

Synthesis of Research on Grade Retention and Social Promotion

This review was commissioned by the ASCD task force in connection with their analysis of the New York City Gates promotion policy.

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The current controversy surrounding the quality of American education has led to consideration of a number of academic issues that have troubled the profession over the years. One of the most significant of these issues is that of social promotion vs. retention in grade level for students who fail to perform according to expectations.

For several decades, most educators have resisted widespread use of retention in grade because of the potential damage to student self-concept. Recently, however, several prestigious national reports have advocated abolishing social promotion:

Placement and grouping of students, as well as promotion and graduation policies, should be guided by the academic progress of students and their instructional needs, rather than by rigid adherence to age (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Promotion from grade to grade should be based on mastery, not age (Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1983).

Every state should establish rigorous standards for high school graduation, and local school districts should provide rigorous standards for grade promotion. We should curtail the process of social promotion (National Science Board, 1983).

Promotion from grade to grade based on examinations and not on "social" promotion is favored by a substantial majority (75%) of survey respondents. This view is shared by parents of school children and by those who have no children in school (Gallup, 1983, p. 38).

A Classic Review

The most instructive publication treating the retention/promotion issue is Jackson's 1975 review of the literature. His general conclusion was that, despite extensive research, "There is no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties" (Jackson, 1975, p. 627).

In his review, Jackson located three types of studies completed on the topic since 1911. The first type compared the achievement and social adjustment of students retained under existing school policies with those promoted under normal policies. Student groups were usually matched on factors of age, grade level, sex, grades, IQ, achievement test scores, and socioeconomic status. The major problem Jackson noted with these studies was their bias toward the benefits of grade promotion. Since some of the students were retained and others promoted under normal policies, the inference remains that those retained were experiencing the most severe problems. In a review of 204 studies, Jackson located 136 investigations that supported promoting students, and 68 that favored retaining such students. Promoted students were viewed as having greater social adjustment and achievement opportunities than those retained in grade.

The second design type compared retained students before and after retention. Here the design favored grade retention since no comparison group was used. Additionally, such designs usually failed to provide control for improvement due to any factors other than retention. Jackson reported that

achievement profiles in these studies indicated no losses and 73 gains in achievement by students who had been retained in grade. In terms of social adjustment, he found three losses, two cases of no gain or loss, and 36 cases of improvements in social adjustment after retention. Among these studies, the data clearly suggested that retention generally improved students' social adjustment and achievement.

The third type of design Jackson located involved a comparison of randomly promoted or retained students who experienced difficulties. Jackson reported only three investigations of this type, which, because of the rigorous treatment conditions, was the only unbiased design (Cook, 1941; Farley, 1936; and Klene and Branson, 1929). Unfortunately, these investigations were all reported 40 years ago and may be of questionable validity when applied to today's schools.

All three studies of the third design looked at achievement gains over a one-semester or a six-month period for primary and intermediate students. Analyses revealed 18 differences in achievement favoring students who were promoted, and 22 differences favoring those who were retained. Obviously, such results fail to provide strong support recommending either course of action as a school policy.

Jackson recommended more rigorous experimental studies to reduce threats to external validity. In his "ideal" experiment, conceived 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

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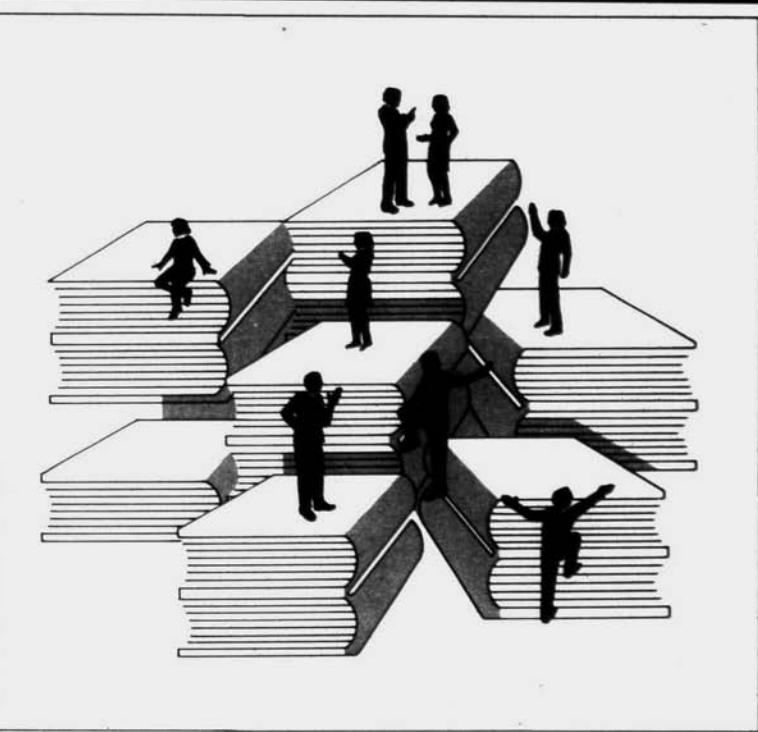
Research on the effects of retention has been mixed—partly because of the difficulty of designing studies on such a question—but research does not support basing promotion decisions on a single criterion, such as test scores.

two groups. To ensure that these groups were statistically comparable, Jackson suggested that students from each group be cross-matched according to variables of achievement, adjustment, and ability. The two nearly identical groups would then be retained or promoted as a treatment condition. Through high school the academic achievement and social and personal adjustments of each student would be monitored and periodically evaluated. All remedial treatments supplied to failing students would be carefully defined beforehand, and carefully recorded under experimental conditions.

Schools have been reluctant to assign students randomly to treatment groups in a study of this sort. In the meantime, researchers have used familiar but flawed methodologies as they attempted to locate the most equitable solution to this problem.

Other Criteria Considered

Others besides Jackson have reviewed research on the retention/promotion issue. Among these, *A Research Summary: The Effects of Grade Retention on Elementary Students* (Baenens and others, 1980) corroborates and extends Jackson's recommendations. Similarly, Bossing and Brien's review (1980) confirms the previous reviews yet raises questions in certain areas. While acknowledging that most studies show that grade retention does not bring significant gains in achievement, they point out that results are sometimes more positive when students have been retained because of immaturity. They also find that much informed opinion and research contradicts the common belief



that immature children's self-concepts are harmed by retention and the equally common belief that threat of retention acts as a motivating force. Bossing and Brien's review proves especially useful in identifying the complexity of formulating an equitable policy based on research alone. They close their discussion by noting some possible alternatives to nonpromotion.

Finally, two especially useful recent documents on promotion and retention include those by Hess and others (1978) and McAfee (1981). Hess provides a detailed historical look at retention/repetition patterns and formulates an important policy review on the question of promotion. His review separates the effects of nonpromotion between retention and repetition for both elementary and secondary children.

McAfee (1981), who is among the most recent contributors on the topic, focuses on the measurement issues in tests (commercial or locally developed) to retain children in grade. He examines the implications of setting a standard so low that it becomes a public mockery, relating the criterion to normal intelligence, or setting the standard for promotion according to a national norm. In particular, he notes the effect of using grade level norms to retain a student,

then readministering the same test one year later when the child is a year older, while adhering to the same grade level equivalent norms. McAfee sees the key issues of promotion and retention in different ways from some theorists, and suggests that school leaders embroiled in the controversy must really decide how to (1) sequence skills according to a hierarchy so students will attain terminal objectives, (2) determine the developmental level of cognitive abilities of students at various levels of instruction, and (3) set standards of retention that will result in a percentage of failure with which a given community can live.

In the final analysis, promotion or retention must be part of a carefully considered state or local decision-making model. While unsatisfactory demonstration of performance may remain predominant in its weighting in the decision, the preceding review of research underscores the multi-faceted complexity of the issue. To make such decisions capriciously or on the student's performance on just one achievement test is intolerable and ignores all that researchers have learned about the effects of errors in the measurement of human behavior.

In the same vein, two similar contributions to the literature are worthy of

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Figure 1. Lieberman's Factors to Consider Before Retaining Students in Grade

CHILD FACTORS	FAMILY FACTORS	SCHOOL FACTORS
Physical disabilities	Geographic moves	System's attitude toward retention
Physical size	Foreign language	Principal's attitude
Academic potential	Attitude toward retention	Teacher's attitude
Psychological maturity	Age of siblings	Availability of remedial services
Neurological maturity	Sibling pressure	Availability of other program options
Self-concept	Involvement of physician	Availability of personnel
Ability to function independently		
Grade placement		
Age		
Previous retention		
Nature of the problem		
Absenteeism		
Basic skill competency		
Attitude toward retention		

note. Lieberman (1980) has generated a decision-making model to determine possible retention. Factors that need to be considered include characteristics of the child and family as well as the school (Figure 1).

A scale developed by Light (1977) to determine a child's suitability for retention includes 19 categories of data similar to Lieberman's. Light's instrument includes a scoring mechanism as well.

Conclusion

The promotion/retention issue seems murky at best. The issue is especially clouded when it becomes a political rather than an educational decision. If the behavior of educational leaders and state legislators persists along current trends, the issue may degenerate into yet another instance where radical surgery is performed to treat the symptom, rather than considering therapy to deal with the problem. To enforce accountability regulations by holding the child in grade seems to ignore the question of how effective the instruction was for that child. Further, it tends to blame the child for failing and too easily absolves the school of responsibility for identifying alternatives to retention. □

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