Grade Retention

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Dr. Stewart

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Grade retention, variously called nonpromotion, being retained, being held back, failing, or flunking, is a controversial practice and stands to become even more so. For over a century, retention has been used as a strategy for remediating children who were not performing up to schools' academic expectations (Potter, 1996). The pendulum has swung back and forth during the past century between the practice of retention and that of social promotion, or "the advancement of a student to a higher grade level before the student has mastered the skills of the current grade level" (Potter, 1996, p. 268).

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). According to Jimerson (2001), an estimated 5% to 10% of all students are retained each year in this country. Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) cited research indicating that between 30% and 50% of all students in the United States will be retained one or more times before they reach ninth grade.

The primary reason students are retained is lack of academic achievement (Tanner & Galis, 1997). A related justification given for retention, especially in the lower grades, is developmental immaturity. This argument is also made for delaying entry into school by a year, even if the child is old enough (May & Kundert, 1995). The reasoning is that giving students an additional year to mature or catch up with peers will "cure" their low academic achievement.

Research on grade retention has been plagued with concerns about the quality of the research itself, including such issues as sample size, comparison methods, and techniques of reporting (Tanner & Galis, 1997). Much research has been conducted on sample sizes too small to be redeemed by advanced statistical analyses. Many studies have not included a group of nonretained
students for comparison. Even when a comparison group is followed, there are inherent problems with comparing a group of retained students with a group of "same grade" students (who are younger) or with a group of "same age" students (who have had exposure to an additional grade level's curriculum). Tanner and Galis (1997) stated,

There are other considerations of dated research that do not take into account recent demographic shifts and changes in current school organization and curriculum. Many citations on both sides of the retention issue are from unpublished research that has missed the refereeing process (p. 110).

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). Jimerson's 2001 meta-analysis of recent studies on grade retention concluded that even when studies show some academic advantage for retained students during the first year after being retained, these effects disappear or even reverse when students are followed for a longer period of time. Overall, though, most of the analyses showed no significant differences between students who had been retained and the comparison group on academic achievement (Jimerson, 2001). A summary of retention research by Walters and Borgers (1995) reported findings consistent with those of Jimerson's meta-analysis.

Studies of early retention have concluded that there is no more academic benefit for students retained in kindergarten than for students retained in later grades (Mantzicopoulos, 1997). May and Kundert's 1995 research on delayed school entry found that students who entered kindergarten one year late were somewhat less likely to be retained, but concluded this was probably because teachers were hesitant to retain students who were already a year older than their classmates. In addition, their study indicated that delayed-entry students were more than twice as likely as other students to receive special education services. They stated that although it is difficult to determine
whether the students in question needed early intervention services rather than the extra year, these students may have been denied their rights to a free, appropriate education if such intervention was postponed by their delayed school entry.

Another focus of retention research has been the effects of retention on students' socioemotional development. As mentioned previously, it has been a common belief that giving students an extra year to develop and mature will provide social and psychological benefits, as well as bolstering self-esteem by increasing academic mastery. Walters and Borgers (1995) reported that in many studies significant differences between retained students and comparison groups on social and psychological factors were not found. In other cases, retention affected students negatively in areas such as personal and social adjustment. Some researchers cited by Walters and Borgers (1995) indicated that retained students had been discriminated against by peers. Jimerson and Kaufman's 2003 summary of retention research cited meta-analysis findings in which retained students demonstrated more absenteeism, more problem behaviors, poorer social adjustment, and more negative attitudes toward school than comparison groups.

Research on kindergarten retention has also provided evidence of "a high emotional cost to the child" (Mantzicopoulos, 1997, 115), even though many believe early retention to be more benign than later retention. Mantzicopoulos (1997) also found that kindergarten retention did not consistently benefit children who demonstrated attention problems.

In addition to the lack of academic and socioemotional benefits of retention, many opponents of the practice point out the long-term negative effects associated with retention. According to Jimerson and Kaufman (2003), grade retention is strongly associated with dropping out of high school. In fact, "grade retention has been identified as the single most powerful predictor of dropping out" (p. 626), and students who have been retained are at greater risk even when they are compared to groups of "equally low achieving but socially promoted peers" (p. 626). The low
academic achievement and high risk of dropping out of school are linked to other poor outcomes for students who have been retained, such as lower educational outcomes and a poorer employment outlook (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). The same authors identified other adverse affects correlated with adolescents being overage for their grades, including greater problem behaviors, more emotional distress, and increased level of substance abuse, and engaging in risky behaviors.

If retention isn't the answer, what about social promotion? As Potter (1996) stated, "social promotion was a failure because students arrived in higher grades under prepared for the instructional level and educators who received them were under prepared to teach them" (p. 268). Unfortunately, many (if not most) educators and laypeople see a false dichotomy: If schools are not retaining students who are not performing up to academic standards, then they must be practicing social promotion, and in truth, this most often is the case. Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) asserted,

Too often, professionals in education debate the merits and limitations of social promotion versus grade retention. Upon considering research examining the efficacy of grade retention, it is evident that a more productive discussion would focus on instructional strategies to assist the education of children at risk for failure (p. 623).

What, then, are some alternative strategies for addressing students’ low academic achievement? Potter (1996) addressed the need for educational administration to lead the way in identifying and implementing strategies to help all children learn. Research on effective instructional practices cited in Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) identified the need for prevention and early intervention approaches, rather than taking an "after the fact" approach. Attention to individual instructional needs, direct instruction, frequent assessment of progress and consequent tailoring of strategies to meet the needs identified through assessment were characteristics of effective practices discussed
by Jimerson and Kaufman (2003). They also remarked that the quality of remedial services must be high in order to see results.

In their 1995 article, May and Kundert recommended developmentally appropriate programs for preschool and lower primary grades, which would necessitate moving away from the practice of placing high academic demands on kindergarten and first grade students. Other proposed alternatives to retention include changes in the way education is structured, such as cross-age classrooms or ungraded primary schools. Like Jimerson and Kaufman, they identified the need for individualizing content and instruction so students can learn at their own rate. Tanner and Galis (1997) proposed achieving the goals of individualizing instruction and grouping children for instruction at the appropriate level by revamping the psychoeducational evaluation process to provide this information.

Professional associations such as the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) have recommended such strategies as seeking parental involvement; making sure instructional strategies are age-appropriate and culturally sensitive; using multi-age groupings for instruction; focusing on providing effective early reading programs; and identifying specific areas of learning or behavior needs, planning interventions to address those needs, and assessing progress in those areas (Jimerson, 2001).

As Jimerson (2001) summarized, "In isolation, neither social promotion nor grade retention will solve our nation's educational ills nor facilitate the academic success of children. Instead attention must be directed toward alternative remedial strategies." This change of focus is a major shift in educational thinking and will not be easy (Potter, 1996). As May and Kundert (1995) simply and eloquently put it, "Children should not have to give up one or more years of their life to accommodate the schools; rather, it is the responsibility of the schools to meet the children's needs" (p.293).
References


