

A Perilous Policy Path: Grade Retention in the Age of NCLB

Author(s): *Pamela Powell, Ed. D.*

Affiliation: Northern Arizona University

2010

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), conceptually, is not hard to defend. The idea that our schools should be providing quality education for all children is unquestionable. The fact that schools and teachers should be accountable is undeniable. The interpretation and implementation of the mandate, however, are of concern. This is especially true when it comes to the practice of grade retention.

Leaving Children Behind

The polarized positions of social promotion (promoting despite academic achievement) or grade retention (repeating a grade) have been and continue to be debated from political dialogue to teacher's lounges to educational foundations to State of the Union addresses. It simply seems counterintuitive and inconceivable that children should advance through a graded system unless they have acquired the requisite skills for the next grade.

If children are not "ready," or if they do not measure up in grade, they are often relegated to the portion of the class deemed for grade retention. They are at risk for being held back. They may be "left behind."

"It is paradoxical that more children have been 'left behind' since NCLB was passed than before" (Jimerson, et al, 2006, p. 86). And, what are the consequences of leaving children behind by utilizing this practice that has been a part of American age-graded schools since their inception in the mid 1800s?

Grade Retention

Grade retention means holding a child back in grade preventing him from being promoted with his peers. Repeating a grade has been exercised for over a century, and considerable research has been conducted regarding the practice.

The typical profile of a child who is retained is a male, young for grade, small for age, of color, and living in poverty. Children who are retained are those who exhibit academic difficulties and/or socioemotional behaviors considered immature. Proponents often tout grade retention as a "gift of time" and explain that an extra year will help a child catch up. Parents often concede to teachers and other school personnel, on whom they rely, who explain this "it's for their own good" philosophy.

Why the Increase in Retention?

In the age of NCLB, adequate yearly progress (AYP) is paramount. Schools must perform and demonstrate growth lest they be placed on an underperforming list with the risk of further consequences. Teachers and administrators feel the pressure of the mandate, and time once spent in enriching lessons and activities is now consigned to test prep activities for children even in the earliest elementary grades.

Children who are retained may make greater academic progress the year following retention, thus lending credence to the practice of retention (Peterson, DeGracie, and Ayabe, 1987; Alexander, Entwisle and

Dauber, 1994). These increases are often not lasting, however. With schools' concern about AYP, though, these increases may make a difference.

What's Wrong With this Picture?

When we engage in this type of thinking regarding children, we are blaming the victim. In addition, we may be using children as pawns to game the system. Furthermore, we are usurping a year of a child's life. This equates to a year of earning power, a year of life outside the institution of education, and a year of being overage in a school system. It also means adding a year to the financial rolls of schools with the grade retention intervention costing the United States approximately \$18 billion per year (Xia and Glennie, 2005c). Furthermore, students of color may be more likely to be retained, as is the case in Florida since implementation of Florida's test-based promotion policy (Greene and Winters, 2009), a policy which is gaining momentum in a number of states.

We need to remember that children do not develop neatly across domains. If the typical child retained is young for grade and small for age, he may not be at the same developmental level of his peers. At all grade levels, in fact, children are at different places. This is the nature of child development.

Additionally, when we engage in conversations about social promotion or grade retention, we polarize an issue, often providing no other options or interventions. We place the burden of learning squarely and only on the shoulders of children rather than the relationship of learning and teaching as a co-endeavor between teacher/facilitator and pupils.

Consequences of Grade Retention

The existing theory regarding grade retention is that it is probably ineffective as a strategy to improve academic achievement or increase personal adjustment (Holmes, 1989; Holmes and Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001, Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). This option has been researched for almost a hundred years, often with no clear-cut benefits (Holmes, 1989; Holmes and Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001). One distressing consequence of retention is its high correlation to subsequent high school dropout.

Children who are retained have a higher incidence of drop out (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 2003; Bowers, 2010; Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, and Heinrich, 2006; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995). Anderson, Whipple and Jimerson (2002) found "retention to be one of the most powerful predictors of high school dropout, with retained students 2 to 11 times more likely to drop out of high school than promoted students" (p. 2). Rumberger (1995) indicates that it is the strongest predictor of subsequent drop out.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 1995) reported that those who are retained have almost double the rate of dropouts than those who have never been retained, and males were two thirds more likely to be retained than females. Frymier (1997) reported that those who have been retained in grade are about twice as likely to drop out as those who were never retained. Jimerson (2007) again examined the efficacy of the practice of grade retention and noted, "The association of grade retention and high school dropout is disconcerting and seems to be the most common deleterious outcome during adolescence," (p. 21).

With large scale grade retention efforts being initiated in multiple states since the inception of NCLB, what will the dropout statistics look like a decade from now? If the number of dropouts increases, what means will we have to accommodate the ensuing ramifications of dropout on the individual, the community, and the nation?

Educating the Populace

Research regarding retention is not new. Research executed as early as 1911 (Keyes) indicated that although 21 percent of the repeaters did better after repeating the grade, 39 percent did worse. Klene and Branson (1929) examined students, who were potential repeaters and then assigned to promotion or retention based on chronological age, mental age and gender. They concluded that those students promoted benefited more than those who were retained. Researchers later in the twentieth found mixed results regarding the efficacy of the practice thus leading to the existing theory of its lack of worth as an intervention (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007).

Teachers may often be unaware of the research regarding grade retention. Pouliot (1997) found that teachers in Quebec who participated in her research strongly believed that retention was beneficial to students. Teachers in the United States have demonstrated similar views (Smith, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Educators, legislators, and parents need information regarding the practice that has been entrenched in the educational institution which most have known. Based on a deficit model, this practice does not ensure positive academic outcomes and is highly correlated to later high school dropout.

Shifting the Paradigm

Truly "leaving no child behind" will require another way of looking at schooling. If we are actually committed to the premise of all children being educated in a system which promises that no child will be left behind, looking at education from a different perspective is essential. In this system, consider the following assumptions:

- All children develop as individuals. Children are always "ready to learn," they are always learning. The notion of ready children needs to be paired with ready schools.
- Children would be better served through a system, which meets individual needs.
- Instead of comparing children with one another. Compare the child with the child.
- Switching schooling to a strength's-based model would assist children in developing talents and in using such to increase development in other areas.
- All children have assets.
- Competition is not the best way to improve schools or educate children.
- Schools need to be universally designed in order to provide for student success.
- Education in our country is a right. Children should not be excluded through subtle forms of discrimination, such as grade retention, because they are perceived to lack the necessary skills for them to succeed in schools where they are supposed to be welcomed to learn, not kept out or held in place because they do not have the same knowledge of peers who may have had more educational experiences and opportunities.
- Schools are places for all children to succeed. All children are developing across many areas simultaneously. Children in an aged graded classroom will have intersections where all will be able to relate and learn. This diversity is something to venerate.
- Learning in schools based on these assumptions may enhance the experiences of most pupils and give rise to a more just system of education thus raising the chance that no child will be left behind

It is conceivable that NCLB, through state and local implementation, has assisted in holding many children behind, particularly children of color or those living in poverty. The mandate with such great hopes of leaving no child behind may have succeeded in doing just the opposite.

References

- Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., & Dawber, S. L. (1994). *On the success of failure: A reassessment of the effects of retention in the primary grades*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., & Dawber, S. L. (2003). *On the success of failure: A reassessment of the effects of retention in the primary grades (2nd ed.)*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Anderson, G., Whipple, A., & Jimerson, S. (2002, November). Grade retention: Achievement and mental health outcomes. *Communiqué*, 31 (3), handout pages 1-3.
- Bowers, A.J. (2010). Grades and graduation: A longitudinal risk perspective to identify student Dropouts. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 103, 191-207.
- Byrnes, D. (1989) . Attitudes of students, parents and educators toward repeating a grade. In L. A Shepard & M. L. Smith (Eds.), *Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention*. (pp.16-33). London: Falmer Press.
- Frymier, J. (1997). Characteristics of students retained in grade. *The High School Journal*, 80, (3), 184-192.
- Greene, J.P.& Winters, M.A. (2009). The effects of exemptions to Florida's test-based promotion policy: Who is retained? Who benefits academically? *Economics of Education Review*, 28, 135-142.
- Grissom, J. B. & Shepard, L.A. (1989). Repeating and dropping out of school. In L.A Shepard & M.L. Smith (Eds.), *Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention*. (pp.34-63). London: Falmer Press.
- Hickman, G.P., Bartholomew, M., Mathwig, J. & Heinrich, R.S. (2008). Differential developmental pathways of high school dropouts and graduates. *The Journal of Educational Research*, (102)1, 3-14.
- Holmes, C. T. (1989). Grade level retention effects: A meta-analysis of research studies. In L. A Shepard & M. L. Smith (Eds.), *Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention*. (pp.16-33). London: Falmer Press.
- Holmes, C. T. & Matthews, K. M. (1984). The effects of nonpromotion on elementary and junior high pupils: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 54(2), 225-236. Jackson, G. (1975). The research evidence on the effects of grade retention. *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 613-635.
- Jimerson, S. (2001). Meta-analysis of grade retention research: Implications for practice in the 21st century. *School Psychology Review* (30)3, 420-437.
- Jimerson, S.R., Pletcher, S.M.W., Graydon, K., Schnurr, B.L., Nickerson, A.B., & Kundert, D.K. (2006). Beyond grade retention and social promotion: Promoting the social and academic competence of students. *Psychology in the Schools*, (43)1, 85-97.

Jimerson, S.R., & Ferguson, P. (2007). A Longitudinal Study of Grade Retention: Academic and Behavioral Outcomes of Retained Students Through Adolescence. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 22 (3), 314-339.

Keyes, C. (1911). *Progress through the grades of city schools*. New York: AMS Press. Klene, V. & Branson, E. Trial promotion versus failure. *Educational Research Bulletin*, 8, 6-11.

Peterson, S.E., Degraie, J.S., & Ayabe, C.R. (1987). A longitudinal study of the effects of retention/promotion on academic achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 24 (1), 107-118.

Pouliot, L. (1999). *A double method approach for a double need: To describe teachers' beliefs about grade retention, and to explain the persistence of these beliefs*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 429 926).

Roderick, M. (1994). Grade retention and school dropout: Investigating the association. *American Educational Research Journal*, 31 (4), 729-759.

Rumberger, R.W. (1995). Dropping out of middle school: Analysis of students and schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32 (3), 583-625.

Shepard, L.A. & Smith, M.L. (1989). *Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention*. London: Falmer Press.

Xia, C. & Glennie, E. (2005c). *Grade retention: The gap between research and practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University, Center for Child and Family Policy, Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy.