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Date August 6, 1971

THE EFFECT ON READING ACHIEVEMENT SCORES OF
NONPROMOTION IN THE ELEMENTARY GRADES

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to ascertain if a student would improve in reading achievement when he had spent a second year in the same grade and if the reading achievement of those pupils who had been retained would be any higher in relation to the rest of the class.

The null hypotheses stated: 1. There is no significant difference between the reading achievement of the first year a student spends in a grade and his reading achievement for the second year spent in the same grade. 2. There is no significant difference between the reading achievement of the student who has spent a second year in the same grade and that of the student who has spent only one year in the grade. 3. There is no significant difference between the reading achievement of the student who will be retained at the end of the year and the reading achievement of the student who will not be retained. 4. There is no significant difference between the reading achievement of a student who has been retained at sometime previously in his school career and the achievement of students in the same grade who have not repeated a grade.

The Stanford Achievement Test was administered to 144 elementary students. The statistical analysis showed that: 1. Students who were to be retained had lower reading achievement scores than those who would be promoted. 2. Students who were retained had comparable reading achievement scores with fellow classmates at the end of their second year in the same grade. 3. Students who were retained did better during the second year spent in the grade. 4. Students who had been retained at sometime previously did not do as well as the other members of their class.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Each year teachers and administrators are faced with certain elementary students who are, for one reason or another, not fitting into the grade level expectations of their age group. In many of these cases, after much consultation and study, the decision is reached that the child will hopefully profit from an additional year in the same grade. These decisions may be based on many factors or on very few. (24:208)

Some of these factors which come under consideration are: the child's social adjustments, his scholastic achievement, his performance compared with ability, feelings of frustration, maturity, parental attitude, and others. In some cases much testing has occurred to aid the decision makers and in other cases very little or even no testing has been done.

All too often it seems that a student is retained in a grade simply because it is believed that repetition of the same subject matter will lead to its mastery. Whatever reasoning enters into the decision of nonpromotion, it does not come forth easily and sometimes seems to bring about an almost insoluble dilemma.

We might consider some of the historical background that has led us into this situation. When the American school systems were in their infant stage they were designed for an elite group who could supposedly meet the objectives of the system and follow the rules that had been established. In this system there was a certain amount of "knowledge" to be accomplished at each grade level. The student would simply stay in the grade until this was achieved, or

he could drop out of the educational system all together. Students who could not move smoothly through this system were considered to be at fault since they knew what was necessary to meet the demands of the system.(24:209)

As our educational system was changed to include all children, the methods of instruction were difficult to modify and in fact did not keep up with the change in clientele. Children were still expected to accomplish the work of one grade level before progressing to the next level. All too often the climate of our schools has tended to promote a feeling of failure in the act of nonpromotion.

As methods of instruction have become somewhat modified so as to reach more children, the old system of promotion has come under criticism and study.(6:249) A conscientious teacher will do some real soul searching in reaching the decision to retain a child. Other factors than accomplishment of subject matter are considered, especially the child who is feeling frustration when he realizes that he is not meeting the same successes as the majority of his class.

We have hopefully reached the stage in our educational programs whereby the welfare of the individual child is coming under more scrutiny and we are concerned with individual rates of development. More researchers are becoming concerned with the effect nonpromotion has on children. Some areas for research include personal and social adjustment, self concepts, scholastic achievement, and attitudes at home and school.

Since scholastic achievement is considered by many as a prominent reason for retention, this study will attempt to ascertain what changes there are scholastically when a child is retained.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to ascertain if a student's reading achievement will improve when he has spent a second year in the same grade and if the reading achievement of those pupils who have been retained will be any higher in relation to the other members of their class.

Null Hypotheses

The null hypotheses to be tested by this study are:

1. There is no significant difference between the reading achievement of the first year a student spends in a grade and his reading achievement for the second year spent in the same grade.
2. There is no significant difference between the reading achievement of the student who has spent a second year in the same grade and that of the student who has spent only one year in the grade.
3. There is no significant difference between the reading achievement of the student who will be retained at the end of the year and the reading achievement of the student who will not be retained.
4. There is no significant difference between the reading achievement of a student who has been retained at sometime previously in his school career and the achievement of students in the same grade who have not repeated a grade.

Procedures

The following procedures were used in this investigation:

1. A review of the related literature and research was made.
2. The Stanford Achievement Test was administered to

students during 1970 and 1971. Data was gathered for those students who were retained and those not retained.

3. Statistical analysis was used to test the null hypotheses.

Limitations

The following limitations are pertinent to this study:

1. The survey of literature was limited to Montana State University Library.
2. The pupils surveyed were all public school pupils.
3. The pupils surveyed were all from two small isolated communities in and bordering Yellowstone National Park.
4. The pupils surveyed were only from first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades.
5. The population sampled consisted of 144 pupils.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms have been used:

Promotion: indicates that a pupil moves from one grade to the next from year to year.

Nonpromotion: a pupil is not moved to the next grade but remains in his present grade for a second year.

Retained (retention): used here synonymously with nonpromotion.

Achievement: indicates scholastic improvement as indicated by the standard test administered to the student.

We will begin this study with the review of related literature and research in Chapter II.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The problem of whether children should be retained in a grade or whether they should be passed along with their chronological age group has been with us since definite grade levels were established. Cook (8:250) links grade level practices with graded text books which came into use in 1837. With the advent of the McGuffey Readers began the movement toward a rigid grading system. A graded elementary school was constructed in 1848 which housed eight grades. From here we moved to the point where even one-room rural schools were run on a rigid grade level system. The difficulty of the graded text served as the basis for achievement standards and consequently a basis for promotion. By 1920 it was common to fail over thirty per cent of the pupils in the primary grades, and by the end of the intermediate grades, over fifty per cent of the students had failed a grade at one point or another.

In the early 1900's concern developed, not particularly for the pupil who was being retained, but for the financial burden of keeping children in school so long. At this point it was realized that herein existed a problem of such magnitude as to require some investigation. Thus came about the study by Leonard P. Ayres and his book Laggards in Our Schools. (3) Significant in his findings were the facts that the most important causes of school failure for children could be removed, that regular attendance and faithfulness were of major importance for success, that some cities were already accomplishing good results in elimination of problems which may have been causing failure, and that very

few children were so defective that their success in school would be prevented.

Some of the causes for retardation as found by Ayres were physical defects, late entrance, irregular attendance, and perhaps most important, the fact that far fewer girls were retained than boys.

Two major remedies were set forth in this study. One was in the legislative area whereby better compulsory attendance laws would be instigated and enforced, and the other was in the realm of administration reforms. These reforms would include such things as medical inspection, better courses of study to more nearly fit the ability of the average pupil, more flexibility in grading, and better knowledge of the facts.

Coffield and Blommers (6:235) found that by the year 1954 the number of pupils experiencing failure in school had been decreased to approximately ten per cent. The extent of the research done on the subject may have had some influencing effect on the trends of nonpromotion.

Many aspects of nonpromotion have been subject to review and study since Ayres completed his study in 1908. The thwarting effect of the school climate was thought to be quite prevalent by Gever. (10:311) He stressed the idea that children are afraid at school because they are taught in an atmosphere where failure is humiliating and dishonorable. They are motivated only by success and this success is based primarily upon teacher approval, rather than self-accomplishment.

Snyder (20:26) listed leading causes for failure as poor foundation, frequent changes of schools, lack of attention, slow learning, irregular attendance, poor health, phy-

sical defects, and low mentality. Also included in her evaluation were poor home environment, laziness, poor teaching, lack of proper sleep.

In a study concerning social adjustment of nonpromoted students, Anderson (1:23) listed conclusions such as the negative attitudes toward others which the nonpromoted group displayed, a negative attitude also toward school, development of unhealthy social attitudes such as over-aggressiveness, withdrawal from the group, or clowning, but little negative response concerning self-image by this group.

An interesting aspect of the promotion/nonpromotion question was studied by Kowitz and Armstrong (16:442-443) wherein they set out to discover the effect of a policy of "achieve or fail". They found that this policy had the greater effect upon pupils who were in no real danger of being retained than upon pupils whose promotion was in doubt. This in turn did cause a trend toward increased achievement in the school as children who were already doing well seemed to strive even harder because of fear of failure.

Goodlad (12:325) concluded that there was evidence to suggest the closer affiliation of nonpromotion with undesirable social and personal adjustment characteristics than with promotion. He mentioned that some children experienced unsatisfactory social contacts, that some were worried over their school progress, some were experiencing difficulty in balancing success and failure, others were insecure in their home environments, and that this showed implications for the development of the individual personality.

In a study on causes of school failure in the Canal Zone by Wolf (24) such aspects as low intelligence, emotion-

al problems, minimal brain injury and incomplete neurological organization, language handicap, poor school situation, and poor health were considered. Each of these areas were found to have some bearing on school failure.

Elsbree, McNally, and Wynn (9) went so far as to suggest that any study carried out in relation to several aspects of child behavior will point to the premise that nonpromotion serves only to make the situation worse. Areas which they suggested for study included home backgrounds, relationships with their companions, the pattern of their play experiences outside school, their personality and intelligence pattern, and their problems, fears and interests. The authors maintained that these aspects coupled with a study of their progress during their repeating year, usually indicated clearly to teachers that nonpromotion was not the solution to the problems these children were facing.

Because of the fact that more research had been done in the area of nonpromotion many educators began to attach a little more weight to the importance of the effect on pupils. Weber (23) has gone so far as to say that the overwhelming amount of evidence for failure in school is due to teacher failure, curriculum failure or a combination of both and that the school system makes no allowances for differential abilities, interests, learning rates, and styles of learning.

Hall and Demarest (14:207), in their conclusions from a study they performed involving the ten-year record of achievement and ability in the fourth and sixth grades of the Phoenix elementary schools, found that their own age group provides identity and keeping children with their own age group will not result in a lowering of academic achieve-

ment. From this study they recommend the continuous progress plan.

As far back as 1941, Walter W. Cook (7:430) tested the following hypotheses:

When minimum grade standards are set and pupils are required to reach specific levels of achievement before being promoted to the next grade, (1) the range of abilities with which the upper-grade teacher has to cope is reduced, (2) pupil achievement in relation to ability is higher, and (3) the average grade standards are higher.

Cook's conclusions were as follows: (7:437)

(1) The high percentage of over-age pupils retained in the upper grades of schools with high standards of promotion reduces the mean intelligence of the classes and lowers 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 is 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 higher ratios of over-ageness is not significantly less than in schools with low ratios of over-ageness. (4) There is some evidence that adjustment of instruction to the ability of the child is superior in every subject except arithmetic in the schools with low ratios of over-ageness.

In the study carried on by Coffield and Blommers (6) it was concluded that nonpromotion for the reason of greater mastery of subject matter did not appear justifiable. It was found that slow learning children who were required to repeat a grade performed at about the same level as slow learning children who were promoted when this performance was measured in the same higher grade, in spite of the fact

that the failed pupils had spent an additional year in attaining this higher grade. Though this seemed to indicate that retaining children on the basis of achievement did not appear to remedy the situation, it was suggested that there might be other variables not studied which entered into the problem such as personal and social adjustment or maturity, chronological age, and physical maturity.

Goodlad (11:150) states his opinion as follows in summarizing his examination of research on the problem:

Blanket promotions for all children are not the answer. Promotion on the basis of fixed minimum standards is not adequate. What to do with the slow learning child after he has been retained or sent along to the next grade is a problem that is at least as complex as the problem of whether to promote.

His recommendations included such items as consideration of each pupil individually rather than in the light of system-wide policy, collection of facts related to all phases of human growth and development, and also examination of curriculum out of which failure grows and is perpetuated.

In the findings of a study by Worth (25:21-25) it is stated that there was no support for the view that nonpromotion improved school achievement. Low-achieving pupils who were nonpromoted appeared to make no greater, and often less, gain in achievement than when promoted. However, the author found in this study that nonpromotion did not seem to have an adverse effect on social-personal development as previous research had led us to believe.

Chansky (5) left the question of appropriate grade placement open with his study of low achieving first graders. The promoted group made significantly greater improvements in vocabulary and in reading comprehension than did the

retained group but no difference in improvement in arithmetic was found between the groups. With relation to ability, the promoted group was observed to be underachieving to a greater extent than the retained children. With respect to changes in personality adjustment, both groups could still be termed maladjusted at the conclusion of the study, less so for the retained group however.

Some studies do exist where students who were retained did do well. In one study, the purpose was to discover what fraction of the nonpromoted pupils were able to do satisfactory work during the year they repeated and if possible, to find out how they did in consequent years. The portion of successful repeaters in the study was well above that which previously published data might have led us to expect. Some worthwhile guides were established in this instance as follows:

General Criteria. There are four general criteria: 1. Which of the alternatives-promotion or nonpromotion-promises to serve best the long-range welfare of the child?

2. No child shall, except in the most unusual circumstances, repeat more than one grade in his progress through the six grades.

3. No child shall repeat Grade VI if such repetition can possibly be avoided.

4. No child shall repeat a grade with the same teacher with whom he failed in that grade.

Specific Criteria. Seven specific criteria are taken into account when deciding whether or not to retain a particular pupil.

1. The pupil's marks for the present year. This is the teacher's assessment of the quality of the pupil's work.

2. The pupil's scores on the standardized achievement tests given to all pupils in May of each year.

3. The pupil's score on a test of mental

ability.

4. The social, emotional, and personality characteristics of the pupil.

5. The pupil's chronological age.

6. The pupil's physical size.

7. The attitude of the pupil's parents toward their child's progress in school, and particularly toward the choice which must be made now. (18:334)

From the study it was concluded that careful selection of children when considering retention in a grade may help bring about success, during and after the year of repeating for a larger percentage of children than shown by previous studies. Another interesting point brought out here was that there was an indication that children who entered at a younger age might need an extra year in which to catch up. (18:333-337)

This factor was also brought out in another study when the question was raised as to whether it would not have been wiser to postpone the teaching of reading until the individual was mature enough intellectually to profit by it. The possibility of directing classroom effort toward the enlarging of vocabularies and experience could be concentrated on until this readiness had been developed. (2:203)

The Gesell Institute has been working for a number of years toward a testing program which would aid the teacher and the school in proper placement of children. Their program suggests the use of developmental findings to place the child properly at the kindergarten level, thereby possibly eliminating the need for nonpromotion later on. (15:328-29)

Webb and Pate (22) also suggest the use of early predicting through testing to predict school difficulties which may later arise. This could be used most effectively in prevention.

When Ayres did his study he found that the more important causes of academic failure and retardation were removable. This is probably just as true today and therein lie implications for curriculum planning and also testing programs. Characteristics of the pupils in terms of level of ability, socioeconomic background, and attitudes have a bearing. The influence of the characteristics of the community in which the school operates such as location and economic level should also receive consideration. Level of school expenditures, qualifications of faculty and special staff, and the services provided should be examined. Complete information of the school population is a must. When all facts are taken into consideration it is possible that the problem of the failure may come within the limits of managerial control. (24:208-216)

Chapter III will present the procedures and conclusions for this study.

CHAPTER III

PROCEDURES AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to ascertain if a student would improve in reading achievement when he had spent a second year in the same grade and if the reading achievement of those pupils who have been retained would be any higher in relation to the other members of their class.

The population sample used for this study was taken from two small communities in and bordering Yellowstone National Park. Out of 144 children in grades one through six, twelve children had been retained and standard test scores were available for their first and second years in the same grade. Twenty-one children had been retained at some time previously in their school career but had tests available only from the year of the study.

The Stanford Achievement Test was the testing instrument used, particularly the following subtests: Word Reading and Paragraph Meaning.

Statistical Procedure

Since the number of students who had been retained was small for each class, it was decided to combine the scores for the six grades. Mean and standard deviations for the pupils at the grade levels are shown in Table 4 (Appendix).

Since students who were retained were compared with students at their same grade level, the following system was used in order to make certain that the status groups were comparable:

1. Means and standard deviations were computed for the two variables. Since the other subtests were not the same between the grades, only the subtests for Word Reading and Paragraph Meaning were used.

2. T scores were computed for each of the subscales for each of the students. The following formula was used:

$$T \text{ score} = 50 + 10 \frac{(\text{raw score} - \text{mean})}{\text{standard deviation}}$$

Means for each of the status groups were computed for the T scores for all students. T tests were computed to test the significance at the .05 level of confidence.

Statistical Analysis of Null Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 stated that there was no significant difference between the reading achievement of the first year a student spent in a grade and his reading achievement for the second year spent in the same grade. The analysis and results are shown on Table 1.

TABLE 1. MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF THE STANDARD SCORES FOR THE FIRST YEAR A STUDENT SPENT IN THE GRADE (STATUS 2) AND THE STANDARD SCORES FOR THE SECOND YEAR SPENT IN THE GRADE (STATUS 4)

Subtest		N	Status 2	N	Status 4	t-test
Word reading	$\bar{X}$ s	12	38.87 5.88	12	50.68 6.91	4.50
Paragraph meaning	$\bar{X}$ s	12	36.87 7.07	12	50.37 6.92	4.72

Since the computed t was higher than the table t, the hypothesis that there was no significant difference between the reading achievement of the first year a student spent

in a grade and his reading achievement for the second year spent in the same grade was rejected.

Hypothesis 2 stated that there was no significant difference between the reading achievement of the student who has not been retained and the student who has been retained and is presently in the second year of the same grade. The analysis and results are shown on Table 2.

TABLE 2. MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF THE STANDARD SCORE FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVE NOT BEEN RETAINED (STATUS 1) AND STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN RETAINED AND ARE PRESENTLY IN THEIR SECOND YEAR IN THE SAME GRADE (STATUS 4)

Subtest		N	Status 1	N	Status 4	t-test
Word reading	$\bar{X}$ s	111	51.98 8.89	12	50.68 6.91	.48
Paragraph meaning	$\bar{X}$ s	111	52.50	12	50.37 6.92	.80

Since the computed t was lower than the table t, the hypothesis that there was no significant difference between the reading achievement of the student who has not been retained and the student who has been retained and is presently in the second year of the same grade was not rejected.

Hypothesis 3 stated that there was no significant difference between the reading achievement scores of the student who would be retained that year and the scores of those students who would not be retained. The analysis and results are shown on Table 3.

TABLE 3. MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF THE STANDARD SCORE FOR STUDENTS WHO WILL BE RETAINED AT THE END OF THE YEAR (STATUS 2) AND STUDENTS WHO WILL NOT BE RETAINED AT THE END OF THE YEAR (STATUS 1)

Subtest	N	Status 2	N	Status 1	t-test
Word reading	$\bar{X}$ 12 s	38.87 5.88	111	51.98 8.89	4.97
Paragraph meaning	$\bar{X}$ 12 s	36.87 7.07	111	52.50 8.83	5.91

Since the computed t was higher than the table t , the hypothesis that there was no significant difference between the reading achievement of the student who has not been retained and the student who has been retained and is presently in the second year of the same grade was rejected. This shows us that students who are candidates for retention are considerably lower in reading achievement scores than are those students who are eligible to be promoted to the next grade.

Hypothesis 4 stated that there was no significant difference between the reading achievement scores of those students who had not been retained and the scores of those students who had been retained at some time previously. The analysis and results are shown on Table 4.

TABLE 4. MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF THE STANDARD SCORE FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVE NOT BEEN RETAINED (STATUS 1) AND STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN RETAINED IN SOME PREVIOUS GRADE (STATUS 3)

Subtest		N	Status 1	N	Status 3	t-test
Word reading	$\bar{X}$ s	111	51.98 8.89	21	45.13 12.18	3.03
Paragraph meaning	$\bar{X}$ s	111	52.50 8.83	21	43.74 9.34	4.12

Since the computed t was higher than the table t, the hypothesis that there was no significant difference between the reading achievement scores of those students who had not been retained and the scores of those students who had been retained at some time previously was rejected.

Conclusions

Analysis of the hypotheses indicate that the following conclusions may be drawn:

1. Achievement test scores for students who are retained are significantly higher during the second time that they are in the grade.
2. Although students who were retained scored significantly lower than others in the class during their first year in the grade, the second experience in the same grade indicated that they did as well as the other students in their grade.
3. Students who have not been retained in some previous grade do show significantly higher

reading achievement scores than do those students who have been retained at some point earlier in their school career.

Summary, conclusions, and recommendations are presented in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

In considering the question of whether or not a child should be promoted or retained, reading achievement was one factor to be considered. Professional journals had articles pertaining to nonpromotion studied from various standpoints, but scholastic or reading achievement was a major factor studied. Many of these articles had the necessary statistical information to show the effects of nonpromotion on students.

In the study by Cook (7:430-437) it was indicated that scholastic achievement is not enhanced by nonpromotion. Hall and Demarest (14:204-207) suggested that continuous progress through the grades did not seem to have a detrimental effect on the academic standards of the school but did not study the effects on individual children. In the study by Chansky (5:225-235) where a nonpromoted group was matched with a group of promoted youngsters, the promoted group showed greater reading achievement than did the group that was retained.

Coffield and Blommers (6:235-250) concluded that greater mastery of subject matter did not seem justifiable in the light of their study. These authors stressed that there might be other grounds for nonpromotion, however. Goodlad (11:155) also suggested other areas to be investigated as he had found that blanket promotions were not an answer.

The available literature indicated several times that scholastic achievement as a basis for promotion did not show that any real gains had been made in this area by nonpromotion.

Of the study presented in this paper it could also be said, as did many of the others, that achievement should not be the main factor in deciding whether or not to retain a child in a grade.

In this study, two areas of reading achievement were tested. These areas were word reading and paragraph meaning. During the school year of 1970-1971 the Stanford Achievement Test was administered to 144 students in two small elementary schools. Out of this sample, only twelve students had been retained during the previous year. Twenty-one of the students had been retained at sometime previously. The purpose of the study was to determine whether or not the two areas of reading achievement in question had shown any significant rise as far as the nonpromoted pupils were concerned.

Conclusions

By analyzing the statistical data the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Students who are retained have significantly higher reading achievement test scores in the second year in the grade when compared with their own test scores from the first year in the grade.
2. Students who are to be retained score significantly lower than their classmates who are to be promoted.
3. After spending a second year in the grade the nonpromoted students do as well as the other members of their class.
4. Students who have been retained at some previous point in their school career fall below their classmates in word reading and paragraph meaning.

Recommendations

From the results of this study the following recommendations given:

1. More research should be done in the area of predictive and developmental testing before children enter school. By this type of testing it might be possible to predict which children would be candidates for school failure and some preventative measures could be taken.
2. Although scholastic achievement did not seem to be effected a great deal by nonpromotion, the behavior of the child has not been considered here. Behavioral studies are another area which should be researched to see if the child experiences any lessened feelings of frustration or failure by being retained in a grade.

APPENDIX

TABLE 5. MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF THE STANDARD
SCORE FOR STUDENTS AT THE VARIOUS GRADE LEVELS

Grade		1	2	3	4	5	6
Word reading	$\bar{X}$	24.02	19.63	27.56	25.66	23.08	31.41
	s	7.18	5.93	4.72	7.92	7.59	7.32
Paragraph meaning	$\bar{X}$	26.92	33.43	47.16	37.85	35.45	38.91
	s	7.47	13.84	7.45	9.76	10.62	13.80

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