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Position Paper: Retention Shouldn't Be Retained

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Abstract/ Thesis

The practice of grade retention should not be retained; research and best practice both point to the flaws and failures of this dangerous educational policy. This position paper outlines a small sample of the wealth of educational research that has repetitively illustrated the reasons why the practice of grade retention is not an effective method of academic remediation.

History of Grade Retention

As a term, “grade retention refers to the practice of nonpromotion of students to the next grade level upon completion of the school year” (Jimerson et al, 1997). Grade retention is a well-established practice in the American school system; a practice dating back to the mid 1800s (Frey, 2005). In 1909, concerns began to rise about the high number of students who were classified as “backwards children” (those who were too old for their grade level) when retention rates were estimated between 20-50% of the total student population (Johnson, Merrell, & Stover, 1990). Over the next twenty years, students started to be assigned into achievement-based classrooms (sorted by current performance and ability) which divided students more by academic strength, rather than chronological age (Dewey, 1998).

Between the 1930s and 1960s, continued use of these leveled classroom models gained in popularity, and rates of retention declined steadily (Johnson, et al, 1990). However, in the early 1980s, the practice of grade retention (also referred to as “repeating a grade”, “being held back” or “flunking”) gained popularity in American schools. Both professional research and general school faculty observations indicated that this practice was not an effective intervention strategy for students. In fact, many began to advocate for the discontinuation of the retention (National Center for Fair and Open Testing). As a result, the practice lost favor in the later

1980s. The tides shifted again with the testing and accountability era in the 1990s, and the practice of retention would still continue to play a role in many schools across the US. As of 2013, grade retention rates are again on the rise (Ritzema, 2012).

Examination of Retention Research and Practice

Perhaps one of the best studies on retention effectiveness was conducted during the 1996-1997 school year. The Chicago Public School system created a policy that called for all 3rd, 4th, and 8th grade students to reach proficiency levels on the Iowa State Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) at the end of those grade levels. If they were not proficient at that time, they were required to take summer school classes, in an effort to boost their skills to reach a proficient level on the ITBS. If students still couldn't meet this ITBS requirement at the end of the summer, those students faced mandatory grade retention for the following year. At the end of the year following retention, the Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR) published their findings about the impact of the district-wide retention program. A summary of that work is expressed in an independent commentary:

The new CCSR report shows again that retention does not work for those who are retained, as retained students showed little gain, despite intensive teaching to the test. Twenty-nine percent of students who were retained at eighth grade in 1997 had dropped out two years later. (National Center for Fair and Open Testing)

Despite independent research such as the Chicago study, retention rates continued to rise with the use of high-stakes testing. From 1992 to 1995, the national rates of retention rose from 6% to more than 13% - more than doubling the rate in just three years (Frey 2005.) By 2003, the rate was calculated to be up to 15% of students were retained annually, and it was estimated 30-50% of all students retained at least once prior to 9th grade (National Association of School

Psychologists, 2003). Currently, estimates indicate that between 7-15% of students are retained annually in the United States (Ritzema, 2012).

Some researchers began looking for trends in retention practices, in order to determine which students are facing the highest retention rates. These studies demonstrate that males are twice as likely to be retained than females, rates are highest in low-income areas with at-risk students, and that black students are the most likely candidates for retention (Anderson et al; Frey, 2005; Wood, 2004). This seems to suggest a more culturally biased impact of retention, rather than any true academic need which would be remediated with such an “intervention.”

In addition to retention alone being an ineffective means of raising student achievement, some studies indicate that retention is even harmful to students (Anderson et al). In one such report, Holmes and Matthews (1984) stated that educators who “continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative outcomes consistently outweigh the positive outcomes.” Some correlative research has found that juvenile delinquents have high rates of retention, learning problems, and truancy (Levine et al, 1985). After being retained, students may start to develop a decrease in self-esteem, experience trouble with peer relationships, and demonstrate behavioral control problems in adolescence if they were retained in elementary school (Jimerson et al, 2007). In one study, 6th graders were asked to name stressful life events; this study indicated that these students perceived retention as being the single most stressful life event – even worse than losing a parent (Anderson et al). Perhaps the most well documented negative long-term effect is the heightened risk of school drop out. Studies have indicated that individuals who were retained even one year have an increased likely of 2 to 11 times of later school drop out. In fact, grade retention alone is the most powerful indicator for later school drop out (Fry, 2005; Jimerson et al, 2007; Wood,

2004).

With such clearly demonstrated pitfalls to the practice of retention, why do some schools continue to use it? Results are mixed as to the benefits of immediate academic gains; some studies indicate short-term gains in academic improvement (up to three years after the year of retention), while other studies see no statistical improvement following retention (Anderson, et al; Ritzema, 2012). However, many studies also demonstrate that any positive effects of retention are negligible when looking at longitudinal gains past three years (Wood, 2004).

Position Against the Practice of Retention

The National Association of School Psychologists (2003) has openly and consistently advocated for the discontinue use of retention in public schools today. Decades of research and study have indicated that this practice is ineffective at best, and likely harmful to students over their lifetime. Such dangerous gambling practices should not be allowed within our schools.

Recommendations

Rather than waiting till the end of the school year and then recommending retention in an effort to reteach unlearned objectives, a more viable (and research supported) option is to enact explicit, systematic, targeted interventions while the student is receiving their core instruction (Anderson, et al). According to Jimmerson (2007) some alternatives to retention include the use of:

- Systematic methods to monitor progress, identify strengths and weaknesses, and identify the most effective methods of instruction
- Student support teams with appropriate professionals to assess and identify specific learning or behavioral problems, design interventions to address those problems, and evaluate the efficacy of those interventions.

As educators continue to move forward with providing research-based interventions for students with learning difficulties, the National Association of School Psychologists (2003) recommends that the practice of retention not be considered a viable option for remediation. The practice of grade retention should not be retained in the American public school system.

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