



Grade Retention and Social Promotion Dichotomy: A Theoretical and Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract: The dichotomy of retention versus promotion in education is persistent. It is a high stake decision teachers, administrators, and policymakers have to make. This article critically reviewed the die-hard retention factors and looked at alternative ways to deal with them. It emphasizes that the approach to repeating grades cannot be taken frivolously. Teachers, administrators, and policy makers' decisions will not only have life-long effects for the individuals upon whom they are placed, but they will undoubtedly affect the future societies as a whole. This article suggested that both teachers and administrators have the vital and deciding power to elect which approach to take, contextualizing curricula and professional development training sensitive to grade retention issues. Educational administrators and teachers must have the insight to recognize the failures and the courage to accept new ways to deal with old problems.

Keywords: at-risk students, grade retention, social promotion

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a lot of debate about grade promotion and retention practices. It is one of the most common argued practices heard among teachers within many educational institutions. On the one hand, it can be seen as a remedial intervention, while on the other hand, it can help students catch up with their peers. In addition, the threat of losing a grade increases students' efforts to improve their grades. However, as a stressful life event, losing a grade may have negative social and academic consequences [Zhang and Huang \(2022\)](#).

In the US, some districts started providing remedial education for students who are at risk of repeating a grade. This practice works by sending them to summer school for a few weeks, where they can retake the test they failed. The goal of these policies is to improve the academic success of low-achieving students. They seem to have the same effect as keeping students focused on learning, which can help them avoid repeating. Various studies have been conducted on the subject. One of these shows that retention rates improve for students in the first and second grades. However, these increases are associated with higher risks of dropping out and even adult crime in the long run ([Eren et al., 2020](#)). Despite the mixed findings on the subject, testing-based promotion has become more prevalent. A number of studies have examined the effects of this practice on student outcomes in different nations.

In most Southeast Asia countries, social promotion appears to be firmly rooted in cultural values related to "saving face" or saving the student from the social embarrassment of being held back to repeat a grade, commonly referred to as retention. The concept of social development involves allowing students to continue to their successive grades, regardless of their ability to meet the minimal standards of achievement in the previous class. The issue of retention versus social promotion has been an ongoing debate among educators in the Western world ([Jimerson, 2001](#)). As is valid with many other controversial issues, public sentiment tends to swing from one extreme to another, influenced by the current political and societal environment.

METHODS

This article will examine the issues surrounding social promotion and retention, focusing on the latter and exploring other possible alternative approaches to students who fail to "make the grade." It adopts the integrative approaches to literature reviews (Snyder, 2019) that critique and synthesizes articles and texts and present alternative approaches pertaining to social promotion and retention.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Critical Review of The Existing Studies

Grade retention or social promotion

What to do with students who have been unable to meet the minimal achievement standards at the end of the school year? The consensus in any given school and context has traditionally been twofold; hold them back and provide them with time, or move them along, hoping they will 'catch up.' Retention desires to give students additional time to learn the information they need before moving to the next grade (Bonvin et al., 2008; Fruehwirth et al., 2016). With the social promotion, the desire is to spare the student from the adverse effects of retention, such as a decreased interest in school and possibly even lower achievement than if they were not retained (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). Although both approaches have merit, a growing desire to base interventions on supportive research has suggested that neither method will be the best solution to the problem (Jimerson et al., 2006; Van Canegem et al., 2021; Wicaksono & Witoelar, 2019). It leads back to what we can do for students who 'don't meet our standards. Several alternative methods may be used; however, many are often related to social promotion or retention, so it is necessary to take a more in-depth look at the issues surrounding the two focusing on retention in particular.

Problems associated with grade retention

Historically, the practice of grade retention appeared shortly after students first began being placed in specific levels according to their age; however, it was not until the 1930s that research began to surface, suggesting the downfalls of this practice (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). The first thing to question any intervention should be 'its' validity. Is it effective in doing what it is meant to do? Retention intends to allow students to catch up to achieve what is expected for their grade level. Unfortunately, as Witmer et al. (2004) discussed, years of research have indicated that the educational benefit for those retained has been quite limited. Many authors have noted that gains are often seen with retained students; however, these gains are usually short-lived (Bonvin et al., 2008; Bowman, 2005; Cockx et al., 2019).

It only makes sense that such students would improve while repeating material they have already studied the year before, and indeed it would give them a boost for the following year. Still, as indicated, the effects of repetition would soon wear off. Perhaps one of the more striking observations is that many studies have found that those retained may be worse off than had they not been kept at all (Bonvin et al., 2008). In some cases, it may be true that retained students would have learned more if they had moved on along with their peers (Silberglitt et al., 2006; Vandecandelaere et al., 2016). This would indicate that the retention of little help is not only possible, but it may even be harmful to students' academic success.

Furthermore research has also indicated that retention directs students down a long path of poor performance (Jimerson et al., 2006; Wicaksono & Witoelar, 2019). Some suggest that such low achievement levels extend beyond high school and into future employment experiences (Jimerson et al., 2006). Understanding why this might happen may be helpful to consider the psychological effects of being retained. The psychological effects of retention have been well noted by academics (Bowman, 2005; Hughes et al., 2018; Jimerson et al., 2006). The idea of being retained is very unattractive to students, possibly even more so for those in their younger years. Not only do they lose the friends of their age group, but they are forced to be with kids that are younger than themselves. Although their new classmates may only be a year younger, it is a "big" difference for children, especially primary age.

There is no greater insult one can give to an early primary student than to suggest that they act or think like someone younger than themselves. It may be why some studies have indicated that students fear retention only third to losing a parent or going blind (Jimerson et al., 2006; Witmer et al., 2004). Research has also shown that retention may result in several other adverse cognitive and affective problems such as difficulties with peers, lowered self-esteem, more inadequate social adjustment, increased problem behaviors, and negative attitudes toward school (Bowman, 2005; Jimerson et al., 2006; Martorell & Mariano, 2018; Owings & Magliaro, 1998). Of course, it cannot be healthy for a 'student's self-esteem to tell them that they are not "smart enough" to continue with their peers, especially at a young age, when they are only just beginning to develop a sense of who they are. Understandably, such an event may influence them long into their future endeavors, such as higher education and employment. Psychological research has shown that success will lead to a more significant effort.

In contrast, failure will often lead to less effort and focus on something the individual can experience tremendous success (Levin, 2007). Persistence in the face of failure is a rare quality for many. We naturally tend to choose the path of least resistance and divert our efforts to things we know we can do when faced with repeated difficulties. This feeling of despondency may explain how other research has also indicated that retention leads to lower attendance and increased chances of dropping out before completing high school (Bowman, 2005; Cockx et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2018; Jimerson et al., 2006). Of course lower participation

will likely lead to a further decrease in achievement, creating a downward spiral, possibly influencing the student to give up and withdraw from school altogether. The relationship between dropout rates and retention was one of the first problems identified during the mid-20th century when dropout rates were a significant concern (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). Today the relationship between dropout rates and retention continues to be noted, especially among minority groups and lower socioeconomic standing (González-Betancor & López-Puig, 2016; Hughes et al., 2017; Jimerson et al., 2006).

A final problem related to grade retention is the concept of grading and assessment itself. Levin (2007) indicated that there could be a great deal of variation in grading between teachers when grading the same work. Thus, this questions the validity and reliability of assessing those students we choose to retain. Furthermore, one must ask whether or not there is a "real" difference between a grade that is one or two percent below a passing mark and one that barely makes a "pass." The artificial construction of standards and averages also ignores each student's individual development (Romey, 2000). It also brings into question the whole concept of having students repeat a grade starting right from the beginning of the same year and ignoring the fact that they have likely mastered some of the ideas already. There is often very little difference in the repeated year's curriculum to that of the year just completed, and the student will likely fall behind once again when they are faced with new material in the subsequent school years (Harrington-Lueker, 1998). It brings to issue that retention is useless, but it is a waste of time and money.

The Price of Grade Retention

The practice of grade retention may not only be harmful to students but may also be detrimental to educational budgets. As the reasons above have shown that retention is primarily ineffective, it follows that this approach's continued practice becomes a blatant careless misuse of the already limited financial resources allotted to education (González-Betancor & López-Puig, 2016; Levin, 2007). Suppose we have a student repeat a year of school. In that case, we are essentially wasting all of the money it costs to have that student remain in the school system an additional year, especially considering they will receive arguably no academic benefit from doing so. Bowman (2005) proposes further hidden costs to retention, such as high unemployment, crime, and the lack of productive citizens due to school dropouts influenced by retention.

Grade retention resurface

In the 1960s and the 1970s in the US, the norm was the practice of social promotion (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). After the adverse retention effects surfaced, educational institutions began to opt for the only apparent alternative - social promotion. However, it did not take long for many to realize that this created a subculture of apathetic students. Some students realized that there was no need to put effort into school to succeed in the next stage regardless of their achievement level (Berlin, 2008). It did not fit well with the Western work ethic that people should not get something for nothing or that "there's no such thing as a free lunch" (Parker, 2001).

The report "A Nation at risk" has been a more prominent influence on the shift back to retention practice than the report "A Nation at risk" in the early 1980s. It suggested that American educational institutions produced high school and college students who could not read or write appropriately due to social promotion (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). It sparked great fear among many Americans who believed they were beginning to lag behind other countries in producing well-educated citizens. As a result of the well-known national initiative, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was implemented in 2001 (Jimerson et al., 2006). This policy called for educational institutions to be held more accountable for student successes and led to standardized testing and, of course, a return to retention. A fascinating observation was made by Jimerson et al. (2006) that since the NCLB introduction, it is somewhat paradoxical that more children are being "left behind" through the practice of grade retention.

Why Ignore All the Research Discrediting Retention?

It has been noted that grade retention most obviously goes against the grain of all the research available (Witmer et al., 2004). Although abundant evidence suggests that retention does not work, educators and administrators continue to return to the practice. Further, they indicated a gap between research and practice in schools (Cabrera-Hernandez, 2021; Pearson, 2018; Witmer et al., 2004). In any profession ". . . better practices and products regularly replace old ones (p.2)" (Parker, 2001), yet this education practice continues to be dug up from the past. Upon further investigation, the answer to why this occurs appears varied.

One explanation is that grade retention seems to make common sense (Levin, 2007; Martínez & Vandegrift, 1991). The initial problem is that the student has not reached the expected level of achievement in the curriculum. Therefore, it appears to make sense to give them more time to do so (Bonvin et al., 2008). It also seems logical that we should stop a student from continuing if a teacher suspects they will continue to fail in the future (Martínez & Vandegrift, 1991). It may be one reason why there is a tendency to retain students

in the earlier primary years instead of later on.

Another line of thought related to why we continue to retain students is that it is a form of punishment for those who did not try hard enough. In a sense, it is a form of negative reinforcement to change the students' future behavior. Punishment is commonly used to alter behavior in many areas of most societies, most notably found in criminal justice systems (Levin, 2007). As noted earlier, some students arguably will choose to put as little effort as possible into their schoolwork if they think they can get away with it, and punishment is one way to deter students from taking this path. There is also the sentiment that if you "do the crime, you serve the time" with the application of retention. If students are not willing to put effort into their schoolwork, they should have to pay the price. Punishment is a common theme in all school life areas, such as losing recess or lunchtime for not doing homework or receiving detention for bad behavior. Once again, retention fits well with the idea that no one should get something for nothing (Harrington-Lueker, 1998; Parker, 2001). We believe that people should earn their achievements, and rewards should not be given freely without being earned (Levin, 2007). Just as the absence of punishment may persuade some to reside on an "easy street," rewards will do the same in the absence of effort.

Our attraction to retention may also be due to a lack of coverage in the teacher's training program (Pearson, 2018) and the lack of knowledge concerning the negative research. Witmer et al. (2004) found that past studies suggested that many teachers were entirely unaware of the research surrounding retention, implying that this may be responsible for their attraction to the practice. It was also suggested that some teachers might be aware of the research but disregard it. Their study hypothesized a negative relationship between teachers' knowledge and their retention use. However, this study could not find a correlation between retention and teachers' lack of understanding. Interestingly, there seems to be a difference in reasoning for retention between teachers of lower and upper elementary students. Furthermore, the higher the levels of education a teacher possesses do not correspond with student retention reduction (Feathers, 2020).

According to Witmer et al. (2004), lower elementary grade teachers held the need to master skills based on their reasoning behind retention practices. In contrast, many upper elementary teachers viewed retention as a reaction to 'students' lack of effort. It was suggested that the upper elementary teachers expected their students to have developed and applied excellent study habits. In contrast, the lower elementary teachers were more likely to attribute achievement to ability and be more concerned about students' self-esteem (Witmer et al., 2004). Teachers' reasoning variation demonstrates how retaining students may be strongly linked to a 'teacher's personal beliefs and experiences.

One of the more intriguing explanations for 'teachers' tendency to ignore research on retention surrounds the distinction between beliefs and knowledge. According to Witmer et al. (2004), beliefs and knowledge are different. Beliefs can be understood "as attitudes, judgments, values, opinions, perceptions, ideology, and internal mental processes." Furthermore, beliefs held by an individual do not change easily, yet knowledge is more flexible. It is also suggested that students' judgments are formed using a mix of beliefs and knowledge, but beliefs may play a more substantial role (Witmer et al., 2004). It would imply that when teachers decide retention, they are more strongly influenced by their beliefs about their personal experiences than any empirical knowledge they may hold on the subject.

Teachers' beliefs can change through differing personal experiences and those shared with colleagues (Witmer et al., 2004). These beliefs can influence all classroom decisions and be biased to the teacher's personal experience, even in contradictory evidence. Studies have shown that a 'student's reading grade at the beginning of the school year can influence the decision to hold that student back at the end of the year, even if the student may have improved by meeting achievement levels comparable to their peers by the end of the year (Bonvin et al., 2008). In terms of theory and research, teachers rely on knowledge about an issue. However, when faced with questions and decisions, they depend on personal experiences or beliefs (Witmer et al., 2004). It might indicate one reason why teachers may revert to the practice of retention even when they are aware of the research showing its ineffectiveness. It also supports the argument that information used to base retention decisions often has low validity. Bonvin et al. (2008) point out a lack of shared agreement among the criterion used to base retention decisions. Moreover, Pearson (2018) argued that such a standard could vary significantly from teacher to teacher. It is genuinely dependent on the 'student's teacher's attitudes and beliefs when decisions are made to have students repeat a grade. When considering the research indicating the possible long-term effect on a retained student, this may be viewed as a rather alarming issue.

The final explanation for why research is often ignored is the tendency to think either. Faced with a bombardment of stimuli, daily people unconsciously attempt to simplify things by creating dichotomies in their thinking. It may undoubtedly be true in the case of what to do with a failing student. We often focus on retention or social promotion as the only solutions and ignore that several alternative solutions exist (Parker, 2001). We find comfort in those things we are most familiar with and maintain a fear for the unknown or

lesser-used approaches. In the face of its ineffectiveness, reemergence and continued retention are excellent examples.

Teachers and schools continue to hold on to this practice because this is what has always been done (Levin, 2007). With this in mind, educators can only expect to get the same results by relying on the same approaches. A well-known quote by Jeffers (1987) states, "If you always do what 'you've always done, 'you'll always get what 'you've always got." Parker (2001) also quotes a Zen saying, knowledge is learning something every day. Wisdom is letting go of something every day. Thus, finding new successes with failing students by looking at new approaches to the problem is necessary.

Alternative Approaches

Approaches to failing students

The approaches taken to address students who cannot meet the schools' standards are crucial (Leslie & Lundblom, 2020; Marley-Payne, 2021). If we consider the need to avoid dichotic thinking, one of the best suggestions may be to avoid using a single approach (Lyubansky, 2021). Many academics stress that no unique approach will work for everyone (Harrington-Lueker, 1998; Jimerson et al., 2006; Levin, 2007; Mellard, 2004). It becomes an obvious point when we take a realistic look at students and acknowledge that each individual has unique strengths, unique weaknesses, and, above all, special needs. For this reason, interventions must recognize each student's individual needs and acknowledge that they are not singular (Jimerson et al., 2006). It will arguably lead to more significant success for both the school and the student. Such an approach does not reject the use of retention flat out. There may be valid individual cases where retention may be considered beneficial; however, discrimination in its application should be carefully and cautiously considered (Bonvin et al., 2008; Feathers, 2020).

It is equally important to observe the student as a "whole"; in other words, we must also address the social and behavioral aspects intertwined with academic performance (Eyasu, 2017; Goos et al., 2021; Martorell & Mariano, 2018; Mellard, 2004). It means that each student should be treated individually and comprehensively in a case-by-case approach (Bonvin et al., 2008). It is then essential to consider research-based strategies and proven effective through empirical evidence. The following is an overview of some possible interventions; however, it is beyond this paper's coverage to explore the whole extent of empirical support for each.

Approaches to retention or social promotion

One of the retention problems is that students must repeat the entire year even though they may have achieved some of the standards (Soler et al., 2021; Petrilli, 2020). Following this observation, one alternative is to observe the standards separately to be completed individually rather than grouping them all in one year to be achieved as a whole (Goos et al., 2021). This way, students may repeat only the standards they fail to deliver, eliminating wasted time measuring what they have already mastered (Parker, 2001). It might be done by having students repeat only the standards they could not achieve while remaining with promoted classmates to continue with the following year's standards. This way, the stigma of being held back will be reduced.

The focus on standards also brings into question the more substantial issue: we have created too many criteria that cannot be realistically achieved in the first place (Romey, 2000). This concept is closely linked to their suggestions that we do away with the idea of grade levels altogether. Romey (2000) argues that the whole purpose of placing students into grades according to their chronological age is unrealistic, considering the variations in development often found between individuals of the same age. One less drastic option may be to create differentiated curricula within the same grade so that 'students' individual needs can be better addressed (Mellard, 2004). On the other hand, a more popular alternative is to repeat the needed material during summer school, weekend classes, or evening classes (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). It would allow students to remain with their promoted peers and reduce negative retention experiences. Yet, it would also address the concepts of punishment, rewards, and providing time to "catch up," as discussed earlier.

Thus far, the focus has been on the student's deficiencies; however, it is equally important to recognize improvements needed among experienced and novice teachers and preservice teachers (Mesler et al., 2021; Pearson, 2018; Young et al., 2019). A distinct approach to teachers is to provide greater professional development opportunities to create better learning environments that recognize and address individual student needs (Adnan et al., 2021; Parker, 2001). Teachers can also be provided with more significant opportunities to work cooperatively with parents and co-workers to find the most appropriate individual students approach. By providing teachers with the skills to recognize individual needs and address them, we also take more of a preventative approach to the problem than traditionally more reactive strategies (Feathers, 2020; Pearson, 2018). Teachers can take a more proactive stance on the question by closely monitoring individual students' progress so that any downturn can be recognized and addressed on time

before they become a more significant problem (Dewar et al., 2021; Mellard, 2004).

Another important yet often overlooked approach is to provide better and more frequent feedback to parents and the student regarding their progress. Parker (2001) and Pollock and Tolone (2021) offer an enlightening explanation of how vital this type of intervention is. It is explained that to find success, students must know precisely what their target is and how close they are coming to achieving it. Without proper and frequent direction and feedback, students only shoot arrows in the dark and hope they will hit the 'bull's eye. Providing them with more excellent and timely feedback increases their chances of success and gives them a greater sense of ownership for their success (Parker, 2001; Pollock & Tolone, 2021; Young et al., 2020).

Finally, the following are recommended essential questions administrators, teachers, and educational practitioners should ask when faced with the dilemma of grade retention or social promotion. 1). Is it possible to create an individualized standard instead of group standards? 2). Would the concept of doing away with grade levels work? 3). Would professional development training create better learning environments that recognize and address individual student needs? 4). Would frequent and timely progress feedback to both parents and the students help? Teachers, administrators, and policymakers must address these vital contextual questions to solve this dichotomy in one's educational settings.

CONCLUSION

The approach one takes towards students who do not meet expected achievement levels cannot be taken lightly. Teachers' and administrators' decisions will not only have life-long effects for the individuals upon whom they are placed, but they will undoubtedly affect the future societies as a whole. As suggested, both teachers and administrators have the power to decide which approach to take, i.e., curricula and professional development training-wise. Teachers and administrators at the school level must look into grade retention and/or social promotion on a case-by-case, cultural and contextual approach. Sound decisions should be made with multiple assessments. Promoting or retaining a student is not acceptable based on one test. Students should take various accountability tests to improve their academic performance. Research has confirmed what most of us already know: If social promotion is used for retention, then the chances of students being harmed are pretty high. There is also evidence that helps retain them do better academically than they would have if they were not. If policymakers want to minimize the harm caused by retention, they should promote special assistance for those retained. At the same time, provide timely feedback to policymakers at the local, regional or provincial levels. It is essential to tackle this dichotomy in an appropriate milieu. Educational practitioners at the school and regional levels must have the insight to recognize one's failures and the courage to accept new ways to deal with old problems. Until then, this dichotomy persisted.

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