

Non-Promotion: “A Year to Grow?”

William M. Bocks

Do grade repeaters achieve greater mastery, stronger social maturity, respond positively to the threat of non-promotion? This writer indicates some findings from research.

“A year to grow” is what some people call it.

Flunking, repeating, non-promotion, retention, or the euphemism “a year to grow”—all mean the same thing. The teacher, the principal, and the parents may call it what they will. It all means the same to the person to whom it is done. What the other children call it on the playground will not be changed, nor will the devastating consequences of the act.

In 1971 more than one million elementary school children were “failed” by well-meaning teachers who ignore, or are ignorant of the research done concerning this “educational” malpractice.¹ Such a widespread custom deserves careful scrutiny.

One might justifiably ask (although one usually doesn't), “A year to grow what?” A year to increase one's natural rate of learning? A year to pump “motivation” into an unwilling child? A year to rid a child of emotional problems, possible physical handicaps, or a deprived environment? A year to conform?

Teachers over the years have been frustrated by the fact that some of the children in their classrooms are not able or willing to do the schoolwork found in the textbooks. Lacking the skills, knowledge, or desire necessary to individualize their teaching, they have attempted to solve the students' problems by making them spend an additional year in the same grade.

Part of the explanation for the widespread high non-promotion rate comes from the fact that many teachers who require students to repeat, some parents of these students, and even the students themselves, often swear that it was indeed their salvation.

Another reason that non-promotion continues as a practice in our elementary schools may be that teachers, school administrators, and parents are not aware of the results of research which has been conducted. The purpose here is to summarize the research on non-promotion which has been conducted over the years. It is hoped that readers may be inspired to look up the studies listed and read them in detail. It also is hoped that readers may decide to do some research in their own schools and seek out any studies that this article may have overlooked.

Numerous studies have been conducted to test the effects of non-promotion. The overwhelming majority of the studies reveal that not only is this practice of no benefit to the child, but often it is harmful.

As early as 1911 a seven-year study was done by Keyes in a school district of about 5,000 pupils.² He discovered that of the large number retained, 20 percent did better, 39 percent showed no change, and 40 percent actually did worse.

Buckingham found that only about one-third of several thousand children did better work after repeating a grade.³

McKinney studied repeaters in grades above the first and found that 35 percent of the repeaters

¹ Ernestine Godfrey. “The Tragedy of Failure.” *North Carolina Education*, October 1971, pp. 10-11.

² Charles Henry Keyes. *Progress Through the Grades of City Schools*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1911.

³ Burdette Ross Buckingham. *Research for Teachers*. New York: Silver Burdett and Company, 1926.

did better work the second time, 53 percent did not improve, and 12 percent did poorer work.⁴

It appears from these studies that the majority of the pupils who repeat a grade will achieve no better the second time in the grade than they did the first time. A substantial number do poorer work the second time in the grade.

Grace Arthur compared the achievement of 60 first grade repeaters with the achievement of non-repeaters of the same mental age.⁵ She discovered that the average repeater did not learn more in two years than the average non-repeater learned in one year.

Coffield and Blommers discovered from their research that slow-learning children who are required to repeat a grade and slow-learning children who are promoted, ultimately perform at about the same level when this performance is measured in the same higher grade, in spite of the fact that the failed pupils each spent an added year in attaining this higher grade.⁶

Klene and Branson, in a study made in Long Beach, California, equated children, all of whom were to be retained in the grade, on the bases of chronological age, mental age, and sex.⁷ Half were then promoted and half were retained. They concluded that, on the whole, potential repeaters profited more from promotion than did the repeaters from non-promotion, in terms of measured achievement.

Farley, Frey, and Garland found that children with low IQ's who had repeated several grades were not doing as well in their schoolwork as children of the same ability who had been kept with those of approximately their own age.⁸ Non-promotion was more likely to be a deterrent than an impetus to acceptable achievement.

Coffield found that failed and promoted pupils who are comparable in achievement at the time of failure, perform at about the same level when achievement of both is measured in the seventh grade.⁹

The practice of non-promotion, as a device to ensure greater mastery of elementary school subject matter, does not receive support from these research findings.

Social Immaturity

Social immaturity is often suggested as a reason for having a youngster repeat a grade.

The argument is advanced that "he/she plays with the younger children, he/she will fit in better with them." The persons who use the social immaturity reason for non-promotion believe that it is beneficial socially for the youngster to repeat a grade. He/she needs that year to "grow."

Anfison studied 116 pairs of junior high school pupils who were matched on school attendance, chronological age, sex, intelligence, and socioeconomic status.¹⁰ One of each pair had been regularly promoted while the other had repeated the previous grade. Anfison found that the regularly promoted students were significantly better in their personal and social adjustment.

Sandin studied the social, behavioral, and emotional results of non-promotion through the use of tests, ratings, and interviews.¹¹ He found that the retained child on the average is likely to choose companions in grades ahead and would like to join them there. The children who made slow progress tended to regard their younger

⁴ B. T. McKinney. "Promotion of Pupils a Problem of Educational Administration." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, 1928.

⁵ Grace Arthur. "A Study of the Achievement of 60 Grade I Repeaters as Compared with that of Non-Repeaters of the Same Mental Age." *Journal of Experimental Education* 5: 203-205; December 1936.

⁶ William H. Coffield and Paul Blommers. "Effects of Non-Promotion on Educational Achievement in the Elementary School." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 47(4): 235-50; April 1956.

⁷ Vivian Klene and E. P. Branson. "Trail Promotion Versus Failure." *Los Angeles Educational Review Bulletin* 7(5): 6-11; January 1929.

⁸ Eugene S. Farley, Albin J. Frey, and Gertrude Garland. "Factors Related to the Grade Progress of Pupils." *Elementary School Journal* 24(3): 186-93; November 1933.

⁹ William H. Coffield. "A Longitudinal Study of the Effects of Non-Promotion on Educational Achievement in the Elementary School." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1954.

¹⁰ R. D. Anfison. "School Progress and Pupil Adjustment." *Elementary School Journal* 40: 504-14; 1941.

¹¹ Adolph A. Sandin. *Social and Emotional Adjustment of Regularly Promoted and Non-Promoted Pupils*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1944.

classmates as inappropriate companions. The retained children did not often receive the social approval of the regularly promoted and on most behavior traits, teachers rated the slow progress children less favorably than those in the normal progress group. Other children are inclined to describe the slow progress children as more likely to be unhappy, grouchy, quarrelsome, rude, and selfish. Is this what happens during that "year to grow"?

Sandin reported that children who had previously been "failed" said that their parents had been angry, that they had been spanked, or that they had been lectured on the need for studying harder. Brothers, sisters, and relatives had criticized their shortcomings and failure was a continual sore point to be brought up for conversation from time to time.

A study by Goodlad showed similar findings.¹² He reports that the promoted children were rejected significantly less by classmates as persons not desirable for very best friends. He says the whole picture of sociometric change over the school year was one of decline in desirable adjustment for the non-promoted children and of improvement for promoted children.

Morrison and Perry found that discrimination against average children varied considerably at different age levels and was most severe in grades four, five, and six.¹³ In general, a definite degree of nonacceptance for average children was found in this study.

These studies which have examined the social outcomes of non-promotion point to many harmful consequences. Non-promotion for the reason of social immaturity does not receive support from these research findings.

Early elementary teachers feel a concern for the wide range of abilities that confront upper-grade teachers. It is a fairly common belief that retaining youngsters who are not performing to a predetermined standard will help to alleviate this problem.

Studies by Goodlad, Coffield, and Cook all report basically the same finding,¹⁴ that non-promotion does not appear to reduce the range of specific abilities with which the upper-grade teachers have to cope.

It appears from these research studies that early elementary teachers need not worry about the higher grade teachers having to deal with a



Photo: Charlene Rothkopf.

¹² John I. Goodlad. "Some Effects of Promotion and Non-Promotion Upon the Social and Personal Adjustment of Children." *Journal of Experimental Education* 22: 301-28; 1954.

¹³ Ida E. Morrison and Ida F. Perry. "Acceptance of Average Children by Their Classmates." *Elementary School Journal* 56: 217-20; January 1956.

¹⁴ Coffield, *op. cit.*; John I. Goodlad. "Research and Theory Regarding Promotion and Non-Promotion." *Elementary School Journal*, November 1952, pp. 150-55; and Walter W. Cook. "Some Effects on the Maintenance of High Standards of Promotion." *Elementary School Journal* 41: 430-37; 1941.

wider range of abilities even when every student is promoted. It makes very little difference.

Threat As Motivation

Very often the threat of non-promotion is used in the belief that it is a motivating force. Many teachers feel that youngsters will quit working if they get the idea that everybody is going to pass.

Otto and Melby put this to a test with second- and fifth-grade students.¹⁵ They concluded that children who are told at the beginning of a semester that all will be in the following grade the next term do as well on a comprehensive achievement test as children who throughout the semester are reminded that they must do good work or suffer non-promotion.

This study demonstrates that threat of non-promotion is not a motivating force. Teachers need not fear that removing the threat of failure lowers achievement.

A great number of the research studies of non-promotion were carried out in the 1930's and 1940's. Because of this, Betty A. Scott and Louise Bates Ames have questioned their applicability to the schools of the 1960's and 1970's. They state that in one of their research studies repeating did appear to have a beneficial effect on student grades and the children's behavior for a group of selected subjects.¹⁶ It is interesting to note, however, that the conclusions of this research are based on the opinions of the teachers and parents of the retained students.

Other recent studies, however, support the conclusions of the earlier research. Ernestine Godfrey reported the results of a 1970 research

project by the North Carolina Advancement School.¹⁷

The study involved more than 1,200 students in grades six and seven from 14 representative schools. The data indicated that retaining the students did not result in helping them "catch up" academically, and that retained students scored lower on feelings of self-worth than did those who were not retained as measured on *The Tennessee Self Concept Scale*.

A study was reported in 1967 by Virginia Dobbs and Donald Neville.¹⁸ Thirty pairs of first and second graders were matched on race, sex, socioeconomic level, type of classroom assignment, age, mental ability, and reading achievement. Each of the pairs consisted of a once-

¹⁵ Henry J. Otto and Ernest O. Melby. "Attempt To Evaluate the Threat of Failure a Factor in Achievement." *Elementary School Journal* 25: 588-96; 1935.

¹⁶ Betty A. Scott and Louise Bates Ames. "Improved Academic, Personal, and Social Adjustment in Selected Primary School Repeaters." *Elementary School Journal*, May 1969, pp. 431-38.

¹⁷ Ernestine Godfrey. "The Tragedy of Failure." *North Carolina Education*, October 1971, pp. 10-11.



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retained first grader and a never-retained second grader.

Results of the study showed both the reading and arithmetic achievement gain of the promoted group to be significantly greater than that of the non-promoted group over the two-year period of the study.

Summary

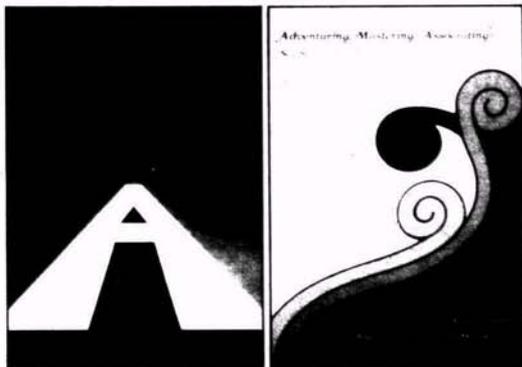
Research studies reviewed in this article deal with non-promotion from various perspectives. They indicate that: (a) the practice of non-promotion is not effective as a device to ensure greater mastery of elementary school subject matter; (b) there are many harmful consequences of non-promotion; (c) early elementary teachers need not worry about the higher-grade teachers having to deal with a wider range of abilities when every student is promoted; it makes very little difference; and (d) threat of non-promotion is not a motivating force; teachers need not fear that removing the threat of failure lowers achievement.

Therefore common sense and the desire for humane treatment of youngsters suggests that our classrooms must adjust to the needs of the child. It does not appear possible to equally prepare all children for a given grade. One way of dealing with the problems created by this fact is to have each teacher prepare for the children who will be in the class. Children do have to be given "time to grow." Research on non-promotion suggests that they can grow even better in classes with their own age-mates.

Many teachers do not individualize their programs because they do not know how. Others have some ideas about how to do it but do not try for fear of failure. It is necessary that school administrators provide opportunities for teachers to learn how to individualize, and provide a safe environment for them to try it.

Individualized programs can remove the need for "a year to grow," and all of the harm that comes from it. ¹⁸

¹⁸ Virginia Dobbs and Donald Neville. "The Effects of Non-Promotion on the Achievement of Groups Matched from Retained First Graders and Promoted Second Graders." *The Journal of Educational Research*, July-August 1967, pp. 472-75.



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