School Retention: A Common Practice but Is It Effective?

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"Should my child be retained in school?"

"Is retention beneficial?"

"Can retention be harmful?"

I am often asked these kinds of questions, especially given my work with students who demonstrate learning and behavioral problems. I am not surprised these questions arise since retention is a common educational practice. However, the frequency of a practice should not be confused with its effectiveness. Some interventions may appear sensible and logical. Consequently, they become increasingly accepted and are implemented even in the absence of data supporting their efficacy.

A major reason cited for the use of retention is that the child is immature and lagging significantly behind his or her peers academically and/or socially. A proposed remedy is for the child to repeat the same grade and be exposed for a second year to the same curriculum, thereby providing the child with an opportunity to mature and experience success (albeit with classmates who are at least a year younger). As we shall see, this rationale contains a major flaw, namely, the assumption that these children simply need an extra year to "catch up" with their peer group. Many of these youngsters require intensive interventions to address their learning and social difficulties that will not be solved by repeating the same material in the same way once or even twice or three times.

The use of retention has also gained momentum in response to well-founded reservations about "social promotion," a policy for promoting students even when they have failed academically. Last year, a school administrator said at one of my workshops, "It makes no sense to promote students who have failed to learn. It will only lead to more failure down the road. Why promote someone who hasn't met requirements for promotion?"

I agreed with him to some extent, but added that if a child is failing in school we must ask what we can do differently rather than requiring the student to repeat a grade. I am not an advocate of social promotion, but I also have serious questions about retention.

I believe that we must identify and apply solutions other than retention and social promotion when students are having significant struggles in school. If we focus only on social promotion or retention, we are likely to lose an increasing number of students to school failure and/or dropout.

Two recent papers support my reservations about retention. Both were authored by Shane Jimerson, Gabrielle Anderson, and Angela Whipple at the University of California, Santa Barbara. One article, "Winning the Battle and Losing the War: Examining the Relation between Grade Retention and Dropping Out of High School," appeared in the journal Psychology in the Schools (Volume 39, #4, 2002), while the other article, "Grade Retention: Achievement and Mental Health Outcomes," was published by the National Association of School Psychologists. The articles summarize research undertaken during the past century about the impact of retention.

As these authors note, retention is frequently used in the United States. It is estimated that 2.4 million students are retained every year and that the retention rate has been on the rise for the past 25 years. There are also some noteworthy individual differences. More boys are retained than girls and more minority students are retained than Caucasian students. Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple write, "Retained students are more likely to display aggressiveness, to have a history of suspension or expulsion, to act out in the classroom, or display behaviors associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Conduct Disorder. Children who are learning disabled are also more likely to be retained."

They found that comparisons of both academic achievement (e.g., reading and math) as well as social emotional adjustment (e.g., peer relationships, behavior problems, and self-esteem) between retained and matched comparison students demonstrated the "negative effects of retention across all achievement and socio-emotional adjustment."

They continue, "Research fails to find significant differences between groups of students retained early (kindergarten through third grade) or later (fourth through eighth grades). What is most important is that, across studies, retention at any grade level is associated with later high school dropout, as well as other deleterious long-term effects." These long-term effects included lower levels of academic achievement in the eleventh grade and a greater vulnerability to stress and diminished self-esteem. In addition, they

cite studies that indicate that retention was perceived by children to be one of the most stressful events that they could experience.

Emphasizing their reservations about retention, Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple contend that "retention was found to be one of the most powerful predictors of high school dropout." They also question the commonly held belief that retention in kindergarten or first grade is less adverse than retention occurring in later grades. They quote a researcher who summarized the literature in this area: "Retention in kindergarten or first grade does not produce long-lasting academic gains, but rather increases the likelihood that the student will become a high school dropout."

As with any research findings, there are always exceptions to the rule. I have encountered some children and adults who were retained and believe that it was helpful. However, most of the individuals with whom I have spoken have only negative memories of being retained. One 10-year-old boy who was retained after the first grade tearfully said, "My friends are all in fifth grade but I'm in fourth. I hated being left back. It didn't help. Even the fourth graders read better than me."

Many years ago parents consulted me about their seven-year-old son. He had been diagnosed with both learning and attentional problems. Given his lack of progress in the second grade, the school recommended that he be retained. As the parents informed me of this recommendation, the mother began to cry. She said, "My son is a lot like I was at his age. I was left back in the third grade and it made me feel even more stupid. I will never forget the beginning of the next school year when my friends moved up to fourth grade but I stayed in third. I felt embarrassed and very stupid. I wish I could say that repeating the grade helped me to learn better. Maybe for the first few months but soon I was behind the rest of the class again. It wasn't until I began to get the kind of help I needed when I was in high school that I was able to keep up."

This mother, with the support of her husband, rejected the recommendation of retention, believing instead that the solution did not reside in her son needing an extra year to mature, but rather needing intensive help with his reading difficulties. I was impressed with the willingness of the school to work cooperatively with the parents in considering and providing services without retaining him. Although this child required extensive tutorial services throughout high school and college, he graduated from college.

When he was in high school, his mother poignantly said to me, "He was spared the pain I experienced when I was retained."

I realize that these are just two examples of the negative impact of retention. However, they are representative of many I have heard during my career. If research indicates that retention is a questionable practice, why is it that many well-meaning educators and other professionals advocate its use? Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple offer an interesting commentary. "Typically, the test scores of students who are retained in the primary grades may increase for a couple of years and then decline below those of their equally low-achieving but socially promoted peers. The temporary benefits of retention are deceptive, as teachers do not usually follow student progress beyond a few years."

In essence, a comprehensive review of the research literature suggests strongly that retention not only impacts negatively on the academic progress of at-risk students but also on their self-image and their motivation. Dropping out of school may be understood as a sign that they have lost hope, believing that there are no actions they can take that will improve their situation. A sense of "learned helplessness" dominates their thinking and behavior.

However, promoting students who are academically and/or emotionally behind their peers without introducing the appropriate support is also counterproductive (although interestingly, the research suggests that at-risk students who are promoted to the next grade fare better than comparable students who are retained). If both retention and social promotion are fraught with major drawbacks, then what stance should be taken with at-risk students? I believe there are several guidelines based on sensible (dare I say commonsense?) educational practices that can direct us.

1. When retention is being considered for a student, individuals making the decision should be aware of the many studies that have been conducted that not only fail to demonstrate the benefits of retention, but also, highlight the adverse effects.

2. If a student is struggling academically and/or socially/emotionally, a comprehensive evaluation should be conducted in an attempt to identify both the student's strengths (or what I term "islands of competence") and deficits. As my friend Dr. Mel Levine has so eloquently described in his book "A Mind at a Time," the process

of learning different academic content as well as learning to interact effectively with others involves a variety of skills. We must understand each student's unique learning profile before we propose treatment strategies.

3. Once a student's learning and emotional strengths and vulnerabilities have been identified, the next step is to design and implement an appropriate intervention program with clearly stated goals and ways to measure these goals. This process is enhanced when there is close cooperation and trust between parents and school personnel and when students are not relegated to the sidelines as bystanders but rather are involved as active participants in their own education. We must help students to understand their strengths and weaknesses and the rationale behind any intervention approach. This process of "demystification" lessens the probability that at-risk students will perceive themselves as dumb or stupid and increases their sense of ownership, hopefulness, and motivation.

4. There should be ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of any interventions. This monitoring should be based upon the goals that have been established and rely upon the input of the educators, parents, and child. Strategies that are ineffective should be modified and replaced. If it is apparent that a strategy is failing to help a student, its use should not be continued month after month. Intervention programs should be conceived as dynamic entities, open to change and improvement. We must be cautious not to make the following assumption that I hear all-too-often, "We have been using this approach for five months and the child is still not responding. He/she is resistant." I believe in perseverance, but if a technique we have attempted for five months is not working, I often wonder who are the resistant ones in the scenario, the children or the adults.

We must be realistic when we develop interventions, but we should not allow budgetary or other constraints to limit our visions of the "ideal" program. Striving for the "ideal" should not be construed as a naive effort in futility but rather as a journey that will help us to turn possibility into reality. We must also recognize that intervention programs may be drawn from a wide spectrum of services. For example, some students may require only several hours of tutoring each week to address their problems while other students who cannot be managed in a regular classroom setting may require

placement in a self-contained classroom. Students should receive those services that will best meet their educational and emotional needs for success in school.

I have been asked, "Wouldn't retention be effective if students repeating a grade were also provided with appropriate support so that they would truly have the opportunity to catch up?" Possibly so. However, since research does not support the efficacy of retention and even highlights its drawbacks, my preference is to promote at-risk students but insure that they receive the necessary support to help them to succeed in the next grade. If this were done, advancement to the following grade would not fall prey to the shortcomings and stigma of "social promotion" since the promotion was accompanied by comprehensive strategies to remedy their learning and/or emotional difficulties.

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 learn and 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.