

A Look at Social Promotion, Grade Retention and Alternatives

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Abstract

This paper explores the issue of grade promotion and social retention in education. The goal of this paper was to determine the advantages and disadvantages of these education policies in addition to examining suggested alternatives and interventions. Three articles, written from three different country's educational perspectives, were examined. Article one provided a look at the practice of grade promotion and social retention in China. The second article examined the issue from an American perspective and the last article was written from a Canadian perspective. All three articles discussed past and current practices in their country. They included numerous research and survey results, determining the effectiveness of retention and social promotion, and suggested alternative interventions. Although all found that there were merits to each of the practices, it was determined that it is time for the education system look beyond these policies and implement alternative interventions which have been proven to provide greater student academic success. Despite a sometimes lengthy and costly implementation process for these alternative interventions, all three articles concluded that there is nothing more important than finding ways to better educate all students in school, in order to prepare them for life beyond school.

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In the first article, “Micro-Study Reveals Flaws in Pedagogy: A Study of Social Promotion in Tianjin, China,” author Jing An, investigated what is revealed about education after school policy changed from the practice of grade retention to social promotion. As part of his study, Jing An interviewed six educators. Three of these educators are pleased with the policy change as they support social promotion, while the other three educators are strongly opposed and believe the practice of grade retention is more beneficial to low achieving students and their future development.

The educators supporting social promotion divide the benefits into three categories: students’ academic future, psychological effect and the tension between teachers and parents. Each Chinese student’s academic progress is recorded in a personal dang’an, which is a record of their individual life experiences from the time they begin school until they die. Having a record of a grade retention in their dang’an may create problems getting acceptance into another school in the future. These teachers also believe that grade retention has a strong negative psychological effect on students. In their opinion, retention excludes students from their original peer group, which can lead to a negative attitude towards studies, making them feel hopeless and worthless. In addition, Ms. Feng claims, “some students dropped out of school after being retained, and became a burden to society; some students even chose to commit suicide simply because of their poor achievement in school” (personal communication, December 11, 2010). Lastly, these educators see that a grade retention policy increases tension between parents and teachers, as parents do not want their children to feel hurt or to be held back.

In contrast, the three educators who support grade retention believe social promotion does more harm than good. They argue that grade retention ensures that students are not moved ahead if they cannot meet the curricular requirements. They feel that there are negative psychological impacts on students who are moved along, as they are often teased and bullied when it becomes obvious to their peers that they are behind academically. These educators also see that negative imitation becomes a factor. The weaker students find the material too hard, give up and develop negative attitudes towards their studies. Other students begin to imitate this negative behavior after realizing that they will not be retained for poor achievement but will move forward with the rest of their peers. In addition to giving up on their studies, struggling students often develop inappropriate attitudes and behavior towards discipline and school rules. These educators see that retained students become more self-disciplined as they realize that they are not free from school rules and regulations.

Despite being on opposing sides of their school division's policy on social promotion, all six educators agree that increased one-on-one tutoring hours is what is needed to help low-achieving students better meet grade level curricular requirements. This is not effective however, if there is no change in teaching methods, leading to the recommendation that all pre-service and in-service teachers need to improve their pedagogical skills. They recommend that all pre-service teachers be required to take two compulsory educational psychology courses as part of their training courses, and that ongoing professional development be provided for currently practicing teachers and administrators. In addition, they feel that all teachers need to be encouraged to consider parents as a valuable resource, and to learn and implement various teacher-parent collaboration strategies, in order to make social promotion a benefit for all.

I found that this article provides a very comprehensive overview of the pros and cons of social promotion from teachers' perspectives, who are on opposite sides of the issue. It is interesting to read that teachers from around the globe, face similar issues to Canadian teachers, in regards to social promotion. Regardless of whether the Chinese educators support the practice of social promotion or not, all feel that teachers need to be encouraged to, "... consider parents as a valuable resource" (An, 2010, p. 14). I strongly agree with this statement as I feel that it is parents who know their children better than anyone else. They spend the greatest amount of time with their children and see how they learn, behave and cope in all types of environments. It is my opinion that it is important for teachers to contact parents immediately, when they first sense some difficulties, in order to open up communication between all parties involved. Although the situation may seem minor initially, it may be upsetting to the child or become a much larger issue if left unaddressed. Parents can be an invaluable resource for teachers as they can share what "works" for their child and provide support to the teacher when implementing new ideas. As a teacher I want to set students up for success. I realize that creating open communication with families does not mean that problems magically disappear. However, I feel that mutual cooperation and attention to most issues tend to make problems less of an obstacle to a child's learning. The article determines that early intervention, parent involvement and increased one-on-one tutoring, using a variety of teaching methods, are the most effective ways to help low-achieving students meet grade level curricular requirements.

The second article, entitled "Alternatives to Social Promotion and Retention," includes research showing that the use of retention and social promotion are "ruining" public education in the United States (Lynch, 2013, p. 1). Documented studies indicate that retention negatively impacts students' behavior, attitude and attendance, and that social promotion negatively impacts

students' futures when they are unable to develop necessary study and job related skills to succeed. According to author Mathew Lynch, the American K – 12 system will continue to deteriorate unless alternate approaches to retention and social promotion are implemented, that will effectively support student development and assist students to achieve academic goals.

In order to be effective, the alternatives to retention and social promotion must include, “accountability, clear standards, early interventions, extended learning time, hiring competent teachers, learning resource programs, mentoring, multiage classrooms, multiple assessment measures, parental involvement, redesigned schools and year around school” (Lynch, 2013, p. 3). In addition, the success of any alternative requires input, cooperation, collaboration, understanding and support for, and from, as many stakeholders as possible, in an effort to reduce barriers to academic success for struggling students. The article lists teachers, school counsellors, administrators, community resources, parents and students all as important stakeholders, and outlines numerous strategies and interventions to replace retention and social promotion.

Two of the most comprehensive interventions discussed in the article are redesigning schools and implementing a year round school year. Both of these interventions mean a complete overhaul of the existing American school system. This supports the author's belief that, “Retention and social promotion policies are overall less about learning, and more about maintaining the structures of schooling as it exists today” (Lynch, 2013, p. 5). Although costly, difficult and very lengthy processes to implement, the results of redesigning schools and implementing a year round school year have enormous potential in improving student achievement, and have proven successful in several countries with high achieving results. In comparison, the cost of schools not implementing alternatives to grade retention and social

promotion policies is also very high, and directly affect students academically, socially, economically, emotionally and even psychologically.

This article really opened my eyes to the fact that there are many more types of interventions that can be used to manage students' poor academic performance than just grade retention or social promotion. Although the article discusses interventions that I am familiar with or have heard about before, there are many that are new to me that, if implemented, would mean very radical changes to the way our schools operate right now. The multiage classroom, one of the suggested interventions, is a new idea to me. It reminds me a little of the old one room school house where all the grades were taught in the same room. Similar to the one room school house, the multiage classroom contains students of different ages, but they are not grouped by grades. The students in the multiage classroom are grouped together to progress continuously, making promotion from year to year unnecessary.

Another suggested practice to decrease the need for social promotion or retention, is to implement a delayed entrance into kindergarten. This idea is also new to me. A delayed entrance means that students will not enter kindergarten according to birthdate; instead they will enter, based on their "developmental age" (Lynch, 2013, p. 13). I see many possible problems arising from adopting this practice. For example, while working as an Early Childhood Educator, I saw many children who were not receiving the stimulus and interaction at home that is needed to acquire age appropriate developmental skills. If kindergarten entrance is delayed, it will mean that these children will be starting school much later than what is considered the norm. I think that they may then go on to experience many of the same issues that grade retention causes with older students being held back.

The final two interventions, as pointed out in the article, mean completely changing our current school system which is both costly and time consuming. I am not sure how realistic redesigning our school system is right now, in light of the provincial budget constraints. However, I would like to learn more about these two interventions, where teachers instruct multiple subjects to the same group of students, over multiple years, in schools that operate year round.

The third article, “Promotion and Retention – What works for students?” takes a look at grade retention and social promotion from a Canadian perspective, initially examining a study done in the Canmore, Alberta education system. The study examines the effects on students who repeat kindergarten. Not surprisingly, it was found that parental attitudes regarding retention and support given to their children, greatly influence their children’s school experiences in later years. Children’s parents who support and encourage them to feel that retention is a normal part of growing up, tend to improve their academic results initially and have no long term self-esteem issues, as they move through the school system. It is important to note that retention of these students was a joint decision done in consultation with, and supported by, the children’s teacher, principal and their parents. These positive results for early retention have supporters arguing that kindergarten retention should be used regularly in order to prevent retention at later grade levels.

The article goes on to reiterate much of the same information given in the first two articles, with regards to the pros and cons of social promotion and retention, on both sides of this education dilemma. Author Jane Mawson, concludes the article stating that she believes that social promotion is a better alternative for students than retention, but that early intervention and effective remedial support are crucial in order for students to experience success at the next level.

My favorite thing in this article was the author's swimming lesson analogy for retention and social promotion. When the author was 17 years old she worked as an Assistant Water Safety instructor. She helped to teach the Level Two "Sunfish" students. At the end of one session, only three of her students had achieved the skills necessary to move on to the next level, where they would swim in deep water for the first time. Despite not achieving the required skills, the other instructor wanted to promote all of the children. However, their Head Instructor insisted that only the three children who had attained the skills, be promoted to the next level. This analogy really made me reflect upon how "socially promoting" these little swimmers to the next level could literally have had them drowning in deep water. The analogy led me to question if socially promoted students feel as if they are "drowning," when they do not have the skills or knowledge necessary to perform at the next grade level. And, if so, does this mean that grade retention is a better alternative to social promotion?

After studying these articles, I have learned that there are definite pros and cons to both social promotion and grade retention, but that most countries are using social promotion over grade retention, which was once the most common intervention. It is interesting to read that, in the survey results provided, most educators feel that social promotion has greater benefits for academically struggling students than grade retention. I find this very surprising as I have heard many teachers express concern that we are just "pushing students through," and that these students never catch up academically, so they graduate with large deficits in their learning and are not prepared to cope with life after high school. Despite more educators favoring social promotion over retention, there is overwhelming agreement that social promotion is not the answer either. Numerous other types of interventions were introduced, that show better results for academically challenged students, than either social promotion or grade retention. Despite the fact that all of

these alternate interventions come with added costs to the education system, I agree with author Mathew Lynch, when he says what is needed is, “. . . a comprehensive strategy, or series of strategies that target the various factors that lead to a student having limited academic success in a school environment” (Lynch, 2013, p. 7). I firmly believe that the benefit of identifying academically struggling students early on in their school career, and addressing these problems with the most effective strategies possible, regardless of the cost, far outweighs the price of implementing and maintaining these alternate strategies. After all, the students of today are the future of tomorrow and the education system must do everything it can to prepare our students to lead happy and productive lives outside of school.

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