A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF PROMOTION AND RETENTION ON CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF PROMOTION AND RETENTION ON CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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Master of Arts in Education

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by

Vennie Evans

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To the Graduate and Research Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Vennie Evans entitled "A Study of the Effects of Promotion and Retention on Children's Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement." I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education, with a major in Elementary Guidance and Counseling.

Linda B Rudolph
Major Professor

Accepted for the Graduate and Research Council:

William H Ellis
Dean of the Graduate School

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Importance of the Study

With the increasing emphasis on back-to-basics and competency-based education, the controversy over promotion and retention is again at the forefront of educational concerns. To promote or not to promote is a question that plagues thousands of teachers each June. Finlayson suggested that we are now "focusing on educational standards to be achieved by individuals so as to assure the public that we have high-quality programs and competent people" (1977, p. 205). However, if the concept of the normal curve has any validity, some individuals must eventually meet failure in attempting to achieve these standards. When children are not promoted to the next grade with their classmates at a regular promotion period, Finlayson contended that they are being told in effect that they are failures in school. If the current move to higher standards continues to its logical conclusion, inevitably some school children will fail or be retained in a grade.

Another popular movement of the past decade, according to Finlayson (1977), focuses on affective education. Its main concern is for the individual's growth and development in noncognitive areas such as attitude formation, self-concept development, and values clarification. Godfrey (1972) believed that students who fail tend to doubt their own self-worth, have little confidence in themselves, see

themselves as inadequate in social and family situations, and have an unfavorable view of their own behavior and moral worth.

Powell (1981) maintained that positive reinforcement, a positive self-concept, a feeling of self-worth, and an enthusiastic, positive attitude about school are all important if a child is to have a life of happiness, fulfillment, and success. He stated that "every child comes to school knowing something and has the ability to learn something" (p. 5). It is not the student's failure, but the failure of the school system for not providing positive environments, flexibility, and materials necessary to see that no child fails. Glasser (1969) supported this position also by his contention that once children receive the failure label and see themselves as failures, they will rarely succeed in school.

Purkey (1970) suggested that the image of school grows gradually less positive with time, and "communicates a sense of personal inadequacy to many students" (p. 42). In order to make an understanding of self-concept a central part of the school, ways of modifying educational methods to prevent the development of negative self-concepts in students must be found. Once children become convinced that school is not the place for them, that it is a place of threat and anxiety where they cannot hope to succeed and where their identity is lost, then the school, as well as the student, is in a very difficult position (Purkey, 1970).

Ames and Gillespie (1970) offered their approval of

having children repeat grades. They felt that a child's repeating a grade should not be a disgrace or admission of failure since no one considers it a disgrace if a child walks, talks, or teethes a little late. Therefore, it is no disgrace if a child is maturing a little more slowly than the average. They also reminded their readers that the "average" is not a person; it is a statistic. Retaining a child in a grade "does not indicate that the child is stupid or dumb; it simply means that the school made a mistake and started the child before he was ready" (p. 82).

At the Gesell Insitutue of Human Development in Connecticut, Ames (1981) reported that retention should not lead children to be emotionally damaged. She said the temporary hurt might well be worth a more comfortable placement for the child. The Institute has studied thousands of children who have been retained, and reports that in almost every instance, retention was successful. She also summarized the works of others who found very positive responses from the majority of teachers and parents whose students and children were retained.

Weathersby (1979) suggested that "parent, administrative, and professional pressure, laziness, and lack of quality in teachers themselves have turned guaranteed promotion into a system whereby all students are promoted, regardless of whether or not the youngsters have mastered the skills" (p. 6). She maintains that eventually these youngsters graduate from high school with official diplomas but

frequently without adequate knowledge and skills to enable them to work effectively in society.

Sandin (cited in Plummer, 1982) stated that non-promotion is a sort of "official reminder to the pupil that he/she has failed in an aspect of his/her career which to many children is quite important" (p. 5). Herrick, Goodlad, Estvan, and Eberman (1956) suggested that neither non-promotion nor promotion is the real answer. They recommended an educational program that facilitates continuous progress for all children in each of the various aspects of their development.

It is surprising, given the importance of the problem and the large number of children involved, how little is known about the impact of grade retention. There is no consistent, generally accepted basis for non-promotion. Children may be retained due to deficiencies in academic performance or to deficiencies in social maturity (Jackson, 1975).

The decision not to promote a student from one grade to the next has received considerable attention since its conception in the 1800's. The literature is vast and contains no one point of view. Proponents of grade retention efforts assert that the benefits outweigh the disadvantages and those opposed find fault with the system. Obviously, there are many factors that enter into a discussion of retention and whether it may actually produce positive results for the school-age child.

Statement of the Problem

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the literature on promotion and retention in the elementary school. Conclusions have been drawn from this research about the specific effects on a child's self-esteen and future academic success. Promotion and retention policies vary widely from state to state, from school to school, and even from classroom to classroom. This study will be made available to the Clarksville-Montgomery County School System to assist teachers and school administrators in making decisions regarding their promotion and retention policies.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

Effects of Promotion and Retention on Self-Esteem

The impact of poor achievement on self-concept has received considerable attention in literature. A 1973 study by White and Howard examined the relationship of self-concept and retention. The researchers used data collected by the North Carolina Advancement School on more than 600 sixth graders from several school systems. They divided the students into three groups: those who had never failed a grade, those who had failed once, and those who had failed more than once. In comparing student self-concept scores, White and Howard found that failure was significantly related to lower self-concept, and that this relationship was most pronounced for the students who had failed more than once. However, this study did not attempt to establish a causal relationship.

In 1975 Finlayson conducted a longitudinal study of the effect of non-promotion upon the self-concept of primary-grade students. He followed the children through the 1973-74 and 1974-75 school years. In the first year, the sample group consisted of 585 first-grade children who had never been retained. During the second year the research included groups of non-promoted, borderline, and promoted pupils still attending the selected schools. Twenty-five students were not promoted, so the borderline and promoted groups also contained 25 students. In an attempt to highlight the effect of non-promotion on the self-concepts of the pupils in the

promoted and non-promoted groups, an intermediary or borderline group was selected by classroom teachers at the end of the first year. These students displayed the same characteristics (maturity, achievement, attitudes, behavior) as the non-promoted students, but for various reasons they were promoted to the second grade. The pupils' self-concepts were measured on four separate occasions by the researcher during the two-year period. The results of this study indicated that after non-promotion, the group of retained pupils continued to increase their self-concept scores significantly, while scores of the borderline and promoted groups dropped slightly, but not significantly, during the second year. At the fourth measurement period, the self-concept scores of the non-promoted and promoted groups were virtually identical.

Supplementing the self-concept data were two teacher questionnaires, a parent questionnaire, and an in-depth, follow-up parent interview designed to highlight the effect of non-promotion of the first-grade youngsters (Finlayson, 1977). The questionnaires secured facts and opinions bearing on the non-promoted pupils' self-concepts and any effect that non-promotion may have had on their self-image from the classroom teachers' and parents' perspectives. The teachers reported that approximately 75% of the pupils recommended for retention manifested a positive self-image prior to non-promotion, and the self-concepts remained stable or became more positive during the first school year in every case; 84%

displayed a positive self-concept in the classroom after non-promotion; and 96% of the cases during the repeated school year remained stable or became more positive. Parents of the non-promoted children were asked to express their opinions regarding retention on the basis of how it affected their child. More than half of the responding parents stated that their children liked school more than they had the previous school year and found going to school easier than the last school year. A majority of the parents viewed their retained children as being more confident, more successful, and happier during the non-promoted year. Given the non-promotion situation and decision a second time, most parents indicated they were in favor of non-promotion and would make the same decision. Finlayson concluded from his study that non-promotion does not negatively influence a child's self-concept.

Plummer (1982) conducted a very thorough study using 218 second- and fifth-grade students who attended a rural school in northeast Georgia. The Katz and Zigler (cited in Plummer, 1982) self-image disparity approach was used. Each child was assessed individually with a questionnaire consisting of 20 adjectives, 10 positive and 10 negative. For each adjective there were two responses, "yes" or "no." Three questionnaires were administered to measure the real self, ideal self, and social self. The results of the study indicated that participants who had been retained had higher, more favorable self-evaluations than participants who had not been retained.

Godfrey (1972) cited a research project conducted by the North Carolina Advancement School which revealed some dramatic differences between students who had been retained and those who had not. The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale was used to measure self-concepts of 1,200 sixth- and seventh-grade students. This scale yields scores on 10 subscales: self-criticism, total positive, identity, self-satisfaction, behavior, physical self, moral-ethical self, personal self, family self, and social self. On every subscale students who had repeated grades scored lower than those who had not. Students who had repeated two or more grades scored far below the mean on each subscale. Scores on these tests showed that grade retention resulted in poor attitudes as well as the belief by the students that they could not achieve goals possible for most people.

Cooper conducted a study in 1980 to determine if there were differences in achievement, self-concept, observed behavior, and teacher perceptions of kindergarten and first-grade students who had been retained and those who had been considered for retention but promoted. The sample for this study consisted of two groups: the first containing eleven kindergarten and first-grade students who had been retained, the second containing 24 first- and second-grade students who were considered for retention but were promoted. Subjects were administered the Metropolitan Achievement Tests, the California Test of Personality, and the Coping Analysis Schedule for Educational Settings. A statistical difference

was found between the promoted and non-promoted groups in academic achievement with the promoted group performing better academically than the non-promoted group. No significant difference was found in self-concept, overt behavior, and teacher perceptions.

The correlation between success or failure and self-concept has been extensively researched. In 1973 Walker (cited in Chafe, 1984) listed numerous studies from the fields of education and psychology which demonstrate the cyclical relationship between self-concept and failure (not necessarily grade retention). Failure breeds poor self-concept which in turn leads to more failure. The issue, according to Chafe, is the effect that failure caused by grade retention has on self-concept.

> Is it more harmful to retain a student or to promote a student who will then remain at the bottom of the class? If a low-achieving student is socially promoted, there is no immediate sense of failure; however, the pattern of failure in relation to classmates remains unchanged. If the student is retained, the failure is there for all to see; but repeating a grade may help the student improve in class ranking, thus beginning a pattern of success. On the other hand, if a student experiences success for one year as a result of repeating a grade, what assurances are there that the success is not transitory? If the increase in achievement is not accompanied by an increase in ability to learn, then the

> student will soon be at the bottom of the class again, but this time with classmates who are younger. This could be an even more devastating blow to self-concept. (Chafe, 1984, p. 8)

Chafe (1984) reviewed several studies and concluded that "relationships have been demonstrated between students who have been retained and four indicators of personal and social well-being: low self-concept, poor social adjustment, poor attitudes toward school, and potential for dropping out" (p. 10). The problem, he adds, is trying to determine a cause and effect relationship.

> It has not been determined whether retainees fail because they have a low self-concept or whether they have a low self-concept because they fail. It has also not been determined that the reason that they drop out of school is because they were retained early in their academic career. It may be simply that the kinds of students who are at risk for retention are the same kinds of students who are at risk for dropping out. What is clear, however, is that retention does not solve the problems of poor self-concept, poor social adjustment, poor attitudes toward school, or potential for dropping out. Although Finlayson's study provides evidence that retention may result in short-term improvements in self-concept, the study by White and Howard suggests that these improvements may be short-lived. (Chafe, 1984, p. 10)

Effects of Promotion and Retention on Academic Achievement

Bocks (1977) pointed out several studies which do not support the idea of non-promotion as a means to greater achievement. As early as 1911 a seven-year study was done by Keyes (cited in Bocks, 1977) in a school district of about 5,000 pupils. Keyes found that of those students retained, 20% did better, 39% showed no change, and 40% actually did worse. In 1926 Buckingham (cited in Bocks, 1977) found that only about one-third of several thousand children did better work after repeating a grade. McKinney (cited in Bocks, 1977) studied repeaters above the first grade and discovered that 35% of the repeaters did better work the second time, 53% did not improve, and 12% did poorer work. Bocks concluded from these studies that the majority of pupils who repeat a grade will achieve no better the second time in that grade than they did the first time.

Other studies cited by Bocks (1977) supported the idea that non-promotion does not ensure greater mastery of elementary subject matter. Arthur's study (cited in Bossing & Brien, 1980) compared the achievement of 60 first-grade repeaters with the achievement of non-repeaters of the same mental age. She found that the average repeater learned about the same in two years as the average non-repeater learned in one year. Coffield and Bloomers (cited in Bocks, 1977) discovered in 1956 that slow-learning children who are promoted ultimately perform on about the same level when their performance is compared in the same higher grade, in

spite of the fact that the retained students each spent an extra year in attaining this higher grade. In a frequently quoted study by Klene and Branson (cited in Bocks, 1977) children who had been recommended for retention were equated on the basis of chronological age, mental age, and sex. Half were then promoted and half were retained. The researchers concluded that potential repeaters profited more from promotion than did the repeaters from non-promotion in terms of measured achievement. In 1933 Farley, Frey, and Garland (cited in Bocks, 1977) discovered 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.

Godfrey (1972) referred to a 1970 research project by the North Carolina Advancement School in which more than 1,200 students in grades six and seven from 14 representative schools were tested and the data analyzed to differentiate repeaters and non-repeaters. Results showed that those who had not been retained were reading at a 6.8 grade level; those who had repeated one grade scored at a 5.2 level; and those who had repeated two or more grades dropped to a 4.5 grade level. On mathematics achievement, students who had not repeated averaged in the 27th percentile; those who had repeated one grade scored in the 10th percentile; and those who had repeated two or more grades dropped to the 5th percentile. These data point out that retaining students did not result in helping them "catch up" academically--the usual

justification for having students repeat.

Holmes and Matthews (1984) used data from 44 different studies to determine the effect of grade-level retention on elementary and junior high school pupils. The 44 studies consisted of 18 published studies, 14 dissertations, and 12 master's theses. A total of 11,132 pupils were included in these 44 investigations. The effect of non-promotion on pupils' academic achievement was measured in 31 of the 44 studies. The results of these studies indicated that non-promotion had a negative effect on the pupils' academic achievement.

In 1964 Chansky (cited in Chafe, 1984) studied the effects of retention on academic achievement in the first grade. The population used was a group of students who were at risk for retention. Students from this group who were identified by their teachers and principals as more promising were promoted. The progress of the students who had been promoted was then compared with that of the retained students. After a year, Chansky found significant differences on the vocabulary and reading scales of the California Achievement Test which favored the promoted students. However, the promoted students were still below the expectations of the next grade and again in danger of being retained.

McAfee (1981) conducted a study over a two-year period in 1977-78 and 1978-79 to determine if retention has a beneficial effect on students. An analysis of his data revealed that retention did have a beneficial effect in the elementary

grades. In the middle-secondary grades no significant effect was observed. In all grades, students in compensatory education groups showed as large as or larger gains than the other groups.

Hess, Martin, Parker, and Beck (1978) reported that studies of effects of retention on academic achievement are generally inconclusive. Remedial instruction within the grade level may be more valuable than older methods of retention.

Dobbs and Neville (cited in Chafe, 1984) studied the effects of retention on first graders. Their study took place in 1967 and they attempted to overcome the problem of initial differences between the promoted and retained groups by matching 30 pairs of subjects on a variety of personal and academic variables. Each pair consisted of a student who had been retained and a student who had been promoted. Over a two-year period they found significantly greater gains in reading and arithmetic achievement among the promoted group.

In 1971 Abidin, Golladay, and Howerton (cited in Chafe, 1984) reported the results of a longitudinal study which observed the effects of retention over a six-year period. They compared students who had been retained in the first or second grade with students who had scored below the 25th percentile on the Metropolitan Readiness Test but who had been promoted. They found no short-term positive or negative effects of retention, but they did observe a significant long-term deterioration in the academic achievement and ability of the retained students relative to that of the

promoted students. Their conclusion was that retention produces a continuous deterioration in achievement and measured intelligence throughout elementary school.

In an examination of the results of 25 studies Rose, Medway, Cantrell, and Marus (1983) found that promoted pupils made gains averaging 8-12 months in one year while retained pupils gained approximately 6 months. In other words, they concluded, it often takes two years for the retained child to learn what the promoted child learned in one year.

A doctoral dissertation by Powell (1982) assessed the academic effects of retention on elementary school pupils. He found that retention did not consistently improve achievement relative to national norms on standardized tests; however, the earlier the child was retained and the higher the child's pre-retention rank, the greater the improvement was likely to be.

Wright (1981) studied the impact of first grade retention on performance in the third grade. Retained and promoted groups were matched on several variables. Achievement test scores for the retained students showed a numerical advantage over the promoted students; however, this advantage disappeared when age was controlled. Wright concluded that the impact on achievement was not great enough to justify the use of grade retention for these students.

An evaluation of a retention/promotion policy for the Austin Independent School District which went into effect in 1981-82 found that retainees made gains that were considered

average for low achievers in reading and gains that were below average in math. Students with the lowest achievement in reading and math prior to retention made the greatest gains. The performance of retainees after repeating a grade was closer to that of their younger classmates than that of students with similar characteristics who had been promoted. Some students made impressive gains. The conclusion was that if retention is intended to produce better gains among low achievers than routine promotion, it is not effective; however, if it is only expected that retainees will come closer to the functional level of their classmates, it succeeds to some extent. In either case, the fact that retention is not bad for all students suggests that retention decisions should be made very selectively and on an individual basis.

Kerzner (1982) tested once-retained elementary students who had completed at least one grade level beyond the grade which had been repeated. Scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills were compared with scores prior to retention. Results showed significant gains were made at all levels, but especially in grades 1-3.

Elligett and Tocco (1983) evaluated the new promotion/retention policy in Pinellas County, Florida. They compared the achievement test scores of retained students at three periods: (1) prior to retention, (2) immediately after retention, and (3) after completion of one more grade. These researchers found that the median rank of retained students increased remarkably after their year of retention. The

median rank then dropped when the students were promoted to the next grade; however, it still remained significantly above what it was prior to retention. Improvement in percentile ranking occurred at all levels, but was greater in the earlier grades than in the later grades. Elligett and Tocco emphasized that the scores from the year following promotion should be compared with the scores prior to retention since it is unlikely that students would have made such gains had they been routinely promoted. Thus, the new promotion/retention policy was effective in raising the achievement scores of retained pupils.

Limitations of Studies

One of the most quoted reviews of retention research is that which Jackson completed in 1975 for the United States Commission on Civil Rights. Jackson critically analyzed 44 studies dating from 1911 through 1973. From these studies, he identified three basic types of research design. Two of the three designs have inherent flaws which bias the results of the research either for or against retention. Design Type I compares the progress of students who are retained under normal school policies with the progress of students who are promoted under normal policies. Since it can be assumed that the retained students have academic or social/emotional problems that are not present in their promoted counterparts (otherwise they would not have been retained), it follows logically that the promoted group will show more progress. This type of design is biased in favor of promotion.

Design Type II compares the condition of retained students before and after their year of retention. This design does not attempt to compare retention with promotion, but rather the effects of spending two years learning material intended to be learned in one year. It is reasonable to assume that students will show some progress after a second year in the same grade; therefore, this type of design is biased in favor of retention.

Design Type III is the only design which effectively compares the value of retention and promotion. Under this design a group of students is identified for retention under normal school policies. Half of the group is then randomly chosen for promotion while the other half is retained. The short-term and long-term effects of grade retention can then be observed from comparisons of these two groups in the following year and in later years.

Unfortunately, Jackson found only three studies which used Design Type III and all of them had additional problems: the most recent of the studies was more than 30 years old; none of their samples were representative enough to permit broad generalizations; and they studied only short-term effects. An analysis of the findings of these studies did not significantly support or reject retention as an educational policy.

Jackson felt that conclusions could still be based on studies representing the first two design types if the findings went against the biases inherent in the designs. What

he found, however, was what he anticipated: the studies from Design Type I significantly supported promotion while the studies from Design Type II significantly supported retention. The primary conclusion that Jackson drew was that additional controlled research is needed before any definite conclusions on the effectiveness of retention can be made. In the meantime, "educators who retain pupils in a grade do so without valid research evidence to indicate that such treatment will provide greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than will promotion to the next grade" (Jackson, 1975, p. 627).

Chansky's 1964 study (described previously in this paper) provided a good example of the problems inherent in Jackson's Design Type I. Although all of the students involved were at risk for retention, those who were promoted had observable differences which led teachers and principals to believe that they had a better chance of succeeding in the second grade. The promoted students had higher mental ages and were months ahead in achievement areas before the study. It cannot be determined whether the superior performance of the promoted students was due to their promotion or to initial differences in ability (Chafe, 1984).

McAfee (1981) expanded on Jackson's (1975) suggestion that there is a lack of experimental research in this area. McAfee contended that the major difficulty in conducting an experimental study is that schools are unwilling to assign treatments randomly to pupils; that is, from a pool of potential

retainees to randomly assign some to be promoted and some to be retained. He maintained that this unwillingness results from the political realities that school people must face at the grassroots level. School officials are expected to know that retention is either effective or it is not. Given the lack of good data, one's position is partly determined by the most persuasive rhetoric that one hears. Schools must exhibit a degree of certainty in their decisions on student assignments. Parents, particularly, are not anxious to have their children as objects in a social experiment.

CHAPTER 3

Summary of Current Policies and Practices: Considerations for Retention

Lindvig (1983) reported that research does exist to support the contention that grade retention can have some very positive results. It may be that educators are better able to recognize when a child is in need of additional time, and it may be that attitudes have changed in response to the understanding of individual problems. Viewing retention as an opportunity as opposed to a defeat has likely made children and those around them much more receptive to retention (Lindvig, 1983).

Perhaps the answer lies in an examination of why children fail and an attempt to provide a learning situation where they can succeed (Godfrey, 1972). If instruction is truly individualized to meet the needs of each student (a concept often given only "lip service" in most schools), Godfrey maintained that it matters little what grade a child is in.

When it has been decided that a child will be retained, Mooney and Mooney (1970) made the following suggestions:

(1) See that the child is allowed to remain at home on report card day.

(2) Prepare the child for taunts from other children.

(3) Do not force the child to go to summer school.

(4) Never talk about "passing" and "failing." (p. 17)

Teachers are cautioned to ponder carefully each instance

of doubtful promotion (Herrick, Goodlad, Estvan, & Eberman, 1956). These authors advised teachers to give children the benefit of any existing doubt and promote them.

Powell (1981) maintained that educators must develop a different attitude toward the lower level student. They must accept this type of student as a human being who has the ability to learn. Educators must take the students from where they are, socially, academically, and emotionally, and help them to grow as individuals. Powell contended that there is no conceivable way to ever practice the philosophy of "uniqueness" or individualization until a more positive approach to grading is initiated. To help alleviate this problem, Powell recommended a grading system of A-B-C-I. Using this system, students, teachers, and parents would no longer have to fear report card day. Students then would not fail, but would maintain a grade of I (Incomplete) until the required work was completed.

Chase (cited in Plummer, 1982) concluded from his 1972 study that careful selection of the child who is retained and consistent monitoring of that child's progress is necessary to alleviate or decrease the possible negative effects of grade retention.

Herrick et al., (1956) concluded that non-promotion of pupils in order to assure mastery of subject matter does not often accomplish its objective. Children do not appear to learn more by repeating a grade but experience less growth in subject-matter achievement than they do when promoted.

simply to conclude from research that promotion is the more defensible of two alternatives is not the answer (Herrick et al., 1956). "Promotion is no universal panacea. It does not change a child's basic learning rate. It does not automatically provide the instruction needed for the range of abilities and attainments ever-present in any given class" (p. 398).

Godfrey (1972) wrote, "Retention of students obviously does not effect improved academic achievement" (p. 35). Moreover, he maintained that retention apparently has detrimental effects, not only on academic achievement, but also on the students' self-concepts and attitudes.

Social promotion and retention are not the sole solution to academic achievement according to Lindvig (1983). Ideally, an educational system should be designed to accommodate the individual needs of its students, and in many ways, systems have undergone tremendous change over the last decade in an attempt to meet both the academic and the emotional needs of students. Educators now understand that many children suffer learning problems resulting from factors other than intelligence. Special programs have been designed to help remediate learning problems out of the classroom, and in the classroom teachers work to group children according to need. Lindvig continued, "Teachers are even incorporating into their curriculum what is now termed 'affective' educational measures which refer to attitude formation, self-expression, etc. and promoting the personal as well as the academic growth of the

student" (1983, p. 254).

There are certain circumstances when a child might benefit from repeating a grade (Lindvig, 1983); for example, the child who is not quite ready for first grade and meets with failure during a very critical time is given a chance to start again rather than being pushed on to further failure and frustration. The child who is generally immature and is pressured by demands in the fourth grade might welcome the opportunity to grow by repeating a grade. The same can be said of the child who gradually falls further and further behind and is seriously frustrated by junior high. The child who is continually absent from school as a result of medical problems, or the child whose family is constantly on the move, may need extra time to catch up or master the basics.

According to Lindvig (1983) there are numerous cases when a child fails to master the basics and has to struggle years afterward. Despite the new methods of teaching and programs offered to meet special needs, there are still students in danger of being pushed on to continued failure. On the other hand, to say that all underachievers would benefit from repeating a grade is probably unrealistic. The answer is dependent upon the nature of the student problem and the circumstances that surround it. Lindvig joined other researchers in recommending that teachers look at the individual child and assess the factors that are likely to contribute to a successful retention.

Horn (1976) contended that the decision to retain a

student should not be made in haste and that teachers should follow these guidelines:

(1) To avoid the ill effects of negative reinforcement, the teacher should not threaten retention nor refer to it in the classroom.

(2) Individual attention should be given to the student to insure that his second year is not simply a repetition of the first.

(3) The repeating student should have a different teacher during the second year if possible, and that teacher should keep a close check on the child's progress to allow for quick discovery and correction of any problems. (p. 33)

Children needing retention should receive it early in their school career according to Horn (1976) because that is when the basics to support their future education are learned. If children are too immature to grasp these basics when first presented, they will profit greatly from an extra year in which to mature emotionally and academically.

Where the goal of education is maximal learning by each pupil, the key question is no longer, "Should academically deficient pupils be promoted or retained?" (Reiter, 1973, p. 14). Children can learn or remain illiterate under either procedure according to Reiter. The question becomes "How can the most favorable learning situation be provided for this pupil?" (p. 14). Reiter suggests, "Placing him with the teacher who will most effectively interact with him and his

unique needs usually is more important than classifying the pupil's test scores or his chronological age" (1973, p. 14).

After examining several studies on the effects of retention on achievement, Chafe (1984, p. 8) came to the following conclusions:

(1) When academic achievement is measured against the norms for the grade which is being repeated, the retained student is likely to show improvement.

(2) When the academic progress of the retained student is measured against the progress of promoted students who exhibit similar skills and abilities, the retainee is likely to fall behind.

(3) Any gains that the retainee has made relative to new, younger classmates will tend to disappear in subsequent years.

Thus, the effectiveness of grade retention in solving academic difficulties depends on the perspective one wishes to take; however, retention by itself apparently does not teach the child how to become a better student, so gains are not likely to be permanent.

Labaree (1983) considered the stands taken by the writers of the six major literature reviews published in the last ten years. He noted that not one of these writers adopted a position in support of retention:

Three remain neutral on the policy question (Jackson, 1975; Selden, 1982; Southwest Education Development Laboratory, 1981) while one, prepared for the Philadelphia

> school system, mildly favors social promotion (Reiter, 1973) and two others strongly support social promotion (Thompson, 1980; Haddad, 1979). The lack of support for retention is understandable. Since social promotion represents the status quo, the burden of proof naturally falls on the supporters of a change toward tougher promotional standards; and no such proof currently exists. (p. 17)

In the fall of 1973 the Greensville County Schools, Virginia, started a new achievement-based promotion program (Owen & Ranick, 1977). Its strict promotion standards refuse social promotion: no student will be promoted until he/she has mastered the skills at the grade level. Out of 3,750 students, 800 were retained the first year. The whole curriculum was changed and to evaluate pupil progress the following testing program was adopted: Science Research Associates (SRA) Achievement Tests (grades 1-9), Iowa Tests of Educational Development (grades 10-12), and Metropolitan Readiness Test (kindergarten). New proficiency-based graduation requirements accompanied the promotion standards. Owen and Ranick maintained that the schools sought to "bring each pupil up to established standards . . . and attend to the diagnosis of students' individual strengths and weaknesses, provide intensive instruction to meet the needs of slower students, and create an atmosphere of success" (p. 533). Retained students were not placed in the same classrooms with newly promoted students, but were instead grouped with other

students of their age. Partial promotions were available for students who achieved most of the skills of their grade. The authors reported the program an unqualified success. Achievement test scores and measured IQs have risen, the dropout rate and number of retentions have fallen, and students, teachers, and the community have responded with satisfaction.

Koons (1977) reacted strongly to Owen and Ranick's advocacy of the strict student promotion policy of the Greensville Schools. The research, he argued, "consistently reveals the futility of such a 'commonsense' policy and points the other way" (p. 701). Koons cited research showing that regularly promoted low-achievers do better than similarly troubled students who are retained. Some students may possibly benefit from retention, but for every one who does "there are two or more who are not helped or who may actually regress following non-promotion" (p. 701). Owen and Ranick claimed that age-based promotion is more damaging than working at the same material until it is mastered. But their claim is based on fallacy according to Koons. "They falsely assume that low-achievers who are promoted with their peers cannot be given work at a level at which they can succeed" (Koons, 1977, p. 702). Making students fit the schools, as Greensville does, will not solve the problem according to Koons. "We must make the schools fit the students" (1977, p. 702).

Koons concluded by stating that regularly promoted,

low-achieving children score higher on achievement tests than do similar retained students after they have spent an additional year in a grade. There is no criterion to predict which children may possibly benefit.

Haddad (1979), in a review of international reserach on grade retention, cited several studies which link retention to dropping out. Findings indicate that a one percent increase in retention leads to an equivalent increase in the dropout rate and that retention at the primary level is a significant predictor of dropping out of high school. Haddad claimed the educational dollar is poorly spent when a student repeats a grade and that those who argue for grade repetition make the assumptions that "academic factors determine success and failure, achievement tests are reliable, some skills are best taught at a particular level, and children placed at similar developmental levels are emotionally better off" (p. 5). This researcher argued for automatic promotion and suggested a nongraded curriculum, ability groups, and a new role for educational measurement to solve the educational and economic problems of the schools.

Baenen and others (1980) wrote a research summary to present findings and restate policy conclusions as to whether grade retention or promotion is more beneficial for students with serious academic problems. She concurred with other researchers by saying:

> The research completed thus far is not conclusive about whether it is better to promote or retain students who

> are achieving below expectations. There seem to be more studies at present which support the view that grade retention is not more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic problems. Many studies have found that some students benefit, some stay the same, and some suffer from being retained compared to those who are promoted. Most of the research available, however, has serious methodological problems that make any conclusions drawn tentative at best. (Baenen, et al., 1980, p. 1)

School systems across the country are developing programs and policies to deal with the promotion/retention dilemma. Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) was introduced in the District of Columbia Public Schools in 1976 and fully implemented throughout the system in September, 1979. The Student Progress Plan (SPP) which is an integral part of CBC dealing with grade placement and promotion was implemented in the primary grades in September, 1980. CBC was designed to help children succeed in school through a skills mastery instructional program which takes into account individual differences in learning style and rate of growth. In accordance with the philosophy of CBC, the goal of SPP is to eliminate automatic promotion by requiring mastery of specific skills before students are assigned to a higher grade level.

In evaluating its first year of the SPP, the District of Columbia Public Schools (1981) found that more students were promoted under SPP than would have been promoted under the

traditional policy. According to SPP, students are promoted at the end of each semester if they have mastered the required skills for their grade level in both reading and mathematics. Students who have mastered the required skills in only one of these areas are placed in either transitional reading deficiency classes or transitional mathematics deficiency classes. Students who fail to master the objectives for their grade level in both reading and mathematics are retained.

The report compared rates of promotion by student educational need (indicated by Title I status under the Elementary and Secondary Eduation Act), reading and math achievement level, sex, and participation in Operation Rescue, a volunteer tutorial program. Results of the evaluation showed that a higher proportion of all students and of Title I students were promoted at the end of the second semester than at the end of the first, and that more girls than boys were promoted (District of Columbia Public Schools, 1981).

Reinherz and Griffin (1970) attempted to find out what factors contribute to successful retention experiences. Their subjects were 57 primary boys from several Quincy, Massachusetts, schools who were repeating a grade for the first time. All the boys had at least normal intelligence. The majority of the students made satisfactory achievement and progress during the retention. Thirty-six earned satisfactory achievement at grade level while 21 had either poor or fair achievement. Thirty-eight made much progress or

improved over past levels while 19 made only little or some progress. In further analysis of their subjects' retention experience, the authors found several variables to be significantly associated with satisfactory achievement. One was the grade level of retention. Over 80% of the first graders made satisfactory achievement, whereas more than half of the second- and third-grade repeaters showed only fair or poor achievement. This finding, noted Reinherz and Griffin, supports the common notion that retention is most helpful and least risky early in a child's schooling.

Three additional findings were pertinent to the association of grade level and achievement. First, most of the children showed learning difficulty from the beginning of their schooling. Second, parental attitudes toward retention tended to be more negative for second and third graders than for first graders. And third, principals offered different reasons for retention for second and third graders than for first graders. For the former they tended to cite academic reasons, but for the latter they usually cited emotional and behavioral reasons, particularly immaturity (Reinherz & Griffin, 1970).

Reinherz and Griffin also found that emotional and social stability were linked with satisfactory student progress. Students showing good social and emotional adjustment and students having good peer relations usually made good progress. The most important finding of the study was its association of satisfactory achievement and immaturity.

Children characterizied as immature, the authors found, tended to achieve better during retention than children showing less sign of immaturity. This finding concurs with the common belief that retention can best help normal, but immature children who need time to develop their abilities (Reinherz & Griffin, 1970).

Thompson (1980) cited several studies on retention and promotion and described a few policies currently in use. His examination of the literature revealed that most reviews of research comparing grade retention policies with social promotion policies favor social promotion. The ideal promotion policy, according to Thompson, appears to involve an individualized, continuous progress curriculum. This policy would call for social promotion as the rule and permit occasional retention when it is in the child's best interest. Thompson maintained that the ready availability of retention can encourage discrimination on racial, sexual, and socioeconomic grounds. Misuse of retention can be discouraged through involvement of parents, teachers, and specialists in the decision-making process.

Cunningham and Owens (1977) supported the Greensville County program in their article entitled, "Social Promotion: Problem or Solution?" These authors suggested:

> Education is based on the belief that time invested by the student in the learning situation will result in definable achievement. Students allowed to progress through the grades wihout mastering the fundamental

concepts of each achievement level are headed for future failures and disappointment. If we want to see these students succeed, we need new plans.

Merely eliminating social promotion will not solve the problem. Unless special programs are provided, failing students will simply be recycled through programs that were inadequate for them the first time and may be equally inappropriate and of less interest the second time. Renewed efforts by educators at developing programs for students who are not achieving at grade level are badly needed. The social cost of unproductive citizens, both within and outside the schools, is borne by all Americans. (p. 12)

Zinski (1983) conducted a study to determine if participation in a pre-first grade transitional program would be more effective than grade retention in enhancing first grade readiness. The transition program emphasized the acquisition of academic and behavioral skills necessary for a successful first grade experience. Transition repeater students were compared to non-transition repeaters at the end of their second first grade year on standardized reading and language achievement tests and on reading levels. Results indicated no significant difference in scores of the two groups on the reading and language tests. Teacher ratings of student performance also showed no significant differences in the two groups.

School adjustment and self-concept were not assessed in

Zinski's study. However, she cited several studies which supported her belief that failure in the early school grades can have significant adverse effects on children's perceptions of themselves. Zinski pointed out that one of the major differences between participation in a transitional program as opposed to first-grade retention deals with the concept of failure. Students participating in transition maintain a forward progression without the experience of not being able to compete and consequently failing the grade. First-grade repeaters, on the other hand, are faced with the realization that they are not meeting required criteria, and this is verified by their having to experience the same curriculum a second time (Zinski, 1983).

Goodlad, a noted author of elementary education textbooks and journal articles, suggested that teachers promote children when in doubt (Goodlad & Anderson, 1963). The authors reminded teachers that when retaining a child, teachers should have good reason to believe that the child will be placed in an environment conducive to pupil growth and satisfaction.

> Another year in the grade must provide not repetition, but the best possible opportunity to grow steadily along lines of personal fulfillment and individual unfolding. Likewise, the teachers who promote and receive slow-learning children have a responsibility to see that these children are carried forward from where they now are instead of being frustrated by unrealistic grade

> expectations. By forgetting grades and grade standards, it is possible to provide educational habitats suited to the wide range of indivudals who live in them. (Goodlad & Anderson, 1963, pp. 40-41)

A variety of alternatives to retention have been proposed and applied in different school systems. One such alternative is the system used in Greensville County, Virginia (described previously) where students are grouped by age as well as achievement level. Non-graded programs are also being initiated to ensure against the harmful consequences some feel develop from non-promotion (Bossing & Brien, 1980). Other authorities insist that the only solution to this problem is individualized instruction. An alternative to retaining a child because of immaturity might be "transitional maturity" or readiness classes for those who did not develop needed skills prior to academic learning. Bossing and Brien reported that teachers tend to continue the practice of retention. These authors suggested that it is crucial to include the parents in the decision-making process. Through the school year, the teacher should keep the parents well informed of the child's progress. It is helpful for the teacher to suggest this possibility to the parents at a mid-year conference as soon as the teacher determines that such placement would be helpful for the child's social and academic growth. Helping the parent feel comfortable with this decision is a major step in helping the child feel comfortable (Bossing & Brien, 1980).

Several authors have developed recommendations, guidelines, or instruments to aid in making retention decisions in individual cases. Lindvig (1983) stressed that an attempt should be made to view the whole child, to trace his or her history in school, and to exhaust alternatives. Considerations for retention which seem to be cited most often include: age; present grade level; attitudes of the student, parents, and others toward retention; intellectual ability; maturity; physical size; sex; family environment; social/emotional adjustment; current level of academic achievement; attendance; and previous retentions (Chafe, 1984). Chafe reported that the common thread among these criteria is that they are all related to the individual student's ability to benefit from retention; it is not automatically assumed that any student will be better off after spending an additional year in the same grade.

Chafe described the Light's Retention Scale which is frequently used as an aid in discussing the pros and cons of whether a student should be retained. This scale measures 19 factors related to a student's ability, performance, adjustment, physiology, and environment. From two to five forced-choice responses are listed under each factor. A value from zero to five has been assigned to each response indicating the relative importance of that response in making a decision. A zero is considered to be a good indicator of successful retention, a five means that the child is not likely to benefit from retention. If a child has received a value

of five on any individual factor, the child should not be retained, regardless of the overall score. The scale is to be used as a guideline only and should not be considered a psychometric test (Chafe, 1984).

The type of promotion/retention policy that a school system adopts depends on the goals which it is trying to achieve. Currently, educators are feeling pressure from the public and from politicians to raise achievement test scores. If this becomes the primary goal of the school system, then Chafe (1984) recommended adopting a promotion policy similar to the Greensville program. This type of promotion policy has been effective in raising the standardized achievement test scores of its students; however, the system needs to be prepared to retain between 20 and 40 percent of its students.

If the goal of the school system is to meet the needs of its low-achieving students, then Chafe would recommend a more moderate policy. In reviewing several promotion/retention policies Chafe has found most to be flexible in allowing for individual differences among students.

The pressure for new standards and accountability has threatened the progressive gains of the sixties and challenged the hard-won practice of social promotion (Thompson, 1980). Godfrey (1972) offered the commentary: "In the meantime, more than 1,000,000 elementary school children will be failed this year by well-meaning teachers who view retention as a way to help."

Suggestions for Further Research

A review of the literature in this area has revealed the need to identify better the student who is likely to benefit from non-promotion. More research is required to deal with the individual needs of students as dramatic changes have occurred over the last few decades. With the recognition of numerous learning problems and the need to adopt procedures to meet the individual problems of students better, the stigma attached to repeating a grade might well be a thing of the past.

The issue of inadequate research designs was addressed numerous times in the literature. Therefore, it is suggested that more appropriate research methods be developed.

Another aspect of non-promotion that needs exploration is whether a student who has not been promoted or who has failed secondary school subjects is likely to drop out of school earlier. Some evidence seems to indicate that there is a positive relationship between school failure and early drop-out.

An investigation into the long-term effects of retention is also recommended as recent literature is scant in this area.

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