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What Doesn't Work: Explaining Policies of Retention in the Early Grades

Illustration by Dave Cutler

Retention is not good for children, assert the authors; it has negative effects on achievement and adjustment. They suggest a number of alternatives that better address the needs of students.

BY MARY LEE SMITH AND LORRIE A. SHEPARD

IF ANY TREND could be said to grow even as we watch, it would be the move away from what has been called "social promotion": the current increase in policies that permit the retention of young children for a second year in a given grade. Some reformers have advocated promotion from grade to grade strictly on the basis of achievement rather than age or attendance.[1] Some states and school districts have responded by instituting "promotional gates" that swing open when pupils pass tests and slam shut when they fail. A recent survey shows that such policies are apt to be popular: 72% of the citizens questioned said that "promotion from grade to grade should be more strict than it is now,"[2] though there was no in-

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dication that those questioned knew (except vaguely) what promotional policies were actually in effect.

STATISTICS AND RESEARCH

In fact, retention practices are poorly documented, because there are no standardized and reliable national longitudinal data on what has always been a local or state issue. We can get a rough idea of retention rates by looking at U.S. Census Bureau data on the percentage of school-age children who are enrolled in a grade below the modal grade for their age. This measure has shown an increase since the middle 1970s. The most recent data show that, in 1982, 21% of males and 15% of females were one year below the modal grade and that 5% of males and 3% of females were two years below.[3] Adjusting these figures to discount children who entered school behind schedule, we estimate an overall retention rate of 15% to 19%. At this rate, retention practices in the U.S. most closely resemble those in such countries as Haiti and Sierra Leone. The much-admired Japanese system, like the educational systems of most European countries, has a retention rate of less than 1%.[4]

The underlying question is whether stricter promotion policies would lead to an increase in overall achievement. Those who advocate achievement-based promotion seem to assume that a specifiable body of content and skills exists for each year of schooling. They further assume that the existence of this body of skills and content implies that an ideal level of competence that can be measured also exists. Children who fail to attain levels of competence appropriate to the grades in which they are enrolled are recycled through the standard curriculum, after which, it is assumed, they will have attained grade-level competence and can go on to the next level, the next standard body of content, and so on. Ultimately, at graduation, the student body as a whole will have attained the socially approved standard of achievement for high school graduates, and the average level of competence will be higher than it is now.

"Going into English class today, I didn't even know what a participle was. *But, before it was over, I had* dangled *one!"*

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The body of evidence addressing this assumption, however, is almost uniformly negative. Indeed, few collections of educational research are so unequivocal. The most comprehensive of the several reviews of research on retention is a meta-analysis conducted by Thomas Holmes and Kenneth Matthews.[5] The consistent conclusion of such reviews is that children make progress during the year in which they repeat a grade, *but not as much progress* as similar children who were promoted. In controlled studies of the effect of nonpromotion on both achievement and personal adjustment, children who repeat a grade are consistently worse off than comparable children who are promoted with their age-mates. Contrary to popular belief, the average negative effect of retention on achievement is *even greater* than the negative effect on emotional adjustment and self-concept.

In early school grades, retention is viewed as a remedy not only for academic incompetence but also for immaturity. Children perceived by teachers and parents as "unready" and in need of a "year to grow" are sometimes retained in kindergarten or first grade, placed in transitional or "pre-first" grades, or tracked into pre-kindergarten according to their performance on tests of developmental readiness. A review of the research on such transitional placements indicates that this practice is no more successful than retention.[6]

Like other practices that add a year to the 13 years a typical pupil spends in school, retention has negative effects on measured achievement and adjustment. The question of effectiveness aside, retention increases the costs of educating a pupil by 8% (assuming the pupil remains in school to graduate) – a cost that runs into the billions nationwide. Such alternatives to retention as tutoring and summer school are both more effective and less costly. Given the large amount of downtime in school, there are more efficient ways of recycling children through the curriculum than making them sit through a second dose of field trips, music programs, and fire drills that are as much a part of a given school year as the curriculum for that grade.

Moreover, dollars are not the only way to measure costs. *Pupils who are retained pay with a year of their lives.* No matter how sensitively teachers and parents handle the retention, the children understand that they are being taken from their age-mates because of some failure. This upsets them and causes them to feel shame, according to Deborah Byrnes and Kaoru Yamamoto,[7] who found that, next to blindness and the death of a parent, children rate the idea of retention as most stressful.

In addition to effectiveness and costs, retention raises questions of fairness. Males and pupils who are relatively young or small for their grade are more likely than others to be retained.[8] The validity of using such characteristics as criteria for retention is dubious, and doing so assigns pupils to a treatment that offers them no benefit and is potentially harmful.

Clearly, a major contradiction exists between the policies of school reformers and the available evidence. In what follows we explore the nature of this contradiction, drawing on the experience we gained in our own policy study of reten-

tion practices and effects in the Boulder, Colorado, school district.[9]

When we studied Boulder, the district had no uniform policy on retention, so each elementary school had fashioned a policy of its own. In some schools, no kindergartners were retained; in others, as many as one-third completed two years in kindergarten before entering first grade. The high-retaining and low-retaining schools were not distinguishable by socioeconomic level, by level of academic ability or achievement, or by ethnic or linguistic composition. Yet something in the traditions of the low-retaining schools permitted them to get along without a practice strongly defended as essential in the high-retaining schools.

Our efforts were directed toward discovering what might account for the differences among the schools and whether any particular advantage was associated with the individual policies that had evolved. The project consisted of case studies on instruction and curriculum; interviews with teachers about their beliefs regarding retention, early childhood development, and education; a study of the criteria teachers use in making retention decisions; a quasi-experiment that matched groups of children who had been promoted with similar groups of children who had been retained; and interviews with parents of these two groups. We have reported the methods and results of these studies elsewhere. We use them here, along with other sources of evidence, to try to account for retention practices. The following five issues represent our best explanation for the persistence of the practice of retention and for the wish to expand it, even in the face of research evidence that is overwhelmingly negative.

TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT RETENTION

Efforts to distinguish the propositional knowledge expressed in research from the tacit or case knowledge possessed by professionals have become commonplace. What teachers know from research usually amounts to highly edited and selectively presented evidence that is cited by advocates of one or another ideology. For example, one of the teachers in our study asserted with confidence that "research has proved" that children who start school before they are ready will eventually drop out of school or society,

When the curriculum is taken for granted as correct, the child who does not keep pace is labeled a failure.

a "fact" purportedly learned in an in-service workshop given by a representative of the Gesell Institute.

Teachers' tacit knowledge – what they know about instruction, discipline, and the like that allows them to make many decisions every day – is often superior to their propositional knowledge, because it is based on an accumulation of experience with real children in actual classrooms. When dealing with judgments about retention, however, tacit knowledge tends to be misleading. A teacher may observe that Johnny is struggling in kindergarten and decide to retain him. The following year – his second year in kindergarten – Johnny shines. He stays on-task, pays attention, learns his sounds and letters. He is "a leader." The teacher absorbs this information and concludes that retention is beneficial. In this case, tacit knowledge coincides with propositional knowledge from research; that is, the child who is retained often makes achievement gains during the second year in grade.

But the information to which the teachers have personal access is incomplete and misleading. Jimmy, alike in many respects to Johnny, is promoted. Perhaps he struggles a little, but he makes it. By the time the two boys are halfway through elementary school, their performance and adjustment are indistinguishable. Unfortunately, Jimmy is only an abstraction to the teachers; he is what Johnny would have been had he been promoted. This is what a control group demonstrates: the typical outcome if a subject remains untreated. Since both Johnny and Jimmy progressed to the same degree, the comparative study shows that retention is ineffective. Since the teachers lack this abstract information, they rely on their direct, but inadequate, experience.

Teachers in our study tended to exaggerate the perceived benefits of retention. Many believed that retention took children from the bottom of their class to the top of the class into which they were retained. They believed that a retention in the early grades prevented a retention later on, when the stigma attached to retention would be more serious. Neither belief is substantiated by research. Some teachers believed that academic failure, teenage use of drugs, pregnancy, and delinquency were the legacy of children who needed to be retained but were not. Most notable was the claim that retention is free of cost and risk. Under close questioning, none of the teachers could remember a single instance in which a child had been hurt in any way by being retained, a belief clearly at odds with what affected pupils and their parents report.

Teachers generally lack feedback on what happens to their pupils after they move on to other grades. Pupils who did not seem out of place on entering first grade at age 7 can later drive themselves to junior high and are sometimes legally eligible to buy alcohol and to be drafted for military service well before it is time to graduate from high school. It is more difficult to keep adults in a public school program, and those who study the dropout problem note that the tendency to drop out prior to graduation is increased for the students who are overage for their grade. "Holding students back a year or more in elementary school increases the probability of dropping out," according to a recent study by Floyd Hammack.[10]

BELIEFS ABOUT CHILD DEVELOPMENT

From our clinical interviews with kindergarten teachers, we constructed a typology of beliefs about how children develop readiness for school. A sizable proportion of teachers expressed beliefs we labeled "nativist." These teachers viewed development as a physiological unfolding in a series of stages, governed by an internal timetable. The age at which a child is able to maintain attention to a task or to discriminate sounds (as a

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precursor to learning to read) is a function of his or her developmental age.

According to this view, what a parent can do for the child in the way of cultural and linguistic stimulation or remedial work at home has next to nothing to do with readiness for school. As one nativist teacher said, "I think the hardest thing for parents to understand about development is that it isn't something they have done. Parents think, 'Well, if I had taken him more places. . . .' But it has nothing to do with that. It's like a little time-clock inside. When the time-clock goes off and it's time, then he'll do it."

Similarly, the nativist view holds that the teacher can do little for a child who is unready for school; altering the method of instruction, supplying remedial help, tutoring, and personal guidance are believed to be fruitless. In fact, remediation is thought to be irrelevant and possibly dangerous. As one teacher put it, "If they're not ready, I'm not going to push them, because that would be pushing them out the door." Therefore, the best thing a teacher can do is to "take the pressure off," cut back on instruction, and provide another year to develop by retaining the child or placing him or her in a transition program prior to first grade.

These beliefs contrasted sharply with those of teachers we labeled "remediationists." These teachers viewed all children legally eligible for school as teachable, if they are given enough appropriate opportunities at home and in the classroom. Unlike the nativists, remediationists claimed that they work individually with the "unready" child, arrange for a tutor and remedial work, maintain high expectations, and vary the mode of instruction to meet individual learning styles. "We try everything we can, and we don't give up on a child," said one such teacher. In the view of the remediationist, labeling a child as unready and marking him or her for retention is "giving up."

Among the teachers we studied, there was an obvious relationship between beliefs about development and the rate of retention in their schools. High-retaining schools were those with nativist teachers. Low-retaining schools had a preponderance of remediationist teachers who looked for alternative means for solving the problem of "unready" pupils.

SCHOOLWORK IN KINDERGARTEN

What was once an idyllic time for coloring, singing, reciting numbers and letters, and learning to cope with one's mittens and the class bully has too often become a fast-paced academic experience. Now incorporated into the public schools, kindergartens have fully adapted to public school purposes.

The kindergarten curriculum has become the curriculum of literacy, a purposeful preparation for what comes next. What was once considered the curriculum of first grade – that is, learning readiness – is now the province of kindergarten. Kindergarten as adults remember it is now what makes up preschool programs. According to Evelyn Weber, the downward movement in the school curriculum reflects a new conception of schooling: the purpose of schooling is literacy and numeracy, narrowly defined; the curricular content that will achieve this purpose is known and can be broken down into small units, carefully sequenced, and taught directly; the teaching methods, like the content, are the same for everyone; the cure for educational disadvantage is more and earlier infusion of drill in letters, sounds, and numbers, along with practice in writing.[11]

Although the kind of schooling that derives from this new view may be successful for some pupils, it also results in increased numbers of retentions in the early grades. The logic of these retentions is straightforward: there exists a standard body of knowledge (X); if a child does not master it, he or she must be recycled through X. Or, in nativist language, if a child is not developmentally ready for X, he or she should be held back from X until ready. An alternative view would be to examine X for its philosophical and psychological justification. When a teacher concludes that a child is "not ready for what I have to teach him," that teacher is thinking about the child's psychological characteristics rather than examining the appropriateness of "what I have to teach him." *When the curriculum is taken for granted as correct, the child who does not keep pace is labeled as a failure.*

The district we studied had schools with linear, literacy-focused curricula, as well as other schools that were exceptions to these trends. In one school, for example, a child entering first grade would be expected to have mastered colors, shapes, many words, and counting to 100, and to be able to begin the first-grade basal reading program on the first day of school. First-graders were expected to work at their own desks for extended periods without bothering the teacher too much. Those who fell short of these goals were likely to be sent back for another year of kindergarten or referred for special education. Kindergarten teachers adjusted their curriculum so that their graduates met these standards.

In another school in the same district, entering first-graders were expected only to be able to distinguish letters from numbers, to know their addresses and the like, and to have good work habits. First-grade teachers in this school cope with levels of competence ranging from preprimer to sixth-grade reading levels, and they tolerate children who are not yet reading by the end of first grade, as long as those children are interested in learning and are progressing on other fronts. Teachers in this school believe that there are many ways to learn and to teach and that a multitude of things can be learned aside from reading.

In the natural experiment that pits these two competing views of learning and curriculum, there is not a clear victor if the overall rate of achievement in the schools is the criterion. This fact makes it necessary to ask whether the literacy-focused curriculum imposed on the kindergartens has demonstrated its superiority in a way that justifies the retentions that are its by-product.

PARENTAL PRESSURES

Parents are ever more eager to provide their children with every possible educa-

tional advantage, from *in utero* Mozart to better-baby flash cards. Many parents whose children had previously been enrolled in preschools with academic curricula or instructed at home have pressured kindergarten teachers to step up the academic pace of their classrooms. If children already know the alphabet when they enter kindergarten, these parents believe, they must take the next step and learn to read in kindergarten. Otherwise, the kindergarten year is wasted. Weber has referred to these parents' "fetish for early literacy" as a reflection of their "anxiety and zeal for their children to have a head start in reading."[12]

It is far from settled, however, whether early training is either beneficial or lasting. Nevertheless, more rigorous training in reading is becoming the norm for kindergarten instruction. Teachers often feel at a disadvantage in arguing with parents that criteria other than reading progress can be used to judge a classroom. When reading becomes accepted as a natural part of kindergarten, those children without the advantages of early instruction at home or in preschool or for whom (for whatever reason) reading instruction comes too soon are likely candidates for retention.

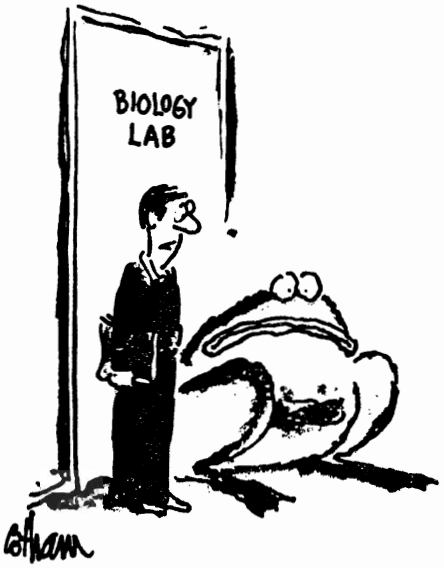
In some schools, parents keep children home who are of legal age for kindergarten but who would be among the youngest in the class. After spending a year in a preschool or at home, these children then enter kindergarten at age 6, and they are among the oldest in the class. In the district we studied, parents frankly admitted that they did this to give their children a competitive advantage in school. Teachers applauded this decision and claimed that the district's entrance cutoff date (September 30) was too late. Boys with summer birthdays were not ready for school, they said. One parent recalled that, at the prekindergarten orientation meeting, the school principal had warned them that boys with summer birthdays would almost certainly be retained.

As we have reported elsewhere,[13] the relatively youngest child in a classroom achieves slightly lower than the oldest child. About nine percentile ranks separate the oldest from the youngest on first-grade reading tests. By third grade, the oldest and youngest are indistinguishable. However, if teachers seize upon this small and temporary difference as a sign of failure or immaturity, they may wrongly label a child, withhold instruction that the child might find meaningful, and retain the youngest children.

Moreover, there will always be someone in any class who is youngest and whose parents wish to intervene and provide an advantage. As the kindergarten is increasingly made up of older children, their needs will become the norm for the class as a whole. Older and more educated kindergartners will demonstrate readiness for more advanced instruction in reading. Unfortunately, children whose parents must work or who cannot afford private preschools are not as likely to perform at the same level as their older and more schoolwise classmates. Thus children of working-class or poor families are more likely to be the ones retained, while the children of upwardly mobile families will receive at least a temporary boost. In the district we studied, low-retaining schools resisted parental pressure to increase the academic rigor of the kindergarten as a whole, and they neither encouraged nor discouraged the practice of keeping relatively young children out of kindergarten for a year.

BUREAUCRATIZATION

Schools are caught in a dilemma of conflicting aims. The desire for education based strictly on merit runs deep in this country. But to be fully merit-based, schools would have to have continuous performance testing, so that a child who successfully demonstrates a predetermined level of competence could proceed through the ranks and graduate at any age. Failure to pass the tests would result in as many recyclings as necessary. As a result, any given classroom would contain pupils of widely varying ages.



"I guess someone should have prepared you for what goes on in there."

The competing value for U.S. schools is the desire for a democratic system of education in which every child would be provided with the best education possible. The promise of American education is to disrupt the stratifications and class distinctions of other nations and of previous generations. Since early research on tracking, some 20 years ago, showed that homogeneous ability grouping enhances the achievement of the fast group and retards the achievement of the slower groups,[14] it has been clear that institutional arrangements that serve meritocratic ends subvert democratic goals. That is, the quality of education for all suffers. Like retention, homogeneous ability grouping helps advantaged groups, creates further barriers for the disadvantaged, and promotes segregation and stratification.

The conflict between merit-based and democratic principles is exacerbated by the societal demand for efficient education, a value that has led to what David Labaree has called "batch production":

> Since . . . the whole class learned the same material at the same time, the students could then proceed on to more difficult material as a group. Individual craft production gave way to large-scale batch production, which in turn led to batch promotion – cohorts of students of similar age, and presumably, similar ability, moving through a progression of educational stages. . . . The ideal case for educational efficiency has always been to move entire classes through the grade levels like an assembly line with no rejects.[15]

Although the current rhetoric of reform calls for a return to merit-based promotion, scholars who have studied schools as organizations doubt that their entrenched bureaucracies can be changed by such rhetoric. Michael Katz used the metaphor of the factory to describe the public school as an organization characterized by mass production, mass promotion, highly centralized authority, diminished teacher autonomy, grade isolation, a standardized curriculum, and rigorous performance standards reinforced by periodic testing for accountability.[16]

As teachers adapt to the bureaucratic organization of schools and respond to the demands for accountability, they begin to worry more about the quality of inputs. In other words, a first-grade teacher who knows that his or her students will be tested on a standardized reading test in May is concerned about whether they have mastered pre-reading skills when they enter in September. This expectation is communicated directly to the kindergarten teacher – or indirectly when the first-grade teacher sends a child who "doesn't have the background for this class" back to kindergarten. In essence, the first-grade teacher rejects the raw material, the product of an earlier point on the assembly line, so that he or she will not be held responsible for a subsequent malfunction.

Teachers of all grades wish for more homogeneous classrooms, so that the output for which they are held accountable can be more efficiently produced. One can argue that such practices as tracking, retention, and special education placements for children who fall short of standards are all based on efforts to attain greater homogeneity in the classroom and to more readily attain the levels of performance imposed by central management.

The district we studied was less highly centralized and bureaucratic than others we know about. Statewide accountability standards are loosely imposed, and the district itself does not use its standardized testing program to enforce common levels of performance. Open, alternative schools are permitted to exist.

Yet principals operated some of the schools on the model of a factory, creating curricula that were highly stratified, applying promotion standards strictly, and encouraging teachers to adhere to the authorized curriculum rather than to exercise their creativity. These were the schools that tended to retain at higher rates or to siphon off children who departed from the norm into prekindergartens, transition rooms, or special education classes – that is, into long-term placements in homogeneous tracks.

EXPLAINING VERSUS JUSTIFYING

Various combinations of teachers' knowledge of and beliefs about retention, "nativist" beliefs about child development, the downward press of the school curriculum into kindergarten, parental pressure, and the bureaucratization of schools account for variation in retention policies. Understanding a phenomenon, however, does not justify it.

Let us not mince words; we see little justification for retentions or for programs that add a year to a pupil's career in school. The evidence is quite clear and nearly unequivocal that the achievement and adjustment of retained children are no better – and in most instances are worse – than those of comparable children who are promoted. *Retention is one part of the current reform packages that does not work.* Moreover, retention and the practices associated with it are costly both to taxpayers and to the pupils affected. These practices are also inherently discriminatory to boys, poor children, the relatively young, and the relatively small.

Of course, we are not the first reviewers to conclude that retention is ineffective. But, in our view, some of the others have added bad advice. For example, the suggestion has been made that, since some children do benefit from retention, schools ought to develop elaborate decision-making procedures for selecting those likely to benefit.[17] However, we remember from our previous research that the kind of staffing procedures being recommended for making decisions about retention were used to identify learning disabilities; they proved to be costly and resulted in correct identifications less than half the time.[18] Nor can we condone the use of such indicators as physical size or gender to decide whether a particular child should be retained. Although some small percentage of those retained may be helped, the evidence indicates that educators are simply unable to predict accurately which individuals these will be.

Taking our low-retaining schools as models, we can suggest some alternatives to retention: a rejection of nativist beliefs about child development; flexible standards of competence in the primary grades; the delay of testing for purposes of accountability; flexible arrangements that decrease grade isolation; a variety of curricula and the use of instructional practices that take into consideration natural variations in achievement, ability, linguistic competence, and background; and the provision of services that enhance opportunities to learn and prevent failure, such as tutoring, summer school, learning laboratories, guidance services, parent education, and individualized instruction. In particular, teachers in the low-retaining schools taught us about the possibilities of managing heterogeneity without the need to sort, label, track, and retain – all practices that may meet the needs of the system, but fail to address the needs of the students.

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