**Research Question**

What impacts does grade retention have on students academically, socially, and psychologically?

**Theoretical Framework**

Albert Bandura, Psychologist is best known for his Social Learning Theory which is a theory that explains that people learn from one another through observation, imitation, and modeling. The Social Learning Theory works well with my research due to the fact that children learn from observing others. Often retained students have learned to model negative behavior that they have seen before. Bandura also suggests that learning does not lead to a change in behavior. Here are two of Bandura Social Theory diagrams.
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These diagrams show how the interaction between a person and their behavior is influenced by a person’s thoughts and actions. It also shows how a person is influenced by their environment/social influence.

**Position and Stance**

As an educator I value and take pride in students leaning and achievements. It is concerning when students struggle with the learning goals and objectives they are supposed to meet. I am a white female teacher from a middle class background and data has shown that black male students from a poverty stricken home struggle the most in school. These are the students that have a higher retention percentage. This is very concerning to me and has influenced me to research what is the outcome of student’s success after being retained. My methodology consisted of interviews with students and parents who have been retained, personal narratives or collages, and artifacts such as student work and test scores. The research was conducted in my classroom as well as using the student’s permanent records. The process was conducted during the 2013-2014 school year. I used the Wheel of Research choices to select the best methods to use during my research. I used the paradigm constructivism approach.

**Methodology**

I conducted this research using 4 volunteer students attending a middle school located in middle Georgia who have been retained. The participants consisted of 3 black male students and 1 black female student between grades 6th through 8th. I conducted my research and study during the 2013-2014 school year. I used the Paradigm Constructivism approach throughout my research. Constructivism is based on observation and scientific study. It is about how people
learn. People construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences.

**Participants**

M.B. is a 6th grade black male student who is repeating the 6th grade. This is the second time he has been retained. M.B made a collage about how he felt being retained. He used drawings and pictures that reflected lack of concern for being retained. I also asked him questions from the questionnaires. He stated, “I did feel a little embarrassed when I failed the 6th grade.” He also stated, “School is a waste of time for me because I just can’t learn but I do like to talk to my friends at school.”

J.D. is a 6th grade black male student who is repeating the 6th grade. This is the only grade that he has had to repeat. He wrote me a paragraph explaining how he feels about repeating the 6th grade. He said, “I did get picked on and I was embarrassed by it.” He explains that he likes school because he can see his friends but he doesn’t like to do any work. He stated, “I cannot get motivated to do my work.”

C.W is a black male who is in the 7th grade. He was retained only in the 3rd grade. C.W. wrote me a letter sharing his feelings about being retained in the 3rd grade. He stated, “I am a little embarrassed now but back when I failed I didn’t care.” He shared that he loves to see his friends at school and has a hard time being motivated in completing his assignments because he really doesn’t like school.

D.C is a black female student who was retained in the 5th grade. She wrote me a paragraph explaining how she was embarrassed and sad when she failed the 5th grade. She had different teachers her second time in the 5th grade but doesn’t feel she learned anything more than before.
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She told me she likes school and has learned to pay attention in class and try her best on her assignments.

**Data Analysis**

There are several themes to which these students have in common. There are several characteristics that the repeaters share. The first theme is that they came to school to socialize. They second theme the participants felt that school work was not that important. The third common theme that the male students had in common was the lack of motivation. Either they would complete their assignments half way or not complete their work at all.

**Conclusion**

Based on my data it appears that grade retention doesn’t help in academic growth and could possibly hurt a child because they could be labeled as stupid which could hurt emotionally.

Why is retention a failed intervention? There are several explanation for the negative effects associated with grade retention:

- absence of specific remedial strategies to enhance social or cognitive competence
- failure to address the risk factors associated with retention (short tern gains following retention mask long tern problems associated with ineffective instruction)
- retained children are subsequently average for grade, which is associated with deleterious outcomes, particularly as retained children approach middle school and puberty

The question must be asked, “What are the alternatives?” Early identification for prevention and intervention is essential, whenever a student is struggling. Early evaluation for learning disorder/deficits and emotional disorders should be followed by appropriate modifications in
instruction. It is encouraging to note that there are many alternatives to help with grade retention. Several school-based supports have been found to be effective in assisting children with educational difficulties (Anderson, Jimerson, and Whipple, 2002). These include various reading programs, summer school and more direct instruction. Some administrators have suggested the transfer of students to alternative schools. Tutoring and after-school programs have also been demonstrated to be beneficial. Other strategies include encouraging parents to communicate and be involved regularly with the school. Programs have been developed to educate and involve parents in their child’s academic program.

Encourage parents to be involved in their children’s education. Because parents know their children well and can interact with the teacher, there are many things that parents can do to help. It is important for parents, teachers, and other educational professionals to work together. For instance, parents may emphasize the importance of education and provide a designated space at home for completing assignments. Parental monitoring of activities may be valuable in helping students focus on their schoolwork. Teachers and parents can be collaborative allies in educating youth (Jimerson & Kaufman 2003).

Recommendations

How can school leaders halt runaway retention? There are four strategies recommended (Black, 2004):

1. Teach teachers how to instruct all students according to the ways they learn.
2. Redesign schools to give students more intensive learning opportunities through cross-grade grouping and block scheduling.
3. Give struggling students support and services as soon as they are needed.
4. Use student assessment to monitor and adjust teaching content and strategies.
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With the student’s best interest at heart, the new retention policies have lead to better efforts to work smarter, more strategically, more personally and in greater collaboration with colleagues, students, and parents to prevent a child from falling. This will require doing whatever it takes to prevent failure.

Preschool intervention programs are the first steps in possibly solving the retention problem. These programs strengthen basic skills necessary for subsequent academic success. "Head Start" is an example of early childhood intervention programs that provide comprehensive educational and family support services to children from economically disadvantaged families to increase school readiness. By enhancing skills for academic success through preschool programs, retention may be prevented.

Educators need to vary instructional skills. Offering children different ways of learning is critical in addressing unique learning styles and needs. Individualized instruction, mixed age classes, creative grouping, reduced class size, scheduling modifications, and the use of volunteer aides are just a few strategies that can provide instructional variety.

Providing students at risk of failing with one-on-one guidance can be an intervention. The relationship between a student and a counselor, teacher, or other mentor can offer the individualized attention many students need to succeed. Together they can design a personal education plan that will help the student set learning goals, break tasks down into manageable chunks, and make him or her accountable for academic achievement.

Clearly, grade retention is not a solution to the problem of ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. What is needed are policies and practices that stress addressing barriers to learning and teaching as an essential and high level focus in every school improvement planning guide. The intent must be to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted, and
cohesive approach. This, of course, represents a major systemic change and requires shifts in prevailing policy, new frameworks for practice, sufficient resources to develop an effective structural foundation, and ongoing capacity building for such changes (Adelman & Taylor, 2006).
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Appendix

**Interview questions for parents by phone or face to face**

1. What grade was your child retained?

2. Do you feel that it helped/hurt your child academically to be retained?

3. Do you feel that it help/hurt your child emotionally to be retained?

4. What was the cause of your child being retained?

5. What is your child’s race and gender?
Appendix

Questionnaires for Students who have been retained

1. What grade were you retained in?
2. What is your race and gender?
3. Do you feel that it helped you academically to be retained?
4. Why were you retained?
   a. Grades
   b. Test scores
   c. Grades and test scores
   d. Parent decision
5. Are you embarrassed that you were retained?
   Yes or No or sometimes
6. Do you get made fun of because you were retained
   Yes or No
7. Did you have the same teacher or a different teacher after you were retained?
8. Do you like school?