An examination of the positive and negative effects of retention

Michelle M. Sabia

Rowan University

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An Examination of the Positive and Negative Effects of Retention

by

Michelle M. Sabia

A Thesis

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Approved by Professor

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ABSTRACT

Michelle M. Sabia  
An Examination of the Positive and Negative Effects of Retention  
1998  
Dr. Stanley Urban  
Learning Disabilities Graduate Program

Each year many students are misplaced in grade levels and are unable to meet academic expectations. As a result school administrators, teachers and parents are faced with finding a solution to these children’s educational problems. Retention is one alternative that is often considered. Due to the frequency of this practice along with limited options, it is important to look at the academic effects of retention on students. Using teacher’s report cards and standardized test results, the effects of retention were studied in six elementary school students. Using a combination of factors including literature reviews and the results of this study, it was determined that in order to be effective, the decision to retain must be made on an individual basis.
MINI-ABSTRACT

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This study was completed to determine if retaining students has a beneficial or negative effect on their academic performance. Through literature reviews and analysis of the data obtained, the effects of retention were seen as highly individualized depending on the student’s developmental status.
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Chapter 1

Introduction To The Problem

Every spring teachers, parents and administrators are faced with the decision of whether to promote or retain students at various grade levels. While the majority of students advance to the next grade level it is felt that for a small minority, retention is in their best interest.

The research as well as the opinions of experts on this subject is varied and conflicting. Some view retention as the solution to avoiding future years of struggle due to a failure to achieve academically at a particular grade level. Advocates believe that social promotion is an unjust alternative to retention. Others take an opposing position some of those not in favor of retention believe that the repetition of a grade level has a deleterious effect on the students academic career and has little or no positive benefits.

Since the end of the Civil War most urban community schools had organized their students into grade levels based on chronological age (Setencich, 1994). At each level there were standard goals. To this day many public school districts set academic standards based on chronological age.

Unfortunately educators are only now recognizing that many students do not fit into the age standards that have
been apriori established for them. Some feel that children require standards based on their developmental levels rather than the commonly used age criterion. As the debate over retention continues, many at risk students are retained or promoted each year depending on the educational philosophy of those who are deciding the best interest of that child.

There have always been and will remain to be, those students who struggle with academic materials that challenge their capabilities. The issue most in need of resolution is whether or not retention the best alternative for academically deficient students at a particular grade level.

**Need For The Study**

It is important to study the factors that are involved in retention to determine if they represent an acceptable alternative for students functioning behind their grade level peers. A large segment of the research literature is not in favor of retention. Nevertheless many educators, parents and administrators continue to retain a growing number of students each year and stand firmly behind their decision.

**Purpose Of The Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between retention and subsequent academic achievement. Standardized tests and teacher input will
serve as the primary sources of information. There are many relevant factors which may effect the academic achievement of retained students including age, gender, race, motivation of students, parental support and determining if the problem is an issue that requires more than extra time in a grade level (Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber, 1994). In addition, review of this research will be of assistance to those involved in the decision making process as to whether retention can serve a useful purpose on behalf of at risk students.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

To accomplish the general purposes of this study, the data obtained is used to answer the following research questions.

**Research Question 1-** How does retention effect academic achievement on standardized test scores?

**Research Question 2-** How does retention effect academic standing over a period of time?

**Research Question 3-** What are the characteristics of students who are retained?

**Definition Of Terms**

**Retention:** The practice of requiring a child to repeat a particular grade or requiring a child of appropriate chronological age to delay entry into kindergarten or first grade (Holder, 1992).
**Standardized Test:** A test that is normed against a comparative sample (Setencich, 1994).

**Academic Performance:** The level at which a student is able to function in a given grade (Allyn and Bacon, 1981).

**Homogeneous Grouping:** Grouping by similar academic ability (Allyn and Bacon, 1994).

**Heterogeneous Grouping:** Random grouping irrelevant to ability (Allyn and Bacon, 1994).

**Social Promotion:** Promoting a student based on chronological age rather than academic readiness (Grant, 1997).

**Modal Age:** The chronological age at which a child should be in a particular grade level (Alexander et al., 1994).

**Overview**

The literature review in Chapter II will provide information on the varied research debating the positives and negatives of non-promotion. The viewpoints, for the most part, are very extreme. On one side advocates feel that retention enables students to catch up to their grade level peers and maintain a strong and steady progress for years subsequent to retention. I have found that teachers make up a large portion of those in favor of retention.

Many of those opposed to retention feel that students do not make academic gains some say that those children actually performed more poorly on an average, in
the next grade level, than they would have if they were originally promoted (Center For Policy Research In Education [CPRE], 1990). The research is heavily weighted in favor of promoting students rather than holding them back. There is valid evidence on the effects of both issues. However research lacks some crucial information such as proven alternatives for success when at risk students are promoted. There is some ambiguity in the studies that do not support retention in terms of results between comparison groups. As noted by Alexander et al. (1994), it is impossible to get two groups of the same age and grade with retention so there will always be a discrepancy when comparing retained students against promoted peers. There are also factors such as length of studies and pre-retention status that are lacking in the current research. There little research, in comparison, on the success of students who were encouraged to repeat a grade but did not.

In light of the current research, I hope to provide educators, parents and administrators with information that will emphasize the importance of taking the many factors discussed into consideration before making the decision to promote or retain a student. I believe this to be an important issue because it is usually not the person being effected, but others, making this decision on their behalf. I am confident that which ever side one concurs with, both
would agree that this is a decision that can be life changing and permanent in its effect.
Philosophies on Retention

The philosophies of many administrators, educators and parents on retaining students is quite different than that of most researchers. Jennings, Lohraff, and Rizzo (1988) cited an estimated 74% of school administrators, 65% of teachers and 59% of parents as supporters for academic retention. Most teachers believe that a pupil’s educational career should be driven by competence or readiness rather than social promotion. Many teachers and administrators believe that, if a child does poorly but is promoted, his struggles in the next grade may be interpreted as evidence that he should have been retained (Jennings et. al. 1988). In their study, The Center For Policy Research In Education (CPRE) found, if a comparable child is retained and does better on repeated material the following year, his improvement may be interpreted as evidence that retention works. If he does not do better in the next or succeeding grades, the teacher’s attitude is often, well, we tried or he would have done worse if he went on. A Gallup Poll, done in 1986 showed 72% of the U.S. citizenry to be in favor of retention. The philosophy seemed to be that tough promotion is synonymous with high academic standards (CPRE, 1990).

Some believe that children begin to experience failure
when they’re promoted to the next grade before they are developmentally ready. Failure breeds more failure as students are put into more difficult situations beyond their ability for success (Jennings et al. 1988). Jim Grant and Bob Johnson (1997) suggest that children who end up retained were initially misplaced in a grade and many developmentally young children need an extra year to catch up. Their research supports the idea that retention works best for children who are average to above average in ability but who are among the youngest in their class (Grant et al. 1997). Retention can be beneficial to children who started school biologically, socially, emotionally or physically behind. Grant et al. (1997) found that it is of no benefit to retain a child in the upper grades unless you have unconditional support from parents.

Those who take the negative stance on retention, appear to be researchers who have done studies on children who have been retained at some point in their academic career. There was no mention of any of the researchers having been educators or having any experience with educational instruction. With this in mind I was better able to understand how there could be such division among groups. Opponents of retention base their criticism on research suggesting that it is of no use to be exposed to the same materials and texts two years in a row (Foster, 1993). Other research shows that any positive effects of
retention diminish with time (Walters and Borgers, 1995). Research also suggests that it is not repetition of a grade that creates success rather individualized educational programs (Holder, 1992). Others believe that grade placement is best made according to chronological age and that children achieve better with peers at the same age level. Advocates of this philosophy support social promotion rather than academic retention (Holder, 1992). The above represent some of the wide varieties of philosophies and theories on grade level placement. Later in this chapter more specific focus will placed on the reasoning behind such theories.

**Background Information**

According to all of the research, there are no national statistics on retention. It is difficult to differentiate, based on age, between students that have been held back at a grade level versus those who are below modal grade due to variations among state policies on ages of school entrance, the number of students who entered school late and the time of year that the data is collected (CPRE, 1993). However it is estimated in a study done by Anderson (1992), that the retention rate in the United States is 6% annually with 50% of all entering students expected to experience retention at least once before entering high school. There are other estimations regarding the percentage of students retained in
the United States, all of which fall in very close range to the above stated. Grant (1997), estimates that 20% of school children are in the wrong grade in terms of developmental levels. In her study Foster (1993) found the most commonly retained students fell into one of the following categories, poor and minority children, boys, African American, children who were the youngest and smallest in their class.

In a 1990 census Alexander, Entwisle and Dauber (1995), discovered that most failures occur in the first three years of school. In looking at the categories and estimated numbers of children being retained in the United States, it is interesting to note some comparisons on this same issue in some other countries. Primary grade retention in Japan and the United Kingdom is zero. The median rate of retention in Europe and the Soviet Union is 2% (CPRE, 1993).

Mantzicopoulus, Morrison, Hinshaw and Carte (1989) reveal in their study that most schools do not have written policies outlining the criteria by which students are retained. Those who did have some policies in place still had flexible standards. Mantzicopoulus et al. found that the higher rate of retention may be due to the recent wave of education reforms focusing on higher standards. Retention rather than social promotion conveys the message that standards are being upheld.
Studies and Test Results

Several studies have been done in attempt to measure the academic progress of students who have been retained. The majority of the studies reviewed for this paper were related to elementary school retention. The studies used various types of sample groups. Most of the research studies noted the difficulty in finding truly representative sample groups, and most came to the conclusion that there is not a truly comparable sample grouping between retained students. It is important that those reading the studies keep this in mind when forming an opinion on retention.

One study done by CPRE (1993) Looked at 63 cases of retained and promoted students of similar academic ability; 54 of the cases showed retained students in first grade scored lower on standardized tests at the end of second grade than those who were socially promoted. The 9 cases that showed overall growth had some form of additional remediation.

In her study Jill Setencich (1994), compared the C.T.B.S. scores of retained and promoted children. The study looked at students in seventh and eighth grade. The scores of those who had been retained in kindergarten or first grade(18) were compared to students who had never been retained(18). The two groups were matched for gender, grade level, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. The findings revealed that there was a significant difference between the
retained and non-retained groups in favor of the non-
retained.

In another study, Borgers (1995), showed that students test scores were higher the year after they were retained; however, by the third year the students lost any gains they had made. Those students who showed the most improvement in the three year study were those who had additional support. From this study the reader may be led to believe that retention can lead to temporary academic improvement which eventually tapers off. Borgers found that the means to any success in retention lies in individual support (Borgers, 1995).

Similar findings were seen in a study done by Holder (1992), in his study Holder looked at group achievement scores on all students who had been retained in his elementary school over a six year time period. Out of a total school enrollment of 647, 186 students had been retained at least once in the elementary school under study. Results of the study indicated grade retention as ineffective. Most students showed an increase in academic achievement the year of the retention but declined within the two years following. This study did not discount all retention but did point out the difficulty in predicting who will benefit and who will not. Alexander et al. (1995) address the issue of academic decline in their book. They
point out that although many students retained in first grade have decreased academic performance in the years following retention, studies fail to take into consideration that annual gains in most instances decline over the years for everyone. The reason for this is, generally the rate of a child’s cognitive growth declines with age.

There are a considerable number of factors to take into consideration when reading the research on retention and taking a positive or negative position on this issue. Much of the data and literature available is dated. A large amount of the available studies are unpublished and the sample groups are rarely large and diverse enough to allow broad generalization. Most evaluations of retention provide follow up for only one year and thus long term consequences may be different and more important than immediate effects (Alexander et al., 1995). The comparison groups are questionable in terms of validity due to several characteristics. They are often same grade students, in which case, one group has been exposed to the same material two times while the other has only had one year of experience. This type of grouping also compares older to younger students. Grade level comparison is helpful in determining if an extra year results in increased achievement for the retained student, but not in determining comparisons between the two. Some studies compare same age
students where retained students are compared to promoted classmates. Because the two groups have not been instructed using the same level of materials, this comparison is invalid.

It is difficult to obtain statistical data through looking at chronological age due to different states cut off dates for school entry and many parent's decision to keep their child home for an extra year. In many studies the researchers only follow the students after the year they are retained and do not provide an academic background on what the child's rate or level of achievement was before retention which makes it difficult to measure progress (Alexander et al., 1995).

Alexander et al. (1995), offer some options for creating comparable sample groups. One option may be to use a random sample whose performance puts them at risk for retention and then randomly place them in two groups (retained/promoted). Because of the random assignment, the influence of other factors should be equivalent. Although this grouping may be more valid, it is highly unlikely that parents would give their consent to have their child participate in such a study. Another type of sample grouping is called "matching." Using this method children who test in the same ability level, some retained and some promoted are compared. The reasons for promotion or
retention may be due to parental choice or teacher recommendation. Although these students may be similar in regard to academic levels, they may be quite different in other areas such as their level of motivation and emotional maturity. For all of these reasons it is difficult to find an ideal population to compare.

Unfortunately in many school districts there are few options for students who are unable to succeed on their chronological grade level. Teachers and parents are too often faced with making educational decisions on behalf of students who fall in this category. Many times the alternatives are recommendations for evaluation by a Child Study Team or retention neither of which may benefit the student. There is clearly a growing need for alternative programs for students who are not functioning on grade level but do not necessarily meet the need for special education or retention.

In their study Jennings et al. (1988), suggest some alternatives to retention. They suggest extending the grades between kindergarten and second grade. The grade levels would be as follows, primary, kindergarten, primary first, first, primary second and second. If a child progresses at the standard intervals then there would be no need to participate in any of the primary levels; however, if a child is struggling anywhere between kindergarten and second
grade, they can participate in the appropriate primary class. Some advantages to this alternative are, there is a new curriculum at each level, new materials and texts, freedom from frustration, and continued forward progress. The curriculum is not remedial but developmental. The philosophy behind this approach is that student's did not develop to the appropriate level so instruction is based on their current level and continues up using the extra year to bring the students up to level. Jennings et al.(1988), also suggest providing remedial help, summer school, instructional aids, and peer tutoring. Some of these options have been tried and do not seem to be enough. Perhaps instead of placing the emphasis on proving retention as a positive or negative approach, researchers should focus on viable options for lower achieving students.
Chapter 3
Methodology And Procedures

Introduction
The following chapter describes the student population participating in this study, the evaluative instrument, collection of data and the research design.

Population
The population for this study consisted of all students grade two through six who were retained in either grade one or two. The sample includes four boys and two girls. All students retained were participants of regular education programs. The school is located in a lower middle class area. Housing consists of some neighborhoods, developments and three low income apartment complexes. The students in this district are predominantly white. This is the only elementary school in the district. There are four of each grade level from grades one through three. The majority of the students are bused to school.

Method of Sample Selection
The information used in this study was obtained through access to school files. Students were chosen based on the year of retention. Only students retained in first or second grade were selected. Access to files was limited to students through the eighth grade. The students in this study were retained within the last eight years.
**Instrumentation**

The evaluative measure used to determine the academic effects of retention is the total battery score on the California Test Of Basic Skills (C.T.B.S) which is a standardized test that is given in the spring of each school year. The total battery score is given as a percentile, ranking the students against other same age students nationally. For the purposes of this study the students scores will be used to compare how a student achieved before and after retention. The results of these scores will be reviewed for the year that the students were retained as well as the years following. Grades on student report cards will also be reviewed.

**Measurement**

The C.T.B.S. test was selected because it is the standardized test which is given annually by the district. The total battery score of the test was used to determine achievement because it is easily comparable from year to year. It is also a clear indicator as to whether or not the retained students continue to make academic gains at their current grade level. Report cards were also used to cite significant increases or delays in student progress because the grades students receive are greatly weighted by curriculum based testing.
**Collection of Data**

Each of the student's cumulative folders was reviewed with consent from the school administration.

**Design**

This study is designed to determine the effects of retention on the academic achievement of students from grades one through five. The results include the success of students within the regular education setting. This research may be used to review how a student achieved with consideration given to grade placement; it is noteworthy that it is impossible to determine how each of these students would have scored if they were not retained or if they were participants of an alternative educational program other than retention.

**Analysis**

The information from successive C.T.B.S. total battery scores will be used to provide information concerning the academic standing of retained students since retention. As previously noted, many factors which can not to be controlled, make it unfeasible to determine retention as a positive or negative decision on behalf of low achieving students. Because the research reveals such inconsistencies between sample groups, it may be seen that there is a growing need for alternatives to retention. There appears to be a great need to provide services for low achieving
students who are not making gains from social promotion or retention.
Chapter 4
Analysis And Interpretation Of The Data

**Introduction**

The review of the literature examined the long standing debate over the benefit or detriment of retaining students in terms of academic performance. This research study was designed to review the academic effects of retention on six students. The study will show the students' academic standing over a period of three to seven years beginning with the year of retention. All of the students in the study were retained in either first or second grade.

**Results**

The results of this study will be based on the results of the students C.T.B.S. total battery score. This score is reported as a percentile. Students total battery score shows where a student ranks when compared nationally to a same age standardized sample group. In this study student report card grades will also be taken into consideration to determine academic success. This is not a standardized, but functional measure of academic achievement. Using these measures the reader may gain insight in determining the answers to the research questions.

**Research Question 1**- How does retention effect the academic achievement on standardized tests?
It is worth noting that one of the students in the study was classified and placed in a special education program. Of the six students, two were girls and three were boys. It is often noted in research that boys are retained more frequently than girls.

In examining Table 1 it may be seen that all of the retained students did as well or significantly better on their C.T.B.S. tests the year they were retained. It may not be assumed that these results are due to an increase in academic progress due to other possible factors. The students may have done better due to repetition of materials or from receiving individualized help. For these reasons it may not be presumed that retention is solely responsible for such gains.

**Table 1**

Percentile Ranking of Children in Total Battery of C.T.B.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>*1.1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>*2.2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pupil 1</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pupil 2</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pupil 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pupil 4</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>sped.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil 5</td>
<td></td>
<td>36%</td>
<td></td>
<td>36%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pupil 6</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Refers to the year the student was retained*
Research Question 2- How does retention effect academic standing over a period of time?
An examination of Table 1 shows that test scores for the years following retention vary. Some of the student’s scores dropped while others rose. The degree to which the scores fluctuated varied among students. In reviewing the test scores it appears that the effects of retention are highly individualized.

Research Question 3- What are the learning characteristics of students who are retained? This question was answered using report card grades and teacher comments on individual students, although this is not a standardized but a functional measure, it revealed some relevant factors concerning academic success. There were several traits that the majority of the students had in common including; low self confidence, distractible, weak listening skills and major area of weakness in reading and language. All of the teachers of the retained students noted that their performance had increased in the year of retention. Through discussion with the retained student’s teachers, it was clear that the retentions were felt to be beneficial and strongly supported. The attributes noted are not to be assumed for all retained students; however it was interesting that they were common among the students studied.
Summary

The test results for the retained year and following years, as well as the learning characteristics for retained student’s, showed that retained students made significant gains in the year of retention. The years following retention did not prove to bring as much success or academic gain on standardized tests. The importance of these results in relation to the research will be reviewed in the following chapter.
Chapter 5

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction
This study was conducted to determine, through the use of standardized tests and teacher input, the academic effects of retention. There continues to be strong conflicting views on the impact of retaining students. The academic achievement of five retained elementary school students was studied to determine if one extra year at a particular grade level was beneficial to them. The findings and conclusions will be discussed in this chapter.

Summary and Conclusions
The question of whether or not retention is beneficial to students is one that deserves considerable attention. Because many students come to a certain point in a school year and are obviously not functioning on grade level, a decision must be made regarding their educational program. Teachers and parents are responsible for determining the best course for such students; whether it be retention or an alternative program. Through looking at the academic results of the six students studied we can determine how retention affected these specific students.

Of the five students retained three were boys and two were girls. Three of the students were retained in first grade while the other two were retained in second grade.
Through looking at each student's end of the year standardized test score, it may be seen that most gains were short term. Test scores in following years seemed to continually decrease. According to teachers reports students were still weak in selected areas but retention was seen as beneficial. Because we do not know what these student’s test scores would have been with an alternate program it is difficult to assess if retention benefited the students at all. An examination of test scores alone would indicate that the students did not show long term improvement.

**Discussion and Implications**

After reviewing the research and studying children who have been retained, there is still not a definitive answer to the question, does retention help or hinder academic performance. Although the children in the study showed a decrease in academic performance over time, there are still many factors which must be kept in mind before choosing a side of this debate. First it is difficult to know how a student who has been retained would have done if they were passed on. While their test scores declined it is impossible to know how much more they would have fallen if they continued to the next grade level. Much of the research compared retained children to others in the same grade. This may be misleading because the retained group
would have been exposed to the same materials two years in a row while the others had only one year of exposure. In the research that was reviewed and in the results obtained in this study academic achievement declined in the year following retention. This phenomenon was observed mostly in the lower grade levels. This may not necessarily have any correlation to retention because most annual gains decline over a period of years for everyone. Generally the rate of cognitive growth declines with age. In short, age along with ability may play a part in academic achievement. Because some retained children do make gains while others do not, it is most likely true that individual child characteristics contribute to predictions to whether or not retention will be successful.

The results of this study did not reveal a definitive answer to the question, does retention have a positive or negative effect on academic achievement. The results of the study showed students making immediate gains after the year of retention only; however, without knowing their prior developmental levels and rates of achievement, it is difficult to measure progress. It was also unknown as to whether or not the retained students were receiving additional support or not. Depending on how one views the test scores, retention may be seen in a positive or negative light. The test scores for two of the retained students
show that they continued to function in the average range each year after retention. Those same test results showed a consistent decline in scores for each student following the year of retention even though some were still average or above. As previously noted, there are several unstated factors which may have an impact on the success or failure of retention lack of pertinent information may create more ambivalence on this subject. It appears as though the decision as to whether or not to retain a student is highly individualized. Those involved in making this decision must look closely at the students learning characteristics and weigh all the options before coming to a conclusion on the best placement for the child.

**Implications for Further Study**

The sample group in this study was very small. Although all test scores declined, different outcomes may have been shown in different school districts using another standardized measure. The sample group was limited to five students who were all retained in either first or second grade. Students retained in higher grade levels may have shown different results. Using a wide range of students may show greater implications for one side of this debate. Further research on support services used in conjunction with retention would be helpful. It would be interesting to study students who were candidates for retention but were
passed on. Looking at alternate programs used for such students, and the outcomes, would be helpful to those faced with making the same decision.
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