

Retention: A Controversial Decision

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Retention or nonpromotion is the practice of requiring a child to repeat a particular grade or requiring a child of appropriate age to delay entry into kindergarten or first grade. Retention has been used to help children who have not kept up academically with their classmates or when children are considered socially or emotionally "immature" for their grade placements. Retention has also been used to help children who have missed a lot of school due to illness or frequent moves, or who are just beginning to learn English. There is no definitive percentage for the prevalence of retention, but it is estimated that about 15 to 19% of public school students are retained at some point in their education and every year over 200,000 students in America are retained in the same grade (NASP). It has also been estimated that by the time children reach third grade, one in five have been retained (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994; Meisels & Liaw, 1993).

Grade retention is making a comeback as a popular method of remediating poor academic performance. As teachers and principals are held more accountable for student performance, retention is viewed as an instrument of school reform around the country. When a child is retained, it does not only signal a child's failure to master the curriculum, but represents a break down in the primary educational environment. (McCoy, A, Reynolds, A 1999). The practice of having children repeat a grade in order to correct failure in academic achievement, or to aid maturity in social/emotional functioning is common (Walker, 1984).

Who's more likely to be retained?

Retained children are more likely to be boys, to have poor reading and mathematics test scores prior to retention (Dauber et al., 1993) and to be from ethnic minority groups (Meisels & Liaw, 1993). Subject-matter grades and classroom conduct (Dauber et al., 1993) are also predictors of grade retention. Cadigan et al., (1998), noted that grades received as early as the first quarter of first grade identified those students who would be retained. In addition, children whom their teachers perceive as having poor peer relationships (Cadigan et al., 1998; Jimerson & Schuder, 1996), poor emotional well-being (Jimerson & Schuder, 1996), and adjustment problems (Reynolds, 1992) are more likely to be retained. According to the research, the following are situations or reasons children are more likely to be retained:

- during the elementary school years
- Black or Hispanic's
- males
- children who have a late birthday
- delayed development
- parents with low educational attainment
- come from single parent households
- live in poverty
- have attention problem
- changed schools

(National Mental Health and Education Center for Children and Families).

Among the family factors that appear to place children at risk for grade retention are low parent educational attainment from high school, socioeconomic disadvantage (Meisels & Liaw, 1993) and frequent school changes or residential changes (Reynolds, 1992). Children are also more likely to be retained when their parents view them as being less capable (Cadigan et al., 1998; Dauber et al., 1993). When children feel that they are rated as less capable by their parents, the expectations of success decrease. As a result, teachers' recommendations for retention is often unchallenged and alternatives to retention are not pursued.

Consequences of Retention

There appear to be many consequences of retention. While there may be individual students who benefit from retention, no study has been able to predict accurately which children will gain from being retained, other than to state that: children who may benefit from retention had positive self-esteem prior to retention, do not have serious social, emotional or behavioral deficits or show signs of difficulty in school because of lack of opportunity for instruction rather than lack of ability. It is strongly suggested that early identification and intervention of academic, behavioral and/or emotional difficulties are put in place in order to avoid the inappropriate use of retention.

The literature indicates that compared to low achieving promoted children, retained children have more problematic social and emotional functioning, more conduct problems, lower self-images and negative images about school (Holmes & Matthew, 1984; Walker, 1984). The prevailing philosophy is that retention is more advantageous for children if it is implemented in the early grades, especially kindergarten or first grade. Pomplum (1988) found that retained first and second grade students, as well as retained third and fourth graders, showed significant improvement on standardized tests of reading, language and math, but not self concept, when compared to students who were not retained. In contrast, retained and nonretained seventh and eighth graders did not differ in achievement.

In a study done by Thomas, et al, results indicated that retention does not facilitate academic or social functioning for kindergarten or first grade students. Their findings suggested that retention is negatively related to functioning for White students. One possible explanation for this is that White students are more likely to be stigmatized by retention than Black students. Based on their study, it was also noted that a White student is less likely to be retained than a Black student. Consequently, when a White child is retained, teachers may well see him or her as particularly lacking in academic and/or social areas of functioning. Many reviews in the literature indicate that children do not benefit from grade retention and is generally not viewed as an effective educational strategy, however, some studies in the past decade indicate that retention can have positive effects. >

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As the number of longitudinal studies of retention have increased, greater attention has been given to the comparison group used to estimate the long-term effects of grade retention. Same-age comparisons tend to show that the effects of retention are not positive and can be detrimental, especially for first grade students. Same-grade comparisons show that the effects of retention are positive in short term, but may disseminate over time. Longer-term studies into high school suggest that children who are retained are more likely to drop out of high school (McCoy, A., & Reynolds, A. 1999). There is a consistent finding that a relationship between grade retention and dropping out of school exists. (Shepard & Smith, 1990). Dropouts are five times more likely to have repeated a grade than are high school graduates. Students who repeat two grades have a probability of dropping out nearly 100 percent (Association of California Urban School Districts 1985). In a study conducted by Grissom and Shepard (1989), they found that students who repeated a year were 20 to 30 percent more likely to drop out of school.

Another factor that can be considered a disadvantage to retention is cost. Based on an annual retention rate of 6 percent and a per pupil cost of \$4,051 (U.S. Department of Education, Center for Education Statistics), it is estimated that U.S. schooldistricts spend nearly \$10 billion a year to pay for the extra year of schooling necessitated by retaining 2.4 million students (Shepard, L.A., & Smith, M.L., 1990).

Alternatives To Retention

There are many alternatives to retention that appear to be more effective in helping low achievers. These include:

- remedial help,
- before and after school programs,
- structured summer school remediation,
- instructional aides to work with target children in the regular classroom
- no-cost peer tutoring.

Groups of teachers in some school systems have developed a team to work out plans with the next grade receiving teachers about how to address the learning difficulties for students who otherwise would have been retained. Some schools also place poor performing students in the next grade with an individualized educational plan, similar to a special education plan, associated to the special education model of intervention (Shepard, L. A., & Smith, M.L., 1990). Other alternatives to retention are using enhanced teaching strategies such as:

- mastery learning
- team teaching
- direct instruction
- cooperative learning
- progress monitoring
- reinforcement
- more structured curricula
- re-teaching
- more intensive practice
- fluency training, and
- use of technology/computers for drill and practice.

These teaching skills can be learned by teachers through in service training and consulting with individuals who are a resource in the school system, such as the school psychologist, social worker, nurse, special education teacher, reading specialist and administrators.

It is also the teachers responsibility to look for signs that children may not be making academic gains. If a child has difficulties keeping up, teachers should look for ways to help before the problem becomes serious. Observations of the student while he/she works on assignments can be beneficial. Teachers can also offer parents opportunities to observe in the classroom and learn about the expectations of the classroom. The support staff can also work with the parents to help them understand about the child's learning. It is important for there to be communication between the home and school, which can help foster learning and appropriate behavior on the child's part.

Grade retention is a remedial intervention that is thought to be by some a response to academic failure. The rationale made by some people is that repeating the previous year of instruction, children will catch up (McCoy, A., & Reynolds, A. 1999), but most low achievers do not catch up when they are retained. Grade retention alone should never be expected to remediate the academic problems that many children experience. Grade retention plus remediation, such as special education if warranted, remedial services, summer school and tutoring may help students to have a better chance for success.

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