Student Retention Impacts and Outcomes

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Review of Literature

Introduction

This literature review summarizes existing literature on evidence-based impacts and outcomes of student retention and retention policy by grade level. Previous research on retention and retention policy highlights several important but conflicting issues. Many school districts set specific requirements for student promotion to the next grade, which can leave educators with difficult and complicated decisions to make when students do not meet these benchmarks. Furthermore, there exist several risk and protective factors that make students more or less likely to be retained, and in the age of COVID-19 and concerns about significant learning-loss, more guidance and understanding on this topic is needed.

Who gets retained?

Student retention rates vary widely by race and gender. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), Black students are twice as likely to be retained than white students, and boys are twice as likely to be retained than girls. Grade retention rates are also highest in first grade, and then peak again in ninth grade (Warren, Hoffman, & Andrew, 2014). Reasons for this are unclear, however. Retention rates also vary by geographic location, with studies showing students living in the South and Northeast more likely to be retained (West, 2009; Warren et al., 2014). Retention is more likely to occur among students categorized as low socio-economic status (SES; Yang, Chen, Rhodes, & Orooji, 2018), and also among immigrant and non-native English-speaking children (Hauser, Frederick, & Andrew, 2007; Warren et al., 2014).

According to nationwide data collected by the US Department of Education for the 2009-2010 academic year, more than half of all fourth graders who were retained were Black (56 percent) and Black students made up almost half (49 percent) of all students retained in the third grade. When all grade levels were combined, Black students were three times as likely to be retained than white students, even though Black students made up less than one-fifth of the student population nationally.

Key retention outcomes

A few notable studies have examined the overall effectiveness of retention on student academic success (Jackson, 1975; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001), and those have largely found limited evidence for a positive relationship between retention and later academic achievement. Jackson (1975) conducted a systematic review of 44 studies focusing on retention outcomes and found limited to no relationship between retention and academic achievement. Similarly, Holmes and Matthews (1984) conducted a systematic review of 44 separate studies where retained students were compared with their promoted counterparts and they too found no evidence for a positive relationship. In fact, these researchers found that students who were promoted had “higher academic achievement, better personal adjustment, and more positive attitudes toward school” than retained students. Jimerson (2001) later followed-up these systematic reviews with a meta-analysis of only studies done where retained students were compared with a control group and found no significant differences in academic achievement between the two groups in most of the studies reviewed, and in those studies where differences existed, they favored promoted students.

The most critical negative outcome of grade retention is dropout. Previous studies show that students who have been retained at some point during their academic career were 3 to 5 times more likely to drop out of school, while other studies found retained students to be 5 to 11 times more likely to drop out (Goldenring Fine & Davis, 2006; Penna & Tallerico, 2005). Goldenring Fine and Davis (2003) also looked at the impact of retention on future college enrollment and found that students who experienced retention later in their academic years (high school) were significantly less likely to pursue a post-secondary education than if they were retained earlier. While some studies show that students retained between kindergarten and sixth grade have the highest rates of dropout (Roderick, 1994), others (Jacob & Lundgren, 2007) found that students retained in eighth grade were more likely to dropout than their non-retained peers, and this was not the case for retained sixth graders when compared to their non-retained counterparts.

Conflicting stances on retention

Some researchers and educators argue that retention can lead to negative outcomes such as poor social adjustment, increased behavior problems, negative self-image, and issues with attendance (Holmes, 1989; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). Others argue that retention can be a useful way to give students more time to mature and get the help they need, and suggest that when more rigorous studies are done where other compounding factors are controlled for, retention does not *always* have a negative impact on student outcomes (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005).

One notable example comes from Florida's *Just Read, Florida!* initiative. A multiyear evaluation of the program found that students who were retained in 3rd grade due to low reading scores later outperformed their non-retained counterparts in reading, mathematics, and science through grade 7 (Winters & Green, 2012). Another evaluation of a reading-based retention program implemented in New York City showed that students retained in 3rd grade for low reading scores showed academic improvement and *no* social-emotional issues by 7th grade (RAND Corp, 2009). It is important to note that in both these initiatives, students who were retained were required to enroll in intensive supplemental reading programs and in the case of Florida, students were paired with a "high-quality teacher" for the upcoming school year.

Still, studies like the ones cited above are limited, and a larger number of studies find that retention does not bring about the desired result (i.e., academic success) in the long-term. Recent studies find no evidence that students retained in early grades experienced any benefits in math and reading by the completion of elementary school years (Hong & Yu, 2007; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005).

Methodological considerations

The actual number of students being retained nationally is suspected to be relatively small. Furthermore, issues with state-level and national-level reporting have caused discrepancies in collecting accurate data. Data from the US Department of Education in 2009-2010 put the number of students retained nationally at just under 1 million (2.3 percent), and there is evidence that retention rates have dramatically decreased since 2004-2005 (Warren et al., 2014). Still, several methodological issues exist that make it difficult to accurately understand retention literature and the impact of retention on student outcomes.

Empirical studies done on retention generally use one of two main approaches: same-grade comparisons vs. same-age comparisons (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Same-grade comparisons compare retained students to students who have just entered the same grade after being promoted from the previous grade, while same-age comparison studies compare retained students to students who were promoted to the next grade. Same-grade comparison studies, while helpful for understanding current academic and social-emotional characteristics of retained students in contrast to where they should be, tell us little about long-term impacts of retention, and have historically yielded inconsistent results (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Studies using same-age comparisons help to show long-term differences in retained students vs. promoted students, and notably, these studies have consistently found that promoted students have significantly better outcomes than retained students, even when controlling for other factors and characteristics between the groups (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005).

Unfortunately, longitudinal studies of long-term impacts of retention on student outcomes are lacking (Warren et al., 2014). More longitudinal studies looking at the impact of grade retention on individual students can be beneficial in furthering our understanding of the direct impact of retention on students. In all, evidence shows that retention can have little to no, and even negative impacts on student educational success and should be avoided when possible. Instead, putting in place multi-tiered systems of support to address student academic needs seems more effective than implementing broad retention policy (Tingle, Schoeneberger, & Algozzine, 2012).

Key Takeaway

The research on student retention is somewhat limited and results are mixed. However, most literature suggests that retention does not have positive impacts for, or negatively impacts, students. Alternative approaches to supporting students should be sought rather than retention.

Selected references*

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