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STUDENT AND PARENT ATTITUDES  
AND FEELINGS ABOUT RETENTION  
AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL

by

Lynne Swantz

A DISSERTATION

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

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Administration,  
Curriculum and Instruction

Under the Supervision of Professor Miles Bryant

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Student and Parent Attitudes and Feelings

about Retention at the Elementary Level


BY

Lynne Swantz

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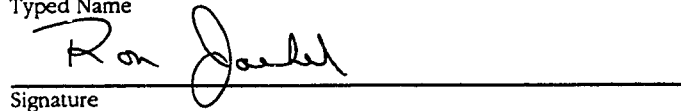
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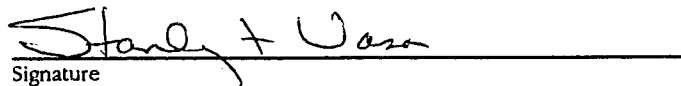
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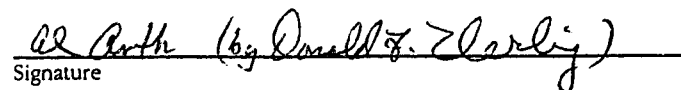
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GRADUATE COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

STUDENT AND PARENT ATTITUDES AND FEELINGS  
ABOUT RETENTION AT THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL

Lynne Swantz, Ed.D.  
University of Nebraska, 1995

Advisor: Dr. Miles Bryant

In this study previously retained students and their parents were individually interviewed to determine their feelings and attitudes about the experience of retention and the effects of having been retained. The study was conducted in a mid-size Nebraska community with an all white population. The students had been retained in grades K-3 during the 1985-1990 school years, a minimum of five years prior to their participation in the study. A total of twenty-two students and eleven parents participated in the study.

The interview questions for both the students and parents were adapted from Deborah Byrnes' research (1985) with elementary students during their repeat year. Individual school data were gathered to provide a context for the feelings

and attitudes of each the students. A series of individual narrative descriptions was presented combining the student interview information, school data, and, when available, parent interview information.

The majority of the retained students in this study had accepted their retentions as beneficial to them. These students generally believed that retention helped them to do better. Others in this group came to believe that their retentions were beneficial to them because they had been told by others at school and home that these retentions were good for them. For a few students, retention was remembered as a painful experience and these students still carried with them feelings of hurt and anger. All but one of the parents in this study were positive in their attitudes and feelings about retention. They affirmed that their children had needed and benefitted from repeating a grade.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Chapter

#### I INTRODUCTION

Introduction	1
Research Questions	6
Definitions	10
Delimitations and Limitations	11
Significance of the Study	12

#### II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction	15
The History of Retention	16
Rationale for Retention	24
Effects of Retention	28

#### III METHODOLOGY

Introduction	67
The Design	68
The Subjects	71
Data Collection	73
Data Analysis	75
Verification of the Data	76
Ethical Considerations	76

#### IV THE STUDY 78

#### V SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary	175
Findings from the Study	180
Conclusions	193
Recommendations	196

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY 197

#### APPENDICES

Appendix A. Transcriptions of Interview Tapes	205
Appendix B. IRB Protocol and Consent Forms	279

## LIST OF TABLES

### Table

1. Personal and Home Factors	178
2. School Factors	179

## Chapter 1

### Introduction to the Study

Retention, or nonpromotion, is an educational practice that began when schools developed the concept of grade levels. Prior to the development of grade levels, there was no need to retain since each student worked at his or her own level of knowledge and skills (Medway and Rose, 1986, p. 142). By 1870 schools had become grade level organized in all aspects, including buildings, teachers, textbooks, curricula and students (Balow and Schwager, 1990, p. 2). With the implementation of grade level instruction, there arose the difficulty of what to do with students who had not attained the proficiency to move to the next grade level. This created a serious problem for the schools because "the discipline of the school and the effectiveness of instruction were threatened if pupils were promoted without the necessary skills to succeed at the next level" (Balow and Schwager, 1990, p. 2).

Thus, the concept of retention was born. Children would be held back until their levels of proficiency were met in order to move to the next grade levels. The solution to one educational problem soon became another educational problem. "By 1900, retention in grade was a major problem in education,

with the failure rate reaching as high as 50 percent, and with adolescents frequently retained in primary grades" (Balow and Schwager, 1990, p. 2).

The first study of the effects of retention was conducted in 1911. In a seven-year study by Keyes in a school district of about 5,000 students, 20 percent of the students who were retained did better, 39 percent of the retained students showed no change, and 40 percent of the retained students actually did worse (Bocks, 1977, p. 379). Since that time, a wealth of research studies have been conducted to determine the effects of retention. According to Medway and Rose (1986), the total accumulation of studies on the effects of retention has numbered close to 100 (p. 154).

More recently Holmes (1989) conducted a meta-analysis of the research on retention. Holmes examined 63 controlled studies where students retained in kindergarten, elementary grades, and junior high school grades were followed up and compared to equally poor-achieving students who went directly on to the next grade. Fifty-four of the studies showed overall negative effects from retention, even on measures of academic achievement (p. 19).

In nearly 80 years of research on the practice of retention, the majority of studies have compared the achievement scores of retained students before and after

retention, or compared students who were retained with equally like ability students who were promoted. This research evidence on the practice of retention "demonstrates unequivocally that retention in grade had virtually no benefits for either the pupils retained, their classmates, their teachers or the schools" (Balow and Schwager, 1990, p. 33).

Over 20 years ago Abidin, Golladay, and Howerton (1971) pointed out that despite the research, "elementary schools continue to retain pupils in hopes that they will profit from the experience" (p. 412). Their conclusion was that "there are some very pertinent dynamics underlying the retention process that are not evident in the research or even possibly in the conscious decisions made by teachers" (p. 412).

While not as comprehensively studied as the effects upon achievement, some studies have been conducted that focused on the affective aspects of retention. For example, Goodlad (1954) conducted a study to measure the social/emotional effects of retention comparing a group of 55 students who retained in first grade with a group of 55 students who were promoted to second grade. While the students were not matched student by student, the groups were equated, "arranged in equitable distributions for chronological age, mental age, and achievement" (p. 307). Goodlad's study revealed that promoted low-achieving students became more

popular during the school year than the students who were retained based on sociometric measures. Further, in comparison with the promoted group, retained students ranked more poorly on self-rating, peer rating, and teacher rating inventories.

When considering the affective aspects of retention, it is essential to understand how the students feel about being retained, but according to Shepard and Smith (1989) in Flunking Grades, "Byrnes contributes the only study in the literature where retained children are interviewed" (p. 108). This study was conducted by Byrnes and Yamamoto in 1985 where 71 retained elementary students and their teachers were interviewed during the year of retention.

A few studies of parent attitudes toward grade retention have been conducted (Chase, 1968; Scott & Ames, 1969; Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986). These studies examined parent attitudes during the year of retention. One study, Shepard and Smith (1989), provided follow-up data from parents in regard to their attitudes about the kindergarten retention of their children at the end of first grade. It is important to note that in the research literature studies on the effects of kindergarten retention are reviewed separately from studies on the effects of retention in first grade and beyond because of the difference in purpose of the two types of retention.

Shepard and Smith explain why kindergarten retention is different,

Repeating kindergarten is intended to be different from non-promotion at other grade levels. Because it comes before academic failure it is meant to be a preventative treatment. The populations served and its social effects are thought to be different. Often children are selected for kindergarten retention because of immaturity rather than poor academic skills (1989, p. 64).

According to Shepard and Smith, while the kindergarten studies are considered separately, the findings are not any more positive than the findings of higher grade retentions. They state that "extra-year programs have not boosted achievement and, contrary to expectation, have hurt rather than helped self-esteem" (1986, p. 85).

Given the limited attention to the attitudes of students and parents, the purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes and feelings of individual students and their parents about retention at the elementary level. When designing the study, the researcher decided to interview only students who had been retained a minimum of four years ago to explore what feelings and attitudes the retained student recalled from the time of retention as well as present feelings and attitudes. By using four years previous as the minimum, the study group

would include students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Likewise, the study would explore the parents' attitudes and feelings about their child's retention and discover how the parents felt about the year of retention and the impact of retention upon their children's subsequent school years. The researcher considered it important to determine if the parents or the school staff recommended retention. If the retention was recommended by school personnel, it was equally important to determine if the parents supported the decision. Further, the researcher considered it essential to determine the reason(s) for the retention.

### Research Questions

The research question that framed this study of students who had been retained was: What are the attitudes of students and parents about retention and its effects? The sub-questions attempt to explore each student's and parent's feelings and attitudes about retention in a "then and now" perspective. In the Byrnes' study, students were asked about their feelings and attitudes during the year of their retention. For this study, the questions from the Byrnes' research have been rephrased to have the student recall his/her feelings and attitudes at the time of retention:

1. How did you feel about being retained?
2. Was it a good idea for you to stay in \_\_\_\_ grade?
3. Should you have been retained?
4. How did your parents feel about you repeating a grade?
5. Do you remember how you found out you were going to be retained?
6. Why do you think you were retained?
7. Do you think it is a good idea to keep students in the same grade?
8. Was it a good idea to keep you in the same grade?
9. What was the worst thing about not passing?
10. What was a good thing about not passing?

The questions were then rephrased to gain an understanding of each student's present feelings and attitudes:

1. Now that you are in \_\_\_\_ grade, how do you feel about yourself as a student?
2. Do you think that being retained in \_\_\_\_ grade helped you to do better in the following grades?
- 2a. How did being retained help you do better in the following grades?
- 2b. Why didn't being retained help you in the following grades?

3. Do you spend much time now thinking about when you were retained?
4. What kinds of feelings do you have when you think about it?
5. How would you feel about being retained now?
6. How did answering these questions make you feel?

These questions from the Byrnes' study represent the core of the interview. Depending on the age and ability to verbalize of each student, other clarifying statements and prompts were used as needed.

In the Byrnes' study a random sample of all parents in the school district were surveyed to discover attitudes about retention. While the Byrnes' study provided general information about parents' attitudes toward the practice of retention, the intent of this follow-up study was to interview parents specifically about the retention of their child. Therefore, the student questions were revised to gain the same information from the parental perspective:

1. How did you feel about your child being retained?
2. Was it a good idea for your child to stay in \_\_\_\_ grade?
3. Should your child have been retained?
4. How did your child feel about repeating a grade?
5. Do you remember how you found out your child was going to be retained?

6. Why do you think your child was retained?
7. Do you think it is a good idea to keep students in the same grade?
8. Was it a good idea to keep your child in the same grade?
9. What was the worst thing about your child not passing?
10. What was a good thing about your child not passing?

Once again, the Byrnes' questions were revised to determine the parents' present feelings and attitudes:

1. Now that your child is in \_\_\_\_ grade, how do you think he/she feels about himself/herself as a student?
2. Do you think that being retained in \_\_\_\_ grade helped your child to do better in the following grades?
- 2a. How did being retained help your child do better in the following grades?
- 2b. Why didn't being retained help your child in the following grades?
3. Do you spend much time now thinking about when your child was retained?
4. What kinds of feelings do you have when you think about it?
5. How would you feel about your child being retained now?

6. How did answering these questions make you feel?

As with the student interviews, additional clarifying prompts and statements were used as needed to gain an understanding of each parent's experience of the child's retention.

### Definitions

Retention. The repetition of an elementary grade level during the following school year. Retention does not include being held back a year before entering school, but does include repeating kindergarten. Synonymous terms in the literature for retention include not passing, repeating, nonpromotion, and being held back.

Academic achievement. Students' educational development as measured by classroom grades and scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. Both of these assessment measures are utilized annually to evaluate student achievement in the school district. These assessments are also used in conjunction with other information about the child in making recommendations for retention.

School success. Active involvement in the educational system including attendance, participation in extra-curricular activities, attitude toward school, and academic achievement.

### Delimitations and Limitations

This study included only those students who were retained in the school district at the elementary level between 1985 and 1990; who were still enrolled in the school district at the time of the study; and who were willing to participate in the study. Further, the study included only the parents of students who participated in the study.

The time frame of 1985 to 1990 was selected to ensure that the pool of potential interviewees during the 1994-95 school year would include students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. This also meant that the students in the study would be asked to recall their feelings about being retained in the interviews several years later. However, an essential aspect of the study was to determine the types feelings students had later in their school careers.

There were no minority students included in this study because there were no minority students enrolled in the school district at the elementary level during the selected time frame.

This study was descriptive in nature and each of the interviews focused on the individual experience of each student or parent. Data collection was limited to interviews of those students and their parents who were willing to

participate and a review of each of the participating student's school records.

### Significance of the Study

The attitudes and feelings of these students and their parents combined with documentation of individual school success provides a more personal and comprehensive understanding of the long-term effects of the practice of retention. When teachers retain students, they are most often in a position to follow the progress of a child during the nonpromoted year and even a year or more beyond, but seldom are they able to know how retained children progress in later years. According to E.R. House (1989) teachers protect themselves by conveying their failing judgments through report cards rather than face to face. After the fact of failing, " they perceive absolutely no negative effects upon students, even though all one has to do is ask or observe students and parents" (p. 210). Further, the studies of the effects of retention have focused on numbers and the averages of children in groups, and have not explored the effects upon the student as an individual. Retention statistics provide numbers, not human stories. E. R. House strongly suggested that:

. . . school districts should or should be required to follow and document the fortunes of those students they

retain over a number of years. This is a reasonable demand and places the responsibility directly upon the school district where it belongs (1989, p. 212).

This study sought to personalize the effects of retention, as well as provide data regarding the long-term effects of retention. The combination and description of data presented an album of pictures of previously retained students. According to Shephard and Smith (1989), referring to retention at the kindergarten level:

In a climate of extreme opinions, for and against repeating kindergarten, it is unlikely that dry, summarized research findings will be persuasive to those who hold contrary opinions. There is always the thought that somehow the groups were inappropriately selected or the outcome too narrowly focused to grant credence to findings (1989, p. 64).

While these researchers were specifically referring to retention at the kindergarten level, this premise can be expanded to retention at all levels. The verbatim quotations from the interviews of students and parents who have experienced retention reveal feelings and attitudes about the effects of retention in an individual and personal manner different from studies on the effects of retention that present numerical findings alone.

Information from this study was presented to staff members of the school district in which the students were retained. The research studies and the personal accounts of students and parents offered staff members an opportunity to consider their own beliefs about retention. The information assisted the elementary principals' decision to not recommend retention for students verified for special education services. The information from this study was also a component in the school district's decision to eliminate the Developmental Kindergarten program, which is described in Chapter IV. The decision was made to provide the additional support services within each kindergarten classroom to eliminate the need for special education labeling of kindergarten students.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

The purpose of this chapter was to review literature from authors who have studied retention as an educational practice. The effects of retention have been studied by a variety of researchers over a period of more than 80 years. The majority of studies have focused on changes in achievement during the year of retention, while some studies have traced achievement growth over a longer time frame. More recently, several studies have employed the meta-analysis method of integrating the findings of multiple research studies. And a few studies have been conducted to explore the social and emotional effects of retention.

This review is a narrative summary of the research on retention and is divided into three parts. The first section reviews the development of retention as an educational practice and traces the history of changing perspectives on the use of retention. The second section defines and explains the rationales for retention. The third section reviews studies of the effects of retention on achievement and studies relating to the social and emotional effects of retention.

### The History of Retention

American schools were essentially ungraded during the mid-nineteenth century. Students progressed according to individual mastery of content rather than established incremental steps. One of the reasons for the change in American schools was the increased number of children to be educated. Abidin, Golladay, and Howerton (1971) pointed out that, "the increasing size and the recognized importance of the 'educational enterprise' as the main ingredients of the American melting pot fostered the development of standardization in education" (p. 410). Through the German influence on American scholars studying in Europe, the concept of graded elementary schools like those in Germany was brought to the United States, and by 1870 every aspect of every school in the country was graded (Balow and Schwager, 1990, p. 2).

The graded school was modeled after the regularity of industrial production and served to standardize education. The standardization included graded textbooks, tightly supervised courses of study, and the orderly division of curriculum creating grade levels signifying specific and definite levels of achievement (Abidin, Golladay, and Howerton, 1971, p. 410). The underlying premise was "that achievement would be enhanced if the curriculum were graded year by year in school

if the teacher focused on instruction on the curriculum of that grade, and if pupils worked to master that curriculum" (Balow and Schwager, 1990, p. 2). Students were to expected to master the requirements before proceeding to the next grade level. It soon became apparent that all children could not master the requirements during the allocated time frame. According to Balow and Schwager, these children created a serious problem for the schools by threatening the discipline of the school and the effectiveness of instruction if they were promoted without the requisite skills for success at the next grade level (1990, p. 2). These slower children were considered "lazy," "undisciplined," and "sinful" (Abidin, et al, 1971, p. 410). Failure in school was blamed on the child (Medway and Rose, 1986, p. 143). Grade retention was introduced as the solution to the problem. Retention of those students who did not achieve minimum grade standards became by 1900 the preferred method for remediating poor academic performance (Kiner and Vik, 1989, p. 9) with rates of retention reaching over 50% and with adolescents frequently retained in primary grades (Balow and Schwager, 1990, p. 2). The solution to the problem of low achievement had become a problem.

While the first study on the effects of retention on achievement was conducted in 1911 by Keyes, Superintendent W. H. Maxwell of the New York schools was sounding the alarm

as early as 1904 over the use of retention as a means of improving the academic performance of low-achieving students (Coffield and Blommers, 1954, p. 235). Yet retention continued to be a common practice until the 1930s. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the standardization of the revised Stanford-Binet intelligence scales was providing data that "revealed a remarkable range of intellectual ability among 'normal' children of a given age" (Doyle, 1989, p. 216). Doyle explained further that this information indicated the possible proportion of students who might not make the expected progress through the elementary grades in a school system of inflexible standards (1989, p. 216). Also, in the early 1930s as various educational groups began speaking out against retention, schools were beginning to move away from rigid policies to a more individualized consideration of promotion and retention. For example, the National Education Association published guidelines in 1931 in regard to promotion and retention. As quoted by Medway and Rose (1986) the guidelines were as follows:

1. Promotion should be decided on the basis of the individual pupil.
2. Promotion should be on the basis of many factors. The final decision as to whether a particular pupil should be promoted should rest not merely on academic

accomplishment, but what will result in the greatest good to the all-around development of the individual.

3. In order that promotion procedures may be more or less uniform throughout a particular school system, a definite set of factors should be agreed upon, which each teacher will take into consideration in forming his judgment as to whether or not a particular pupil should be promoted.

4. Criteria for promotion should take into consideration the curriculum offerings of the next grade or unit and the flexibility of its organization, its courses of study, and its methods.

5. It is the duty of the next higher grade or unit to accept pupils who are properly promoted to it from the lower grade or unit and to adapt its work to fit the needs of these pupils.

6. Promotion procedures demand continuous analysis and study of cumulative case history records in order that refinement of procedures may result, and guess work and conjecture be reduced to a minimum (p. 147).

According to Medway and Rose, the result of moving from blanket policies of retention to the more flexible guidelines of individual consideration for retention was that the retention rates began to decrease. Also, a great number of studies on

non-promotion were being conducted during the 1930s and 1940s (Bock, 1977, p. 382). Another factor was that in the late 1930s and early 1940s schools had become concerned with keeping students in school because it was felt that failure experiences would cause children to leave school and enter the work force to assist their families (Medway and Rose, 1986, p. 143).

At the same time, social scientists had begun to challenge the practice because they feared "potential adverse effects of retention on children's social and emotional development" (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, and Marus, 1983, p. 201). School failure was perceived to be an unhealthy experience for the child and the blame for school failure shifted from the student to the educational environment (Medway and Rose, 1986, p. 143).

Over the next thirty years educators who were sensitive to the views of social scientists began instituting different kinds of policies that eliminated school failure by automatically promoting students. According to Rose, Medway, Cantrell, and Marus (1983), these policies of "social promotion" were intended to reduce the numbers of average, low-achieving students in the classroom. Once promoted, the students were grouped according to their ability and were provided individualized remedial help (p. 201). But, according

to Medway and Rose, some children continued to be retained and the decision to retain was "based on social and emotional maturity, age, attendance record, home background, and the child's own interests, rather than on the basis of achievement test scores alone" (1986, p. 144).

Ebel provides a rather different perspective to the change that was occurring in the focus of the schools:

Emphasis in education shifted away from things to be learned and toward conditions for learning, from products to processes, from subjects to children. The objectives of this new child-centered education turned out to be considerably more variable and diffuse, less clearly definable, less amenable to objective assessment, than the older subject-matter objectives had been. It became more difficult to distinguish failure from success in learning, more difficult to make and defend decisions to retain a pupil in grade (1980, p. 386).

Beginning in the early 1960s serious questions were being raised about the value of social promotions. Despite the intentions of those favoring a sensitive approach to school failure, standardized achievement scores were declining and students were graduating from high school without adequate skills in reading, writing, and computation. According to Medway and Rose, those demanding an explanation for the

decline in achievement quickly pointed to relaxed educational standards and social promotion as the causal factors (1986, p. 144).

The educational pendulum began to swing in the direction of educational accountability as governmental, industrial, and public support for raising the academic demands placed on students grew. Renewed interest in academic performance, state mandated minimum competencies, and standardized testing have increased the pressure to retain students (Kiner and Vik, 1989, p. 9). As Kowitz and Armstrong pointed out,

All too often the educational program is judged tough or soft by one test only: the promotion policy of the school. Proponents of a tough program often suggest that the school with the higher rate of pupil failure is the better one (1961, p. 435).

Support for retention as an educational practice comes from both outside and inside the educational system. The 1970s and 1980s "brought a shift in educators' interest to criterion reference testing and mastery learning" (Sandoval and Fitzgerald, 1985, p. 164). Studies in the late 1980s (Rafoth, Dawson, and Carey, 1988; Kiner and Vik, 1989; and Smith, 1989) indicated that most educators believe retention is both academically and socially beneficial to students.

Thus, retention became an accepted educational practice again. Statistically, social promotion has been dead for at least 10 years, according to Shephard and Smith. They indicate that "today's graduates and dropouts are emerging from a system that has imposed fierce nonpromotion rates, flunking between 30 and 50 percent of all entering students at least once in their school careers" (1990, p. 88). Shephard and Smith explain these figures based on their recent research:

Although no national statistics have been collected on grade retention, we recently (1989) analyzed data from 13 states and the District of Columbia. Our estimate is that 5 to 7 percent of public school children (about 2 in every classroom of 30) are retained in the U.S. annually. However, annual statistics are not the whole story. A 6 percent annual rate year after year produces a cumulative rate of nonpromotion greater than 50 percent. Even allowing for students who repeat more than one grade, we estimate that by 9th grade approximately half of all students in the U.S. have flunked at least one grade (or are no longer in school). This means that, contrary to public perceptions, current grade failure rates are as high as they were in the 19th century, before the days of social promotion (p. 84).

### Rationale for Retention

There are two focuses underlying rationales for retaining students. The first focus has the integrity of the school as the critical issue. Students must achieve the requirements before being promoted. If all the students in the classroom are at or above grade level, teachers can then teach the grade level curriculum to students who are prepared to learn it, and avoid contributing to the development of negative school attitudes (Beck, Cook, & Kearney, 1960, p. 44). According to Balow and Schwager (1990), this rationale assumes that:

1. all children possess the requisite ability to be successful in school;
2. the differences between successive grade levels are quite large;
3. the curriculum is appropriate for all children; and
4. when a pupil does not master the curriculum, it is the pupil who must be held accountable.

This rationale was challenged by Cook in a 1941 study. Cook stated,

In many studies of the extent and causes of nonpromotion, one finds the opinion expressed by teachers that grade standards must be maintained; that unless definite standards of achievement are required for promotion, the grade system breaks down,

achievement levels are lowered, and the upper-grade teachers are required to teach groups varying too widely in ability. This opinion appears so plausible that it is difficult, without experimental evidence, to demonstrate that just the opposite is true (p. 430).

For the study, 18 school systems were selected. According to Cook, the schools were grouped by a ratio of over-ageness (number of years that the average student in seventh grade was retained). Then the schools were "arranged in order of the magnitude of the ratio of over-ageness, and school systems at one extreme were matched with schools at the other extreme with regard to size, socio-economic status, and preparation of teachers" (p. 431). A random selection of students was used to ensure equivalence of the groups in regard to ability and achievement such that the mean intelligence quotient of the seventh grade students in the high-ratio group was 102.0, while the mean for the low-ratio group was 102.7. With respect to achievement, the mean mental age of the students in the high-ratio group was 141.29 and 141.30 for students in the low-ratio group (p. 434).

Cook drew the following conclusions from his study:

- (1) The high percentage of over-age pupils retained in the upper grades of schools with high standards of promotion reduced the mean intelligence of the classes

and lowered significantly the achievement average of the grades when compared with schools with more lenient standards of promotion. (2) The hypothesis that pupils of equal mental ability achieve more in schools with high standards of promotion was not substantiated by this study. (3) The range of specific abilities with which the teacher has to cope in the upper grades in schools with high ratios of over-ageness was not significantly less than in schools with low ratios of over-ageness (p. 437).

Clair Koons (1977) made reference to Cook's study when stating, "even with extensive retention, classes will remain heterogeneous, and allowances for differences will be required if teaching is to be effective. The notion that nonpromotion of low-achieving students creates homogeneous classes should long since have been dispelled. . . (p. 701).

The second rationale for retention centered on the student. The premise was that unearned promotions could be seriously harmful to students. Low-achieving students who were promoted without the necessary skills to do the required work would suffer academically and emotionally as they fell further behind in their school work (Beck, Cook, & Kearney, 1960, p. 44).

The premise of the second rationale for retention was that the retained year will provide another year for the student to attain skills. According to Balow and Schwager, this rationale assumes the following:

1. the grade level curriculum is appropriate for all pupils;
2. pupils who do not master the curriculum do have the ability to catch up if they are given more time;
3. the differences between successive grade levels are quite great; and
4. there is greater emotional trauma associated with low achievement at grade level than there is in being placed with a younger age cohort (1990, p. 4).

In some situations retention is recommended, not because of low academic achievement, but because of the immaturity of the child. A "year to grow" is believed to provide the child with a social environment more appropriate to his or her level of maturity (Scott and Ames, 1969, p. 434). Closely aligned to this rationale, arguments are sometimes made for retaining students with late birthdays on the assumption that they too are at-risk for school failure.

### Effects of Retention

As has been previously indicated, studies on the effects of retention began early in the 1900s. However, it was the contention of Jackson (1975) "that most of the research had been quite inadequate for making valid inferences about the effects of grade retention" (p. 614). Jackson's original plan for the review included four steps:

First, all the analyses would be examined and categorized by the type of basic analytical design used. Second, the basic analytical designs would be examined for inherent flaws. Third, those analyses whose basic analytical design were judged to be reasonably free of substantial inherent flaws would be separated according to the criterion which was investigated, and further divided by various contextual variables, such as grade level and IQ, which might affect the criterion. Fourth, the pattern of results for each criterion would be examined within and between different categories of the contextual variables (p. 616).

Jackson completed only steps one and two of the original plan because in his opinion, "very few of the analyses were free from serious inherent design flaws" (p. 617). According to Jackson, he examined the better designed analyses without

stratification by the contextual variables. He reported on the 30 studies that had one or more analyses which were tabulated. He indicated that three general types of analytical design prevailed. The most commonly used type of design compared the outcomes of students retained under normal school policies with the outcomes of promoted students.

Within Jackson's Design Type I category of comparing retained students with promoted students were studies that reported on achievement effects, as well as adjustment effects. Before reviewing Jackson's conclusions, a few of the Design Type I studies included in the meta-analysis will be highlighted individually.

The 1954 Coffield and Blommers study matched each of the 147 students who had been retained in one of the grades three through six with "a student who was a promoted classmate in the grade in which the failure occurred, on the basis of the particular achievement variable studied." Coffield and Blommers were able to match 93 of the retained students with students within the school system (internal match). The remaining 54 retained students were matched with students from another school system (external match).

Coffield and Blommers pointed out the bias inherent in their own study because of internal matching, stating,

It is to be expected that in this type of matching a bias favoring the promoted group will be introduced, for even though each pair is perfectly matched in terms of obtained test scores, the fact that one member is passed while the other is not indicates that in the best judgment of the room teacher, some difference in favor of the promoted pupil exists between them.

Therefore, they also utilized external matching to reduce the degree of possible bias. The criterion variables studied were grade equivalent scores from subtests of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. Score comparisons were made between the retained and promoted groups for the repeat year and the year following. Scores were also compared on individual student progress from the retention year, repeat year and the year after. While other issues were investigated and reported on from the data collected in this study, most germane to the discussion of the Type I design data are the following conclusions drawn from the study. Regarding achievement during the repeat year, the results of the study indicated that "the educational progress of failed pupils is typically about four to six months less than that of matching promoted students" (Coffield and Blommers, 1956, p. 248). A comparison of achievement past the repeat year indicated that:

The educational progress of failed pupils during the two years following failure is not significantly greater (perhaps of the order of one to three months) than that made by promoted matchees during the single year spent in the next higher grade.

Thus, the Coffield and Blommers study did not find retention to be of much benefit in educational growth.

A study conducted by Kamii and Wiegert attempted to answer the question, "Do children who spend seven years in elementary school do as well, in the long run, as those who finish it in six years?" (1963, p. 452). Their sample groups came from students who were in the seventh grade during the 1959-60 school year. Students who had a record of one retention in grades one through five were compared with a random sample of students who had never been retained and were the expected age for their grade level. Kamii and Weikart did not include in the retained sample students "who were in special classes for the mentally retarded" (p. 452). Each group had nine girls and 22 boys and the students were compared using three variables: grades in academic subjects at the end of the first semester of seventh grade; achievement test scores from the end of sixth grade in reading and arithmetic; and intelligence test scores on the California Test of Mental Maturity.

A comparison of the grades at the end of the first semester showed that the nonretained group had earned 17 "As," 67 "Bs," 52 "Cs," 16 "Ds," and no "Fs," while the retained group had earned no "As," 14 "Bs," 51 "Cs," 38 "Ds," and 48 "Fs" (p. 453). Using national norms, "the retained group as a whole achieved less than the normal group achieved in six years" (p. 454) on the Iowa Every Pupil Tests of Basic Skills. The IQ scores showed that "the mean was 94 for the retained group and 112.6 for the normal group" (p. 454). When the researchers looked at the relationship between IQ scores and marks, they used the Chi-square test and singled out the 10 students from each group whose IQ scores were in the normal range and found that "given the same IQ range, regularly promoted pupils earn better marks than the ones who have been retained" (p. 457).

Kamii and Weikart concluded that "the evidence indicates that, in general, retention does not help in the long run," stating also that "some retained pupils turn out to be better students than some regularly-promoted ones" (p. 457).

However, they went on to point out that:

Whether or not retention helped these students cannot be ascertained without a controlled experiment. Further research is necessary to determine what kinds of pupils benefit from retention before educators can justifiably retain pupils of elementary-school age (p. 457).

Considering the effects of retention on aspects other than academic achievement, the purpose of John Goodlad's study was "to determine whether or not differences in social and personal adjustment exist between two groups of promoted and nonpromoted children" (1954, p. 301). Goodlad chose to study first grade retainees on the premise that,

It is important to attack the promotion problem as early as possible in the school life of a child. A boy or girl who fails the sixth grade, for example, probably has experienced the effects of several previous near-failures. For him, repeating that grade represents the repetition of only a fraction of his total schooling. For the first grader, failure of the grade is not a cumulative experience. If this failing experience is damaging to him, the damage should be revealed in his next year's development, while he is still at a young and impressionable age (p. 303).

While the students in the study were attending different elementary schools, they were all in the same school system. Goodlad's first sample group included 55 students who had been retained in the first grade. The second group of 55 were students who were promoted to the second grade, but whose readiness for success in the second grade was considered doubtful by their first grade teachers. The students in each

group were matched on chronological age, mental age, and achievement. Instruments used to compare the two groups included the Kuhlmann-Anderson Intelligence Tests, the Metropolitan Achievement Test, the California Test of Personality for self-rating, sociometric questions for peer rating, and the Haggerty-Olson-Wiskman Behavior Rating Schedules for teacher rating.

Goodlad found that there were statistically significant differences in both social and personal adjustment between the repeating and non-repeating school children. Goodlad stated, "The evidence presented, together with evidence from other studies that repetition is not conducive to greater efforts or achievement and that it is associated with undesirable school attitudes and behavior, seriously questions nonpromotion as a valid educational practice" (p. 327).

Returning now to Jackson's criticisms of the Type I studies, it was Jackson's contention that the Design Type I studies were biased toward indicating that grade promotion has more benefits than grade retention because it compared retained students who were having difficulties with promoted students who were obviously having less difficulties, as evidenced by the fact that they were not retained. The overall results from the Design Type I studies indicated that promotion was more favorable than retention in regard to both

adjustment and achievement. In regard to the measures of adjustment, promotion was more positive than retention at a 67 to 37 ratio.

In the two hundred and eight analyses of achievement, three-fifths of the analyses used some measure of gains on achievement test scores. Two-fifths of the analyses used grades or achievement test scores relative to grade-level norms. Thus, in these analyses the retained students were being compared to the promoted students without a constant metric creating a bias in the results toward grade retention which is in the opposite direction of the inherent bias of comparing retained and promoted students.

The second type of design in Jackson's meta-analysis compared the outcomes of retained students before and after their year of retention. According to Jackson, "this design is biased towards indicating that pupils benefit from grade retention because of the lack of control for possible improvement resulting from causes other than the retention experience itself" (p. 623).

Considering the Design Type II data in the Coffield and Blommers study, the results of the achievement progress of retained students showed that:

(1) Failed pupils typically gain approximately only six months in educational progress during the repeat year and still fail to achieve the norm for the grade involved.

(2) Failed pupils typically gain approximately one year and three months in educational progress during the two years following failure and still fail to achieve the norm for the grade involved (p. 248).

While Jackson's contention that this study design is biased to show that students benefit from retention, Coffield and Blommer's results certainly did not show much benefit in achievement from the retention.

A study by Reinherz and Griffin sought to determine "the differentiating characteristics of children who are academically successful at the end of the retained year and those who are not" (1970, p. 214). Their sample group consisted of 57 boys in the first, second, and third grades who were repeating a grade for the first time. All 57 boys "were at least of normal intelligence as measured by scores on standardized group tests" (p. 214). These students' progress was measured on two criteria.

The first criterion was academic achievement which referred to "attainment of standards commensurate with grade level. Included in the achievement measure were grade point total, current reading level (as measured by standardized

reading tests) and whether the child earned bona fide promotion" (p. 214-215). Their study showed "satisfactory achievement at grade level or beyond was earned by 36 children at the end of the repeated year. The remaining 21 had either poor or fair achievement" (p. 216).

The second measure was on academic progress which referred to "a measure of the child's rate of growth in relation to his previous level. Included in the progress measure were improvements in grades and standardized reading test scores as well as improvement noted in teacher comment" (p. 215). The finding on this measure was "noted as 'much' for 38 children. Only 19 children made 'little' or 'some' progress" (p. 216).

Level of maturity was found to be significantly associated with making "satisfactory progress" in that "a large proportion of children characterized as 'immature' made 'satisfactory achievement' during the retained year compared to children with less evidence of immaturity ( $p < .05$ )" (p. 216). This supports the contention that there are children with normal potential who just need more time to develop.

According to Reinherz and Griffin, another significant association came from the study. They pointed out, "It is noteworthy that 84 percent of first graders made satisfactory achievement in the year of retention while more than 50

percent of second and third graders made 'fair' or 'poor' achievement" (p. 217).

Scott and Ames selected 27 students for their study of the effects of retention for students who were held back for the reason of immaturity only. They defined immaturity as either young in chronological age, or immaturity in behavior, or developmental age below the chronological age. The students included in the study had been retained as follows: "Five were retained in kindergarten, fourteen in first grade, three in second grade, three in third grade, one in fifth grade, and one in sixth grade" (Scott & Ames, 1969, p. 434).

To evaluate the effects of the repeat year, Scott and Ames used the following measures:

Children's final grades in June, 1966 (before they repeated) were compared to their mid-year grades in February 1967 (the repeat year).

Teachers were asked to fill out a questionnaire evaluating the pupils' attitudes and progress during their repeat year.

Parents were asked to fill out a questionnaire evaluating their children's attitudes toward school during the repeat year as compared with attitudes the preceding year (p. 435).

According to Scott and Ames, the retentions were academically successful pointing out that, "Academic performance, as measured by grades received, improved to a statistically significant degree for every one of the twenty-seven children who had to repeat a grade because of immaturity alone" (p. 438). Further, "striking improvement" was reported by the students' parents and their teachers rated all of the students as "average, high, or very high" in their school adjustment (p. 438).

With no comparison data with promoted students, the results overwhelmingly indicated gain rather than loss for retained students in both achievement and adjustment in Jackson's Type II design studies. However, it was Jackson's premise that,

Natural regeneration from a temporary decline in one's physical or emotional state, normal growth and maturation, or regression effects are likely to cause some increase in the measured academic achievement of low-scoring students in their personal or social adjustment over a period of time, whether the time is spent repeating a grade or progressing through the subsequent grade (p. 623).

The third design was the experimental one, where each pupil in a group of potential retainees was randomly assigned

to repeat a grade or to be promoted to the next one, and then a semester or more later the retained students were compared with their promoted counterparts. The statistically nonsignificant results favored retention at a 22 to 17 ratio, but the single statistically significant result favored promotion. Jackson pointed out that while this was the superior design, the forty analyses from these studies were not adequate for making generalizations about the effects of grade retention on students' achievement due to the lack of representative samples, the age of the studies, and the short-term nature of the studies. Jackson's conclusion was that "there is no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties." His recommendation was that further study be conducted utilizing the experimental design.

In 1981 McAfee agreed with Jackson's evaluation of the research, but he dismissed the possibility of experimental design research:

To determine whether or not retention is beneficial, all would agree that implementation of experimental designs would best allow us to answer the question. Unfortunately it seems that most school districts will be unwilling to adopt such a strategy because of the

political ramifications (p. 22).

Thus, his conclusion was that efforts must be made to improve the quality of non-experimental designs of research. In his own study on the effects of retention, McAfee utilized pre-testing and post-testing composite scores from the SRA Assessment Survey and divided the students into subgroups of retained students, promoted students in a compensatory education program, and regularly promoted students for his comparison. The results of his study suggested that "retention appears to be beneficial only in the elementary grades.

However, given the nature of the non-experimental study, there are caveats that limit the degree of certainty one can attach to the results" (1981).

Holmes (1983) found eight reports of studies where retained students were matched with promoted counterparts on the basis of standardized achievement test scores as measurements of the dependent variable achievement. After analyzing these studies, his conclusion was:

If, as is often the purported case today, retention of pupils is accomplished with the intention of improving the academic achievement of these pupils, the research does not seem to support this practice. It seems that retained pupils fall behind during the year that they are

retained and spend the rest of their academic careers in vain attempt to catch up (p. 4).

Referring to Jackson's contention of bias in favor of promoted students in matched student studies, Holmes and Matthews (1984) pointed out that while this was a valid conclusion sometimes, the inherent bias had not always been ignored in the research design. According to Holmes and Matthews:

When retained groups are selected from schools with more stringent retention policies than the policies in the schools from which the control groups were selected, his assumption need not hold. With some studies selecting control groups from age peers and some from grade peers (the latter may be biased in favor of retention), some selecting control groups from within the same school and some from without, and one of the studies employing an experimental design, some of the research biases may be compensated for in a meta-analysis (p. 227).

Thus, Holmes and Matthews began their search of the literature to identify potentially relevant studies. The reported studies that they included in their meta-analysis had to meet the following criteria:

- (a) presented the results of the original research of the effects on pupils of retention in the elementary or junior

high school grades, (b) contained sufficient data to allow for the calculation or estimation of an effect size, and (c) compared a group of retained pupils with a group of promoted pupils (1984, p. 228).

The 44 studies they included in their meta-analysis were conducted between 1929 and 1981, with the majority having been conducted between 1960 and 1975. A total of 11,132 students (6,924 promoted students and 4,208 retained students) were included in these studies. In all, 575 individual effect sizes were calculated.

One hundred forty-two of the measures were of variables defined as personal adjustment variables from a total of 21 studies. These variables included social adjustment, emotional adjustment, and behavior. All sub areas produced negative effect sizes. Only nine studies measured the effect of retention on the self-concepts of the retained students. With 34 effect sizes calculated, the promoted students outscored the retained students by .19 standard deviation units. Attitude toward school was also measured in eight of the studies producing 26 effect sizes. While the differences were not large, the difference that was measured indicated that retained students held school in less favor than promoted students.

Included in the Holmes and Matthews meta-analysis of personal adjustment variables was the often-quoted Goodlad study which was previously reviewed as part of the Jackson Type I design studies. However, it bears repeating that Goodlad found that there were statistically significant differences in both social and personal adjustment between the repeating and non-repeating school children.

Finlayson's study to measure the self-concepts of retained and non-retained students was included in the Holmes and Matthews meta-analysis. His study yielded results that were somewhat contradictory to Goodlad's. Finlayson's study was longitudinal over a two year period and measured the self-concepts of the students on four separate occasions. Finlayson began the first year of the study (October, 1973) with a sample group of 585 first grade students who had not been previously retained.

In the second year of the study, 75 of the students were grouped for comparison. Each group consisted of 25 students since that was the number of students who had been retained from the original 585 students. A random selection of 25 promoted students were grouped together and a group of 25 students who were considered borderline were grouped together. The students in the borderline group were selected

by teachers at the end of first grade because they "displayed the same characteristics (maturity, achievement, attitudes, behavior) as the nonpromoted pupils, but for various reasons they were promoted to the second grade. The borderline pupils were equated by 1) teacher judgment and 2) mental ability" (1977, p. 205).

The results of Finlayson's study showed that the self-concept scores of the borderline group and the promoted group dropped slightly, but not significantly, during the second year of the study, while the self-concept scores of the nonpromoted group continued to increase. On the final measurement (May, 1975), "the self-concept scores of the nonpromoted and promoted groups were virtually identical. The nonpromoted group had a mean score of 15.16, the promoted group 15.20" (p. 206). Finlayson's explanation for the results was that, pupils' self-concepts tend to become less positive as they mature in the primary grades. They internalize a more realistic self-image consonant with their capabilities and skills as they interact with their environment. This sharper focus of one's abilities will usually be realized more quickly by more intellectually advanced and mature children. The phenomenon may have developed in the promoted group of pupils to cause their self-concept scores to decrease while in the second

grade. Toward the end of the second year the borderline also decreased slightly, but not significantly, in self-concept (p. 206).

Returning to the Holmes and Matthews meta-analysis, the effect of retention on students' academic achievement was measured in 31 of the 44 studies with 367 effect sizes calculated. The results were that each of the sub areas (language arts, reading, mathematics, work study skills, and social studies) produced negative mean effect size values, indicating that nonpromotion had a negative effect on the students.

One such study of the effect of retention on students' academic achievement in the meta-analysis was conducted by Dobbs and Neville. They matched 30 pairs of children, 20 pairs of boys and 10 pairs of girls, on the following variables: " (a) race, (b) sex, (c) socio-economic level, (d) type of classroom assignment, (e) age, (f) mental ability, and (g) reading achievement" (1967, p. 472). According to the researchers, matching the students on these seven variables "imposed a high degree of control on the major variables relevant to achievement" (p. 472). All of the matched pairs of once retained first graders and never retained second graders were low socio-economic, Caucasian, and slow learners.

Dobbs and Neville, using the t-test for the data on the 30 matched pairs, showed "both the reading achievement gain and the arithmetic achievement gain of the promoted group to be significantly greater than the corresponding gains of the nonpromoted group" (p. 473). Further, their analysis of variance on the data of 24 of the matched pairs, whose achievement test scores were available the second year of the study, showed both the reading and arithmetic gains of the promoted group to be significantly greater than the nonpromoted group. Dobbs and Neville concluded about their study that, "since an attempt was made to control variables other than promotion which could have influenced achievement gain, strong support is provided for concluding that promotion led to the increased achievement gain of the promoted group" (p. 474).

Another study of the effect of retention on students' academic achievement was a long term study conducted by Abidin, Golladay, and Howerton. The samples were drawn from all regular sixth grade classrooms and included an experimental group of 85 students. Fifty-one of the students had been retained in first grade, while 34 of the students had been retained in the second grade. The control group was made up of 43 students who had never been retained, but scored below the 25th percentile on the Metropolitan Readiness Test

(p. 413).

Examination of school records indicated that the reasons for retention for the 85 students included immaturity, academic failure, and miscellaneous reasons such as absenteeism. According to the records, none of the students had been retained due to low ability. Further, "examination of the subject matter grades (reading, math, spelling) of the retained and promoted group for the first grade showed no significant difference" (p. 414).

Data was collected from each child's school records for the first five grades. The results of the comparison of achievement data "clearly suggest a deterioration in the retained group's academic achievement during the first six grades relative to the promoted group" (p. 414). A comparison of ability showed that,

whereas the ability of the retained group was significantly higher at the outset of first grade, by the time they reached the fourth grade their mean IQ was 7.7 points below the promoted group and by the sixth grade the mean IQ difference had increased to 11.2 IQ points (p. 414).

In Flunking Grades (1989) Holmes provided an update of the 1984 meta-analysis. In this 1986 meta-analysis study 536 achievement effect sizes were obtained from a total of

forty-seven individual studies. Once again the results indicated negative effects from nonpromotion. However, the negative effects of retention were not so great in the lower elementary grades as in the upper elementary grades. Because the overall effect from the study was somewhat less negative than in the earlier meta-analysis (Holmes and Matthews, 1984), Holmes attempted to pinpoint what was different in this study. Included in the 1986 were nineteen additional studies. Of these nineteen studies, a set of seven studies was separated as those reporting results favoring retention.

What appeared to make the results of these studies positive were the special services for nonpromoted students. A composite description of the retention plans of the positive studies showed:

Potential failures were identified early and were given special help. When the decision to retain was made, the parents were first consulted for permission. An individualized and detailed plan was prepared for remediation purposes. The children were not recycled through the same curriculum but were instead placed in special classes with low student-teacher ratios (Holmes, 1989, p. 28).

Shephard and Smith point out the lack of follow-up studies on retention stating,

in the research literature on retention there is little mention of long term consequences. In Holmes' review . . . , for example, only eighteen of sixty-three controlled studies provided any data three or more years past the retention year. None followed retained students into high school (1989, p. 34).

The literature does show a consistent association between retention and dropping out. Grissom and Shephard have reviewed the literature on dropping out and conducted their own large scale study to consider the effects of retention on dropping out in later school years. They point out that "many researchers who study the dropout problem have tended to treat grade retention as one of several measures of school achievement. . . " (1989, p. 44). Their study was predicated on the perspective that "retention is not synonymous with very low achievement, either in terms of who is selected for retention or its subsequent effect" (p. 44). Their study was analyses of three large-city data sets using causal modeling. They explain their findings and the limitation to their own study:

Analyses that adjust for achievement and various background variables suggest that there may indeed be a causal connection between retention and dropping out.

Statistical controls help to assure us that the apparent relationship between retention and dropping out is not merely a correlational artifact. The causal model is not, however, truly explanatory. It does not tell why students are more likely to drop out (p. 58).

Mary Lee Smith and Lorrie A. Shepard have surveyed the literature on retention, in addition to having conducted some of the most recent research. The focus of their research has been on kindergarten retention which is a recent phenomenon in the long history of retention practices. The premise behind this practice is to provide an extra year to mature or acquire readiness skills and prevent later stress and failure. It is intended as a preventative treatment before first grade, and as such is assumed to not have the stigma of grade retention.

Kindergarten retention generally comes in three forms: placement in developmental kindergarten before attending the traditional kindergarten class, transition rooms that function as junior first grades, and repeating the kindergarten year. There are far fewer studies on the effects of kindergarten retention as compared to the plethora of research on grade retention. The results of the majority of the studies showed no difference or benefits in achievement. Further, according to Shepard, the finding of no difference or no benefit held true whether the children were placed due to developmental

immaturity or based on pre-academic problems. Measures of self-concept or attitude, while rarely included in research studies, also showed no difference or negative effects from the extra-year placements (Shepard, 1989, p. 76).

A study conducted by May and Welch examined the relationship between students' early school retention and their later academic achievement. The students in the study had been retained early as a result of either preschool or kindergarten developmental testing. May and Welch explained,

The Gesell Institute suggested that as many as 50% of school problems could be prevented or remedied if all children were placed in the grade appropriate for developmental age. They also state that many school difficulties, including problems diagnosed as emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, minimal brain damage, and underachievement, are the result of children being asked to perform at levels for which they are not developmentally ready (1984, p. 381).

Essentially this developmental placement theory looks at the options for adding a year like the previously mentioned retention options for kindergarten age students.

For their study May and Welch selected 223 children who "represent all the children from grades 2 through 6 who were enrolled in a suburban homogeneous white middle class school

district's elementary school from the time of their Gesell kindergarten screening to the time of data collection for this study" (p. 382). Based on their screening scores for developmental age, some of the children in the study had been recommended to spend three years in school before attending the second grade. One group of 62 students were coded as "BAY" indicating that they had followed the developmental placement program and "bought a year" prior to second grade. The mean developmental age (DA) of the "BAY" group was 55.53. Another group of 59 students were coded as "OP" because they did not take the recommended extra year and were considered overplaced. The average DA for the "OP" group was 57.93. The third group was coded "TR". This group of 102 children had tested as developmentally mature, with an average DA of 59.84. They had followed the traditional school route.

The subsequent performances of these groups of students were compared on the "Gesell Developmental Test, 3rd grade New York State PEP Tests in reading and math, and the Stanford Achievement Test" (p. 381). In spite of the fact that the students "BAY" group were approximately a year older than the "OP" and "TR" groups, the "BAY" group had the lowest scores on all measures. The results of their study were contrary to what they had expected given the Gesell Institute's advocacy for developmental placement. May and Welch stated,

It appears that the extra year of school has not helped the BAY children's scores on these standard measures of school performance.

These measures are primarily academic and intellectual, and admittedly do not consider many of the social-emotional or motor components of development that the Gesell Institute values. However, if the students' academic performance is considered an important area, then providing students with the extra year to mature may not be the best way to improve it. This is particularly true when examining the data that showed that there were not any significant differences between the OP children and the BAY children on the standardized measures (p. 384).

May and Welch concluded that "there were not any demonstrable positive effects of buying a year on children's later academic achievement," but they did suggest also that further research needed to be conducted on the "effects of developmental placement on children's social-emotional growth" (p. 385).

Along the same lines, Sandoval and Fitzgerald conducted a study "to evaluate the long-term effects of repeating a grade or participating in a junior first grade" (1985, p. 164). The results of their study and their conclusions are not included in

what Shepard and Smith refer to as the majority of kindergarten studies as far as their results. The sample group was composed of students in a single high school in a Northern California community. Forty-one of the students had repeated a grade. Thirty-four of the students had attended a junior first grade program and 75 students were matched for the regularly promoted control group. The group sizes were reduced to 30, 32, and 75 respectively when special education students were removed from the sample.

The selection of students for the junior first grade was made by teachers and guidance personnel on the basis of four factors. They were children: "(a) with late in the year birthdays, (b) who are immature socially and in their work habits, and who are judged to be intellectually capable in spite of immaturity" (p. 166). A final factor was that parents had to agree to the placement in the junior first grade.

The groups were compared on freshman English and math grades, school district designed minimum competency testing, and academic progress. The results indicated that "the grade repeaters do worse than the other two groups" (p. 168). When the researchers studied the time of intervention, they found that "the later the retention in the students' school career, the poorer was their high school achievement" (p.169). Sandoval and Fitzgerald also surveyed the students in the study to

evaluate the differences in attitude toward nonpromotion held by the three groups. The students completed a questionnaire using a Likkert-type scale on the benefit or harm of retention. One-way analysis of variance indicated only one difference in the opinion between the groups. The control group perceived the social benefits less positively than the junior first grade and retaineer group. Sandoval and Fitzgerald concluded that the junior first grade program was successful academically and attitudinally. They stated that "either early intervention had the desired effects, or later grade retention had detrimental impacts on students, or both" (p. 170). Further, the researchers pointed out that the study could not determine if the students from the junior first grade were doing better than they would have done without the additional year since there was not a comparison group of equivalent students who had not attended the junior first grade (p. 170).

Shepard and Smith conducted a study to assess the effect of kindergarten retention on achievement and adjustment in the first grade. They matched 40 retained children from schools with high retention rates, with 40 control children from schools with low retention rates. The schools were matched on socioeconomic and achievement levels. The individual children were matched "on sex, birthdate, socioeconomic level, second language, and beginning

kindergarten readiness scores" (1987, p. 346). The students' achievement was tested using the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS). According to Shepard and Smith there was only one real difference in the scores. The children who repeated kindergarten scored higher on the reading subtest such that they "were one month ahead of where they would have been (the previous year) if they had been promoted to first grade instead of spending two years in kindergarten" (p. 351). The effect was reversed on the math subtest with the first graders scoring one month ahead of the retainee group in grade equivalent units. It should be noted that both groups scored well about the national norm in both reading and math,

In reading the retained group was at the 63rd percentile; the control group, who were younger and lower in academic readiness compared to other children in the district, was at the 56th percentile nationally. In math, the retained and control children were at the 78th and 81st percentiles, respectively (p. 352).

The researchers pointed out that despite their scores above the national average on the CTBS, the retained children and the matched controls were below average in the school district. (p. 352). In the final analysis of this study, Shepard and Smith state that the dominant finding in this study was of no differences between retained and nonretained groups and thus

the belief that extra-year programs will give at-risk children a boost was not supported by the research (p. 357).

Shepard and Smith have also researched and the studied the issue of being the youngest in the primary grade level. The standard perception is that being the youngest in grade is a disadvantage to achievement. Shepard and Smith point out that the "'age effect' literature verifies that children who are youngest in their first grade class are at a slight disadvantage" (p. 80). They go on to point out the common sense understanding that "this is hardly surprising since an 11-month period of growth and development is a significant portion of a lifetime for six-year-olds" (p. 80). In their study of youngness as a disadvantage in achievement, Shepard and Smith found that this trend "seemed to come almost entirely from the children who were below the 25th percentile of their respective age groups" (1986, p. 79). Their conclusion was that it was the combination of low ability and youngness the caused the disadvantage in achievement compared to classmates who were older. They also found that the difference between youngest and oldest children "is smaller than popularly believed, only about 7 or 8 percentile points on achievement tests" (p. 80).

Additionally, Shepard and Smith conducted a study with kindergarten teachers to determine if they consider such

factors as age when considering retention for student. They found that teachers are more willing to hold back a younger child, but not to hold back an older child with equally deficient skills. Their conclusion was that "if teachers are more willing to hold back younger children, retention data cannot be used to evaluate the effect of youngness" (p. 79).

In regard to the consideration of other factors in recommending retention for students, H. Wayne Light designed his Retention Scale (LRS) (Light, 1977) as an instrument to assist educators in thinking about children who were being considered for retention. The scale includes 19 factors to be rated that "best describes the student's situation" as follows:

School Attendance, Intelligence, Present Level of Academic Achievement, Physical Size, Student's Age, Sex of Student, Siblings, Previous Retention, History of Learning Disabilities, Student's Attitude about Possible Retention, Parent's School Participation, Motivation to Complete School Tasks, History of Delinquency, Knowledge of English Language, Present Grade Placement, Transiency, Emotional Problems, Experiential Background, and Immature Behavior (Light, 1977).

Theoretically, such an instrument should be helpful in determining which students would benefit from retention.

Sandoval conducted a study (1980) with 123 candidates for first grade retention. The results of his study "indicated that Light's total score is not sufficiently reliable and has little concurrent validity for making retention decisions" (p. 442). Sandoval further stated that teachers found that the weighted descriptors for some of the factors "did not suitably describe many children" (p. 445). While Sandoval did not find the scale to "meet the conventional standards for a psychometric device intended for use in schools," he did perceive that the scale "may have utility as a counseling aid" (p. 445).

However, Vasa, Wendel, and Steckelberg (1984) rejected the premise of using Light's Retention Scale as a counseling aid. In their examination of the content validity of the scale, they found that "several criteria were not typically considered in retention decisions and the remaining criteria varied widely in their use" (p. 447) from their survey of "325 school personnel from 200 randomly selected schools in four midwestern states" (p. 448). Therefore, Vasa, Wendel, and Steckelberg concluded that "the use of the LRS as a nonpsychometric counseling tool would not seem justified without further evidence of the content validity of the items and their relative weights in making retention decisions" (p. 448).

As previously referred to, the Deborah Byrnes' study stands out in the literature as "the only study we know of in the literature where retained children are interviewed" (Shepard and Smith, 1985, p. 108). Byrnes interviewed 71 children in grades 1, 3, and 6 during their year of retention. At the sixth grade level, four girls and six boys were interviewed. From the third grade, interviews were conducted with six girls and three boys. The majority of children who were interviewed, 13 girls and 39 boys, were repeating the first grade. The study was focused on younger students because "they are the most likely to be retained and particularly because parents and teachers often think retention is less socially stigmatizing for younger children" (1989, p. 114).

Byrnes' conclusions from the study were that children do feel anxious about the reactions from others about their failure at school. Generally, children look upon retention as a punishment. Despite what may be the best intentions of their teachers, "retained children perceive retention as a punishment and a stigma, not as a positive event designed to help them" (Byrnes, 1989, p. 130).

The research literature has identified a number of variables which have been found to be correlated with grade retention. A typical profile of the child at high risk of being retained would include:

1. Males (various studies show ratios of 2 to 1 up to 9 to 1 over females)
2. Significantly lower academic achievement
3. Somewhat lower IQ (5 to 10 points)
4. Parents unwilling or unable to intercede in the child's behalf - i.e. to contest the retention
5. Minority status
6. Low socioeconomic status
7. Working mother
8. Poor early readiness skills
9. July to December birthdate
10. Late maturation (physical, mental, social or emotional)
11. High activity level

(Abidin, Galladay, and Howerton, 1971, p. 411, Donofrio, 1977, p. 351, Walker, 1984, p. 3).

A large research project on the factors which place students at risk was conducted by Frymier and Gasneder (1989). They collected data on 45 factors that are related to being at risk for failure in school and/or life. Their sample group included 22,018 students. While they collected vast amounts of information in identifying at-risk factors including home environment, abuse, drug usage, and so on, what is most important in reference to this study is that "retention in grade

also emerged as an issue" (p. 46). Frymier and Gasneder made a very significant point when considering retention as a factor related to being at risk:

Of the factors identified in previous research contributing to at-riskness, retention is the only one that imposed by the school. Retention is something that schools do to students rather than something that happens as a function of where they live, what their parents are like, or how they feel about themselves (p. 91).

The study also revealed that the practice of retention continues to be prevalent given that "four out of ten teachers reported that they regularly retained students in grade, and almost half thought that retention was effective" (p. 90). It is not only teachers who perpetuate the practice of retention. The educational leaders of the schools are also actively continuing the practice of retention. The study indicated, "almost three-fourths (71%) of the principals said that they regularly retained students in grade, but only 26% thought that retention was effective" (p. 90).

The review of the literature nearly always points to retention as being less than effective. Why then does this educational practice continue? Rose, Medway, Cantrell, and Marus expressed this opinion:

Taken as a whole, the experimental data collected over the past 70 years fail to indicate any significant benefits of grade retention for the majority of students with academic or adjustment problems. This conclusion is not new (Koons, 1977, p. 702), but the message has been widely ignored. In view of this evidence why are so many children retained, and why are many more children who ultimately get promoted considered for retention? In our opinion, the answer may not lie so much in the unfamiliarity of school administrators, teachers, school psychologists, and parents with the research evidence, but with the fact that nearly all retained children show some progress in the repeated year. The casual observer of the children's progress is unable to compare this growth with those gains that might have been found had the children been promoted (p. 206).

In conclusion, this review of the retention literature showed the following:

- Studies have been conducted for many years.
- Some of the studies have compared the achievement of nonpromoted students with promoted students.
- Some of the studies have compared the achievement of nonpromoted students before and after retention.

- Some of the researchers made specific reference to not including verified special education students in their studies, while other researchers did not indicate if they had or had not included special education students.

- A few separate studies have been conducted to determine the effects of an additional "year to grow" at the early primary level.

- The research has included some attention to the social and emotional effects of retention.

- The studies have very rarely focused on the individual experience of retention.

- The studies have often been flawed due to the lack of controlled studies and/or the research methods utilized.

- The study results most often indicate little or no benefits in achievement by retaining students.

- The study results most often indicate little or no social and emotional benefits for retained students, and some studies indicate that it is harmful to self-concept.

- The research indicates that there is an increased potential for students to later drop out of school if they have been retained.

- The research indicates that retention is generally perceived by school staff and parents as an effective strategy for remediation for low achievement and immaturity.

- The review of the literature revealed a disparity between a best practice and actual practice, yet there continues to be widespread use of retention.

- There is little indication that school districts are conducting follow-up data collection to delineate the long-term effects of retention for their own students.

The task was now to gather this type of information and present it in a manner that would provide both quantitative data and descriptions of students' and parents' attitudes and feelings.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes and feelings of individual students and their parents about retention. In order to gain both past and present perspectives on the effects of retention, only students who were retained a minimum of four years previous to the year that this study was designed were interviewed. This time frame also created the a study group to include students at the elementary level, the middle level, and the high school level.

A quantitative research format provides one means of exploring and understanding the feelings of individuals. A qualitative format provides another avenue of exploration and understanding. Patton described the differences in the two types of data collection:

Quantitative measures are succinct, parsimonious, and easily aggregated for analysis; quantitative data are systematic, standardized, and easily presented in a short space. By contrast, the qualitative findings are longer, more detailed, and variable in content; analysis is

difficult because responses are neither systematic nor standardized (p. 24).

Open-ended questions establish the framework of the qualitative inquiry. Patton points out that "the open-ended responses permit one to understand the world as seen by the respondents" (p. 24).

Qualitative research design begins with the concept that there are multiple realities in any given situation and it is the business of the researcher to report these realities. Direct quotations from interviewees provide "the raw data in qualitative inquiry, revealing the respondents' depth of emotion, the ways they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions" (Patton, 1990, p. 24). Qualitative research is more concerned with understanding the social phenomenon from the participants' perspectives. As Creswell (1994) points out, "the only reality is that constructed by the individuals involved in the research situation" (p. 11).

### The Design

The genesis of the study came from the researcher's awareness that a growing number of students were being recommended for retention in the researcher's school district. Having read some literature on the effects of retention, the

researcher was concerned that this "accepted educational practice" was increasing. The researcher began attending the meetings where retention recommendations were being discussed by student assistance teams. The common thread was that the teachers seemed to be asking themselves "How can I send a child on to the next grade level when the child doesn't have the skills to meet the requirements of that grade?" For each child the lack of skills might focus on academics, particularly reading, behavior, work/study habits, or social development, but as each teacher talked, his or her recommendation to hold the child back for a year seemed rational, caring, and in the child's best interest.

Meanwhile, the researcher was reviewing the literature on retention which revealed over a hundred studies on the subsequent effects of this educational practice. In Chapter II the wealth of research on the effects of retention was indicated. A number of the studies were described with the objective of delineating the variety in the types and focuses of the studies that had been previously conducted, as well as spotlighting the limited attention given to the attitudes of students and parents. Unique in the research was Deborah Byrnes' 1985 study, "Attitudes of Students, Parents, and Educators toward Repeating a Grade." This study was multifaceted, but of greatest interest to the researcher was the

character sketches of retained children. Byrnes indicated that, "through these short vignettes it is hoped that a view of young non-promoted children may be gained that goes beyond percentages and numbers." These vignettes painted a tapestry of individual pictures of how children were dealing with their retentions during the repeat year.

From these children's stories came the researcher's desire to know what happened then? Once the year of retention was done, the students would move on. How would they feel a few years later? What kinds of attitudes and feelings would they have about their retentions when they were older and had experienced more of school? The concept for the study came from these questions.

Students would be interviewed utilizing the same questions that had been in Byrnes' study. While the Byrnes' study had included a parent questionnaire, it was sent to a random sampling of parents who may or may not have experienced the retention of their child. In this follow-up study on attitudes and feelings about retention, parents of retained students would also be interviewed for their attitudes on retention, specifically on the retention of their child.

This study was designed to provide the reader with a different perspective from those in previous research efforts

by letting students and parents who had experienced retention speak for themselves. The appropriate beginning for this study was a qualitative process of phenomenological inquiry, which focuses on the question: "What is the structure and essence of this experience for these people?" (Patton, 1990, p. 69). The initial focus was exploring and presenting the individual cases, thus "the researcher's task is to gather the data and present them in such a manner that 'the informants speak for themselves'" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 21).

Then school records were studied to provide a context from which to better understand the perspectives of the individual students and parents. For the presentation of this data, the researcher's responsibility is "to present an accurate description of what is being studied, though not necessarily all of the data that have been studied (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 22). In conjunction with the presentation of the data, interpretive comments from the researcher were included in the descriptive narratives.

### The Subjects

The study subjects were drawn from students who were retained between the 1984-85 and the 1989-90 school years. During that time period, 88 students were retained at the elementary level in the school district. There were no

minority students in this study because there were no minority students enrolled in the school district during the selected time period.

Thirty-six students were retained at the kindergarten level; 21 in first grade; 16 in second grade; 13 in third grade; one in fourth grade; and one in fifth grade. By the spring of 1994 when this study was being formulated, 48 of these students were still enrolled in the school district.

The goal was to interview as many of these forty-eight students who were still enrolled in the school district as were willing to participate. Likewise, all of the parents who were willing to participate would be interviewed. By January of 1995 when the interview process began, the group had been reduced to 40 students.

From the group of 40 students, eight indicated that they did not want to participate. The parents of ten students would not give their permission. Three of these students would have participated in the study if their parents had agreed. Neither the students nor the parents were called upon to explain their decision not to participate, but one parent said she "didn't want her child to lose any study time." A total of 22 students were interviewed. The mothers of 10 students, and both parents of one student were also interviewed. When parents volunteered a reason for not participating themselves, they

either indicated difficulty in setting up a time with their schedules or just a general lack of time to participate.

All of the students who were interviewed experienced retention during early elementary years. Three students were retained in the third grade; six in the second grade; seven in the first grade, and six students in kindergarten.

#### Data Collection

Data was collected during the second semester of the 1994-95 school year. Since the students in the study ranged from fifth graders to high school students, it was necessary to be flexible in establishing times and places for the interviews. Interviews that were conducted during school hours were held in each school's Guidance Office.

Initial telephone contacts were begun in January and personal contacts were started in February at parent/teacher conferences and some parents signed their permission at that time, while others indicated that they did not want to participate, nor did they wish for their children to participate. Parents who were not available at these conferences were initially contacted by telephone. Some of the parents asked to have the permission forms mailed to them and others indicated that they should be sent home with their children. A personal visit was made with each student before the interview was

scheduled. Each interview was conducted at a time and place that was agreed to by the student or parent. Interviews were conducted as follows:

<u>March</u>	<u>April</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>June</u>
Student F	Student C	Student A	Parent R
Parent F	Student D	Parent A	
Student K	Parent D	Student B	
Student N	Student E	Parent B	
Parent O	Student L	Student G	
Parent P	Student M	Parent G	
Student T	Parent M	Student H	
Student U	Student O	Student I	
	Student P	Parent I	
		Student J	
		Student S	
		Student Q	
		Parent Q	
		Student R	
		Student V	

To create a more relaxed atmosphere and lessen stress for the participant, the researcher began each interview with some general conversation about school, the student or parent, and the researcher before the tape recorder was turned on. The interviews were structured around the sub-questions listed previously, but other clarifying questions and prompts were utilized as needed. For example, if the participant did not seem to understand what was being asked, the researcher reworded the question. The researcher sometimes used phrases like "so you felt. . ." or "you thought. . .", or would

repeat back the participant's exact words to clarify what had been said.

Each interview was taped and each tape was transcribed verbatim and included in Appendix A. Follow-up phone calls were made as needed for additional or clarifying information. Students' school records, which included grades, standardized test scores, teachers' comments, attendance records, participation in special programs, and demographic data were gathered and used in conjunction with the information from the interview after the interview had been conducted.

#### Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure involved two general steps. The first step was the analysis of information for each student in the study from the transcribed tape, observations, and school records. If the student's parent had participated in the study, that data was incorporated with the student's data. The data was presented in a descriptive narrative followed by an analysis of the student's/parent's experience of retention. The second step was to gather several key elements of the information about and from the participants and put this data in a matrix, summarized on Tables 1 and 2, as a starting point for the presentation of the study findings.

### Verification of the Data

According to Patton (1990), "validity in qualitative methods, . . . hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork" (p. 14). Thus, the ability to interview and document objectively and thoroughly the feelings and attitudes of the students and parents establishes the validity of study.

The verbatim transcription of the interviews was done by an individual not associated with the students and parents in the study. While employed by the school system, this person works in the school business office and as such, has contact with school personnel only. Nor did this individual have access to the full names of the participants. Once each interview was transcribed, this individual returned the erased tape and the printed copy of the interview to the researcher. The researcher was able to add to the validity by the collection of data from a variety of sources. Assistance in the analysis of data was provided by a recently graduated doctoral student.

### Ethical Considerations

To protect both the students and the educators interviewed, no real names were used in this study. Parental consent was obtained for each student who participated. Each student and parent participant signed an appropriate form

indicating agreement to participate in the study. Samples of these forms are included in Appendix B with the research protocol submitted to the University of Nebraska Institutional Review Board.