



Principal, teacher and parental perceptions of student retention in selected Montana elementary schools
by Donald Gilbert Rath

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education
Montana State University

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Abstract:

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The major results of the study indicated that: (1) males are retained at significantly higher rates than females, (2) perceptions of retained students by parents and teachers are frequently divergent, (3) teachers need to recognize and be aware of special affective and cognitive needs of retained students, (4) the major factor leading to or causing retention is immaturity, (5) most principals, teachers, and parents support retention of students, and (6) a high percentage of schools do not have a formal promotion and retention policy statement establishing guidelines and procedures to be followed in the retention process.

The major recommendations of the study were: (1) that each school district should develop a formal promotion and retention policy statement listing criteria to be considered for retention and the procedures to follow in developing a communications network between the school and the parents, (2) that instrumentation should be utilized for the purpose of identifying and monitoring student characteristics that may lead to retention, (3) counseling services should be made available to all elementary students, but especially for the counseling of retained students and for further involvement in the retention process, and (4) further studies should be conducted to identify school variables that may lead to student retention and to further identify factors related to teacher and parental perceptions of student retention.

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OF STUDENT RETENTION IN SELECTED
MONTANA ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

by

Donald Gilbert Rath

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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APPROVAL

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This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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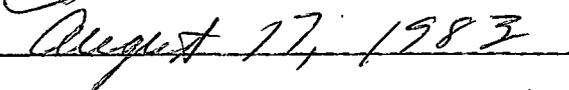
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
ABSTRACT.....	x
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2 -
Importance of the Study.....	3
General Questions to be Answered.....	6
General Procedures.....	11
Limitations.....	12
Definition of Terms.....	14
Summary.....	16
2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.....	18
History of Retention Practices.....	18
Criticisms of Retention Practices and Attempts to Accommodate Individual Differences.....	22
Retained Student Characteristics.....	28
Rationale for Nonpromotion.....	35
Current Status and Trends.....	40
Summary.....	55 -
3. PROCEDURES.....	58
Review of Related Literature and Research.....	59
Survey of Retention Practices.....	59
Extent of Survey and Population to be Surveyed.....	59
Principles Questionnaire.....	60
Case Study Form.....	62
Retention Scale.....	65
Parent's Check List.....	66
Promotion Policy Statement.....	67 -
Analysis of Data.....	68
Statement of Null Hypotheses.....	68
Case Study Forms, Parent Check List, and Retention Scale.	72
Summary.....	75
4. ANALYSIS OF DATA.....	78
Instrumentation.....	78
Principal's Questionnaire.....	78

TABLE OF CONTENTS—Continued

	Page
4. ANALYSIS OF DATA (Continued)	
Case Study Forms.....	79
Retention Scale.....	79
Parent Check List.....	80
Data Tabulated.....	80
Principal's Questionnaire.....	80
Statements of Null Hypotheses.....	85
Discussion.....	116
Principal's Questionnaire.....	116
Case Study Forms—Teacher Perceptions.....	116
Case Study Forms—Teacher and Parent Perceptions.....	118
Summary.....	120
5. PROMOTION AND RETENTION OF STUDENTS.....	123
Promotion and Retention Statement.....	124
Summary.....	127
6. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	130
Summary.....	130
Conclusions.....	137
Recommendations.....	143
REFERENCES CITED.....	145
APPENDICES.....	151
A. Cover Letter to Principals of Class I Elementary Schools..	152
B. Principal's Questionnaire.....	153
C. Cover Letter to Superintendents of Selected Districts.....	157
D. Cover Letter to Principals of Selected Districts.....	159
E. Cover Letter to Classroom Teachers of Selected Districts..	161
F. Case Study Form.....	162
G. Retention Scale.....	164
H. Cover Letter to Parents.....	168
I. Parent's Check List.....	169

LIST OF TABLES

TABLES	Page
1. Years of Experience.....	81
2. Program Options Instead of Retention.....	82
3. Retention Causes.....	83
4. Do Retained Students Achieve Academic Success.....	83
5. Do Principals Feel Retention is Worth the Work and Effort	84
6. Parental Perception and Attitude to Retention.....	84
7. School Policy Statement.....	86
8. School Economic Status.....	87
9. School Academic Performance.....	87
10. Chi Square Comparison of Male and Female Retention-Total Enrollment.....	89
11. Chi Square Comparison of Male and Female Retention-No Minorities.....	90
12. Nonminority and Minority Retentions.....	90
13. Minority Population and Number of Retained Students.....	91
14. Student Forms Returned.....	92
15. Teacher Perceptions of Retention Causes.....	93
16. Parental Perceptions of Retention Causes.....	93
17. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher Perceptions of Students' Physical Development.....	94
18. Teacher and Parental Perceptions of Retained Students' Physical Development.....	95
19. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher Perceptions of Students' Health Condition.....	96
20. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher and Parental Perceptions of Retained Students' Health Condition.....	97
21. Teachers' Perceptions of Students Being Happy About Going to School.....	98
22. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Retained Students Being Happy About Going to School.....	99
23. Teacher Perceptions of Students' Contributions to Group Discussions.....	99
24. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Retained Students' Contributions to Group Discussions.	100
25. Teacher Perceptions of Students' Enthusiasm for Learning.	101
26. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Retained Students' Enthusiasm for Learning.....	103
27. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Stress Displayed by Retained Students.....	103
28. Teacher Perceptions of Students' Stress in School Discussions.....	104

LIST OF TABLES—Continued

	Page
29. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Stress Displayed by Retained Students.....	105
30. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher and Parent Perceptions of the Way Promoted Students React to Retained Students..	106
31. Teacher Perceptions of How Retained and Promoted Students Get Along.....	107
32. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher and Parent Perceptions of the Way Retained Students Get Along With Other Students..	108
33. Teacher Perceptions of Work Completed by Retained and Promoted Students.....	109
34. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher and Parent Perceptions of the Amount of School Work Completed.....	110
35. Teacher Perceptions of the Degree to Which Students Worked Up to Their Ability.....	111
36. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher and Parent Perceptions of the Degree to Which Retained Students Worked Up to Their Ability.....	112
37. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher and Parent Perceptions of the Degree to Which Retention was a Benefit to Students..	113
38. Chi Square Analysis of Teacher, Parent, and Administrator Opinion of Retention.....	114
39. Retention Scale—Raw Scores for Retained and Promoted Students.....	115

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to: (1) investigate the retention practices of Class I elementary schools of Montana, (2) to determine guidelines and criteria utilized in retention decisions, (3) to identify student characteristics that may lead to retention, (4) to compare teacher, parent, and administrative perceptions of the retention process, and (5) to develop a proposed promotion and retention policy statement.

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The major recommendations of the study were: (1) that each school district should develop a formal promotion and retention policy statement listing criteria to be considered for retention and the procedures to follow in developing a communications network between the school and the parents, (2) that instrumentation should be utilized for the purpose of identifying and monitoring student characteristics that may lead to retention, (3) counseling services should be made available to all elementary students, but especially for the counseling of retained students and for further involvement in the retention process, and (4) further studies should be conducted to identify school variables that may lead to student retention and to further identify factors related to teacher and parental perceptions of student retention.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Schools traditionally fulfilled two major functions in our society. They had the responsibility of transmitting knowledge, skills, and attitudes to their students. They also had the responsibility of judging whether or not, or to what extent, students had attained the desired knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Anderson, 1976). Trump (1977) stated that evaluation of student abilities had been based largely on a grading system which emphasized academic competencies and ignored student needs, interests, and actual abilities in other areas. An NEA report (1970) noted that promotion or nonpromotion that was based on a strict grading system was questionable because quite frequently student growth was not considered in the promotion or retention decision and justification for the decision was often based on inadequate evidence. Ahmann stated, "If the philosophy of the school is concerned with the most effective development of the whole pupil, then policies for promotion must be consistent with the criterion of what is best for the pupil." (1963:583)

Trump (1976) and Doll (1966) were critical of the usage of scholastic grades as the major criterion for retention decisions. The emphasis on these extrinsic motivators negated the individual differences and needs of each student. Anderson (1976) said that schools should not completely eliminate the failures but that they

should avoid promoting perceptions of failure on the part of the students by not giving some consideration to the particular circumstances that led to the promotion of nonpromotion decisions.

Statement of the Problem

It is a curious and sad paradox to note that, in a land where education is so highly valued and so much the key to one's personal advancement and society's total growth, approximately one third of those students who started first grade would drop out of school before completing the eleventh grade. These students would drop out not because of a sudden whim or capricious impulse, but because of more or less continuous exposure to failure experiences which reinforced feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy (Hamachek, 1972). In our graded system of instructional organization many pupils faced failure on a regular basis because of their inability to conform to the standards set for them within the schools they attended. It had normally fallen upon the teacher and building principal to make the decision as to whether or not a student would benefit by repeating a grade or by being promoted to the next grade level where he might become even more unhappy and frustrated with his situation. There was considerable disagreement as to the benefits of retention. Because of the discrepancies in the achievement of children who were retained and of those who were promoted, the question was raised as to which was more important—having a child achieve satisfactorily relative to his mental age expectancy, or having a child achieve satisfactorily relative to the achievement of the other children in his class (Chansky, 1964:230).

The fact that student retention has been a matter of serious concern to elementary principals, led the writer to design a study related to the problems of elementary school student nonpromotion.

The problem approached in this study was to survey the entire K-6 population of Class 1 elementary schools in Montana to determine whether school system policies for promotion or retention had been developed. If so, what guidelines for retention were stated in terms of conditions or student characteristics that would result in a decision to retain a student? Biographical and academic case studies of those K-2 elementary school students who had been retained in a previous grade prior to the 1982-83 school year were developed and utilized in three selected Class 1 Montana school districts along with retention scales in order to determine educational, personal, and social characteristics of nonpromotion. A proposed promotion policy statement was also developed based on data found in the review of literature, the survey instruments, and the case study forms.

Importance of the Study

The decision to promote or to retain a student had always been a complex problem and was often difficult to defend or justify (Goodlad, 1963). The word "retention" had fallen into disrepute in some quarters (Horn, 1976) and the value or harm of retention had remained unresolved. The findings were inconsistent and Reiter (1973), Dufay (1966), Trump (1977), Goodlad (1963), and Ames (1977) represented the viewpoint of authorities who generally opposed retention. These educators believed in continuous promotion and developed a philosophy

based upon psychological implications that a child's self-confidence and ultimate school growth was benefited by being assigned to the next grade regardless of performance in class. Other authorities such as Thomas (1965) and Scott (1969) found nonpromotion could have benefits for some pupils but not for all. Immaturity of the students and excessive absences were found to be the most common reasons for retaining a student in a grade for another year (Horn, 1976). The debates continued for many years and conclusive findings were not determined by any study.

Definitive, clearly stated policies for retention were not often available to the elementary school principals who, by necessity, had to deal with recommendations for promotion or nonpromotion each school year. As a consequence to judging whether or not a student had met the achievement criteria for a given school year, the issue of promotion or retention remained a perplexing consideration in most American school systems.

The writer of this paper found that the decision whether to retain or promote a slow learning child was seldom easy. Support from parents, teachers, and administrators was deemed necessary and the situation needed to be handled positively. The negative implication of retention had been identified in numerous studies and were all too obvious: emotional damages, a feeling of inferiority, a failure complex, and social maladjustment. Jackson (1975), Goodlad (1963), and Trump (1977) were only a few of the authorities who referred to specific causes and effects of retention. In their opinions, schools needed

to change their curricular offerings and needed to change teacher attitudes and existing grading standards.

Goodlad (1963) and Bocks (1977) viewed retention as being completely negative in its effect upon students. Goodlad concluded that repeaters did not receive the social approval or acceptance of those students that were regularly promoted. Repeaters were often found to be unfriendly, cruel, and antagonistic in relations with their classmates. They were also revealed to be lacking in self-confidence, self-respect, and general feelings of well-being.

Discussions as to factors leading to retention had long been noted in educational literature. In one early study, Reed provided the following list of causes of nonpromotion:

1. Poor home conditions
2. Physical defects
3. Transferring from another school system
4. Retarded motor development
5. Difficulty with the English language
6. Lack of application of acquired skills
7. Irregular school attendance
8. Late entrance into school
9. Delinquency
10. Too high a school standard
11. Faulty curriculum
12. Lack of flexibility in methods of promotion
13. Lack of student supervision by the parents
14. Laziness on the part of the student
15. Unqualified teachers
16. Too many students in the classrooms
17. Short term attendance
18. Courses of study did not provide for special needs or interests of the students
19. Variability of students
20. Failure by the teacher to provide for the needs of the individual student
21. Inadequate medical inspection and treatment
22. Inadequate formulation of promotion standards
23. Inaccurate methods of measuring results

These statements caused some districts to look at the conditions that led to student retentions in their schools. Decisions were made in some districts that resulted in some policy changes that improved school programs and working conditions for students who were experiencing difficulties. (1927:4-5)

Anderson (1976) reported that most of the failures occurred in schools that used "norm-referenced" grading methods. A predetermined percentage of students were therefore doomed to fail simply because they could not outscore enough of their classmates. Since several studies had indicated that students continued to attain about the same rank in their class or grade over extended periods of time, students in such a grading system continued to fail over the years. Eventually they felt inadequate and saw themselves as being failures.

The question of the relative value of retaining students indicated a need for a study of the retention trends and practices in the State of Montana. As an elementary school principal, the writer believed that there was a need to examine promotion and retention policies in the state. It was the writer's opinion that research in this area would be valuable to teachers and administrators in their decision making process as they would be able to rely on more current and localized information pertinent to the problems of student retention.

General Questions to be Answered

The review of related literature and research provided answers to the following questions:

1. What was the history of student nonpromotion in elementary schools in the United States from 1850 to 1980?

2. What were the major research findings pertaining to nonpromotion of elementary school students in grades K-6?

3. What were some of the controversies concerning student retention?

4. Had school programs been changed or adapted to allow for alternatives to nonpromotion of students?

5. What were some positive and negative aspects of student retention?

6. Had the national trend shown nonpromotion to be more prevalent during the 1970's-1980's than before?

The following questions were answered from data obtained by use of the principal's questionnaire:

1. Were alternate program options available for the students being considered for retention?

2. Did principals feel that perceptions of the relative merits of retention differed between principals and classroom teachers?

3. What were some perceived common causes for students to be retained in Montana Class 1 elementary schools?

4. Did Montana Class 1 elementary schools normally have a formal promotion policy and what were some of the common elements of the promotion policies being used?

5. Based on perceptions of elementary school principals, did retained students achieve improved success and thus "catch up" with their peer group?

6. Did elementary principals feel that retention of students was usually beneficial for the student?

7. Based on perceptions of building principals, what were parental perceptions and attitudes towards a retention decision?

The following questions were also answered from data obtained by use of the principal's questionnaire. The questions were answered through the use of statistical analyses:

1. Was the overall academic achievement level of students independent of the socio-economic make-up of the school community?

2. Was there a statistically significant difference in the proportion of male retentions as compared to female retentions?

3. Was there a statistically significant difference in the proportion of minority students being retained when compared to the proportion of nonminority students being retained?

4. Was there a statistically significant difference in the proportion of male minority students being retained when compared to the proportion of female minority students being retained?

Answers to the following questions were obtained by analyzing and comparing data collected from the principal's questionnaire, case study forms, retention scale, and the parent's check list. The first question was only concerned with teacher and parent perceptions as to the perceived causes of retention.

1. What were the perceived major causes for student retention?

2. Were teachers' perceptions of students' physical development independent of whether the students were retained or regularly promoted?

3. Were the perceptions of a student's physical development independent of whether the perceptions were made by a parent or a teacher?

4. Were teachers' perceptions of students' general health conditions independent of whether the students were retained or regularly promoted?

5. Were the perceptions of students' general health conditions independent of whether the perceptions were made by a parent or a teacher?

6. Were teachers' perceptions of students being happy about going to school independent of whether the students were retained or regularly promoted?

7. Were perceptions about retained students being happy about going to school independent of whether the perceptions were made by a teacher or a parent?

8. Were classroom teachers' perceptions of students' contributions to group discussions independent of whether the students were retained or regularly promoted?

9. Were perceptions of a retained student's contributions to group discussions independent of whether the perceptions were made by a teacher or a parent?

10. Was enthusiasm for learning as perceived by the classroom teacher independent of whether the students were retained or regularly promoted?

11. Were perceptions of a retained student's enthusiasm for learning independent of whether the perceptions were made by a teacher or a parent?

12. Was the perception of a retained student's emotional adjustment independent of whether the perception was made by a classroom teacher or a parent?

13. Was the amount of stress displayed in discussions about school as perceived by the classroom teacher independent of whether the student was retained or regularly promoted?

14. Was the perception of the amount of stress displayed by a retained student independent of whether the perception was made by a classroom teacher or a parent?

15. Was the perception of the way promoted students reacted to retained students independent of whether the perception was made by a classroom teacher or a parent?

16. Was the perception of the way students got along with each other as perceived by the classroom teacher independent of whether the students were retained or regularly promoted?

17. Was the perception of the way the retained students got along with each other independent of whether the perceptions were made by a classroom teacher or a parent?

18. Was the amount of work completed as perceived by a classroom teacher independent of whether the student was retained or regularly promoted?

19. Was the perception of the amount of school work completed by retained students independent of whether the perceptions were made by a classroom teacher or a parent?

20. Was the degree to which students worked up to their ability as perceived by classroom teachers independent of whether the student was retained or regularly promoted?

21. Was the perception of the degree to which retained students worked up to their ability independent of whether the perception was made by a classroom teacher or a parent?

22. Was a person's perception as to whether retention was beneficial to the student independent of whether the person was a parent or a teacher?

23. Was a person's perception as to whether retention was usually beneficial to the students independent of whether the person was a parent, a teacher, or a principal?

24. Was there a statistically significant difference between scores for retained and regularly promoted students as computed from the Retention Scales that had been completed by classroom teachers?

General Procedures

The general procedures followed in this study were as follows:

1. The writer conducted a review of literature and research related to the nonpromotion of elementary school students. This review addressed the history of retention practices from the 1850's to the present and included data cited by authorities which indicated both advantageous and disadvantageous of student retention. Current trends and rationale for promotion or retention of students was examined with a view toward gaining an understanding of the causes and effects of student failure. The review of literature also included data obtained from a computer search of ERIC files under the following descriptors: "academic failure," "holding power," "nonpromotion," and "retention."

2. A survey was developed and administered in all Montana Class I elementary school districts. The survey was designed to gain information about the school district retention policies, ages, grades, and sex of retained elementary students in grades K-6. This survey was also to provide information on the trends and practices regarding student retention in the state of Montana. Respondents were also asked to provide information on the academic, social, and behavioral characteristics of students that were retained with the intent of determining benefits or detriments of retention.

3. Case study reporting forms were developed and utilized in three selected Class I elementary school districts. The purpose of this instrument was to examine and identify specific academic, social, and behavioral characteristics of students that had been retained in grades K-2 prior to school year 1982-83. Additionally, data was

accumulated on relative positive and negative values of retention. This instrument was completed by the classroom teachers and parents who were able to provide current comprehensive information on the students' present characteristics as well as perceptions of the value of nonpromotion.

Data was also gathered on a stratified selection of regularly promoted students in grades K-2 for comparative purposes with an equal number of retained students of the same sex.

4. Information obtained in the case studies was collected and used for the purpose of determining the perceived relative benefits or disadvantageous to students who were retained.

5. All data was reported and summarized with the purpose of developing a proposed retention policy statement which could be utilized by school personnel in matters of student promotion or nonpromotion.

Limitations

The study was limited in the following ways:

1. The materials and references for this paper were gathered from the Montana State University library reference facilities. The review of literature was gleaned from textbooks, periodicals, journals, and ERIC. While any available sources in the Montana State University library were considered, references noted in the Education Index (1970-83) were reviewed. The descriptors used to obtain information were limited to the following: academic failure, holding power, nonpromotion, and retention.

Interlibrary loan facilities were also utilized along with the research and service facilities of the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

2. The survey was limited to grades K-6 in all Class I elementary schools in the state of Montana.

3. This study considered information reflecting retention practices during the 1982-83 school term.

4. The three school districts selected for a more detailed study were chosen to reflect two school systems that were representative of Class I elementary schools with normal achievement ranges and normal population variances and one school system that reflected a high proportion of minority students. In-depth studies of teacher-parent perceptions of retention as well as student characteristics were explored. The case study format being used followed some recommended authoritative guidelines for student data sheets (Rosander, 1977:87-8).

5. The case study forms utilized in the three selected Class I school districts were only used for those students who were enrolled in grades K-2 for the 1982-83 school year.

6. The survey instruments and case study forms were created by the writer of this paper and as such were not standardized. Validation and reliability procedures are reported in Chapter 3.

7. The generalizations drawn from the study were from a limited number of schools and students in the state of Montana and were therefore not intended for universal generalization throughout the United States. Benefits obtained from this study were intended to add to the contemporary field of knowledge concerning the retention of students in

our country and were also intended to be of potential value to the educators in the state of Montana.

Definition of Terms

Certain terms were considered in the following context:

Acceleration. Acceleration is the practice of speeding the fast learner through a subject area or grade to provide more interesting and challenging work for the student (Thomas, 1965:126).

Automatic (Social) Promotion. This practice is based on the desire not to injure the child socially or psychologically (Dufay, 1966:52). The underlying theory is that children will develop more normally and naturally if they are advanced each year along with their peers even though they do not master the academics at that particular grade level (Jarvis, 1966:227).

Class I School District of Montana. This is a classification given to a school district with a population of 6500 or more (School Laws of Montana:75-6503).

Continuous Promotion. This assumes that though children learn at a varying rate, maximum learning takes place when pupils progress steadily through the grades with their peer group (Coffield, 1956). This promotion practice is based on chronological age and is usually synonymous with automatic or social promotion.

ERIC. This is the acronym for the Educational Resources Information Center which is a national information system for providing ready access to lists of educational research materials in the field of education.

Failure. (1) This term when implied in the usage of the infinitive "to fail" refers to the inability of an individual to attain success with respect to a particular goal. In this context it shall mean the lack of movement from one grade level to another. (2) This term when used as a noun shall identify a person who has failed to attain a desired objective. In this context it will be a specific reference to an individual who has not attained success in some endeavor (Anderson, 1976).

Nongraded. This is the organizational practice of dividing the school work into smaller units above the kindergarten level. Pupils move into the next level whenever they have completed the work below that particular level. It also eliminates the term "grade" as it pertains to the placement in the school hierarchy. (Thomas, 1965:119). This term shall also refer to the practice of grading students subjectively rather than with letter grades (Goodlad, 1963).

Nonpromotion. This refers to the practice of allowing a child to spend two consecutive years in the same grade (Horn, 1976). Nonpromotion is also a part of the graded school plan in which educators attempt to sort pupils into achievement levels in order to maintain the graded concept of the elementary school (Elsbree, 1967:227).

Promotion. This is the regular and sequential movement of an individual through predetermined academic and grade areas. This is also described as the process of keeping pupils of like achievement in the same group and "passing" them on to the next grade at the end of the school year (Goodlad, 1963:49).

