"TO RETAIN OR NOT TO RETAIN: WHAT’S BEST FOR THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD?"

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

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INTRODUCTION - STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

When asked which educational issue is the most controversial and most hotly contested, many people answer "retention". Thousands of administrators, teachers and parents have determined to find the best solution. "If my child is having difficulty in school, how can I help him succeed? Would it be better to hold him back or let him go ahead?"

Unfortunately, very little attention is spent on the issue of student retention and promotion in some of the country's finest teacher-preparation colleges. Many graduates leave their institutions of higher learning with a sense of preparation and readiness, only to be thrust into a situation for which they are completely unprepared. As a result, the focus of this thesis evolved. It is the purpose of this paper to review the pertinent literature available to determine the factors and issues involved in answering the question: "Is retention the best solution for helping those children who are having difficulty in school?"

SOCIAL PROMOTION AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Many contemporary educational experts, including authors Lorrie Shepard and Mary Lee Smith, advocate the removal of all retention practices and policies. Their solution for students having difficulty is to let them continue to progress with their peers, on to the next grade level. This theory, termed "social promotion", is based on the idea that it is to the child's psychological and sociological benefit to remain with their peers and that any deficiencies will be compensated for in the future years.

Although this is a popular idea in many school districts across America,
studies have indicated that social promotion is not the panacea it appears to be. Co-authors Barbara and Christopher Johnson concluded that once children are in a classroom situation that is far above their ability level, their frustration level increases and their poor performance continues. As their friends and classmates steadily grow and develop, the child who is floundering will experience accelerated frustration and slow growth. The authors state the "the child who is a little behind in second grade may well be far behind in eighth."^1

A three-year study conducted in Weston, Connecticut supports the Johnsons' findings. According to their research in the Hurlbutt School, students who were not ready for the level of performance but were promoted anyway, in accordance with school policy, did not "catch up" in the following years. ^2 Similarly, another expert has concluded that the belief that the child will "catch up" is nothing more than a myth. ^3

Does this mean that promotion for social reasons is a negative practice that should be discarded completely? Not necessarily. Some children, like those who have been retained multiple times, may benefit more from progressing than from repeating another year. However, all educators must be quick to realize that while promotion for social reasons may have its benefits, the harmful effects of pushing an unready child through the system without concern for their individual needs can be far more damaging than allowing them to repeat a year in-grade.

It is important, however, that those who doubt the harmful effects of universal social promotion policies be aware of the refuting evidence that would
dispute their beliefs. Hundreds of critics have noticed that since World War II, "U. S. high school seniors do not know much about history, literature, mathematics, science, and current events." Furthermore, twenty-seven million American adults can not read or write sufficiently to complete a job application, and another thirty-five to forty-five million are only marginally literate.

Why, in our world of compulsory, free education and research-supported teaching methods are there so many Americans graduating from a thirteen-year educational process without gaining mastery of even the most fundamental skills? The author believes that the answer lies in part with the current acceptance of universal social promotion. Children are shuffled along from grade to grade without being taught the basic life skills that are necessary in preparing them to be productive members of society.

Dexter Manley, a professional National Football League player, is the prime example of the disastrous effects of universally-practiced social promotion. Dexter suffered from an undiagnosed learning disability (poor auditory memory) and became frustrated with the work level in the first two grades of school. However, instead of taking the time to see how to help him on an individual basis, the school followed their pre-set philosophy and shuttled him from grade to grade. Dexter Manley, in his entire thirteen-year educational journey, never learned to read beyond a second grade level. He never "caught up".

Perhaps one of the saddest points of his story is that his teachers knew that he had not acquired the necessary skills, but refused to acknowledge that he needed help on an individual basis and might even benefit from an
additional year. Dexter struggled through high school, actually got admitted to Oklahoma University with a low ACT score of 6, and eventually graduated from the university, all with only a second-grade reading level.

Fortunately for Dexter, he had the athletic ability to get a job in the professional ranks and earn a living. After over twenty years of illiteracy, he got reading help from a national agency and eventually learned to read and write on a functional level. However, one might reasonably argue that there are hundreds of other children in the same situation as Dexter, many of whom will not be as fortunate. They are being forced into a higher level of learning with additional responsibilities and more complex academic concepts before they get a chance to really learn the vital basics. How can we be expected to prepare our children for the future if we do not insure that they get a fair and complete education within our school system?

Perhaps the error regarding the concept of social promotion is not the theory itself, but the manner in which it is implemented. It does not seem reasonable to impose an all-inclusive policy of social promotion. Many children not only do not benefit from the universal administration of promotion, but may carry lifelong scars as a result of being "shoved along". One school superintendent accurately summarized this point by stating, "I believe that the 100 percent promotion policy sets up a practice that is misleading. It doesn't eliminate failures. It simply covers them up."

Social promotion, therefore, only remains a viable option in education when it refrains from being the "rule". Many schools, however, might argue that this promotion policy is far less of an evil than retention. Administrators feel that
the negatives of social promotion are far fewer than the number of negatives involved in retention.

RETENTION AS AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Retaining students has been a process used in American schools for the major part of American history. Within the past two decades, however, questions have been raised concerning how this process affects children. Indeed, it was perhaps due to the extreme use of retention policies that created the apparent need for social promotion theories.

Opponents to the idea of using retention point to the child's psychological, emotional and sociological facets. Many of their arguments, listed as "myths" by author Jim Grant, include the following: the child's self-concept may be damaged, the child will have to endure criticism from peers and classmates, the child will have the same teacher and curriculum for two consecutive years, and the child's immaturity is not enough of a reason for retention. 8

Perhaps the facet that receives the most attention is the feeling that the child's psychological self-concept will be shattered by being "held back", or not being promoted with his classmates. Many argue that the labels assigned to these children will create life-long scars. However, one could question the level of self-concept a child maintains when he is forced to struggle along, feeling incompetent. How can a child labeled "dumb" or "retarded" by his peers (and sometimes teachers), continue to maintain a high level of self-confidence? If anything, the situation of being stuck in a situation far above his abilities re-affirms in the child's mind that "I am stupid". 
Retention is a practice that is usually considered a primary-age phenomenon. First-grade is the traditional grade for non-promotion, most likely because, as Monica Overman points out, "Most investigators urge teachers to retain students as early as possible." The author agrees that the younger the child is when the non-promotion decision is made, the better it is for the child. However, retention should not be exclusively used for the younger child. In fact, a child at any level who is struggling with work that is beyond his ability should be given the choice of benefitting from an extra year.

Contrary to what might be considered "obvious" reasoning, educational writers such as Shepard and Smith continue to assert their belief that the practice of retention holds little or no value for children. Their study of sixty-four children attempted to prove their point. When asked how they felt about retention, the group of children answered in the following manner: 84% "sad, bad, upset"; 3% "embarrassed"; 6% "happy"; and 7% miscellaneous responses.

Although these studies were conducted to eliminate the practice of retention, they have helped to bring light to the fact that retention is a suitable option for some children. It is obvious that society's view of retention has affected how children view this experience negatively; the majority of the children apparently are voicing what they have heard from adults and peers because the majority of those questioned had not personally experienced retention. Therefore, they have no personal stories on which to base their response. They only have what they hear from their teachers, parents, and other adults in society.

Aside from this observation, however, there is another point one can analyze
from the given research. From the results listed above, consider, "What about the 6% whose response was "happiness" when asked about retention?" Are these children, like Dexter Manley, crying for someone to give them the extra time that they need? Are these the four children who would be unjustly served by the elimination of the retention alternative?

Matthew Crane's story clearly demonstrates the need to allow some children additional time to mature and develop the ability to handle the advanced academic responsibility. Matthew was young when he began kindergarten and, although he was intelligent, he had a tough time associating with the other children, and staying on task with written work was nearly impossible. All he wanted to do was play.

Matthew's parents were advised to give him another year to develop before continuing with first grade. They refused, certain that Matthew's intelligence was sufficient to pull him through. They thought that he was just a "late bloomer" and that he would soon catch up. He struggled through first and second grade, developing an aggressive attitude at home and school (possibly as a psychological defense against feeling incompetent). In addition, he developed a deep hatred for learning. Each of his teachers suggested non-promotion, but each time, Matthew's parents refused. As he was shuffled on to third grade, his frustration level was at an all-time high and his achievement was at an all-time low.

Matthew's break came in the beginning of his third grade year. During a classroom discussion, he mentioned that he would like to go back and "visit" with his second grade teacher. Both teachers agreed and Matthew spent the
rest of the day in his old classroom. When he came home, excited and happy
about his school experiences for the first time since before kindergarten,
Matthew's mother was shocked into the realization that the teachers had been
right.

Immediately, Matthew was moved back into his second grade class. His
love for learning gradually returned and his frustration was replaced with a
new-found level of self-confidence. His aggressive behavior subsided, and he
eventually went on to high school, completely competent and feeling good about
himself. All Matthew needed was a little more time to grow before moving on
to a more complex situation.

Stories like this are abundant, clearly demonstrating that the practice of
non-promotion can be beneficial. Yet many people in our society still look at
retention as "failure" and, as a result, children pick up cues that it is a
dreadful experience reserved only for those who are "dumb". This societal belief
is so deeply rooted that even the terms used -- flunked, held back, failed -- all
denote negative experiences. It is society's view toward retention rather than
the actual process that causes the damage to the children. Is it any wonder
that our children see non-promotion as a fate worse than death?

PARENTAL ATTITUDES AND INFLUENCE

Any sociologist will tell you the high degree of influence a child's immediate
society has upon his feelings and ideas. Parents, as one of the most influential
figures in a child's life, can greatly affect how the child sees himself and his
abilities. One mother displayed the societal and parental influence
through a letter sent to Parents magazine. When she realized that her kindergarten daughter, Rachael, was not prepared for the demands of first grade, the mother battled society's warnings of "She'll be bored", "It will be repetitious", and "She'll feel she's failed." Yet she decided that a good, sound educational beginning was more important than listening to society's pressures. She carefully explained things to Rachael and her daughter went on to blossom in her second year of kindergarten, "relieved of the need to pit her energies against each day like a knight fighting a dragon."12

Unfortunately, many parents are not like this mother. They relent to society's pressure and equate non-promotion with their personal failure as a parent. This fear results in parents who either become emotionally upset or inflexible in dealing with possible alternatives. Sadly, poor grades at report card time, a possible indication of the possibility of non-promotion, has been known to trigger off a torrent of emotional and physical child abuse. Police in Cobb County, Georgia report that abuse incidents "as much as double in the three days after school grades are issued".13

In a study investigating parental attitudes, Shepard and Smith interviewed several children, of various elementary ages, to determine parental response to non-promotion. Angela, a first grader, responded that her parents were "mad and sad". She reported that they spanked and grounded her, preventing her from going to Disneyland over summer vacation.14 This was all a result of her teacher's request that she be retained for another year of first grade. Most likely, Angela simply needed another year to grow, yet her parents saw this as a failing situation and rewarded it with discipline. Stories like this do not verify
that retention is bad, only that parents and society in general need to learn how to deal fairly with the fact that some children just need more time.

"How a child is told that he is going to repeat a grade -- and the clues that the child picks up about this retention from his parents and teacher -- these are the things that make the difference between having a child who feels good or feels badly."15 In a study of fifty-two students, 42% reported that they did not find out about their non-promotion until they received their report cards. An additional 7% found out from a sibling or principal, or even not until the list of names was posted on the classroom doors the succeeding year.16 These findings clarify the need for parents and teachers to work together in preparing a child for the possibility of non-promotion.

As with most things in life, there are effective ways and ineffective ways to handle each situation. Some parents tell their child that they have tried to help him, but because the child did not benefit from their help, they want the child to stay in the same grade the following year to "get back on track". Although this may seem like a satisfactory explanation to most adults, children get the message that their parents do not think that they are working hard enough, and that their best is just not good enough.

Author Jim Grant offers another procedure that parents can utilize to present a better, clearer understanding of non-promotion so that children can fully comprehend. He suggests that parents emphasize their fault in either enrolling or advancing them before they were ready. The child should be consulted with options for correcting the parents' mistake, and the child needs to feel that he has the support of his parents, teacher, and principal.17 If the
reasons for not being promoted are presented to the child in this or a similar manner, the child’s burden is lightened and he is allowed to realize that perhaps he is not as incompetent or "dumb" as he thought he was. School can become enjoyable and manageable once again.

Retention, therefore, is not the evil destroyer of a child’s life that many people have chosen to believe. Handled on an individual basis, with care given to inform the child in an appropriate manner, the extra year can be a great advantage. Louise Bates Ames, Ph.D., has documented a large number of such cases; numerous letters have been written by parents whose children have "blossomed" after being retained.18

For those hard-nosed skeptics who still refuse to admit that non-promotion can and should be a viable option, perhaps no one can convince them better than a child who has experienced the process first-hand. Below is a poem, written by Joshua Farrington, an eighth grade student from Vermont. He explains what his feelings are as he looks back at the decision to give him a necessary extra year:

I am glad I made the choice
To retain and remain,
And not put so much stress on my brain,
For I am a December boy.19

TEACHERS AS INFLUENTIAL FACTORS IN RETENTION

It is necessary to point out that the additional year that is given must be stimulating and challenging for each child. M. Scott Norton, an opponent to the general practice of non-promotion, clearly states this vital issue. "Under any circumstances, providing the student with merely 'more of the same', whether
retained or promoted with deficiencies, is unlikely to produce desired results.\textsuperscript{20} Unfortunately, it is the author's belief that teachers in many school systems neglect this important point. They see the second year in grade as a "rerun" in which the child receives the same information in the identical manner. How many adults are entranced by previously-seen re-runs? Is it any wonder that children who are exposed to a re-run of a school year have the same feelings of boredom?

Teachers also become an important influence on how non-promotion is handled. Teachers who are sensitive to the needs of each individual child and accommodate the curriculum and teaching styles to expand upon, rather than only repeat the first year's experience, produce a challenging atmosphere in which the child will develop. Statistics have shown that 60\% of elementary school students receive satisfactory conduct and academic grades the second time "in grade".\textsuperscript{21} It is the author's opinion, based upon personal stories and statistics listed previously, that this figure could be 100\% if teachers would only take the time to consider the individual child's needs during the critical additional year.

Thus far, through the research presented, both social promotion and retention remain viable options for children in our educational system. Each theory has its benefits and serves the needs of different children. It would indeed be an injustice to eliminate either alternative. Educators need to look at the individual child's needs and correctly use the practice that would best aid that particular child.
PREVENTIVE VS. PRESCRIPTIVE APPROACHES

Some educational experts have argued that neither social promotion nor retention are the ideal solutions. Obviously, both of these practices are prescriptive rather than preventive. What can be done to help these children before they get into a situation above their heads that calls for prescriptive measures? The key is making sure that each child is ready to handle the responsibilities before they are forced to encounter them.

Many psychologists and sociologists point to the increasing academic pressure on very young children as the root of many later problems in school. One principal reflects the influence society holds on educating children at very young ages: "People want to get their children involved early...I don't know if it's a matter of trying to keep up with the Joneses or whether the parents really want to get their child off to a good start; but I think a lot of it is, Johnny is going to do it, so Mary has to do it too." While pre-school learning occurs and is necessary for the development of every young child, there is a rising occurrence of introducing academics to the preschool-age child.

Sadly, one only has to take a trip to their local bookstore to find numerous books that encourage parents to get their children involved in academic areas during their preschool years. Titles such as Kindergarten Is Too Late and How To Teach Your Baby To Read jump out and imply that parents who want their child to be "the best" (and who does not wish this?) must begin teaching curricular themes even during the infant stage of a child's development.

Glen Doman, author of one of these preschool learning books, states, "It is truly astonishing that it has taken us so many years to realize that the
younger a child is when he learns to read, the easier it will be for him to read and the better he will read."23 One might conclude from his statement that if a three-year-old can be taught to read, it is better than waiting until the first grade to acquire this skill. Is it right for parents to assume that just because neighbor-boy Billy can read at five that their child Sara should read at the age of four? How young is too young?

The competitive nature of our society has, indeed, invaded even the education of our young children. In an effort to get the "best and brightest" children in the world, our society has incorrectly assumed that by not introducing our children to academic subjects before first grade, those precious first years of life are wasted. Yet, is this societal pressure ironically setting our children up for future struggles with activities that they are not yet ready to perform and will most likely be unsuccessful with?

"Too many parents - and teachers - get great pleasure from watching a four-year-old count to fifty. But what good does that do when the child has no concept of what fifty is? Even a parrot can mimic numbers."24 This accurately depicts what thousands of early childhood experts have been communicating for many years: Children can not truly learn concepts that are beyond their developmental level. In addition, according to J. Amos Hatch and other childhood specialists, pushing a child to perform beyond what he is developmentally able to do places undue stress on him, affecting how he sees himself as a learner and as a competent person.25 This begins with the very young child and continues with children of every level within the school system.

This concept, often referred to as readiness, is tied directly to non-
promotion and social promotion by the thread of individual need. A child's individual developmental level determines his own ability to handle new concepts. Consequently, those children who are pressured to perform tasks before they are ready frequently fail to learn the necessary concepts and unnecessarily incur a great amount of stress. This directly results in children who may either be promoted with deficiencies or may need another year in-grade. Would it not be much easier for the child if we could nip the problem in the bud?

Just as each child is unique in appearance and personality, each has his own individual rate of development. Consider for a moment the following situation: A classroom teacher brings in a box of shoes, each an identical size eight. She instructs each student to select one pair, put them on, and wear them for the entire day. By the time the final bell rings, the teacher has several children with aching feet because the shoes were too small, some who bear blisters as a result of trying to keep the oversized shoes from slipping off, and perhaps a few who suffer no major discomfort because the shoes matched the size of their feet.

Absurd, you say? Unfortunately, this is the same situation many of us put children into when we determine readiness based on the "norm" rather than the individual. Children are not cut from the same mold. Their rates of development differ, and to neglect this issue will certainly create far worse problems than blisters and aching feet.

ENTEANCE AGE

A common misconception about readiness at any grade level is that it deals
only with the child's intelligence level. The story of Matthew Crane, portrayed earlier, depicts many parents' common belief that because a child is "bright", school and all of the situations it brings will come easily and naturally for him. Dr. Louise Bates Ames cautions parents and educators on this point: "Do not confuse high intelligence with maturity and readiness. A child can be unquestionably bright, but at the same time immature."

This truth is seen not only in Matthew's story, but also in many classrooms within our American school system. Teachers, especially in the primary grades, are handed a group of young children of similar chronological age that vary greatly in maturity and readiness, though they may share comparable IQs. This calls for the need of an accurate definition of "developmental age". Raymond S. Moore, in defining the equatable term Integrated Maturity Level (IML), states that it is "the point at which the developmental variables (affective, psychomotor, perceptual and cognitive) within the child reach an optimum peak of readiness in maturational and cooperative functioning..."

Author Jim Grant supports and expands upon this definition by pointing out that this developmental age may or may not correspond with the child's calendar age. He explains that it is the age in which the child can handle the given criteria or experiences with skill and ease. This is crucial in insuring that each child masters the necessary academic and social skills and is given the opportunity to be successful within the school setting and on into adult life.

So what does this mean for today's parents and educators? What is the practical application? Obviously, this ties in with the aforementioned dangers of pressuring preschool children to learn before they are developmentally ready.
The social competitive determinants just do not merit causing the psychological problems and stress placed upon these young children. But what can we do to change the system and society's rules so that we are better addressing the individual child's needs?

The fundamental aspect is to address the difference between chronological and developmental age. In August of each school year, millions of parents visit their local school to register their young children for kindergarten. Are these parents enrolling their child because he is ready to handle learning within the school setting or simply because the law says that if the child is five-years-old by a certain calendar date, he should begin formal schooling? Unfortunately, the latter is the most frequent, truthful response.

The author is personally aware of one child who was directly affected by this enrollment practice. The child's fifth birthday was just before the required November 1 deadline, and her parents were happy that she had made the "cut-off". She began kindergarten in the fall at the young age of four. Fortunately, because of her developmental age, the young girl was able to handle the academic pressures and social situations. However, she was the exception rather than the rule. Many of our kindergarten classes today are filled with children whose developmental levels are not advanced enough to cope with the academic and social situations, thus adversely affecting the learning environment.

Society has sensed this problem and has tried to solve it by changing the "cut-off" to an earlier date. (Today, the movement has pushed it back to June
1 for most areas). Perhaps due in part to experts' research conclusions, the pendulum has swung back in favor of a later entrance age. The general belief is that if the child's chronological age is older, he will have more of a chance for success. Raymond S. Moore verifies this idea with his findings: "In nearly every case, these long-term studies favor the later entrant. In fact, we know of no such studies that clearly support the idea of early entrance to school, or that demonstrate that early entrants make significant continuing gains in attitudes, motivation, achievement and social and emotional growth."29

These findings were verified by studies conducted with actual elementary children. Inez Kings' study, comparing fifty-four children who started school at the age of 5 years, 8 months - 5 years, 11 months with fifty students starting six months later, revealed that of the eleven who had to repeat a grade, only one came from the older group.30 R. Vance Hall, in his study on the relationship between school age entrance and school achievement, reported that 801 of the 12,800 elementary pupils surveyed had been retained at least once. Of these "retainees", 78% of the boys and 80% of the girls were underage when they started the first grade.31

Although these research statistics appear conclusively in favor of a later entrance age to formalized schooling, caution is suggested with the sole use of chronological age to determine readiness. After all, this philosophy is different from the traditional practice only in the specific age used as a guideline. Question: Where is the reference to the child's individual developmental age and personal stage of development? Answer: It's not found in this "progressive" practice either.
One can not help but note, however, that the studies reveal some interesting points to consider. The results reveal that, in general, the child who waited until six years of age to begin school performed much better than his younger counterparts throughout the school-age years. Not only does this suggest that age six seems to be a more suitable general age for readiness, but it simultaneously refutes all those who are trying to encourage early childhood academics. Perhaps as the pressure increases towards more and more academics in kindergarten, the average readiness age of those enrolling will continue to increase. This clearly demonstrates that children will develop at their own rate and will be able to handle only what they are ready to handle. An increase in societal pressure will not change that.

How, then, can parents and educators determine if a child's developmental level is adequately advanced for school? Careful observation is perhaps the primary clue. However, there are also tests that have been developed to evaluate individual readiness. One such test has been developed by the Gesell Institute. This twenty-minute test includes questions without right or wrong answers, resulting in no "failures". It simply identifies those children who need a little bit of extra time to grow before they are ready to meet the challenges of kindergarten or first grade. It is the author's belief that the results from this type of test, used in conjunction with personal observations, could better determine each child's level of development and thereby help insure that each child's educational beginning is a successful one.

This seems to be such a simple, easy solution, yet school systems within the constraints of our society do not seem overly receptive to the idea. Perhaps in
the near future, there will be a turn towards utilizing an individual's developmental level in enrolling young children in school. However, the problem still faced today is "What about those students who are already in school?"

OVERPLACED CHILDREN

Unfortunately, there are many children already in school that either began school before they were developmentally ready or were pushed too quickly into new grade levels that they were not prepared for. This situation, often referred to as overplacement, occurs as a result of this action and can produce disastrous effects on a child. According to author Barbara Johnson, when children are overplaced, they are not only unhappy with school, but they fall behind in their academic work and many times, never make up the lost ground.33

Most educators would like to believe that the number of these cases is low, yet the statistics suggest otherwise. A 1967 survey by the Gessel Institute reported that 33% of children in the public school system were struggling continually with work that was beyond their ability34, an apparent display of overplacement. Dr. Frances L. Ilg, in a more recent survey, indicated that the chances are more like 50 - 50 that any particular child enrolled in school today is at least one grade beyond his developmental age.35

Obviously, this is not a problem that can be "swept under the rug" or dismissed. These overplaced children, in general, are not just "lazy", unwilling to do the work that is being asked of them. It is a matter of inability rather than unwillingness. We can either ignore these children and allow them to
trudge along, learning little and hating every minute, or we can place them in
the grade level that better suits their developmental level so that enjoyable
learning can occur.

"Unready children are trapped in a situation where they are humiliated in
front of their friends every day, and survival becomes a matter of escape by
daydreaming...clowning...avoiding school...developing psychosomatic illness."³⁶
Sound like a child in your class? The children who exert the most behavior
problems may be just trying to find a way to survive in a situation beyond
their understanding.

The stress that overplaced children have to deal with comes from parents,
teachers, principals, friends and themselves. Although each child in this
position feels the same stress, each one is independent in how he expresses his
feelings. Some, like Dexter Manley, act out and display misbehavior. Others,
however, show their unhappiness in more covert ways. These are the more
difficult students to identify.

According to author Jim Grant, there are various types of students who
struggle with undue stress in elementary school but can not demonstrate it in
obvious ways. One group is made up of those children who are intellectually
bright, but are immature in the social, emotional and physical areas. Another
group consists of those children who are "placed under undue stress to perform
and succeed".³⁷

Parents, teachers, principals and school systems that decide upon using a
system based upon individual developmental levels must first understand how
to detect those students who are overplaced and are not learning to the best of
their ability. As mentioned above, there is no clear-cut rule as to how these children react to stress; their reactions are as unique as their personalities.

Jim Grant, however, provides a listing of possible covert behavior patterns that children under stress often display. Used as a guideline, these seven examples can be used to begin to identify and rectify cases of overplacement:

1. A child who is passive, apathetic or unresponsive.
2. A child who only "goes through the motions"; bored and unmotivated.
3. A child who focuses on academics; doesn't care to do anything but read and study.
4. A child who often "fades into the background"; seldom participates in classroom discussions or activities.
5. A child who uses good communication skills frequently and freely (talks often), but avoids activities involving writing.
6. A child who avoids challenge and competition.
7. A child who frequently procrastinates; postpones work often.

One must be careful, however, not to overgeneralize and suspect every child who possesses one of these behavior traits. To do so would be abusing its intent to be used as a guideline. The Gesell Institute, however, has developed a forty-minute test that can be administered to first, second and third grade students that will evaluate correct grade placement based upon their individual developmental level. According to the testing experts, this test can also help determine if the individual child is ready to be advanced or whether another year at the same level would be more appropriate. Used with personal observation, including the seven listed guidelines, the Gesell test could help administrators make the important decisions based on individual situations.

Once each child has been placed in the correct grade level that corresponds with his developmental level, the struggles and stress that have been in existence will diminish and hopefully, in time, will vanish completely. It seems
like such a simple solution -- allow each child to progress at their independent rate of development.

However, a fundamental, crucial point that must be adhered to is the notion that all of the options should be available for the child's benefit. If anti-retention theorists refuse to acknowledge that this is a viable option, the child who needs another year to grow will not be able to learn at a level that matches his developmental level. Likewise, if a "no social promotion" policy is staunchly adhered to, the child whose self-concept has been run down by multiple retentions certainly is not getting his needs met either.

CURRICULUM ALTERNATIVES

"All children have a right to be placed in the learning environment that best insures their educational achievement." Some school systems have chosen to provide this personal right through flexible promotion and retention practices that meet the child's individual need, as described above. Yet, some schools have seen the need to create new facets within their educational system to accommodate the varying developmental rates. Once again, because educators must be knowledgeable and willing to use all of the available options, two alternative facets that have received some recognition in recent years will be briefly discussed.

One of the most recent progressive trends in alternative education is known as the transitional grading system. According to author Tom Schultz, research indicates that forty of the fifty states report the existence of some type of developmental kindergarten or transitional first grade. Whether referred to as pre-kindergarten, readiness-first, pre-first, or transitional first, the concept
remains the same. The program is designed to allow children the opportunity to develop another year before progressing a full grade level.

Under this system, a child who completes the regular kindergarten class but needs time to develop emotionally, psychologically or socially before encountering the pressures of first grade can be promoted to the transitional first grade. This eliminates any negative feelings of failure because the child is physically progressing to a new classroom. (Pre-kindergarten operates similarly, giving the additional necessary year before kindergarten rather than afterwards).

Although some educators have shown levels of skepticism, this new educational practice seems to be generally well-received. The necessity of having a pre-first grade classroom in one school corporation was discussed in the following manner: "...for some, especially for those slow-maturing boys, its availability can make the difference between school success and school failure." It would only seem reasonable that if a transitional class could be added or even substituted for one of the "regular" classes, the money and effort would be well worth the results seen in the children.

It is important to emphasize, however, that since the transitional grade is provided to meet the individual needs of children who need more time to develop, it would be self-defeating to expect the pre-first grade to contain a curriculum identical to that of the regular first grade. Educators must provide a comfortable atmosphere that includes activities designed to challenge the developing child, but allow for success as well. One school system finds this "fine line" by providing more activity-based material rather than the usual pen and paper method. A child in the transitional grade focuses on developing
physical and motor skills, social skills, problem-solving skills, and most importantly, each child develops habits of success.\textsuperscript{42}

Transitional grading seems to be the most popular alternative, but certainly not the only one. Non-graded schooling is another option, although the required radical structural changes have gained this option an overall negative response. Like the introduction of the open-concept school in the 1960's, it may take many years for this idea to be evaluated and decisions made to alter the established school in such a way as to accommodate the non-graded system.

A non-graded school doesn't mean a school without letter grades as a form of evaluation, as the name implies. Rather, it is a flexible schooling system whereby the boundaries of first grade, second grade, etc. are erased. Each child who enters the school begins with the work appropriate to his own current developmental level, and continues with the more advanced material when he is developmentally ready. There is no "failure", nor is there "passing" without the necessary skills.

The concept of non-graded schools is not a new idea, although little has been mentioned about it until recently. In 1938, a school was established based upon four years of research in this field. It was based on the educational philosophy that "schools must begin with children where they are and provide a flexible program of learning which makes learning possible for each individual on the basis of his capacity to learn and his rate of learning."\textsuperscript{44}

Established in an attempt to avoid the harsh retention practices of the time, the school was organized around units. The primary unit consisted of grades one through three, and the intermediate unit included grades four through six.
The flexibility inherent in this system allowed for the developing needs of not only the "slower" child, but also the needs of those children whose developmental levels were capable of handling more. The "superior" child, for example, might complete each unit in two and one-half years, whereas the "slower" child may take three to four years. Time was not the major factor. Learning was the focus.

One can certainly not advocate the idea that each school corporation across America tear down their organizational structures and utilize either the non-graded or transitional approach. In fact, there are many available options, not limited to those presented here. Dr. Robert J. Reedy, superintendent of schools in New Hampshire, accurately resounds the author's views by stating, "It is not important as to how the child is given time. The important issue is to offer extra time if the child needs it."45

THE DECIDING FACTOR: THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD

Americans have, in general, been very critical of the current educational system. The buck has been passed from superintendent to principal to teacher and then back to the administrators again. It appears that this vicious cycle is doing nothing more than perpetuating serious problems. Educators must stop to consider the child's individual needs and attempt to meet those needs. Only then will we be able to return to a successful learning system of which we can be proud.

Therefore, the time has come for us to re-evaluate our objectives. Will we be satisfied in the "success" of each child who can complete the required
curriculum in thirteen years? Or are we going to begin offering options to children that will allow them to grow and learn in a happy, healthy manner?

It is the author's wish that everyone could see the educational process as Carleton M. Saunders (Ph.D.) sees it: "Education is thought of as a continuous, gradual, growing process. Attempts are made to meet the needs, interests, capacities, and abilities of the pupils." Those who acknowledge the value of this philosophy must attempt to disregard social pressures that try to dictate which alternatives should be considered viable options.

How can we change? The answer, as stated time and time again throughout this paper, involves providing each child with activities that match his developmental age. For some, this means providing a transitional grade to allow for that all-important additional year. Those who are overplaced and are constantly struggling need to be relieved by retention. Still others, frustrated and scarred by years of unfair educational practices, may need to be promoted for psychological and social reasons. There is no clear-cut rule that we can apply to every child. The best solution to the retention vs. social promotion controversy is simply "What's best for the individual child?"

EPISODE: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

As I look towards my future career as a teacher, my mind reflects upon my childhood memories. School was such a joy for me and learning was exciting. Many interesting, motivating experiences were presented at a level that matched my level of development. There was no undue amount of stress placed
upon my shoulders to accomplish more than I was capable of doing. Learning was fun.

I was one of the fortunate ones. There are millions of American children, however, who can not share similar joyous memories. They have been scarred by the inflexibility of their school system; they have learned that learning is worthless. Feeling stressed on a daily basis and learning to feel incompetent, many of these children quit school. These are the only students we truly fail.
INDIVIDUAL INVENTORY

This inventory was developed to be used as a guideline in determining what decisions should be made concerning a particular child. After completing the checklist, correlate your answers carefully, with the needs of the child in mind, to arrive at the best solution.

1. Is the child's chronological age below the average age of the children in your class?  
   YES  NO

2. Does the child interact amicably in a social situation (Can they play/work with other students?)  
   YES  NO

3. Has the child grasped the fundamental concepts appropriate for the grade level?  
   YES  NO

4. Does the child have difficulty with activities involving fine motor skills?  
   YES  NO

5. Is the student bored and unmotivated, showing little interest in anything school-related?  
   YES  NO

6. Does the child ask for directions to be repeated multiple times?  
   YES  NO

7. At certain times of the day, does the child escape to the restroom? (i.e.- during math time)  
   YES  NO

8. Does the child show an inappropriate attachment to mother or home?  
   YES  NO

9. Is the child interested or involved in activities other than academics?  
   YES  NO

10. Has the child's personality changed dramatically? (i.e.- become aggressive, withdrawn, etc.)  
    YES  NO
11. Is the child interested in writing, or attempting to copy written words?  

12. Can the child ask for help when he/she is confused?  

13. Does the child turn in poor work, even though a great deal of effort has been given?  

14. Does the child know his identification information? (Kindergarten/1st grade readiness: name, address, phone no.)  

15. Has the child already been retained?  

16. Does the child often discuss or refer to the previous year's class? (Indicate a desire to return?)  

17. Does the child prefer to play with students in the grade level below his/her current grade level?  

18. Are there covert signs of stress present? (Refer to Grant's 7-point guideline)  

19. Would a transitional or developmental grade suit the child's needs?  

20. Is there a transitional grade available?  

21. Do you believe that the parents will be cooperative with any alternative chosen?  

After all of your responses have been tabulated, and your decision has been made, complete the following questions. Remember, your goal is to find the solution that best meets the needs and developmental level of the individual child.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
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22. Does the principal agree with the decision made?  

23. Do the parents agree?  

24. Has the decision been explained to the child, in a clear, careful manner?  

| YES | NO |
ENDNOTES


11. "Grant, I Hate, p. 39-43.


15. Grant, I Hate, p. 68.


17. Grant, I Hate, pp. 70-71.


19. Grant, I Hate, p. 78.


24 Grant, I Hate, p. 59.


26 Grant, I Hate, p. 11.

27 Dorothy N. Moore and Raymond S. Moore, Better Late Than Early (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1975), p. 34.

28 Grant, I Hate, p. 57.

29 Moore, Better Late, p. 90.


32 Grant, I Hate, p. 62.


34 Ames, Is Your Child, p. 3.

35 Grant, I Hate, p. 2.


37 Ibid, p. 35.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid, p. 64.


43 Grant, *I Hate*, p. 85.

44 Saunders, *Promotion*, p. 50.

45 Grant, *I Hate*, p. 88.

46 Saunders, *Promotion*, p. 5.
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