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PREVIEW

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**Comparison of the academic and social-psychological status of
retained and non-retained elementary school students**

Rose, Janet S., Ph.D.

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1991

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

COMPARISON OF THE ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL
STATUS OF RETAINED AND NON-RETAINED ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL STUDENTS

by

Janet S. Rose

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Psychological and Cultural
Studies

Under the Supervision of Professor Wayne C. Piersel

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 1991

DISSERTATION TITLE

Comparison of the Academic and Social-Psychological Status of Retained
and Non-Retained Elementary School Students

BY

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

COMPARISON OF THE ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL
STATUS OF RETAINED AND NON-RETAINED ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL STUDENTS

Janet S. Rose, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1991

Adviser: Wayne C. Piersel

This study compared the academic and social-psychological status of students who had been retained in first grade with that of non-retained age and grade peers five years following their initial first grade year. Four hundred eight students from an urban, midwestern school district participated in this study. Eighty-eight students were 5th graders who had been retained in first grade. Fifty-eight 6th grade students whose first grade achievement test scores were highly similar to those of the students who were retained were classified as socially promoted. The other students were regularly promoted students from intact fifth and sixth grade classrooms; 139 were in fifth grade and 123 were in sixth grade.

Information was obtained from multiple sources, including the students themselves, their cumulative records,

and their teachers, peers, and parents. The dependent measures obtained for all students included group achievement test scores, information from self-report measures of self-concept and locus of control scales, and a brief survey of attitudes toward retention. Current grades and teachers' ratings of behavioral functioning were obtained for retained and socially promoted students. Peer ratings of sociometric status were obtained from intact classrooms. Parents of retained students completed a questionnaire concerning their experiences with the retention process. Other factors, such as gender, socio-economic status, age at entrance into kindergarten, prior and present attendance patterns, and ability were analyzed to examine their relationship to current academic and social-psychological status.

Retained and socially promoted students were functioning significantly lower than their regularly promoted peers in all areas except sociometric status; however, differences between retained and socially promoted students were minimal. No support for long term academic benefits or social-psychological benefits was found for retention. Most of the negative social-psychological effects appeared to be related to continued academic difficulties and not retention or social promotion per se.

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PREVIEW

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Statement and Significance of the Problem

This year more than two million students in the United States will be retained in the same grade for another year because they have failed to meet expected standards of academic performance and/or social adjustment. The 1982 "Gallup Poll of Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools" reported that raising "academic standards" was a major concern; however, few districts have been found to have measurable standards for each grade. No descriptions of or data on promotion standards are available nationwide. The practice of retention is inconsistent across and within school districts as well (Niklason, 1987; Shepard, 1989).

Schools are not required to provide information to any federal or relevant state agency on the number of students retained so exact rates are not available; however, U.S. Census data on the number of students who are below the modal grade for their age, which in most cases reflects retention, indicated a dramatic rise in this number during the late 1970s. Enrollment below the mode was related to student ethnicity, gender, educational level of the head of the household, family income level, and region of residence

(Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983). Bianchi (1984) found socioeconomic characteristics and, to a much lesser extent, family compositional differences among Hispanics, blacks, and whites to explain the higher rates of grade retention of minority children.

The issue of whether to retain low achieving and/or socially immature pupils has been a concern of U.S. educators since the turn of the century (Bocks, 1977; Germain & Merlo, 1985). It is of interest to note that the rate of nonpromotion was approximately 50% during the 1800s.

Prior to graded schools gaining prominence in the United States in the mid-1800s, students progressed through texts at their own individual rates, and their educational status was determined by the texts they had completed (Thompson, 1980). This rate steadily declined during the first half of the 20th century, and the concept of social promotion was introduced in the 1930s to provide incentive to keep over-age students in school rather than dropping out and joining the labor force (Medway & Rose, 1986). According to Niklason (1984), the evidence now indicates a reversion to a grade-standard policy, in which each student is required to achieve at a predetermined level within a given school year as a requirement for promotion.

Labaree (1984) views the retention/social promotion debate as arising from the conflicting influences of the

desire for organizational efficiency and meritocratic values. The belief that individuals should earn promotions and not be given them has resulted in a renewed shift toward retention. Social promotion, tracking, and merit promotion represent strategies for resolving these conflicting goals.

Most educators and parents have definite opinions on the merits of retention versus promotion and can often relate personal experiences to support their biases (Byrnes, 1989; Smith, 1989). A recent study conducted by Byrnes (1989) indicated that retention is generally accepted and supported by teachers, parents, and school administrators. Cadigan, Entwistle, Alexander, and Pallas (1988) found that teachers tended to underestimate the negative effects of retention while parents and students did not. A study by Byrnes and Yamamoto (1984) found that next to going blind and the death of a parent, children rated flunking a grade as most traumatic.

Recent reviewers of research on retention effects conclude that there are no clear benefits for pupils in terms of academic or personal-social growth nor improvement in motivation or attitude toward school (Holmes, 1989; Norton, 1984; Shepard, 1989; Rafoth & Carey, 1991).

Norton (1984) examined the empirical support for the following four prevalent rationales for retention: (a) to ensure greater mastery of subject matter; (b) to allow

students adequate time to grow and mature; (c) to reduce the range of abilities in classes; and (d) to motivate students and prevent student apathy. Norton (1984) and others (Bocks, 1977; Dawson, Rafoth & Carey, 1991; Holmes, 1989) concluded that although much of the research is flawed, retention as a means of achieving any of these goals is not supported by research.

The very long term consequences of failing a grade are difficult to directly assess, but the problems that ultimately result in dropping out of high school frequently have roots in the elementary grades (Lichter, 1962). Hahn, Danzberger and Lefkowitz (1987) found that the connection between grade promotion and dropping out begins as early as kindergarten. Hahn et al. (1987) also found that students who have been held back a grade are up to four times more likely to drop out than those who have never been retained. Thus, even if it could be assumed that academic deficits could be entirely remediated by repeating a grade, there may be severe emotional costs.

Shepard and Smith (1989) raised the issue of whether the emotional impact of being retained goes away, even for those who are later successful. In an extension of a 1987 study they conducted on the effects of kindergarten retention, Shepard and Smith found that no matter how positive the outcome of retention, there is always a

downside, and it is crucial to consider this in any decision to retain. Furthermore, Shepard and Smith (1989) caution that often the "positive" outcomes have statistical but not practical significance. For example, a difference of one month on a standardized achievement measure may be statistically significant. However, most would agree that this has no practical significance that would justify adding a year to a child's schooling.

There are also economic and legal aspects of retention to consider. Ostrowski (1987) advises that when computing the financial costs of retention, both the expenses related to providing an additional year of schooling and those related to the costs of providing remedial programming should be taken into account.

Because the number of students who are retained can only be estimated, it is difficult to determine the actual costs associated with retaining students, and there has been little attention given to the amount of expenditures associated with retention. Jackson (1975) estimated that retention cost the United States between \$739 and \$903 million for the 1971-72 school year. Bracey (1985) reported the expense of retaining 900 students in one year in one affluent school district in Virginia to be \$4.5 million. Niklason (1984) estimated the cost to public education for the 1979-80 school year to be over \$4 billion. She arrived

at this figure based on an estimated national retention rate of 5.7% (Rose et al., 1983) for the 1979-80 school year, a public school student population of 41,578,655 (Eiden, 1980), and an average expenditure of \$2,021 per pupil (Eiden, 1980).

While the cost of the additional year and remediation are immediate expenses, there are also the long-term costs to society. Since retention is associated with dropping out, Ostrowski (1987) suggested that part of the price society pays because of students leaving school early should be factored into the overall expense of grade retention.

Although there are presently few court cases involving retention practices, legal challenges to the school districts appear to be increasing (Walden & Gamble, 1985). Both Walden and Gamble (1985) and Stroup and Zirkel (1983) reviewed court cases and found that the courts will generally support the schools' authority regarding academic decisions if they are based on sound professional judgment.

Stroup and Zirkel (1983) summarized the courts' position on the retention/promotion controversy, recommending that schools: (a) establish retention/promotion policies which use multiple traditional criteria and individualized academic judgment; (b) avoid any radical changes in promotion requirements, and give adequate notice to those who would be affected if changes are made; and (c) insure that retention/promotion policies do not have a disproportionate