

**Up-Dated Research and Reflections about Retention: A Questionable
Educational Practice that Continues to Flourish
Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

In November, 2002 I devoted my website article to a review of retention, a frequently applied educational practice. I emphasized that although retention is used in schools throughout the United States, research indicates that it is an ineffective strategy, often leading to a negative outcome for those students who have been retained. After the article appeared, many parents and educators wrote to me. Interestingly, most were unaware of the large body of research that existed about this topic. Several educators reported that their school regularly retained students, but they often questioned the efficacy of doing so; they noted both the lack of academic progress shown by retained students as well as the social stigma that many of these students experienced from classmates. Some parents wrote to say that their child's school had recommended retention, but now that they knew about the retention research, they had serious reservations about accepting this course of action and wanted to explore other strategies to help their children.

Several parents and educators who wrote described positive results for their children or students who had been retained. I noticed that positive outcomes seemed most associated with children who had been retained at an early age such as kindergarten or first grade or when they transferred schools. For example, one parent said that retention had been of benefit to her son, although she added that he transferred to a different school the year he was retained; to avoid possible embarrassment he informed his friends that his new school was more demanding academically than the school he had previously attended and that the fifth grade work he was doing in his new school was similar to sixth-grade requirements at the school he had left. This mother noted that if her son had not transferred to a new school, she did not think that she and her husband would have approved his being retained.

Given the interest in the theme of retention and the start of a new school year for millions of children and adolescents, I thought it was an opportune time to up-date my

earlier article. In part, my motivation to do so is based on my awareness that during the upcoming school year thousands of parents and educators will consider the option of retaining children. In making a decision they should be aware of the research findings pertaining to retention as well as possible alternatives to this intervention for struggling students. Readers may wish to review my 2002 article for some background material about retention as well as “social promotion” (i.e., promoting students even when they have not met basic academic requirements).

In my 2002 article I frequently referenced the writings of Dr. Shane Jimerson, a school psychologist on the faculty of the University of California at Santa Barbara, who I believe is one of the foremost experts about the topic of retention. A few months ago, Jimerson and five colleagues (Sarah Fletcher and Kelly Graydon from the University of California at Santa Barbara, and Britton Schnurr, Amanda Nickerson, and Deborah Kundert from the University of Albany, State University of New York) published a very thoughtful article in the journal *Psychology in the Schools*, which continues to raise serious reservations about the efficacy of retaining students.

Their article, titled “Beyond Grade Retention and Social Promotion: Promoting the Social and Academic Competence of Students,” quotes a report from the Educational Research Service that notes, “Perhaps no topic in public education suffers from a greater divide between the views of researchers and the views of practitioners and the public. The existing research overwhelming points to negative effects of retention.”

A paradox is highlighted, namely that more children have been “left behind” since the “No Child Left Behind” legislation was passed than before NCLB existed. Jimerson (although the article was co-authored with the five colleagues mentioned above, for simplicity I will use only Jimerson’s name when referring to the article) takes a very strong position about retention. He argues, “Research examining the efficacy of grade retention suggests that it is not likely to be effective in remediating academic failure and/or behavioral difficulties; rather, it is essential to focus on instructional strategies and specific interventions to facilitate the education of children at risk for academic failure.”

It is important to point out that Jimerson includes both academic and behavioral issues when considering the impact of retention. Retained students, compared with

struggling students who were not retained, demonstrated a lack of achievement in school. The few studies that indicated positive achievement effects also found that the benefits diminished over time and disappeared in the later grades. In terms of behavioral measures, the retained students compared with a matched control group who were not left back were found to have “poorer social adjustment, more negative attitudes toward school, less frequent attendance, and more problem behaviors.”

The data examining the long-term impact associated with grade retention raise serious questions about the practice of having students repeat a grade. Jimerson argues, “While there are few studies examining the efficacy of early grade retention that extend through high school, longitudinal studies that do exist have consistently demonstrated that retained students are more likely to drop out than matched comparison groups of equally low-achieving, but socially promoted, peers.” In one study, retained students “had lower levels of academic adjustment (i.e., a combination of achievement, behavior, and attendance) at the end of Grade 11, were more likely to drop out of high school by age 19, were less likely to receive a diploma by age 20, were less likely to be enrolled in a postsecondary education program, received lower education/employment-status ratings, and were paid less per hour. . . . Results from other longitudinal samples have yielded similar findings, suggesting poorer long-term outcomes for retained students relative to a comparison group of low-achieving, but promoted students.”

While one may argue that retention did not “cause” all of these negative outcomes, it seems evident that retention did not serve as an effective educational intervention for at-risk students. If anything, as mentioned above, there are data to suggest retention is associated with poor outcome. The question may be raised, “What factors contribute to these research findings?” Jimerson attempts to answer this question within a “transactional-ecological model that emphasizes early influences, multiple contexts, and developmental processes in considering both the short- and long-term developmental trajectories of retained students.”

Jimerson explains, “From this perspective, current adaptation is influenced by the individual’s past and current circumstances, ecological contexts, and previous developmental history. Therefore, considering the transactional-ecological model of

development should not be construed as a single event causing all subsequent negative events but rather as an outcome associated with a disadvantaged developmental history exacerbated by an ineffective intervention. Without appropriate support and assistance, children experiencing grade retention are likely to continue upon developmental pathways characterized by low-achievement, poor adjustment, and further academic failure. This helps to understand why grade retention is typically an ineffective and potentially harmful intervention, as it does not in and of itself address the needs of these low-achieving and/or misbehaving students.”

As I contended in my 2002 article, while retention is a questionable practice, so too is social promotion. It makes little sense to promote students who are lacking certain academic, cognitive, or emotional skills and expect them to succeed at the next grade level. What does make sense is to promote them, but offer interventions that actively and directly address their areas of difficulty. This point parallels that of Jimerson’s when he observes, “Given the heterogeneous characteristics among retained students and the assortment of needs, educational professionals have a responsibility to delineate specific evidence-based intervention strategies that will enhance the achievement and adjustment of individual students. Thus, there should be an emphasis on early intervention designed to promote the social and academic competence of students.”

There are realistic, research-based alternatives to retention and social promotion that Jimerson identifies in his article. I should like to review them briefly to highlight that effective alternatives to retention do exist. A more in-depth discussion of the issues related to retention may be found by going to the following link, which has several of Jimerson’s excellent articles posted: www.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention.

The following are intervention programs that directly address the academic and behavioral issues of at-risk students, thereby providing choices other than retention and social promotion for these students:

Preschool Intervention Programs. These programs strengthen basic skills necessary for subsequent academic success. “Head Start and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) are two examples of early childhood intervention programs that provide comprehensive educational and family support services to children from economically

disadvantaged families to increase school readiness. . . . By enhancing skills for academic success through preschool programs, retention may be prevented.”

Comprehensive Programs to Promote Social and Academic Development. I have long believed that children will be more prepared to master academic demands when educators also focus on strengthening their social/emotional skills, including problem solving, decision making, and learning to resolve conflicts. Programs such as Dr. Myrna Shure’s “I Can Problem Solve” offer opportunities to teach children ways of thinking and behaving more effectively. This leads to success in all aspects of school and lessens the probability of children being left back.

Summer School and After School Programs. Jimerson observes that many students may benefit from additional instructional opportunities that can be scheduled during the summer or after school hours. He cites numerous studies that demonstrate the positive impact of such programs, especially when compared with the negative outcome of retaining students.

Looping and Multi-Age Classrooms. This intervention takes into consideration the individual learning differences that exist among students and the greater flexibility that is provided by the structure of looping and multi-age classrooms. In looping classrooms, students spend two or more years with the same teacher, which permits the teacher to provide instruction that more effectively meets the needs of each student as well as enhancing their strengths or “islands of competence.” As the name implies, multi-age classrooms include students of different ages and varying abilities being placed together, permitting each student to move ahead at his or her own pace. The structure of the classroom also allows students to learn from one another. Jimerson states that “other countries that have significantly lower retention rates in comparison to the United States often use looping.”

School-Based Mental Health Programs. Students demonstrating mental health and behavioral difficulties often lag behind their classmates academically. These difficulties frequently prompt recommendations for retention. To address this problem, some schools have implemented school-based mental health programs to meet the mental health needs of students in a more efficient manner. Preliminary research data suggest

that such programs are “promising interventions for promoting social and emotional competence” and thus, lessening retention.

Parent Involvement. Studies demonstrate that parent involvement and collaboration with teachers are associated with greater accomplishment among students. Jimerson writes, “Policy changes that encourage parent involvement, increasing understanding among administrators, teachers, and staff, and inviting parents’ involvement in all aspects of their children’s education are proactive strategies that may make parent involvement more feasible.”

Early Reading Programs. Reading is an essential skill for almost all learning. Children who have difficulty mastering this skill are at risk to lag behind their classmates, to become discouraged, and to experience feelings of hopelessness. Many are likely to become the students recommended for retention. It is important to address vigorously this downward spiral by providing “structured early reading programs that have been demonstrated to promote student success.” Retaining students who struggle with reading without offering the intensive and systematic reading assistance they require will not remediate the problem; instead it may exacerbate their feelings of frustration and inadequacy.

Effective Instructional Strategies and Assessment. Jimerson notes, “There are numerous teaching techniques which can be easily implemented within existing classroom structures to increase student performance.” He specifically mentions direct instruction, Curriculum-Based Measurement, cooperative learning, and the use of mnemonic strategies, all of which have been demonstrated to enhance student performance.

Behavior and Cognitive Behavior Modification Strategies. These are strategies applied to reduce disruptive behavior while increasing positive classroom behaviors. Obviously, when a student’s behavior improves, he or she is better equipped to learn and less likely to fall behind and be retained.

After identifying these different intervention activities, Jimerson advances an important position. “It is essential to accept the responsibility of facilitating the progress of students who do not meet school/district/state standards. Children do not arbitrarily

fail to meet academic standards; rather, their lack of academic success typically reflects the failure of adults to provide appropriate support and to use scaffolding to facilitate their early development and academic trajectories. . . . It is essential to move beyond the question ‘To retain or promote?’ and prudent to focus on ‘how to promote the social and academic competence of students.’”

As I read Jimerson’s position, I could not help thinking about the view I advanced in my 2002 article. At that time I wrote, “I appreciate that the task of identifying and providing students with interventions that will nurture their success is not always easy to achieve and in terms of dollars can be costly. However, as we identify the obstacles that prohibit us from delivering the most effective services we should keep in mind the possible consequences if we neglect to provide these services, namely, children who fail in school, who drop out emotionally and physically, whose dreams and aspirations are eclipsed by a sense of hopelessness, and whose futures become less promising and more bleak. Given these possible consequences, I believe that the sensible choice is to devote our time, energy, and resources to minimize those obstacles that hamper the success of any child to succeed in school regardless of how daunting these obstacles may appear. As we engage in this task, we will be wise to question and avoid educational practices that research suggests may actually do more harm than good.”

I feel even more strongly about this view than I did four years ago, bolstered not only by ongoing research that continues to demonstrate the negative impact of retention, but also by findings that identify interventions that hold much promise for helping at-risk students succeed in school. I hope that this research will be given serious consideration whenever educators and parents struggle with the question of whether or not to retain a particular student.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>