SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH ON GRADE RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION

W
hich is ultimately better for the failing student, retention in the same grade for another year or "social promotion" to the next grade? This difficult question has bothered educators since the middle of the 19th century, when the graded school was first instituted in this country. Yet today, despite the long history, widespread use, and extensive study of grade retention, the issue remains unsettled.

In a multilevel educational system that is geared to the average student at each level, the most popular and apparent remedy for failing students is in-grade retention. Proponents of retention argue that students who do not understand the material at one grade will find it difficult or impossible to benefit from material at the next level. Retention gives slow or maladjusted students time to come up to grade level and reduces the range of abilities within each grade. Retention is also seen by many educators as an appropriate remedy for students who are immature.

Proponents of social promotion believe that simple grade repetition does no more good for academic achievement than promotion to the next grade. Instead of being given remedial help, repeaters are most often "recycled through a program that was inappropriate for them the first time and that may be equally inappropriate and of less interest to them the second time" (Jackson, 1975).

Furthermore, say critics of grade retention, the stigma of flunking is damaging to the social and personal development of low-achieving students; it starts a snowballing cycle of failure that may extend into adult life. Cook (1936 and 1929) noted that the gains made by retained groups attained equal but still better after one term, but the statistical significance of this result is not reported.

A Critical Review of the Research

By far the most valuable publication dealing with the retention-promotion debate is Jackson's 1975 review of the literature on the effects of grade retention. His central but lamentable conclusion is that—despite extensive research on grade retention—most studies published up to mid-1973 are "quite inadequate for making valid inferences about the effects of grade retention." And despite Jackson's recommendations for research designs and methodologies that would yield meaningful results, no definitive studies have been published since his review.

In an ideal experiment to test the relative merits of social promotion and grade retention, a large number of low-achieving students from a large and diverse population would be randomly divided into two groups. To further ensure that the two groups were as similar as possible, students from one group would be cross-matched with students from the other group according to several achievement, adjustment, and ability indices.

The two more-or-less identical groups would then meet their respective fates, promotion or retention. For several years thereafter and ideally through high school, the academic achievement and social and personal adjustments of each student would be periodically evaluated. Furthermore, the remedial treatments to be given the failing students would be carefully defined beforehand, and the actual efforts at remediation recorded.

None of the research studies reviewed by Jackson approached this ideal, and only three experimentally assigned students to be either retained or promoted. Unfortunately, the most recent of these studies is 40 years old, and all three studied the effects of retention over a period of only one semester. Nevertheless, they are the only studies that can be used to directly compare the effects of grade retention and social promotion.

In his 1941 study, Cook followed 312 students in grades one through seven who were scheduled for retention during the next term (the district used a semianual promotion system). The students were divided into two groups that were matched with regard to grade level, chronological age, IQ, and reading comprehension. One group was promoted; the other retained. After one term, no significant differences were found between the groups in either achievement or personality areas.

Cook noted that the gains made by both groups were small compared to the class average, a result to be expected since both groups came from the bottom 5 percent of each grade. "As far as achievement and personality development are concerned," Cook concluded, "the crucial issue appears to be not whether the slow-learning pupil is passed or failed but how adequately his needs are met wherever he is placed."

The other two studies of this type, published in 1936 and 1929, are similar to Cook's in both design and conclusions. In the 1936 study, promoted and retained groups attained equal but still low levels of achievement. In the 1929 study, the promoted group was doing better after one term, but the statistical significance of this result is not reported.

Flawed Research

Despite its experimental value, most educators are understandably reluctant to allow low-achieving students to be randomly assigned to promoted and retained groups. A decision this important is preferably made after careful consideration of a number of factors, with the interest of the child foremost in mind.

Perhaps due to this reluctance, most researchers have not used the experimental approach discussed above and have instead compared the fates of students retained under normal school policies with those promoted under normal policies. But as Jackson points out, such a comparison "is biased toward indicat-
HIGHLIGHTS FROM RESEARCH ON GRADE RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION

Although research does not indicate whether failing students benefit more from in-grade retention or social promotion to the next grade, neither retention nor promotion alone solves the educational programs of most low-achieving students.

A review of the literature on retention vs. promotion reveals flaws in the research. Researchers have failed to use an experimental approach to study the benefits of each practice. Most studies compare the fates of students retained under normal school policies with those promoted under normal policies. Such a design consistently shows that promoted students do better than retained students, but promoted students usually have less severe problems in the first place than do retained students.

Students have been shown to benefit from retention if (1) their rate of progress in the year before retention was less than half the normal rate, and (2) if they were achieving at normal rates, but were immature in early grades.

Alternatives to retention and promotion include transitional maturity classes, upgraded classes, remedial instruction, and smaller classes with more individual instruction.

Decision-making models for retention are basically lists of factors to consider before making a decision to retain or promote.

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Effects of retention and promotion. There is nothing in them that indicates studies of this type do not compare the attainment would not have done as well or better had they been promoted.

Stringer (1960) examined 50 cases of retention in grades one through eight to determine what factors would predict improvement in the retained year. The most significant criterion she found was the rate of progress in the year before retention. Eight students were achieving at or greater than the normal rate in the year before they were retained. During the year of retention, however, all these students posted losses, the average decline being 70 percent of a grade level.

In contrast, of 25 students who were achieving at less than half the normal rate in the year before retention, 23 showed gains during the year of retention that averaged about 75 percent of a grade level.

Stringer states that students "tended to see as just (or helpful?) a retention that confirmed their own perception, and as unjust (or spiteful?) a retention that ignored their actual accomplishment." In reaction, they responded positively to a deserved retention and negatively to an undeserved retention.

Another criterion that helped identify successful retainees was the amount of lag that existed at the time of retention. More students gained from retention and less lost from it when the lag was from one to two years below grade level. When the lag was either less than one year or greater than two years, more students posted losses and their losses were greater.

Reinherz and Griffin (1970) followed 57 boys of normal intelligence who were repeating for the first time in grades one through three. They found that "a large proportion of children characterized as 'immature' made 'satisfactory achievement' during the retained year compared to children with less evidence of immaturity." Over 80 percent of the first-graders made satisfactory achievement, whereas less than half of the second and third graders made equivalent progress. Children with good or excellent peer relations and children with good or excellent social and emotional adjustment also made significant progress. These findings support the beliefs of many educators, conclude the authors, that retention is most useful for normal but immature students in the early grades.

Recently, two publications have appeared that are designed to help educators decide between promotion and retention for individual students. Lieberman's decision-making model for in-grade retention (1980) is simply a list of factors that should be considered before making such a decision. The factors are not weighted, says Lieberman, because "it is the individual student who must give weight to the factors."

Included are child factors, such as physical size, maturity, grade placement, age, self-concept, and attitude toward promotion; family factors, such as transiency, language spoken in the home, and age of siblings; and school factors, such as the attitudes of principal and teacher toward retention, and availability of personnel and special education services. Lieberman discusses each factor and identifies several "rules of thumb."

Light's Retention Scale (1977) is quite similar to Lieberman's list except that each of 19 factors is scored and a composite total is computed. Light emphasizes that the final score is to be used only as a guideline. Each factor was included "when research was available for guidance," and the possible scores for each factor were "assigned subjectively after a careful analysis of research pertaining to the question."

Although Light discusses the justification for each factor, the research support he has to is rarely apparent. Nevertheless, the scale is valuable for stimulating thought about the multitude of factors that must be weighed before a retention decision is made.

Implications

What, then, should teachers and administrators do when faced with the problem of failing students?

The most important concern is not which grade failing students are placed in, but whether their needs are met wherever they are placed. If these special needs are to be met, Cook observed, "the formal textbook-assignment-recitation procedure will have to be discarded."

Alternatives to retention and promotion have been suggested by many researchers. Reinherz and Griffin propose "transitional maturity" classes for children between kindergarten and first grade who aren't yet ready for academic learning. "Such a procedure as well as ungraded classes," they state, "would cut the educational bed of Procrustes, not cut the child to fit the bed."

Dobbs and Neville note that low-achievers continue to experience failure whether promoted or retained "unless classroom activities are adjusted to the ability level of the individual child."

They suggest systems of continuous progress, ungraded classes, ability grouping, remedial instruction, and smaller classes with more individual instruction.

In schools where these kinds of options have not yet been developed, educators can use the small amount of research and decision-making instruments to determine which students might benefit most from retention. Using this information and a large dose of good judgment, teachers and administrators can carefully decide whether retention or promotion will better serve the total development of each child. It is clear, though, that unless real efforts are made to adjust the present system to the special needs of low-achieving students, both social promotion and grade retention will continue to exacerbate these students' failings.

References


