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Grade Retention and Social Promotion Among
Middle School Students

by

Travis C. Shaw

March, 2011

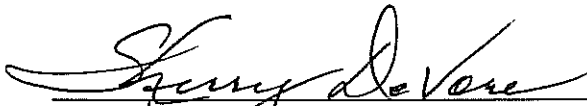
A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
School of Education

Grade Retention and Social Promotion Among
Middle School Students

by

Travis C. Shaw

This Dissertation has been approved as partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
Lindenwood University, School of Education



Dr. Sherry DeVore, Dissertation Chair

3/24/11
Date



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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree.

Full Legal Name: Travis C. Shaw

Signature: Travis C. Shaw Date: 3/24/11

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Abstract

The use of grade retention and social promotion among middle school students in Missouri was analyzed in this study. Quantitative data were gathered from 115 middle school principals who completed an online survey regarding grade retention and social promotion. Qualitative data were collected from five middle school principals in southwest Missouri who participated in an interview. The five principals selected students from their respective schools to participate in an interview where additional qualitative data were collected. The students who were selected had been retained or socially promoted while in grades six through eight. Data collected from the survey showed 68% of participating principals retained students, and 78% of participating principals socially promoted students. The data from the survey also revealed the participating principals felt it was important to involve teachers and parents when retaining or socially promoting students. A student's grades were the biggest contributor to grade retention, and a student's age was the biggest factor when choosing to socially promote. The retained students who were interviewed had a more positive attitude than the socially promoted students. The retained students who were interviewed had seen improvement in their grades and attendance from the previous year, whereas only half of the socially promoted students had seen improvement in their grades and attendance. Despite what most research yielded regarding negative long term effects of grade retention, middle school principals continue to use this option. However, the retained students who were interviewed showed improvement and had a positive outlook on their future.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Educators at the second largest school district in Missouri are making an impact on at-risk students, and the result has been a drastic reduction in the district's dropout rate. Students at all grade levels who have low attendance, poor behavior, or struggle in reading or math, have been identified and intervention plans have been created (Riley, 2011). Students who struggle in these areas are often socially promoted, or retained in the same grade level, at some point during their education.

The educators in this district understand social promotion and grade retention cannot be effective without focusing on each individual student, and that is why the district implemented the Persistence to Graduation Initiative four years ago. Through the initiative, educators primarily focus on increasing student attendance and providing a positive mentor for students (Riley, 2011). The director of attendance service, Morgan (as cited in Riley, 2011), commented, "They [the students] have to be here if you're going to have success" (p. 4A).

When one student from this same district started high school, she was missing class once a week and began to see her grades drop (Riley, 2011). Quickly, educators in the district intervened to keep the student from dropping out. Now, this 19 year old high school student is very thankful for having teachers who care about her (Riley, 2011). The student, who attends a mentoring program entitled, *Saving One Kid at a Time*, reported, "It's good to have someone who checks in on me, who cares about me. It helped me. Without it, I don't know where I'd have been" (p. 4A).

Background of the Study

The over-arching questions guiding this study served to examine grade retention and social promotion: If schools are currently retaining students at the middle school level, are the students successful the following year? What interventions ensure success for the student? What are the reasons a school would choose to promote a student?

Student grade retention in schools has taken place for several years (Holmes, 2006) and is predominately used within the elementary schools in the early grades (Silberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006). Educators are aware of students who were retained at the middle school level or even started kindergarten late because parents did not feel the child was ready (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). However, some parents are more concerned with the social stigma associated with retention and less concerned with the academic benefits, so they insist their child be socially promoted to the next grade (Berlin, 2008). Without targeted, systematic interventions in place, both social promotion and grade retention are unlikely to be successful thereby increasing the chances a student will drop out of school (Mattos, 2008).

Grade Retention

Hong and Yu (2008) published a study which focused on a group of kindergarten students who had been retained for academic reasons. Hong and Yu (2008) reported:

No evidence suggest[s] that kindergarten retention does harm to a child's social-emotional development. Rather, the findings suggest that, had the retained kindergartners been promoted to the first grade instead, they would possibly have developed a lower level of self-confidence. (p. 407)

Hong and Yu (2008) also indicated that the students may have struggled the following year in reading, and most likely the school would encounter discipline problems with the students who were promoted prematurely.

If grade retention is necessary for kindergarten students who do not demonstrate the skills needed to be successful the following year, can the same be true for middle school students? Does a student's social-emotional development play a bigger role as the student becomes older, or is it more beneficial to retain the student at an earlier age? Stone and Engel (2007) studied 22 elementary students retained because of Chicago's new policy on social promotion and focused on the intervention of retention:

Students were most often exposed to the same material used in the previous year. Although access to remedial supports varied, students reported little guidance from teachers and generally did not change their learning strategies. However, students with high levels of instructional support who altered their learning strategies during the retained year were relatively more academically successful. (p. 605)

With appropriate interventions, including academic support from teachers and changes in the learning strategies employed by students, grade retention can be a positive experience (Stone & Engel, 2007).

What issues arise when students at the middle school level are retained?

According to Mattos (2008), when students are retained while in middle school, their achievement levels actually decrease the following school year. A middle school teacher, Sharp, argued retention is not good for students and questioned why her district continued the same practices (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). Schools often have strict, specific criteria or

policies, for retaining students which leaves no consideration for the whole student, causing the student to be retained without exception. With such policies in place, educators may not be considering the best interest of the student (Larsen & Akmal, 2007).

What are the social ramifications a student faces after being retained? Students' self-esteems may be shattered because they are made to feel like a failure (Anderson, Whipple, & Jimerson, 2003). Often students who have been retained feel unintelligent because their classmates become aware of their failures (Penna & Tallericco, 2005). The relationship students have with their parents may also be strained because there is a sense of disappointment that goes along with retention (Bowman, 2005). These ramifications have administrators, teachers, and parents questioning whether retention is the best solution for the students. Another solution for struggling students may be social promotion, which, arguably may give the students confidence to succeed at the next grade level.

Social Promotion

According to Mohl and Slifer (2005), social promotion has three damaging outcomes on the educational structure:

First, it taxes both teachers and students. Promoting a student into a higher level of English when he/she lacks basic reading skills places an undue burden on future teachers and students. Second, it sends a message to students that they can move on to the next level even if they lack the required knowledge or effort. Social promotion also distances schools from their goals of fulfilling No Child Left Behind standards. (p. 48)

However, socially promoting students may give them a sense of hope. Students may feel this is their second chance to prove they are capable of stronger achievement (Potter, 2003), and the opportunity to succeed is within their grasp (Doyle, 2004). Students' self-esteems may not be affected negatively if they are promoted to the next grade because of the confidence the teachers and principal may be instilling in the students (Jacob & Stone, 2005).

The argument of whether grade retention or social promotion is the best solution for students began many years ago and is still highly debated among educators today. Grade retention has been the most commonly used predictor for students who do not graduate from high school, yet school administrators continue to retain students (Penna & Talerico, 2005). Also, if social promotion dismisses student academic accountability, then school administrators need to explore research-based interventions that will close the achievement gap (Berlin, 2008).

Teaching and Learning

For student success, interventions should be implemented following the year that a student struggled but was not retained (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009; Stone & Engel, 2007). In some elementary schools, there is more than one teacher for each grade level. This configuration allows a student who is retained to have a completely different atmosphere for learning. However, when students reach the fifth and sixth grade, many schools departmentalize core classes (Legters, McDill, & McPartland, 1993). A small school may have one teacher per grade level for each subject area. In this setting, retained students will have the same teachers and teaching strategies as the previous year.

Educators must implement a Response to Intervention (RtI) for struggling students (Buffum et al., 2009), and create a pyramid of interventions that works best for their students (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). In the bottom tier of interventions, or Tier I, educators initiate universal strategies that will target all students (Mattos, 2008). If these strategies are implemented correctly, 85-90% of students should be successful (Buffum et al., 2009). In the second tier of interventions, educators target students who are not successful after Tier I strategies were implemented (Mattos, 2008). Roughly 10-15% of the student population, require Tier II interventions in which strategies are more individualized. Approximately 5% of students in Tier II will still not experience success; therefore, a different set of interventions are implemented for these students (DuFour et al., 2004). This set of instructional strategies is referred to as Tier III interventions. Strategies in this tier are very intense and targeted for each individual in hope that the student will be successful.

The *how* in teaching and learning is extremely important (Schmoker, 2006). According to Schmoker (2006), two critical questions that must be answered to achieve student success are: What are the students being taught, and what teaching strategies are being used to teach the students? The curriculum may not change for students who are retained, but how the teacher instructs must be different from the previous year or the results will be the same (Buffum et al., 2009). Teachers must offer higher levels of instructional support by matching the teaching strategies to the student's learning style (Potter, 2003). According to DuFour et al. (2004), if an educator focuses on the *learning* of the students rather than the *teaching* by the teachers, students can be successful.

Statement of the Problem

Each year, middle school students are promoted to the next grade level when the expected level of performance was not achieved; this is known as social promotion (Berlin, 2008). Students enter the next grade level lacking the necessary academic skills for success. Mohl and Slifer (2005) stated that social promotion is one of the biggest problems that middle schools face. Students who move to the next grade level, despite not showing proficiency, place an undue burden on their teachers and themselves (Mohl & Slifer, 2005). Social promotion also sends a message to students that no matter how low their grades, the students will still be promoted to the next grade (Berlin, 2008); thereby, enabling less than adequate effort (Parker, 2001).

When students in middle school continue to fail each year and are promoted to high school without the academic discipline or study skills to be successful, changes in the students' attitudes or behaviors must occur or failures will continue (Berlin, 2008). Social promotion does not hold students accountable for their learning and also inhibits motivation among students (Greene & Winters, 2006). Because students continue to fall behind after being socially promoted, schools may struggle to meet the goals under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (Mohl & Slifer, 2005).

Students may be required to repeat the same grade level because of failing grades. Depending on the setting, students may have the same teacher and learning experiences as the previous year. Can students be successful in the same environment they once experienced failure? Not only are there obstacles with the school setting, but when a student is retained the chance of dropout is increased by 35% (Penna & Talerico, 2005). If a student is retained twice, the probability of dropping out is nearly 100% (Penna &

Tallerico, 2005). Retention is also often used as a punishment or to increase the level of academic accountability with students (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). Unfortunately, 5-10% of students each year are retained because they have met a school district's criteria for retention (Eide & Goldhaber, 2005). The specific academic problems are often not addressed with retention; therefore, the problems still exist the following school year (Anderson et al., 2003).

With grade retention the largest predictor of students dropping out (Lillard & DeCicca, 2001), why do educators still use this option for students? When students drop out of school, their future income is reduced, they are more likely to be incarcerated, and their opportunity for further education is diminished (Heubert, 2003). According to the U.S. Department of Education (1999), dropout rates continued to increase during the 1990s, and within the last few years that trend has continued. Greene and Winters (2006) reported a high school student drops out every nine seconds. The opportunity of success for students who are retained in the same grade is not impossible, but less likely (Penna & Tallerico, 2005).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of grade retention and social promotion on student achievement in public middle schools in Missouri. Also, the purpose of this study was to garner the perceptions of students and principals surrounding grade retention and social promotion. Grade retention and social promotion policies, procedures, and criteria used in middle schools were examined then compared with findings from relevant research.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the opinions of middle school students who have been retained regarding their current grades as compared to grades from the previous year?
2. What are the opinions of middle school students who have been socially promoted regarding their grades as compared to grades from the previous year?
3. What are the perceptions of students and principals regarding grade retention and social promotion?
4. What criteria are used by school districts when educators are considering retention and social promotion?

Significance of the Study

The research surrounding grade retention and social promotion was conducted mostly in the 1990s when the focus was on eliminating tracking and ability grouping through the United States Reform Movement (David, 2008). Grade retention was prevalent during this era because intervention strategies were not commonly used and retention was viewed as the only solution. Recently, David (2008) argued, “a major weakness in the research on retention is documenting the educational experiences of students who are retained” (p. 84). Students who are not provided individual, targeted interventions “are unlikely to catch up whether they are promoted or retained” (David, 2008, p. 84).

Since the mandates of accountability and high expectations were instated in 2001 through the NCLB Act, the effectiveness of grade retention and social promotion has, once again, been questioned. According to David (2008), “today’s expectation that all

students will meet high standards has contributed to a backlash against ‘social promotion.’ In this environment, grade retention has been making a comeback” (p. 83). From 2003 to 2007, 8.8% of sixth through eighth graders had been retained (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The percentage has ranged from 6.2% to as high as 13.3% over the past 14 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Jacob and Lefgren (as cited in David, 2008) “concluded that students retained in 8th grade were more likely to drop out than their peers...” (p. 84). Changes in education have led to stricter guidelines and higher expectations for individual student achievement. With targeted benchmarks in place and a greater emphasis on interventions, will students benefit from retention or promotion, if mastery is not attained?

Research Design

The ongoing debate among educators concerning retention versus social promotion continues each year as administrators and teachers attempt to make the right decision for students. Through this study, middle school principals provided their opinions and perceptions through the completion of a survey. The participants chosen to complete the survey included all public middle school principals in Missouri. The principals who were chosen to be interviewed were from public middle schools and junior highs in the southwest region of Missouri. The students who were selected to be interviewed had either been retained or socially promoted while in grades six, seven, or eight. Quantitative data were collected from the survey responses and qualitative data were obtained from principal and student interviews.

Theoretical Framework

Schools must focus on learning, and teachers must implement best practices in instruction. For these strategies to occur, teachers need to understand that conditions of learning affect the education of all students. Gagne's (1985) conditions of learning provided the lens to view the instructional strategies that need to occur for students to be successful. Gagne (1985) described the four principles of the condition of learning theory:

1. Different instruction is required for different learning outcomes.
2. Events of learning maneuver the learner in ways that constitute the conditions of learning.
3. The specific operations that constitute the instructional events are different for each various type of learning outcome.
4. Learning hierarchies define what intellectual skills are to be learned and a sequence of instruction. (p. 29)

These four principles are often referred to as *differentiated instruction*: teaching with the student's individual needs in mind (Tomlinson, 2003).

Grade retention and social promotion would be less prevalent in schools if Gagne's (1985) conditions of learning theory, along with specific instructional strategies, were accepted and implemented in classrooms (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). According to Marzano et al. (2001) and Tomlinson (2003), using a variety of instructional strategies when teaching students ensures that all students have the best opportunity to learn. Educators will be focused on the necessary intellectual skills to be mastered and plan their progression of instruction accordingly (Gagne, 1985). If the

instruction does not exist in the classroom and students are retained or socially promoted, the conditions of learning that are present must be adapted to meet the needs of the students.

Definition of Key Terms

To assist the reader in understanding the terms particular to this study, the following definitions are offered:

Core subject. The subjects in a student's schedule that are considered the most important for that student to be successful outside of school.

Curriculum. The necessary objectives and activities within the set of courses offered by an educational institution (Schmoker, 2006).

Departmentalize. Assigning students to specific classrooms where teachers are highly-qualified in the given subjects.

Intervention. Alternative measures a teacher would use to assist students who are struggling academically or behaviorally (Stone & Engel, 2007).

Proficiency. An advancement in knowledge or skill; a thorough competence derived from training and practice (Webster's New College Dictionary, 3rd ed., 2008, p. 939).

Remedial. Intended to correct or improve one's skill in a specified field.

Social-emotional development. Hong and Yu (2008) defined social-emotional development as "the ability to pay attention, make transitions from one activity to another, and cooperate with others in a school environment" (p. 412).

Social promotion. Any student promoted to the next grade level regardless of his or her academic or behavioral performance in the previous grade.

Limitations

Limitations of a study are “those characteristics of design or methodology that set parameters on the application or interpretation of the results of the study” (Mitchell, Wirt, & Marshall, 1986). The following limitations were identified:

1. Because the survey was voluntary, the level of participation was unpredictable; thereby affecting the sample size.
2. There was no control over which parents allowed their child to participate in the study.
3. The principals’ responses during the interview sessions were self-reported perceptions and may not have reflected the stated policy of the school districts.

Delimitations

Delimitations of a study “are those characteristics that limit the scope (define the boundaries) of the inquiry as determined by the conscious exclusionary and inclusionary decisions that were made throughout the development of the proposal” (Mitchell et al., 1986). The following delimitations were identified:

1. Only principals of public middle or junior high schools in Missouri received the survey.
2. Students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades who had been retained or socially promoted were included in this study.

Summary

Why is it necessary to research retention and social promotion in middle schools? Each year middle school students are promoted to the next grade level when academic performance was not demonstrated, which may cause an unwanted burden on teachers

and students (Mohl & Slifer, 2005). Students who are socially promoted, despite failing grades in core classes, may experience failures once again because they lack the necessary skills for success. Students are also retained each year with the hope of a second chance for success; yet, grade retention has been the most commonly used predictor for students who do not graduate from high school (Penna & Talerico, 2005). Grade retention may also lower students' self-esteem because they may feel defeated (Penna & Talerico, 2005). Obtaining both quantitative and qualitative data from middle school principals and students may provide insight on the use of current practices and perceptions regarding grade retention and social promotion.

In Chapter Two, a review of literature was presented. Chapter Three contained a detailed description of the methodology. An analysis of data were included in Chapter Four, and a summary of findings was reported in Chapter Five.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Grade retention and social promotion are continually debated among school administrators, counselors, teachers, and parents. In the following review of literature, Gagne's (1985) conditions of learning were presented as proven strategies that work in classrooms and could decrease the use of grade retention and social promotion if implemented correctly. The characteristics of at-risk students were explored, and research regarding what makes at-risk students successful was also reviewed. Background information and a historical perspective were provided on both grade retention and social promotion. Lastly, information on summer school and other widely used interventions for struggling learners were explored.

Some educators believe that retention is essential for students who have not mastered the necessary skills (Mohl & Slifer, 2005). Other educators may have a different opinion and feel enrolling students in a summer school program will prepare them for the next school year (Johnson, 2001). Promoting students socially may also be the solution that gives these students higher self-esteem and the best opportunity for success (Doyle, 2004). Students in middle school look to peers for support, modeling their behavior, and defining their ethical standards according to what is acceptable (Pennington, 2009). Still, some educators will argue retention, social promotion, and summer school alone cannot be successful without proper intervention, and in fact, will contribute to a child being unsuccessful and disliking school (Cuddapah, Masci, Smallwood, & Holland, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

Gagne (1985) reported different instructional approaches are critical if a teacher expects different results for a student, and prerequisites are necessary for a student to be successful. Prerequisites established by educators identify strengths and weaknesses of a student; therefore, teachers can better assess a student's needs. By identifying a student's strengths and weaknesses, learning is more individualized, giving a student the best opportunity for success.

Gagne (1985) suggested, "Learning tasks for intellectual skills can be organized in a hierarchy according to complexity" (p. 92). He also added:

The primary significance of the hierarchy is to identify prerequisites that should be completed to facilitate learning at each level. Prerequisites are identified by doing a task analysis of a learning/training task. Learning hierarchies provide a basis for the sequencing of instruction. (p. 92)

If a teacher's instructional strategies are designed around the learner's needs, the student can be successful; therefore, the use of grade retention or promoting a student unjustly would not be necessary (Gagne, 1985). In the event educators felt social promotion or grade retention were necessary, understanding the proper learning hierarchies for the student would ensure the correct sequence of instruction for student success. Also, if a student was socially promoted or retained, implementing the appropriate strategies to accommodate the student's needs would increase the opportunity for greater success.

To effectively reach all students, not just those who are at-risk of failure, nine instructional events should take place in the classroom:

- Gaining attention.
- Informing learner of the objective(s).
- Stimulating recall of prerequisite learning.
- Presenting the stimulus material.
- Providing learning guidance.
- Eliciting the performance.
- Providing feedback about performance.
- Assessing performance.
- Enhancing retention and transfer. (Gagne, 1985, p. 5)

Using research-based best teaching practices and differentiated instruction epitomizes what Gagne (1985) believed to be critical for student achievement. Implementation of Gagne's (1985) conditions of learning, along with addressing the social obstacles that failing students encounter, may contribute to increased student achievement. Other researchers, such as Marzano et al. (2001), also described specific research based instructional strategies that work for all students in the classroom.

According to Marzano et al. (2001), there are specific teaching strategies that have positive effects on student achievement and accommodate the various learning styles in which students exhibit. Creating the appropriate conditions of learning (Gagne, 1985) and using differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2003) have a positive effect on students' learning outcomes. Marzano et al. (2001)

identified specific instructional strategies which translate into percentage gains in student achievement:

1. Identifying similarities and differences 45% gain
2. Summarizing and note taking 34% gain
3. Reinforcing effort and providing recognition 29% gain
4. Homework and practice 28% gain
5. Nonlinguistic representations 27% gain
6. Cooperative learning 27% gain
7. Setting objectives and providing feedback 23% gain
8. Generating and testing hypotheses 23% gain
9. Questions, cues, and advance organizers 22% gain (p. 7)

When educators use different research based teaching strategies with their students, the learning outcomes for these students will increase (Marzano et al., 2001); thereby, decreasing the probability of student failure and grade retention.

Students At-risk

The majority of middle school students will be successful and productive in high school and beyond (Johnson & Perkins, 2009). Others will struggle and not have the support necessary from the school or their parents to be successful and will become at-risk to grade retention or dropping out of school (Johnson & Perkins, 2009). There are certain characteristics that determine whether a student is considered at-risk. Their behavior may be erratic and inconsistent. They may feel a sense of both superiority and inferiority and are often fearful and anxious in their surroundings (Cichucki, 2007). At-risk students can become angry in a short period of time making adults struggle to

understand their intentions (Child Development Institute, 2010). This causes students to act very childish (California Department of Education, 1987) with frequent mood swings.

At-risk students face some of the toughest challenges in life and in school.

Educators cannot teach at-risk students the same way they teach other students because of the chronic stressors in at-risk students' lives (Jensen, 2009). At-risk students may be self-conscious, struggle with self-esteem (Freeman, 2009), and search for some adult identity among their peers (Pennington, 2009). They may be sensitive and take offense to any kind of criticism, but at the same time can be optimistic and hopeful about their future when involved with a positive mentor (California Department of Education, 1987). At-risk students are often from poverty and struggle academically because of the lack of parental support (Neuman, 2008).

Students of poverty. In America, nearly one out of every five children lives in poverty, which is one of the highest poverty rates in the developed world (Neuman, 2009). Middle school students need to feel safe, have food when they are hungry, and have someone in their lives who consistently takes care of them. Students of poverty often do not have these essential needs (Jensen, 2009). Two critical factors for student success are the consistency of attendance and parent's level of involvement in the educational process. Families of poverty are mostly concerned with survival; therefore, their child's education is often overlooked (Jensen, 2009). Making sure their child goes to school consistently and helping with homework are secondary to putting food on the table. When this happens, a student's chance for success diminishes.

Since the NCLB legislation was enacted, schools must follow government mandates to ensure funding; however, the students of poverty may be adversely affected.

Neuman (2009) stated:

The single best determinant of a school's likely output is a single input; the characteristics of the entering children. The painful truth is that we have done almost nothing to raise or change the trajectory of achievement for our disadvantaged children. (p. 582)

Early and frequent interventions, especially with poverty stricken students, are crucial to change the trajectory of achievement (Buffum et al., 2009).

During a study by Larsen and Akmal (2007), Patterson, an elementary principal, was interviewed and asked to relate her experiences with grade retention. Patterson was aware of the research pertaining to grade retention and requested her superintendent produce research that supported the school system's new policy on grade retention (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). Her supervisor refused while emphasizing the importance of the district's promotion policy (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). Patterson realized policy, practice, and research may often have differences, and was reported as stating, "You just do what you need to do. It doesn't make any difference what the research says about retention right now" (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p.11). Moreover, Patterson emphasized:

We teach the child who has come out of something like Oliver Twist and has been homeless, or has lived over a dog kennel after the father abandoned Mom and the four kids. These students will go on to middle school. There is just no way that I'm leaving that kid behind. It's just not going to happen!

And it doesn't make any difference whether they're at grade level or not at grade level. (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 11)

Following reflection, Patterson realized the need to complete the necessary paperwork, as per policy, and conceded, "It's the right thing to do" (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 11).

Sharp, a seventh grade teacher at Mountain View Middle School, agreed with Patterson. Sharp believed retention targeted those students who are already at-risk because of their struggles at home (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). Sharp also recognized the differences in academic success between students facing poverty and those who do not:

The basic needs are an issue. With lives like these, how can they walk around and look normal? They should have a big sign on them: I'm broken and can't be fixed. We have multi-parent families, single-parent families, no-parent families; families are in extreme distress. People who don't live in poverty are so oblivious to that. They say, "Well, this isn't happening in my neighborhood or school, so it must be a problem with the school." To me, often the people that are oblivious are, unfortunately, also the ones who are making the decision. (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 11)

Pittman, a middle school principal, remarked, "A lot of these kids have a lot of problems. I don't think they're working at being retained. They're just not working at being academic" (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, pp. 11-12).

Effects of grade transitions. In the 1960s, researchers studied incoming middle school students to determine if the decline in academic performance after exiting elementary school was truly the phenomenon educators believed. According to Finger and Silverman (1966), there was a decline in achievement for the majority of the 489

middle school students who were studied during their transition year from elementary to middle school. The decline in achievement was highly related to the students' lack of academic motivation (Finger & Silverman, 1966). Middle school students are often intensely curious (Hooft, 2005) and would rather learn by being active and not sedentary (Freeman, 2009). They often want interaction with their peers rather than their teachers (California Department of Education, 1987) and often do not care about academic goals, but would rather make friends and interact socially (Cichucki, 2007). If students are not taught with the aforementioned characteristics in mind, it may be more difficult for the students to be successful.

A study conducted in the 1980s also indicated an overall decline in academic performance after students entered middle schools. Petersen and Crockett (1985) studied records of 335 students and reported the students' academic performance dropped significantly at seventh grade. This was the transitional grade level for subjects such as mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies (Petersen & Crockett, 1985). If middle school curriculum is not presented in a manner in which students can find personal relevance, they may not be motivated to learn. Middle school students will exert the most effort to learn things they see useful in their lives and enjoy using skills that will solve daily problems (California Department of Education, 1987). An even greater decline in academics was discovered for those students who experienced a school transition between grades six and seven (Blyth, Simmons, & Cariton-Ford, 1983). Still, students who had two school transitions during their middle school years experienced the greatest decline in academics (Crockett, Petersen, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989).

Interventions for at-risk students. Students are labeled at-risk because they lack confidence and success in their academic accomplishments (Cuddapah et al., 2008). A study, published in 2008, described the effects of a Professional Development School sponsored summer program on at-risk students. The students enrolled in the program displayed negative behavior patterns and increasingly removed themselves both mentally and physically from the learning environment (Cuddapah et al., 2008). These students often skipped school and were at high risk for dropping out of school, which would likely lead to “individual and social consequences of dropping out of high school are considerable” (Belfanz, Legters, & Jordan, 2004, p. 1). Cuddapah et al. (2008) concluded the students in the summer program increased their attendance rate and grade point average because of the individualized, targeted interventions that were implemented.

According to Fairchild, McLaughlin, and Brady (2006), out-of-school time is defined as “any amount of time frame after normal school hours or during the summer” (p. 1) and are logical places to start when working with at-risk students because of the changed school environment (Kugler, 2001). Day (2002) believed different classroom environments and strategies are necessary to meet the needs of at-risk students. Day (2002) reported, “Motivation to learn is crucial for at-risk students, who can be discouraged by constant lower-level drills and practice sessions that seem to focus on their shortcomings and repeated failures” (p. 1). In research conducted by Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007), disadvantaged students were found more likely to be successful during the school year than during the summer months, which was contrary to the conclusions drawn by Cuddapah et al. (2008), Day (2002), and Fairchild et al. (2006).

Cuddapah et al. (2008) indicated socioeconomically disadvantaged students experienced the greatest loss of learning during the summer months; therefore, individualized academic programming for at-risk students would be of value during the summer.

Educators in Pulaski County, Arkansas, understood the need for special interventions with at-risk students. They created the Alternative Classroom Experience (ACE) to help at-risk students live their lives more responsibly. Located near Little Rock, the ACE has accommodated 30 different third through fifth grade students five times a year for an intense five-week program. The students are excused from their regular school setting and are provided “academic tutoring, disciplined study, outdoor adventures, team building activities, leadership training, and social issues education (AIDS, violence prevention, gangs, and drug and alcohol awareness)” (Tollette, 2006, p. 1). One component of the ACE program has been to assist parents to augment parenting skills and provide them with further educational and societal services (Tollette, 2006). As with any effective intervention, early exposure is essential to prevent detrimental behaviors from becoming customary; making it difficult for at-risk students to change. The ACE program has centered on the following structure:

- A strong and historic partnership and camp facility.
- Commitment to serving at-risk youth when identifying factors first emerge.
- A history of formative evaluation to improve the program over time.
- A structure of youth empowerment opportunities, integrating AmeriCorps positions as opportunities for program graduates.
- A strong staff training and development model, including the uses of several established programs for youth success. (Tollette, 2006, p. 1)

According to Tollette (2006), the ACE program has included “a comprehensive, multi-faceted web of activities and support structures focused on academic performance, social rules and expectations, and productive social coping skills” (p. 1). Major elements of the program have consisted of:

- Academic instruction.
- Insisted success.
- Parenting meetings.
- Social issue awareness programs.
- Cooperative games and team-building.
- Reality therapy discipline.
- Transition support to regular schools.
- Long-term follow-up.
- Long-term connection. (Tollette, 2006, pp. 1-2)

The ACE students have been recruited mainly with referrals from school personnel, with school counselors making the majority of the referrals. According to Tollette (2006), candidates for the program generally have exhibited poor self-esteem, have struggled to maintain positive relationships with peers and adults, have declining grades, inconsistent attendance, possible learning disabilities, and a family history of at-risk behaviors (Tollette, 2006).

A study, conducted with the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, discovered that 35% of students referred to the ACE had used alcohol or additional drugs before attending the camp. Nineteen percent were in the presence of alcohol or drug use at school, and 64% stated that substance abuse existed at home (Tollette, 2006). The

Arkansas Crime Information Center also reported that 5% of students in Pulaski county had been arrested, which was an increase of 14% from the previous year (Tollette, 2006). Since the program's inception, the ACE has developed three independent studies to determine the success of the program. Two of the studies were conducted in 1994 by the University of Arkansas and the University of Oklahoma, and another study was performed in 2004 by self-governing Arkansas consultants. The three studies documented the following results:

- Significant improvement in 10 of 14 factors of classroom behavior, such as need for direction in work, behavior toward teacher, and other classroom skills.
- Significant improvements in 10 of 12 subsets on the Stanford Achievement Test focused on math and reading.
- After a five-week program, an average gain of half a grade level in reading and math.
- In comparison to a control group, fewer incidences of school absences and an improved or more stable grade point average. (Tollette, 2006, p. 4)

The camp excelled in giving students the assistance they needed to achieve at an early age. It gave them a safe environment in which to learn and helped them to cope when they go home. Once the students experienced success in a violence-free setting, they were encouraged and willing to work much harder.

Grade Retention

Jackson (1975) defined grade retention as “the practice of requiring a student who has been in a given grade level for a full school year to remain at that level for a

subsequent school year” (p. 613). The assumption is if students know they will be retained each year when evidence of achievement is not demonstrated, this will motivate students to be successful (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). If students do not attain the specified achievement level, they are required to relearn the same material (Picklo & Christenson, 2005). By utilizing grade retention as a responsibility tool, some educators believe teaching the same curriculum the next year will be an effective method to attain an increase in achievement (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). Penna and Tallerico (2005) reported:

Retention-in-grade is the single most powerful predictor of dropping out of school. It is even more powerful than parents’ income or mother’s educational level, two family-related factors long associated with student achievement and school completion. In fact, dropouts are five times more likely to have repeated a grade than are high school graduates. (p. 13)

Research has also shown that students who are retained one time have a 35% chance of dropping out, and those students who are retained in two or more grades have nearly 100% chance of dropping out (Penna & Tallerico, 2005). In fact, retaining students while in middle or high school increases the chance for dropping out even more compared to students who were retained in earlier grades (Bowman, 2005).

Arguments against grade retention. Researchers have reported that grade retention does not increase student achievement, yet schools still practice this policy (Bowman, 2005). Reasons for retaining students include immaturity, not meeting specified criteria for promotion, and the belief a student will do better the next year with the same curriculum (David, 2008). Those who oppose retention argue that it does not benefit a student’s academic progress, it is too costly to a school district and a student’s

self-esteem, and it is closely related to a high dropout rate (Bowman, 2005). Herszenhorn (2004) believed that for some students retention may be the best option, and schools should not dismiss this option completely.

A study was conducted in 10 schools concerning grade level promotion and retention policies and procedures. The findings showed the schools' retention policies and procedures were not in line with retention research (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). Larson and Akmal (2007) reported educators face ethical dilemmas when policies and practices do not necessarily coincide with what the students need for success. When this happens, alternatives and interventions need to be explored (Buffum et al., 2009). Administrators, teachers, and parents are torn between socially promoting students and retaining them in the same grade. If students are retained because they have not demonstrated the necessary academic skills, are the educators acting in a professional and ethical manner?

A grade retention policy in New York City was implemented in 1981 and was abandoned in 1990 because an increased number of students were retained a second time, and 38% of those retained students dropped out of high school (Eide & Goldhaber, 2005). Only 25% of students who had not been retained in the same school district dropped out of high school (Eide & Goldhaber, 2005). The consequences for dropping out of high school can be detrimental. Consequences include a smaller income throughout adulthood, increased chance of jail or prison sentences, less opportunity for higher education, greater chance of living in a dysfunctional household as an adult, and diminished opportunities for employment (Heubert, 2003). Educators do not wish for such long term negative effects on students, yet data indicate that dropouts have increased over the past decade (Penna & Talerico, 2005). An estimated 5-10% of students are retained each year in the

United States, making it more difficult for these students to graduate from high school (Anderson et al., 2003).

Penna and Tallerico (200) conducted a study with 24 students who were high school dropouts to understand what factors contributed to the students' lack of success. The study found that 20 out of 24 students identified grade retention as a major factor in the reason for exiting school (Penna & Tallerico, 2005). Students indicated three common phenomena were detrimental to their education due to grade retention:

- The unhelpful academic nature of the repeat year.
- Social stigmatization by peers, primarily for being overage for grade level.
- Their own immediate and longer-term emotional reactions to these academic setbacks and peer pressures. (Penna & Tallerico, 2001, pp. 14-15)

According to students involved in the study, very few changes were made during the retained school year. Students often failed the same assignments and tests due to receiving the same textbook and instruction as the previous year. As one student stated, "It was the same teacher, the same curriculum, the same seat, the same stuff over and over again" (Penna & Tallerico, 2005, p. 15). According to Jorgevich, a teacher, the redundancy of repeating the same grade often caused frustration and boredom. Teachers assumed the retained students remembered or already understood the curriculum because the grade was being repeated. In fact, teachers gave less individual help rather than more and would often embarrass students by pointing out the students should remember the information from the previous year (Penna & Tallerico, 2005). The students interpreted these comments as demeaning and indicated grade retention was not only unproductive, but in many cases was counterproductive (Mattos, 2008).

The study also provided data that revealed the social implications of grade retention. The retained students were treated negatively in two ways: students were made fun of for being behind academically and for being older than the rest of their classmates (Penna & Tallerico, 2005). Also students were bullied, mocked, picked on, ridiculed, and berated simply because they were repeating the same grade (Penna & Tallerico, 2005).

One student reported:

I got a lot of negative pressure from other students on my repeating. They would tease me, pick on me, all kinds of negative things. I can remember this one boy who just picked on me daily and it was like I would try to dodge him in the halls. He made me feel so ashamed to be held over, and he would pick on me. It was terrible. (Penna & Tallerico, 2005, p. 3)

The negative attention did not stop once the students left the retained grade. In fact, several students indicated they dealt with the stigma of being unintelligent for several subsequent grade levels (Bowman, 2005).

Educators who were interviewed during a study in 2007, felt retention policies had negative effects on students. One middle school principal, Montfort, did not agree with her district's new policy on retention and promotion, and was aware of the research pertaining to retention, but realized there were political ramifications to the district's decision to adopting the new policy (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). Montfort remarked:

I didn't support it then and I don't support it now. If no student from my building is retained year after year, I'll get some questions. We see retention as a last resort in this building. We try to absolutely minimize the number of students we hold back. (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 8)

Retaining students has never been popular, and research tends to support the same view point (Greene & Winters, 2006).

Many teachers in Montfort's school were also aware of what is developmentally suitable for middle school students and the effects of grade retention. Sharp, a 15 year veteran middle school teacher, stated:

There is serious conflict here. We know that retention isn't good for kids and that middle school kids are all over the map developmentally. So why are we doing it? I think the intentions of the district are good—they have people breathing down their necks, but they don't live in the same reality that we do. (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 8)

Teachers' opinions supporting grade retention. The synthesis of literature did not support grade retention as an effective intervention; therefore, supportive opinions are limited. Contrary to the opinions espoused by Penna and Tallerico (2005), Larsen and Akmal (2007) did not find evidence that connected lasting negative effects with grade retention. When educators were interviewed in Larsen and Akmal's (2007) study, several agreed that research did not support retention; however, the use of retention in their school they taught in had yielded positive results. Wellman stated, "I'm pretty sure that research says the opposite of retaining, but our district's policy on retention has opened the door to intervention" (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 7). He also added, "Retention initiates a dialogue between the school, the parents, and the child. This is pretty productive. We wound up with an intervention [a wake-up call] that worked" (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 7).

Another teacher, Wise, also disagreed with the concept of retention but liked the influence it provided him. Wise expressed, “I personally like having the baseball bat to hold over kids’ heads when they don’t want to get their work done. ‘You don’t get this done, you’re gonna be back here next year!’ It gives me some way of motivating students” (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 7).

The *wake-up call* concept was repeated time and time again among teachers who were in favor of retention and even among those who opposed it. Some teachers were in favor of retention due to the lack of interventions in place at their school. A middle school reading specialist, Hickman, argued, “We’re still not holding back as many kids as we could be. The district has taken away so many support programs that we don’t have any choice but to pass them on or retain them” (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 7). Jorgevich exclaimed, “It’s the only way we have, in some cases; to show kids we’re serious. We can’t just pass them on and let them do nothing” (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 8). Wilkinson, also a middle school teacher, supported retention but did not see it as effective. She felt students had very little motivation to be responsible for their own learning and lamented, “I wish it worked more often—but as far as accountability with students goes, there is no leverage whatsoever” (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 8).

Schools with limited resources for interventions and support programs have to make the difficult decision of who should be retained. Should students who need extra support and instruction be retained or should students be retained for punitive reasons? Should summer school be used instead of retention, and can students receive enough remediation through summer school? Wise commented, “The politics of retention are interfering with the decision to retain and summer school” (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 9).

The political influences in schools are harsh realities. Policies often dictate how districts handle students regardless of the students' individual situations or needs. For example, several years ago the school board at a district in the state of Washington adopted a new promotion policy for fifth and eighth grade students, because of the state's increased pressure for accountability (Larsen, 2002). The policy required a certain number of *points* to be earned in grades five and eight for advancement to the next grade. This policy was very unpopular among staff and administrators because the *whole child* was not being considered (Larsen, 2002). There are so many chronic stressors that students deal with outside of school that ultimately affect their education (Jensen, 2009).

President Clinton and the legislature agreed students should be held accountable if they did not meet specified academic standards by passing stricter legislation regarding social promotion (Parker, 2001). The legislators argued educators should do whatever it takes for students to be successful; this included grade retention (Parker, 2001). Students need to understand that positive results can only be achieved by hard work, and "getting something for nothing" (Parker, 2001, p. 2) will no longer be accepted.

Social Promotion

In 2004, the New York Education Secretary, Rod Paige, responded to Mayor Michael Bloomberg's decision to abandon the use of social promotion in New York City's school districts (Eide & Goldhaber, 2005). Paige commented, "I congratulate the mayor for his leadership and his concern for the children of this great city. Social promotion is not good for children and I am addressing this issue" (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p. 17). New York City is just one of a few large school districts that have released statements ending their use of social promotion (Eide & Goldhaber, 2005).

In 2004, the Florida State Board of Education also released their announcement to end social promotion in the state of Florida. Had this change been in effect during the previous school year, nearly 400,000 students might have been retained (Matus, 2005). Similar to the argument against grade retention, educators in schools using social promotion carry the professional responsibility of providing effective learning opportunities for students. Larsen and Akmal (2007) posed the question, “Should middle graders who have not demonstrated the skills and knowledge required by state standards be promoted to the next grade by [educators] who know that those students’ lack of skills will likely contribute to future academic failure” (p. 34)?

Arguments against social promotion. The *threat* of retention should never be used, especially if educators do not intend to follow through. Berlin (2008) related an incident concerning a student, Edward, who was very intelligent but unmotivated. A teacher threatened Edward with retention even though the teacher knew retention would never occur (Berlin, 2008). Edward responded, “That’s what they told me in sixth grade and here I am in seventh grade” (Berlin, 2008, p. 28).

Edward’s situation demonstrates one of the biggest dilemmas middle school educators encounter: What should be done with students who fail? Educators dislike retention because it has been associated with increased dropout rates (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). If educators do not retain, they often use another flawed option by socially promoting students (Berlin, 2008). Just as Edward, many students manipulate the system. Students know educators have no intention of retaining them; therefore, even though academic performance during the school year is lacking, promotion to the next grade

level occurs (Mohl & Slifer, 2005). Greene and Winters (2006) reported educators in schools continue to face ethical challenges concerning social promotion policies.

When students enter high school after being socially promoted during middle school, the students have just as great a chance of dropping out as they would after being retained (Berlin, 2008). Berlin (2008) argued educators in middle schools need to reform their promotion policies. If educators in middle schools would require students to earn credits, then students would learn accountability at age 11 rather than at age 14 during their freshman year (Berlin, 2008). Students should retake only the classes they failed, and receive specific interventions instead of repeating an entire grade (Buffum et al., 2009). Educators would be forced to look at each student's needs, which could allow a better opportunity for student success.

Several large school districts, including Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City have required students to reach mastery on certain benchmark levels of standardized tests before promotion to the next grade level (Greene & Winters, 2006). Some proponents would agree educators are not aiding students by promoting them if the skills necessary to be successful at the next grade level have not been attained (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). This argument makes sense; however, there is little research to support it (Greene & Winters, 2006).

Greene and Winters (2006) discovered students who attended schools where social promotion had ended and retention policies were in place had increased achievement levels on the district's standardized tests. Students understood the threat of retention was finally real, and they would be held accountable (Greene & Winters, 2006). Prior to social promotion policies changing, students knew, even if they performed poorly

in school, they would be promoted to the next grade. Although the study by Greene and Winters (2006) showed direct benefits for students, it would be several years before researchers knew whether ending social promotion would have long term positive or negative effects on high school dropout rates.

When Chicago Public Schools decided to end social promotion in the mid-1990s and began holding students more accountable, there were many questions the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) wanted to ask (Jacob & Stone, 2005). The CCSR questions included:

- Does retention improve academic outcomes?
- What are problematic and unforeseen side effects?
- Did it contribute to test-score gains?
- Did high-stakes testing policies produce only one-time impacts on behavior or are there long-term gains?
- Did high-stakes accountability cause the teachers, parents, and students of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to change their behavior in ways that would lead to higher achievement, or does the evidence suggest that the CPS's initiatives resulted in simply more focus on testing? (Jacob & Stone, 2005, p. 1)

According to Jacob and Stone (2005), when the school board at CPS decided to end social promotion, the intent was to do three things:

1. Make educators pay more attention to the lowest performing students.
2. Encourage parents to become more involved in their children's education.
3. Send strong messages to students that achievement mattered. (p. 1)

Since students' promotion to the next grade was dependent upon success when taking standardized tests, opponents to high-stakes testing were concerned. The pressure students would face on these tests could be too great for many to overcome, and the students would simply give up and become less engaged in school (Jacob & Stone, 2005). How did educators in Chicago Public Schools make the change from socially promoting students to a higher level of accountability through retention?

Alternatives to social promotion. As educators consider alternatives to social promotion, one option is to establish a set of minimum test score standards on reading and mathematics sections of a standardized assessment, such as the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) (Jacob & Stone, 2005). Students who do not meet the minimum test scores at the end of the school year, should be required to take an intensive summer school class (Owings & Kaplan, 2001). The class needs to be structured around curriculum standards that educators feel are vital to student success in the next grade (Potter, 2003). Upon completion of the class in August, students would retake the standardized test. The students who did not pass the test a second time would be retained in the current grade level, and any student who was 15 years or older would be sent to alternative school where intensive interventions could be implemented (Jacob & Stone, 2005).

Educators in the Chicago Public Schools implemented a new policy to address their concerns with social promotion. In the beginning years of the policy more than 33% of all third, sixth, and eighth grade students failed to achieve the minimum test score requirements. Prior to the 2000-2001 school year, 20% of qualified third graders and 10% of sixth and eighth graders were retained under the new policy. Beginning with the 2000-

2001 school year, educators utilized recommendations from teachers and principals when making promotion decisions (Jacob & Stone, 2005).

According to teachers and principals, students will be motivated to work harder because of the threat of retention (Parker, 2001). In Chicago, one eighth grade teacher reported, “Because the students know I’m not the one failing you, I’m not the one holding you back. And so then the students are much more motivated to do their work, especially as the year progresses” (Jacob & Stone, 2005, p.3). Another teacher stated, “We have pupils who have become students. That is, they actually do some studying because they have a goal now, whereas before they knew that they were going to be pushed on (promoted) no matter what they did” (Jacob & Stone, 2005, p. 3). Teachers and principals also felt the policy had a tremendous impact on parental involvement. David (2008) echoed this sentiment in that principals and teachers agree that strict policies regarding retention make parents more concerned about their child’s education.

Jacob and Stone (2005) reported teachers were happy with students who were more highly motivated, with parents who were involved in their child’s education, and with additional help with struggling students. Doyle (2004) found some parents believe that by terminating social promotion, the responsibility for higher performance is placed on the students and parents, not the teachers. However, according to Berlin (2008), survey results among teachers and principals did not support this opinion. The preponderance of educators and administrators believe that ending social promotion optimistically influenced educators’ conduct and their school district’s instructional focus (Berlin, 2008). One Chicago public school teacher stated, “Nearly all teachers [in this

school] feel extra responsibility to help students meet standards” (Jacob and Stone, 2005, p. 3). Likewise, a math teacher expressed his opinion about the policy:

It has made me more accountable. It has kept me on my toes the entire year.

There’s not one day gone by that I haven’t thought about what they need to know and that if they don’t pick up these skills they will not pass. And I feel it is my responsibility to get them to pass math. (Jacob and Stone, 2005, p. 3)

Overall, educators and administrators in Chicago Public Schools felt the change had a positive effect on instructional strategies. Marzano et al. (2001) agreed that for students to effectively meet promotion standards, educators need to implement targeted, systematic instructional strategies.

Educators in schools throughout the nation are struggling with students who fall behind academically at an early age. Many schools continue to promote the students to the next grade despite an obvious lack in skills. Educators in Chicago have proven through determination to banish social promotion. Increased responsibility can encourage teachers and administrators to focus on the lowest achieving students in the classrooms. This high level of accountability can make a difference in teachers’ curricular focus, but teachers must also change their instructional strategies to see substantial gains (Schmoker, 2006). School boards that adopt policies creating greater accountability for students should invest in their teachers and commit to improved professional development.

The mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, agreed with the stance Chicago took on social promotion (Winerip, 2004). Bloomberg focused specifically on third graders who were promoted to the fourth grade despite low test scores. The mayor

reported, “I think what you’re seeing is the last gasp of an old system. Either you want reform, or you don’t” (Doyle, 2004, p. 1). Deciding to abolish social promotion has and always will be a controversial issue. One New York City citizen agreed with Bloomberg, “If you can’t read and write in the third grade, you should not pass. Way to go” (Doyle, 2004, p. 1). The debate of social promotion versus grade retention is a serious one. What happens to students who are retained, and what happens to those who are promoted despite not reaching mastery?

The retention and social promotion debate. The arguments are convincing from both sides. Those who are against social promotion believe that moving students to the next grade without mastering the necessary skills is detrimental (Bowman, 2005). Those opposing grade retention do not feel students gain anything from being retained. In fact, opponents to grade retention feel that students are simply repeating a failing experience and are affected socially in a negative way (Eide & Goldhaber, 2005). Both sides agree on one thing: social promotion and grade retention can offer support for higher achievement and academic success for students (Doyle, 2004).

Chicago’s effectiveness to abolish social promotion was debated differently by two reporters, even though positive gains were reported. Mathews (2004) cited research that ending social promotion in Chicago schools had a positive effect, while Herszenhorn (2004) reported the schools were actually softening their policy on social promotion because research showed that ending social promotion had not raised test scores.

This debate highlighted how grade levels and structures are not always based on a rational process. In elementary and middle schools, students are grouped according to age rather than ability (Doyle, 2004). The exception to this structure is at the high school

level where achievement levels determine grade placement, not a student's age. Why do educators in elementary and middle schools continue to group students by age? Grouping in this manner does not occur in the workplace, nor does it occur in professional sports, or in the military. A student's age should not determine his or her level of achievement. In fact, the age of a student can often hide developmental differences (Child Development Institute, 2010). Parents have also noticed differences in their own children's developmental progress when reaching specific ages. A precocious five year old is much different than one who struggles academically, but this noticeable difference can disappear by the time students reach their teen years (Cichucki, 2007).

Should middle and junior high schools begin to follow the same structure as most high schools in the United States? When students enter high school they do not take French II until they have mastered the standards of French I. Algebra I always precedes Algebra II because a student must master the standards in Algebra I first. If high school students fail most of their freshman classes, the students do not become sophomores without retaking the failed classes. Consistent with high school practices, Doyle (2004) suggested students need middle school graduation requirements also, not grade retention and social promotion. Schools should begin implementing standards-based grading so students can advance once standards are mastered, and interventions can be implemented for students when mastery does not occur (Mattos, 2008). This practice would place more accountability on students, ensuring students have learned the necessary skills, and assist students who struggle to master the standards.

Interventions to Replace Retention and Social Promotion

Often, college freshmen take advantage of classes that are offered prior to their first year. Some educators in school districts use summer sessions as a method to get an early start on the school year. Wolverton (2007) reported:

In his final summer before starting college, Roddy Jones followed a path that an increasing number of [students] are taking: He enrolled in classes early. He came early to get a jump on his academic work. (p. 17)

Wolverton (2007) reported the following statement, by Ridpath, the director of the Drake Group, which focuses on upholding the academic integrity in college sports, “Summer courses are typically very compressed and intense” (p. 21). Wolverton (2007) stated, “It’s very tough for a kid right out of high school to do this well...I just think we are taking away from kids and potentially setting them up for failure” (p. 17).

Arguments in favor of summer school. Summer school is often an intervention educators in schools utilize when students do not show proficiency during the regular school year. Many educators try to re-teach the same curriculum during summer school; however, to accomplish this in the allotted time, educators must compress 36 weeks of education into four short weeks. It would make more sense for educators to enhance the curriculum and provide students with a summer program that will enable success in the upcoming year (Gilchrist Ash, 2003).

A summer school program at Swain High School in North Carolina was extremely important for incoming freshman to build areas such as academics, study skills, and self-esteem (Gilchrist Ash, 2003).

The effective practices included in this summer program were:

- A four week course running from mid-June through mid-July.
- The program focuses on building high self-esteem and confidence.
- Core classes are taught using a hands-on approach.
- Team building and cooperative learning strategies are taught.
- Goal setting is an important part of this summer program.
- Educational field trips are a vital part of the summer program.
- Teachers who participate in the summer program also serve as mentors.
- Students who participate in the program receive one elective credit. (Gilchrist Ash, 2003, p. 2)

Even though this particular summer program was designed for freshman entering high school, it could be adapted to a middle school setting for struggling students.

Educators may argue that summer school classes are often more successful for students because students are enrolled in fewer classes than during the regular school year (Fairchild, McLaughlin, & Brady, 2006). Interruptions are generally less frequent, class sizes are usually smaller, and teachers can individualize their instruction more effectively (Buchanan, 2007). Penna and Tallerico (2005) found students felt more adequate and comfortable in summer school because most of the students in the class had already experienced failure.

Early identification of potential at-risk students is important when developing a quality summer school program. Criteria, such as academic progress, attendance, or learning ability should be considered when taking into account summer school for students (Alexander et al., 2007). Educators should separate academics and behavior;

therefore, instead of requiring students to attend summer school for punishment, teachers should focus primarily on academic remediation. Once a list has been established for possible summer school enrollment, teachers should prioritize which students need summer school for academic success (Rischer, 2009).

An important concept in creating a successful summer school program is to make it different than the regular school year (Buchanan, 2007). Class sizes should be smaller to give students a better opportunity for one-on-one instruction. Those students who have a higher level of failure (failing the most classes throughout the school year) should be given the highest priority for mandatory attendance (Rischer, 2009). Using standards-based guidelines may be the most effective way to identify students for summer school. This type of criterion-based approach allows educators to get a clear picture of what standards students have not mastered (Doyle, 2004).

Developing a summer school handbook that includes expectations such as promotion requirements, attendance, dress code, transportation, discipline, and consequences is important for student success (Rischer, 2009). Also, notifying students and parents early is essential for a smooth transition into summer school. Students need to participate in cooperative and engaging learning activities that can raise self-esteem and confidence toward learning (Fairchild et al., 2006). Educators should focus on students' weak areas and their confidence so students may be successful in the next grade level. Since most students do not want to attend summer school, giving small rewards for class participation, learning gains, perfect attendance, and good behavior could prove to be motivating (Rischer, 2009).

Arguments against summer school. What about the negative side of summer school? Not all critics believe summer school is beneficial for students. In an effort to end social promotion, the Chicago schools created a program called Summer Bridge (Buchanan, 2007). The school district required all students in grades three, six, and eight to attend the summer session if the students were not on grade level at the end of the school year. A statement from the Chicago Consortium of School Research discovered the Bridge did not have long term positive effects for students (Buchanan, 2007). Students in Chicago schools mastered enough skills to move ahead, but they were still behind other students in future grade levels (Picklo & Christenson, 2005). Design for Change, a Chicago-based school reform organization, labeled Summer Bridge as an “expensive failure” (p. 1), and stated students did not receive long term skills but only skills that helped them on the state test (Herszenhorn, 2004).

The Executive Director of the National Association for Year-Round Education, Stenvall, stated, “Remediation summer school sets kids up for failure. Students who have struggled during the regular school year are grouped with other struggling students. This creates an environment like a jail term rather than a positive learning experience” (Buchanan, 2007, p. 32). Jennings, President and CEO of the Center on Education Policy, commented, “Schools too often focus summer sessions on rote learning and basic skills, rather than building skills with long-term academic benefits” (Buchanan, 2007, p. 33). Attendance is also a concern. Students who do not have good summer school attendance are usually the students who are the furthest behind (Johnson & Perkins, 2009). To address this issue, many school districts make summer school mandatory for those students who do not pass the state standardized test (Buchanan, 2007).

Another issue for school districts has been the additional expense summer school has added to the budget. In 2007, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MODESE) decreased funding for summer school by half (Buchanan, 2007). School boards in California, facing pressure for high school seniors to be successful on the exit exam, are focusing summer school funds on these students (Buchanan, 2007). Ultimately, a decision such as this takes money out of the general budget and out of classrooms. Because of the NCLB Act, districts are allocating more money for remediation in the areas of communication arts and math; moreover, students who fail other classes may not get summer help.

School boards have determined running a summer school program can be more expensive per pupil than a traditional school day. District personnel still have to “hire teachers, provide custodial services, have administrators on duty, pay for air conditioning, serve meals, and offer transportation” (Buchanan, 2007, p. 2). Superintendents are trying to combat these additional costs by consolidating their summer programs in fewer buildings and employing less staff. The use of summer school will continue to be debatable, so what other interventions are educators implementing to reach at-risk students?

Accommodations during the school day. Some schools have started extending the school day so there is time after school or on Saturdays for tutoring, remediation, and extra help. The extended school day allows teachers to give students more one-on-one help in the academic areas in which they struggle. The extended day also helps teachers and students build better relationships with each other (Penna & Tallerico, 2005).

At the secondary level, educators are allowing students to retake courses they have failed during the regular school year (Owings & Kaplan, 2001). By doing so, students would be able to schedule the same class with two different teachers or take English I and II during the same semester. This is not considered typical scheduling, but it may be a better alternative to retention or social promotion. Educators are also changing unstructured study hall classes into more precise, systematic intervention rooms so students can get more help during the school day (Penna & Tallerico, 2005).

Some educators are focusing on the most basic changes, such as teaching test preparation skills (Buffum et al., 2009). Because the scores from standardized tests have such a major impact on schools and their accreditation, educators have decided they need to prepare students more adequately if scores are to increase. Between 1994 and 2001, educators in Chicago schools increased their test preparation activities from 10.5 hours to 21 hours due to adopting a more stringent grade retention policy (Jacob & Stone, 2005). Schools that faced academic probation had strong incentives to improve under the district's new accountability policy. Educators in these schools increased their test preparation activities from 14 hours to 32 hours (Jacob & Stone, 2005).

Teachers in Chicago also began spending more time on language arts and mathematics content. District representatives found that too much time was spent on curricular areas that were not helping students be successful (Jacob & Stone, 2005). Also, much of the math curriculum that was being taught was not on grade level. When language arts teachers began looking at their curriculum in more detail, they realized a need to spend more time on reading instruction rather than penmanship, public speaking, and listening skills (Jacob & Stone, 2005).

One eighth grade teacher commented:

Reading is the most important thing that they're going to get out of here. It's got to be the most important. They can't function if they can't read. To me, all the other things should be put aside until they can do this. (Jacob & Stone, 2005 p. 4)

Chicago educators began to emphasize higher student expectations and academic support during the immediate years after abolishing social promotion. According to DuFour et al. (2004), teachers need to become more sensitive to students' needs and change the way they teach students who are at-risk of failing. Students need more personal support from teachers regarding school work if they are to be successful (Buffum et al., 2009). Students in Chicago schools reported that the level of parental support and help on school work had increased between 1994 and 2001 (Jacob & Stone, 2005). To see greater gains in achievement, the educators began requiring specific students to attend after-school programs, such as tutoring. In fact, the attendance for these programs nearly doubled between 1994 and 2001 allowing more students to receive individualized instruction.

Summary

Educators across the country are still debating whether grade retention and social promotion are unjust or beneficial. Deciding whether to socially promote or retain at-risk students can be a challenging decision. Those in favor of grade retention believe it holds students accountable academically; whereas, social promotion allows students to move to the next grade without the necessary skills for success (Mohl & Slifer, 2005). Educators who are against retention argue it damages a student's self-esteem; whereby, social

promotion gives a student the confidence needed for high achievement (Eide & Goldhaber, 2005).

All students must be assessed individually for their needs to be fulfilled (Neuman, 2008). Teachers and principals are beginning to recognize how differentiated instruction benefits students (Marzano et al., 2001). Gagne's (1985) conditions of learning established a climate for maximum learning, and include understanding the proper learning hierarchies for students.

Students who are at-risk deal with issues related to their socio-economic status and have chronic stressors that educators must take into consideration when working with students each day (Jensen, 2009). Summer school can be an effective means of intervention when it is designed to accommodate the specific needs of at-risk students (Buchanan, 2007). If students are either socially promoted or retained when they do not pass core classes, educators may not be considering what is best for the students (Berlin, 2008). Students must be looked at individually with specific interventions considered, if they are to be successful and for their needs are to be met (Mattos, 2008).

In Chapter Three the methodology was detailed. The collection and analysis of data regarding the study were presented. The population and sample of participants was introduced and defined. Chapter Four described the analysis of data. A summary of findings was presented in Chapter Five.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Research Perspective

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this study. The qualitative research was conducted through a multi-case study approach. Interviews with five middle school principals were conducted to achieve insight on local school district's policies and procedures regarding grade retention and social promotion. Principals also gave their personal opinions and perceptions regarding social promotion and grade retention. Middle school aged students who had been retained or socially promoted were interviewed to garner their perspectives and personal experiences concerning retention or social promotion.

The quantitative research was conducted through a descriptive approach. Data were collected from middle school principals through an online survey to determine how schools serve students who have not demonstrated mastery of grade level skills. Also, middle school principals responded to questions relating to policies and procedures surrounding retention and social promotion.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the opinions of middle school students who have been retained regarding their current grades as compared to grades from the previous year?
2. What are the opinions of middle school students who have been socially promoted regarding their grades as compared to grades from the previous year?
3. What are the perceptions of students and principals regarding grade retention and social promotion?

4. What criteria are used by school districts when educators are considering retention and social promotion?

Population and Sample

The population for the study involved public middle school principals and students. To obtain quantitative data, the sample consisted of 290 public middle school principals in Missouri. Five public middle school principals and 11 retained or socially promoted students in southwest Missouri were selected to provide qualitative data.

Participants involved in the qualitative research were students and principals from selected public middle schools in southwest Missouri who were selected through purposive sampling using a criterion sampling approach. Airasian and Gay (2000) explained, "Qualitative researchers choose participants whom they judge to be thoughtful and who have information, perspectives, and experiences related to the topic... (p. 139). Initially, five principals were contacted by the researcher to participate in the study. Upon agreement to participate, the superintendent of each school district was presented with a letter explaining the research project. Once permission was obtained from each superintendent, the principals contacted parents of students who had been retained or socially promoted while in middle school. Each principal explained the rationale behind the study and requested permission for the students to participate. Eleven students were involved in the qualitative research; six were students who had been retained while in middle school, while five were students who had been socially promoted while in middle school despite not showing academic progress. An attempt to have equal representation of boys and girls to participate in the qualitative research was made. The students' ages

ranged from 12 to 15 years. The five middle school principals were interviewed upon completion of the student interviews.

The participants involved in the quantitative research were principals selected through purposive sampling (Airasian & Gay, 2000). Participants were both male and female middle school and junior high principals from schools in Missouri where sixth, seventh, or eighth grade students attended. All principals in Missouri meeting the specified criteria received an email inviting them to participate in a survey relating to grade retention and social promotion. A link to the survey was attached to the email making it convenient for each principal to participate.

Instrumentation

Interview questions were created by the researcher to garner the perceptions and opinions of middle school principals and students surrounding grade retention and social promotions. The interview questions were field-tested by local principals and superintendents prior to beginning the study to assure clarity and understanding. An online survey consisting of 10 questions, was created by the researcher and then field tested for clarity and understanding by local principals and superintendents prior to beginning the study. The survey included structured close-ended, Likert, and checklist items.

Data Collection

Consent to participate forms (see Appendices A, B, and C) were signed by middle school principals, parents of retained or socially promoted middle school students, and superintendents who agreed to participate in the study, respectively. Letters of participation (see Appendices D and E) were sent to the principals and students after their

interviews were scheduled. The online survey (see Appendix F) accompanied a letter of introduction (see Appendix G), and informed consent (see Appendix H). The survey was sent via SurveyMonkey to 290 middle school principals in Missouri. The list of principals was generated from the MODESE website.

Once interview questions were field tested, the qualitative data were collected through face-to-face interviews with students (see Appendices I and J) and face-to-face interviews with the students' building principals (see Appendix K). The interviews were captured with an audio recording device and responses were later transcribed. The quantitative data were collected through an online survey using SurveyMonkey. A link to the survey was sent via email to 290 middle school principals. One-hundred fifteen surveys were completed and submitted resulting in a 39.65% (or 40% rounded to the nearest whole number) return rate. The survey was emailed to principals twice and was available for two weeks each time in an attempt to obtain the largest response possible. Once the data were collected, a descriptive analysis of the responses was conducted to formulate graphs.

Data Analysis

Following the student and principal interviews and the review of transcripts, the responses were organized, categorized, and interpreted (Airasian & Gay, 2000). The retained and socially promoted students were referred in the interviews by code. For example, retained student number one was coded Student R1, and socially promoted student number one was coded Student SP1. The principals were referred in the interviews by letters. For example, the first principal interviewed was referred to as Principal A. Similarities and differences of the students' responses were analyzed to

determine the effectiveness of grade retention and social promotion. A comparison analysis of the principals' responses was conducted to gain knowledge of their perceptions and opinions (Creswell, 1998) regarding grade retention and social promotion. The responses from the survey were collected and the percentage of responses in each category of the five-point Likert scale was determined (Airasian & Gay, 2000). The criterion principals selected for using grade retention and social promotion were also analyzed to determine level of importance. Graphs were constructed so the data were visible and clearly understood (Wallgren, Wallgren, Persson, Jorner, & Haaland, 1996).

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board (see Appendix L). The participants involved in the qualitative research were students selected through purposive sampling with a criterion sampling approach (Airasian & Gay, 2000). The students' building principal was also interviewed upon completion of the student interview. Any personal or identifying information concerning the participants remained confidential and anonymous throughout the interview process, the collection, analysis, and reporting of data. Questions in the interviews were asked in a manner that was positive and not degrading to the participants.

Summary

This study involved both public middle school principals and middle school students in Missouri. Qualitative data were collected through interviews with students from southwest Missouri who had been retained and socially promoted. Also, interviews were conducted with the students' principals. The responses to the interview questions were transcribed and summarized so the research questions may be answered.

The study also provided qualitative data that confirmed how some Missouri schools were serving students who are not successful academically.

Quantitative data were collected through an online survey which was completed by 40% of public middle school principals in Missouri. The data were used to achieve a better understanding of how principals felt about retention or unjustified promotion.

Graphs were constructed from the quantitative data derived from the survey completed by public middle school principals.

In Chapter Four, an analysis of data were described. Graphs were constructed to clearly depict data results. A summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations were presented in Chapter Five.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Data

Quantitative data were gathered from a ten question survey sent via email to all middle school principals in Missouri. Of the 290 principals who received the survey, 40% of principals completed the survey. Qualitative data were gathered through face-to-face interviews with five selected middle school principals and eleven middle school students from the southwest region of Missouri. The students, who were selected by their principals, met the criteria of either being retained or socially promoted while in grades six, seven, or eight.

Quantitative Data

Survey: Middle school principals. The survey completed by middle school principals in Missouri consisted of ten questions. The first two questions addressed the use of social promotion and grade retention in middle schools.

Survey Question 1. Do you retain students at your school when they have not demonstrated the necessary skills to be successful in the next grade?

Of the 115 principals who completed the survey, 68% reported they retained students. According to Penna and Tallerico (2005), principals who retained students would make a monumental mistake that would negatively affect the students' future. Their research indicated that "grade retention is the single most powerful indicator of dropping out of school. In fact, dropouts are five times more likely to have repeated a grade than are high school graduates" (Penna & Tallerico, 2005, p. 13). However, Stone and Engel (2007) refuted the aforementioned research and argued that with appropriate interventions, including academic support from teachers and changes in the learning strategies employed by students, grade retention can be a positive experience.

Survey Question 2. Do you promote students to the next grade level even though they have not demonstrated the necessary skills to be successful in the next school year?

Of the principals surveyed, 78% indicated they promoted students to the next grade even though the student may not have been ready academically. The response from the principals may indicate there are times when students need to be moved to the next grade despite not having the academic skills to do so. Many of the principals felt utilizing retention at the same time with social promotion in middle schools are the best procedures for assisting at-risk students.

Survey Statement 3. Grade retention is an effective intervention.

Principals participating in the survey responded to statements three through seven using a Likert scale. Choices listed were strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. The purpose of these statements was to acquire principals' personal perception on the topics of grade retention and social promotion.

Only 15% of the principals surveyed felt that grade retention could be used as an effective intervention (see Figure 1). Wise, a Chicago teacher, viewing grade retention not only as an effective intervention but as leverage, asserted, "I personally like having the baseball bat to hold over kids' heads when they don't want to get their work done. You don't get this done, you're gonna be back here next year! It gives me some way of motivating students" (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 7). However, according to Mattos (2008), when students are retained while in middle school, their achievement levels actually decrease the following school year.

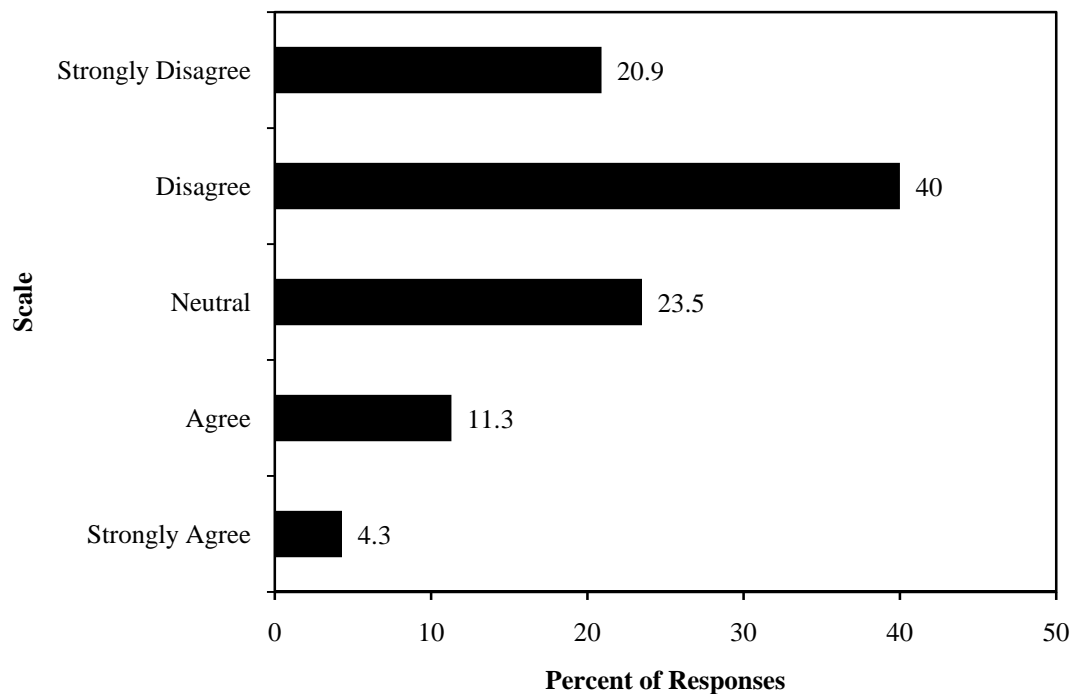


Figure 1. Grade retention is an effective intervention.

Survey Statement 4. The policies and procedures regarding retention and promotion in my school's handbook are research-based.

The data received from this statement were inconclusive. Twenty-seven percent of principals agreed or strongly agreed their policies and procedures were research-based, 37% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 36% of principals were neutral regarding the statement (see Figure 2). Often administrators in schools put retention practices in place based on creating higher levels of accountability for students, and what principals and teachers felt was the best solution for the student (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). Wellman, a classroom teacher in Chicago schools, stated, “I’m pretty sure that research says the opposite of retaining, but our district’s policy on retention has opened the door to

intervention.” (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 7). Wellman also added, “Retention initiates a dialogue between the school, the parents, and the child. This is pretty productive. We wound up with an intervention [a wake-up call] that worked” (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 7).

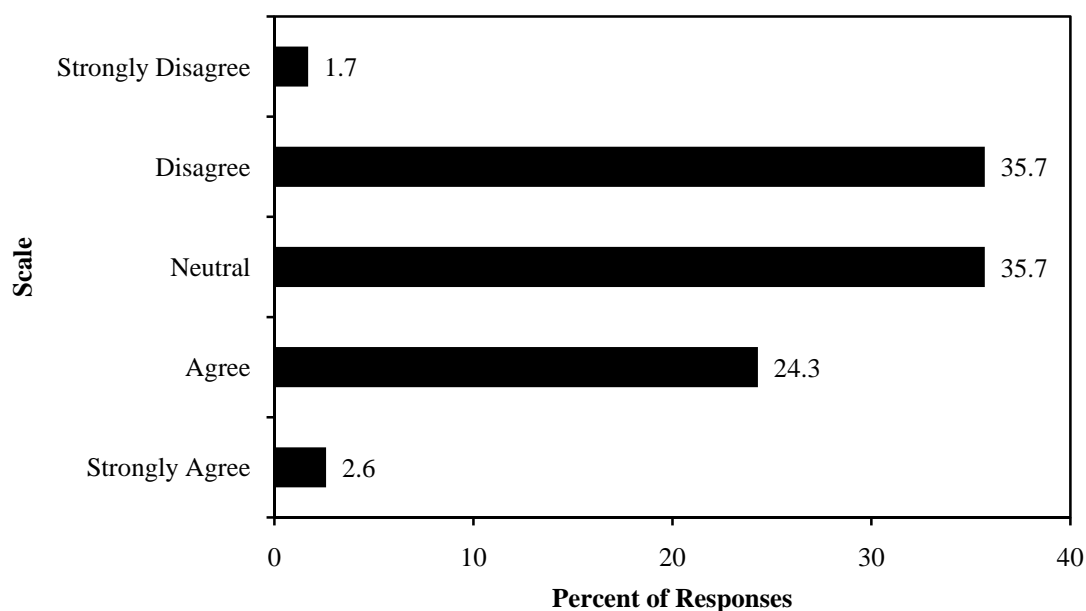


Figure 2. District's policies and procedures are research-based.

Survey Statement 5. It is important to have several people involved in the decision of retaining or socially promoting a student.

The principals overwhelmingly felt they needed a team of people to help make the correct decision when retaining or socially promoting a student. Ninety-five percent of principals stated they agreed or strongly agreed with involving other stakeholders (see Figure 3). Principals' opinions regarding statement five were consistent with the research

from DuFour et al. (2004), agreeing that professional learning communities are needed for higher achievement gains.

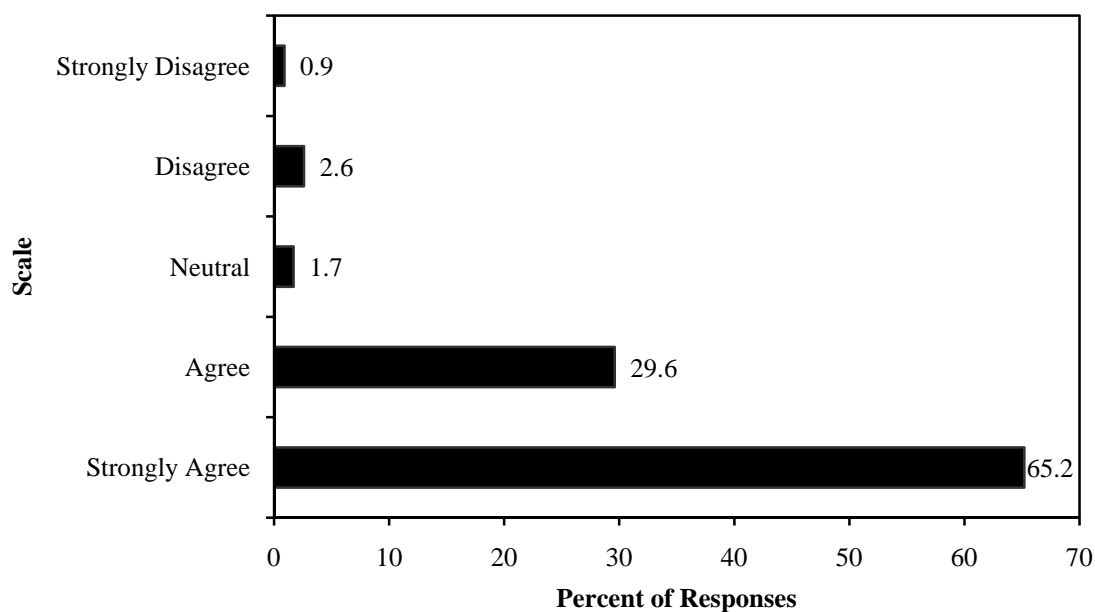


Figure 3. Stakeholders should be involved in decision making when considering retention or social promotion.

Survey Statement 6. Students should never be retained.

According to the survey results, only 7% of principals agreed or strongly agreed that middle school students should never be retained (see Figure 4). A high percentage of principals, 78%, felt grade retention may be warranted with middle school students and that using grade retention should never be completely ruled out for students. Herszenhorn (2004) also believed that for some students retention may be the best option, and schools should not dismiss this option completely. However, other researchers have reported that

grade retention does not increase student achievement, yet schools still practice this policy (Bowman, 2005).

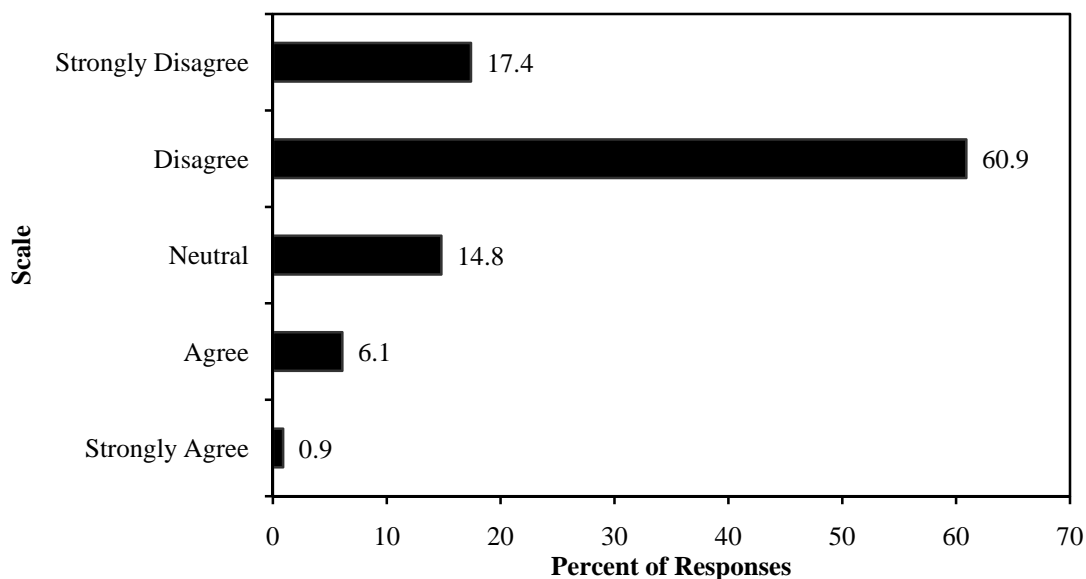


Figure 4. Students should never be retained.

Survey Statement 7. Students should never be socially promoted.

Similarly, 78% of the principals either disagreed or strongly disagreed with never socially promoting a student (see Figure 5). Socially promoting students may give them a sense of hope. Students may feel this is their second chance to prove they are capable of stronger achievement (Potter, 2003), and the opportunity to succeed is within their grasp (Doyle, 2004). Agreeing that something should *never* take place was difficult for the majority of principals.

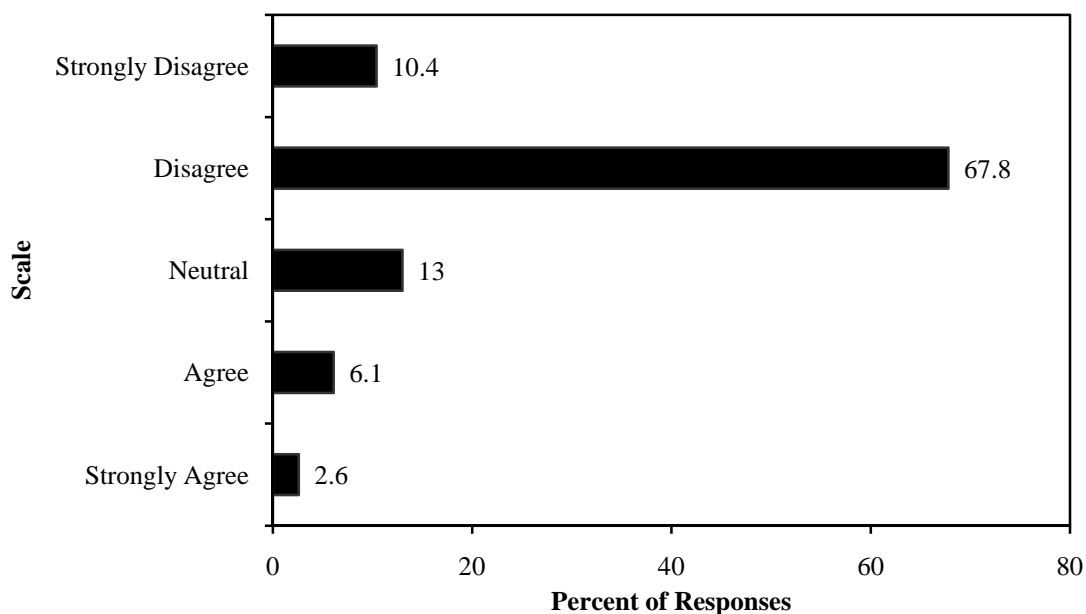


Figure 5. Students should never be socially promoted.

Survey Question 8. In what circumstances might retention be appropriate?

The principals were given three circumstances to choose and could choose all the circumstances they felt applied to student retention. The choices were health reasons, high absenteeism, and a family or social situation. The principals were also given the opportunity to select a separate response if they felt grade retention was never appropriate (see Figure 6). Of the principals surveyed who agreed with retention, 82% felt high absenteeism should be a factor when considering if grade retention was appropriate for a student. Half of the principals believed health reasons may need to be considered when retaining a student, and 43% of principals thought a family or social situation should factor into the decision. Only 8% of principals did not agree with retention under any circumstances.

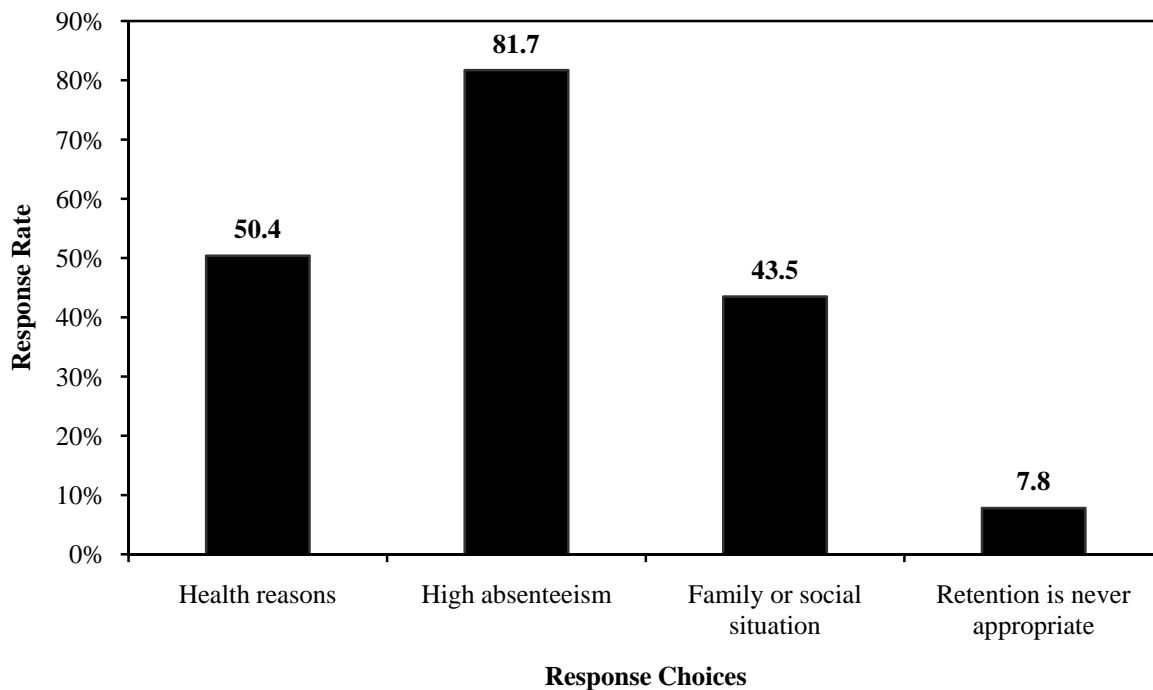


Figure 6. Circumstances for grade retention.

Survey Question 9. In your school, what criteria are used to determine if a student should be retained?

The principals were given 13 criteria to choose which included physical size, age, behaviors, attendance, gender, grades, self-esteem and attitude, mobility (frequently moving from school to school), potential ability, physical or learning disability, parent input, teacher input, and student input (see Figure 7). Of the 13 criteria listed, students' grades were selected at a 90% response rate. Only 4% of the principals believed a student's gender was important when determining if a student should be retained.

Other criteria selected by over 70% of the principals were teacher input (86%), parent input (80%), and attendance (74%). These results were consistent with what

Schmoker (2006) identified as two contributing factors to student success: consistent attendance and parent involvement. It could be interpreted the majority of principals who completed the survey would agree these two criteria should be considered when retaining a student. Mobility (23%), physical size (28%), and physical or learning disability (34%) all ranked as low priority (one-third or less selected by principals) when retention was considered.

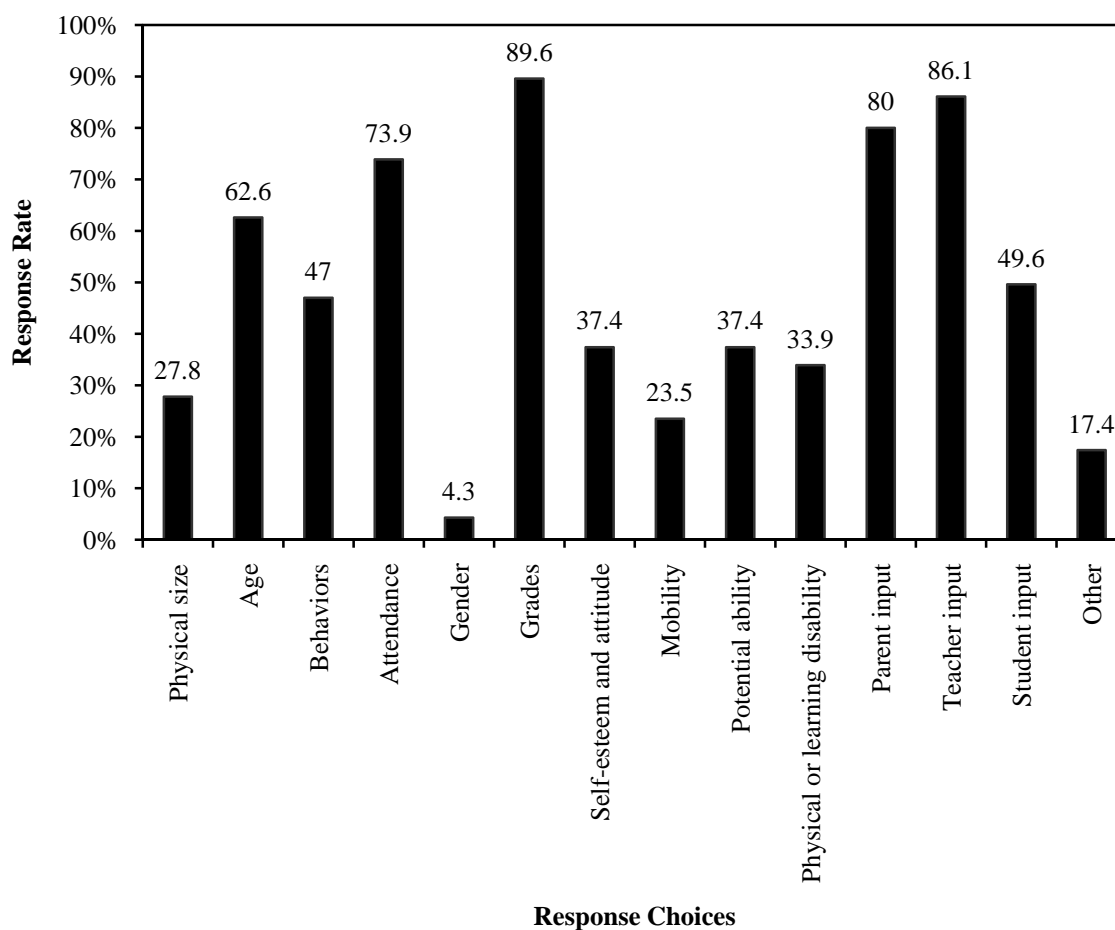


Figure 7. Criteria used for grade retention.

Principals were also given an opportunity to select *other* (17%) and specifically list criteria that should be considered when retaining students. Some of the responses principals listed (but not limited to) were achievement scores, health reasons, maturity, social skills, completed homework, English Language Learner (ELL), Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) scores, reading comprehension levels, and siblings in a lower grade. Principals have a difficult decision when deciding to retain students as there are multiple factors involved when determining the right placement. Every student's situation is different; therefore, it is difficult to follow a concrete policy and still meet each student's educational needs.

Survey Question 10. In your school, what criteria are used to determine if a student should be socially promoted?

The principals were given 13 different criteria to choose, which allowed them to select all the criteria that applied to their setting. The choices included physical size, age, behaviors, attendance, gender, grades, self-esteem and attitude, mobility (frequently moving from school to school), potential ability, physical or learning disability, parent input, teacher input, and student input (see Figure 8). Of the 13 criteria listed, teacher input was the criterion principals selected most at a 79% response rate. A student's gender was selected by only 6% of the principals.

Other criteria selected by over 70% of the principals were age (78%) and parent input (75%). Mobility (18%) and physical or learning disability (30%) both ranked as low priority (one-third or less selected by principals) when social promotion was considered. Two outliers emerged: parent input ranked among the top answers selected, and mobility and physical or learning disabilities ranked among the least answers selected.

Principals were given an opportunity to select *other* (18%) and specifically list criteria that should be considered when socially promoting students. Criteria principals listed (but not limited to) were maturity level, Individualized Education Plan (IEP), principal and board input, completed homework, English Language Learner (ELL), impact on other students, previous retention, health, and siblings.

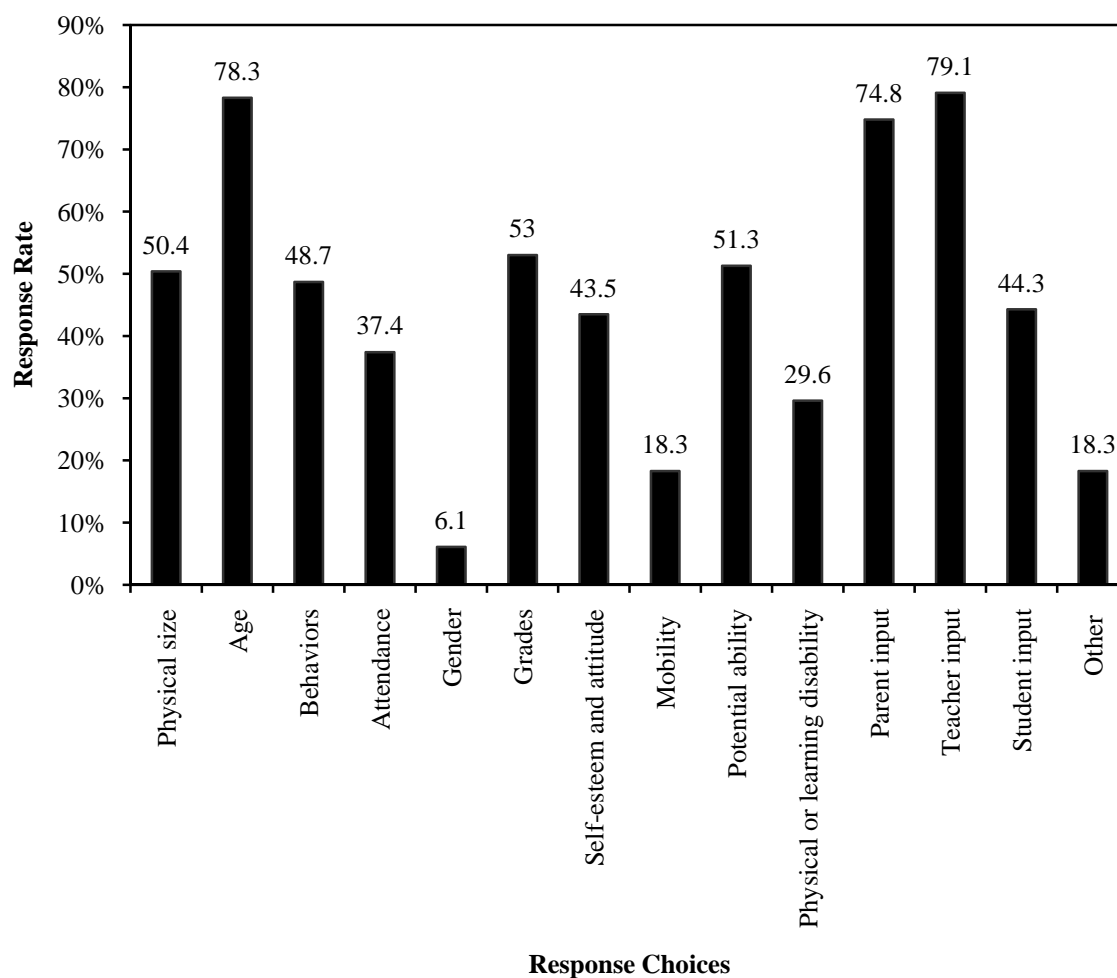


Figure 8. Criteria used for social promotion.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data were obtained through face-to-face interviews with middle school principals and with middle school students who had either been retained or socially promoted while in grades six, seven, or eight. Each of the five principals responded to fourteen questions regarding their opinion about grade retention and social promotion. They also addressed their school districts' policies and procedures on grade retention and social promotion. The student interviews focused on the success or failure of the students while being retained or socially promoted. The interviews were structured to allow the students to reflect on their personal feelings and to share what may or may not have worked for them.

Interviews: Middle school principals. To assure anonymity, each principal was assigned a data code. For example, the first principal interviewed was referred to as Principal A, and the second principal interviewed was referred to as Principal B.

Interview Question 1. Do you retain students at your school when they have not demonstrated the necessary skills to be successful in the next grade?

All five of the principals who were interviewed answered yes to question number one. Four of the principals (A, B, C, and D) were absolute with their answers and Principal E was hesitant to commit to answering yes. The reason for his hesitation was because the principal did not necessarily agree with retention (reflective of other responses during the interview), but knew he had to answer the question truthfully. Principal E stated, "I have retained in the past, but I don't feel it is what's best for students." More schools are using retention than in the past, according to recent studies.

Schools are using retention for accountability, not necessarily because it is the best decision for the student (Larsen & Akmal, 2007).

Interview Question 2. Do you promote students to the next grade level even though they have not demonstrated the necessary skills to be successful in the next school year?

Three of the five principals (A, D, and E) had promoted students who had not mastered grade level skills. Principal C stated, “We have done it once,” and Principal B had a definitive *no* to the question of social promotion. Social promotion is an idea that some educators in schools are abolishing because using it does not hold the student accountable (Jacob & Stone, 2005). However, some educators have considered the whole student to determine what will ensure success (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). The educators involved in the Chicago project disagreed with continuing to socially promote students because it took the accountability and responsibility away from the students (Stone & Engel, 2007).

Interview Question 3. When do you believe grade retention is warranted?

The opinions expressed by the principals were sporadic and inconsistent.

Principal A was noncommittal:

I think we look at each case and look at the different variables and factors that go into it. I ask the grade level teaching team to give input... Counselors are part of that discussion and parents are part of that discussion. Factors, such as attendance, are a primary concern. Taking the whole big picture together of many different factors could lead us to make a decision one way or another based upon that student’s situation.

As stated previously, Principal B was completely against social promotion and felt policies on grade retention need to be simple. Principal B felt grade retention was warranted when “the student does not make a satisfactory grade. If they are not making D’s or better, we believe in retaining the student in a core subject.”

Principal C answered, “When a student shows they do not have the content skills necessary for the next school year; this would warrant retention.” Grades and discipline were the two primary factors for retention according to Principal D. Principal E did not agree retention was the best solution for students:

At this age level, my personal belief is that it is very rare that retention is warranted, but I have seen situations where a student shows less maturity, doesn’t have the necessary skills, and the parents are really pushing for it, and either they are moving in from another district or the peer influence doesn’t have a huge impact either.

Interview Question 4. When do you believe social promotion is warranted?

Principal A felt the determining factor for social promotion was whether or not promoting students would give them the best chance to graduate. Again, Principal A acknowledged attendance was a factor, along with mastery of concepts, but simply knowing the individual and what motivates the student for success were critical.

Principal B was the only principal who did not socially promote students. However, the principal indicated if the student was going to turn 16 or 17 while in middle school, she would probably promote that student on to high school. Principal B commented, “I wouldn’t want a 16 to 17 year old student in my building. So, I guess if I was ever put in that position, I would probably socially promote a 16 or 17 year old.”

Principal C responded similarly, “If a student will be in the same building when they are 16 with 12 year olds, and we feel it is not going to benefit them to repeat the grade, we would promote the student.” The age of a student was also one of the top choices for social promotion selected by 78% of principals who completed the online survey.

Principal D believed a student should be socially promoted “When the child would be more successful in moving on than staying and causing a discipline problem... not just discipline, but for their well-being.” Principal E focused on interventions for the promoted student and reducing the risk of the student dropping out:

...in most cases when students are lacking in the basic academic skills at the end of the school year... you are better off socially promoting them and still trying to fill those gaps any way you can. In most situations, if you don't do that and you hold them back, you are highly increasing the odds of that student dropping out of school.

In general, age and considering what is best for the student's individual situation were the main criteria for socially promoting a student. These two reasons for promotion may be debatable, but these principals felt they knew their students well enough to make the correct decision.

Interview Question 5. Are parents involved in the decision to retain or socially promote the student? If yes, in what way?

When asked whether parents were involved in retaining or socially promoting their child, four of five principals answered yes to the question. Principal B indicated parents were not involved in the decision because the decision was made solely on the

student's academic performance. Parents were notified in writing at the end of the first semester if their child failed a core class. Parents were also kept abreast of their child's progress through the second semester so that if their child qualified for retention it did not come as a surprise to the parent.

The four principals who stated parents were involved in the decision to retain or to socially promote only involved parents in the discussion of their child, not the final decision. Parents were asked to provide insight and to help educators gain knowledge of their child so the educators could make the best decision and were involved in conversations between the student, counselor, teachers, and principal. Although parents were allowed to give input about their child and what they felt was best, the final decision was made by the principal. Principal E explained because of constant communication with the parents, rarely were the parents in disagreement with the educators' decision, but occasionally parents disagreed. Principal E summarized:

The way they are involved is I include them in conversations with the counselor early on the school year. I become involved in those conversations if we are still looking at significant gaps and low grades in the second semester, and then as we make final decisions I always get their input. From my first meeting on with them I do point our board policy which states that the ultimate decision does rest with me on their educational placement. Very rarely are we at odds over the decision, but that has happened as well.

Interview Question 6. Are there curriculum changes made the following year for students who are retained? If yes, what changes are made?

All of the principals responded the curriculum did not change, but adjustments were made in how the curriculum was delivered. Principal A reported the change in delivery for a retained student took place because the team of teachers for the student was completely different than the previous year. In this particular school, there were two teams of core teachers per grade which allowed a retained student the opportunity for differentiation the following year. Different personalities and instructional strategies helped to make a retained student successful in this school. Without a different approach to learning, a retained student may not see academic success the following school year (Buffum et al., 2009; Stone & Engel, 2007).

Principal E also indicated that the curriculum for a retained student may look different because of how the curriculum is addressed or delivered. Principals B and C reported the curriculum was not different but mentioned the use of interventions such as tutoring. Principal E did not acknowledge curriculum changes, “Not really, other than we offer additional tutoring if they need it, and the teachers are more aware of what that student needs.” The principals believed teachers should focus primarily on how the student needed to be taught differently and that the implementation of interventions for the student was a priority. Buffum et al. (2009) concurred that educators must implement a Response to Intervention (RtI) for struggling students, and create a pyramid of interventions that works best for their students (DuFour et al., 2004).

Interview Question 7. Are there curriculum changes made the following year for students who are socially promoted? If yes, what changes are made?

Principal A felt that the major advantage a socially promoted student had over a retained student was that the student could be placed correctly with the proper core team of teachers. The principal and counselors knew the student very well and understood what motivated the student. This allowed the student's learning styles to match with the correct teaching styles.

Overwhelmingly, the principals contended the delivery and approach to curriculum was the only change made regarding curriculum. According to Schmoker (2006), two critical questions that must be answered to achieve student success are: What are the students being taught, and what teaching strategies are being used to teach the students? Even though Principal B did not socially promote students, she indicated that an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for these students would need to be in place. Principal B stated, "I think there would have to be teachers brought in and accommodations would have to be made in order to try to catch that student up for the next grade level." Specific accommodations would need to be implemented for socially promoted students to succeed.

Interview Question 8. Are specific interventions in place for retained and socially promoted students? If yes, what interventions are used?

For student success, interventions should be implemented following the year that a student struggled but was not retained (Buffum et al., 2009; Stone & Engel, 2007).

Principal A felt that attendance was one of the biggest contributing factors for students not being successful; therefore, an intervention for retained or socially promoted students was an attendance contract. Regarding attendance contracts, Principal A stated:

We have attendance contracts that we write with the students and their family, and we have seen some nice success with that. We know that when we are able to communicate with families the importance of good habits, and we try to build it from a positive point of view, that you can't grow up if you don't show up.

Principal A explained that because the prosecuting attorney enforced student attendance by prosecuting parents when necessary, writing the legal ramifications in the contract made a difference to parents. A Problem Solving Team (PST) was also in place where Principal A was employed. This team met regularly during the year to identify at-risk students and recommended interventions early in the year to avoid retention. Mattos (2008) supported this position by arguing, educators must implement a Response to Intervention (RtI) for struggling students to be successful.

Principal B mentioned the pyramid of interventions that are in place. An hour each day was set aside for struggling students to get extra help with their specific teachers. Three days a week, math and communication arts were the focus during this intervention time, and two days a week the students received help in any other area. The teachers focused on specific interventions for each student. Computer-based instruction was also used when applicable.

Principal C did not indicate any specific interventions for retained or socially promoted students. Students in this school had the same homeroom teacher each year, so when a student was retained, the student had this teacher an additional year. Principal D

also mentioned the use of intervention time during the day. Struggling students were assigned to specific rooms, extension classes or remediation classes, for additional support.

Principal E indicated that the interventions for socially promoted and retained students were the same interventions for all students. The first level of interventions for students in this particular school was the advisory program. Regarding the school's advisory program, Principal E reported:

We do a tiered advisory program where students are placed in a small group advisory to help them get caught up on homework. The next level of that becomes a situation of meetings with parents and counselors on where their gaps are. The next step is the tutoring program, even down to much more focused tutoring with a specific subject level teacher with four or less students in that tutoring session. Then, finally, they can become a part of the Saturday school program as well.

In summary, the majority of the principals indicated that interventions were used daily for socially promoted and retained students. However, the interventions in place for these students were also the same interventions for the rest of the student population. The curriculum may not change for students who are retained and socially promoted, but how the teacher instructs should be different from the previous year or the results will be the same (Buffum et al., 2009).

Interview Question 9. How do you determine success or failure for retained and socially promoted students?

Society often judges the success and failure of students by simply looking at students' grades. The local school boards may evaluate the individual principal and

teachers in their district by the school's MAP scores. The federal government, under the No Child Left Behind Act, assesses each state by their adequate yearly progress (AYP), or proficiency level in communication arts and math, as an example. However, the principals who were interviewed did not determine success or failure solely by a student's grades. Yet, a student's grades were the first indicator for retention, according to the policies in the principals' districts.

Principal A mentioned success was determined by a student showing progress in several areas: attendance, behavior, and achievement. Principal B stated success was determined if a student's grades, attitude, and self-esteem were improving. Principal C commented, "The largest factor is attitude. We feel that they will pass the second year because they know what is expected, but if that student's attitude toward school becomes better, then we were successful." Principal D focused on the whole child by looking not only at grades, but also a student's behavior and social skills, or how the student interacts with other students who may be younger. Principal E responded:

At a local level, success is just based on the experience. I have seen more success from the students we socially promote than I have from the students we retain.

I'm not talking about a large number of students, but on a local level that is what I have seen.

The responses indicated each child must be viewed individually, and multiple criteria should be considered when determining the success or failure of a student.

Interview Question 10. Are changes made to the students' schedules, teacher assignments, and school climate? If yes, what changes are made?

Principals A and E were employed at large schools, so having different teaching assignments for retained students could be accommodated. However, Principals B and C indicated, because of the size of their school, if students were retained then they would have the same teachers as the previous year. Principal B answered:

Unfortunately, with the size of our school, each grade level only offers specific classes, and there are only certain teachers that teach specific subjects or grade levels. So, the schedule kind of dictates what the student is going to have.

Principal C responded she is very careful who is placed in the classroom with the retained or socially promoted student to ensure the best opportunity for success. Principal D indicated changes were made to a student's schedule based on the following criteria: NWEA (progress monitoring assessment), MAP data, reading logs, grades, and discipline.

Interview Question 11. In your opinion, what main criteria should be considered when deciding to retain a student?

Principals found it difficult to state only one main criterion that should be considered when retaining a student. The criteria Principal A focused on were student success both academically and behaviorally. Principal A attempted to respond, "Has the student been able to show that they can master the concepts that are necessary for this level, but also that will help them at the next level?" Principal A indicated if the team of people involved in making the decision can answer yes to the aforementioned question, then the student should be promoted to the next grade.

Principal B stated, “One, academics. Is the student capable? Is retention going to help this child? How are we going to hurt his or her self-esteem, and does the child have a chance to succeed if he or she is retained?” Principal C indicated the maturity of the student was the only criterion that should be used when determining whether the student should be retained. Principal D replied that grades and social skills would be two specific criteria used for determining placement.

Principal E believed a student’s age, level of deficiency, and maturity level should be considered before retaining a student. Principal E commented, “Is this kid at-risk for dropping out, or is this kid really socially, emotionally, and behaviorally behind his peers? That might be the situation where you say retention could really benefit the child.”

Interview Question 12. In your opinion, what main criteria should be considered when deciding to socially promote a student?

The principals found it difficult to give one main criteria when deciding to socially promote a student. Principal A stated student success was the main criterion when deciding whether to socially promote a student. Principal B felt a student’s maturity level, age, and appropriateness with his or her peers should be considered when using social promotion.

Principal C believed a student’s maturity level and the safety of others has to be considered. Principal D looked primarily at discipline, age, and grades. She was concerned that a student’s age while in middle school could be detrimental to his or her success.

Principal D commented:

I look back on the kids that we have socially promoted and a lot of it is due to grades, but it's due to discipline also. They can be 16 and still in the 7th grade. Is that going to help them?

Principal E stated the three main criteria he looked at were “how far behind in the curriculum they are, their grades, and the level of being at-risk for drop out.” Common criteria listed for determining social promotion and grade retention were student's age, maturity, behavior, academic ability, and at-risk level.

Interview Question 13. What is your school district's policy and procedures for student retention?

The policies and procedures for the five school districts were very different. Three of the policies and procedures were very specific and objective, while two had qualifying criteria in place for students, and then became very subjective once a student met the criteria. Principals shared the policies and procedures regarding grade retention used in their respective school districts.

Principal A responded:

The policy district-wide is that the students have to pass four out of their seven classes, and they have to pass two out of their four core subjects. If they don't meet that requirement the policy says that they should be retained. Now, is there flexibility in that even though that is a hard fast written policy? Yes. We have a number of students every year who are socially promoted who do not meet what that policy says, but yet in the educational best interest of the student, from the board to the superintendant on down, the student is promoted.

Principal B shared:

At the middle school, if students have one F in any core subject then they are retained at semester. For example, in semester one, if they make an F in a core subject, they just have to show improvement by that next semester. If they show improvement, then they are able to go to that next grade level. If there is an F at the second semester, then we have to look at first semester and second semester to make that determination. In the past, we have been able to offer summer school. So, if students have failed a semester they had the opportunity to go to summer school, and if they successfully passed summer school they would be promoted to that next grade. If they did not successfully pass summer school, then they would be retained.

According to David (2008), reasons for retaining students include immaturity, not meeting specified criteria for promotion, and the belief a student will do better the next year with the same curriculum. Those who oppose retention have argued that it does not benefit a student's academic progress, it is too costly to a school district and a student's self-esteem, and it is closely related to a high dropout rate (Bowman, 2005).

Principal C related:

If a student has one F in any subject area at the semester, that student is required to go to summer school, whether it is here or another school, pass summer school, and then he can pass. If he doesn't go to summer school, he doesn't pass. If he has five F's in any subject area for semester, he is automatically retained.

Buffum et al. (2009) believed students should retake only the classes they failed and receive specific interventions instead of repeating an entire grade. The best interest of the student is not taken into consideration if he or she is made to repeat the entire grade.

Principal D reported:

We have a check list (Light's Retention Scale). A lot of it is the teacher. If the teacher sees that a child... for example, I had a student last year, and she's [the teacher] like "he's not ready to go onto the next grade. There's no way." I said, "Well, there could be reasons he is not ready to go on, not just by grades, but by things going on at home. Is he low because he needs to be tested for special services?" That's when we pull up that checklist. That helps us to see if it is going to be prosperous for him to go on or keep him here and retain him. That is hard because we've had a few kids that retaining them has made a difference, and then we have some that it has not at all, and they should have gone on. So it is really difficult.

The Light's Retention Scale essentially determines if a student is considered at-risk. At-risk students' behaviors may be erratic and inconsistent. They may feel a sense of both superiority and inferiority and are often fearful and anxious in their surroundings (Cichucki, 2007). At-risk students can become angry in a short period of time making adults struggle to understand their intentions (Child Development Institute, 2010). This causes students to act very childish (California Department of Education, 1987) with frequent mood swings.

At-risk students face some of the toughest challenges in life and in school and may not learn in the same way as peers because of the chronic stressors in their lives

(Jensen, 2009). At-risk students may be self-conscious, exhibit low self-esteem (Freeman, 2009) and search for some adult identity among their peers (Pennington, 2009). They may be sensitive and take offense to any kind of criticism but at the same time can be optimistic and hopeful about their future when involved with a positive mentor (California Department of Education, 1987). At-risk students are often from poverty and struggle academically because of the lack of parental support (Neuman, 2008).

Principal E responded:

The district policy is very open in that it basically says that the district philosophy does not believe that retention is a positive thing, but ultimately the decision rests with the building level principal. At the building level, in our handbook, our policy and practice is that a student who fails two or more units of study in a core area will be considered a candidate for retention, two credits in core areas can be made up in summer school. More than two credits missing in core areas cannot be made up in summer school.

The assumption is if students know they will be retained each year when evidence of achievement is not demonstrated, this will motivate students to be successful (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). However, this motivation does not work if the principal does not follow through with policy.

Interview Question 14. What is your school district's policy and procedures for social promotion?

Principals A, C, D, and E indicated the same policies and procedures for retention were used when determining whether to socially promote a student. The five principals indicated they did not have specific policies and procedures in place for socially

promoting students. Principal B was the only principal who responded with an explanation of how her school board would possibly deviate from their very specific grade retention policy. Principal B stated:

We do not have a written social promotion policy. We do use our judgment. If it is going to be detrimental to that child or for that grade level for the child to be with those peers, then we would consider social promotion, but again it would... I keep referring to 8th grade because that is really the only time that we look at the social promotion because if someone is 16 or 17 or is a very mature 5th grade student we would have to look at their best interest to keep them retained in our building or not.

When students enter high school after being socially promoted during middle school, the students have just as great a chance of dropping out as they would after being retained (Berlin, 2008). Berlin (2008) argued educators in middle schools need to reform their promotion policies and require students to earn credits, then students would learn accountability at age eleven rather than at age fourteen during their freshman year (Berlin, 2008).

The principals' responses were consistent with much of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The principals each had shared a unique perspective regarding the use of grade retention and social promotion with middle school students. They felt strongly about the policies and procedures in place within their school district. The primary focus among the principals was student success, regardless of their opinion on grade retention and social promotion.

Interviews: Retained students. To assure anonymity, each student was assigned a data code. For example, retained student number one was coded Student R1 and retained student number two was coded Student R2.

Interview Question 1. Why do you think you were retained?

The responses from the six student participants were centered on the lack of academic success. According to Picklo and Christenson (2005), if students do not attain the predetermined achievement level, they are required to relearn the same material. The retained students stated because they failed classes the teachers and principals decided to retain them. Student R1 added his behavior was also a contributing factor to his retention. He believed his parents were in favor of his retention because they felt he was not ready to move on to the next grade.

Students R2 and R3 indicated failing to complete work and not turning in daily assignments led to their retention. Student R4 indicated a lack of effort and not working to potential contributed to being retained. Student R5 realized the need for retention and stated, "I wasn't learning what I needed to." The principals of each of these students indicated in their interviews there are other factors besides academic success that contribute to a student being retained. However, the responses from the students indicated their academic failures were the major indicator for their retention.

Interview Question 2. When you were retained in the same grade, how did that make you feel?

Three of the students expressed a positive feeling regarding their retention, while three students were angry and sad. Student R1 was encouraged because of his grade retention. He indicated retention allowed him the opportunity to complete the same

school work and possibly get better grades since he was familiar with the curriculum.

Student R1 also stated he had many problems with students in the previous grade and he might not get into as many fights with his new classmates.

Student R2 felt happy, yet sad. He felt sad because he was not moving on with his friends; however, retention also brought him a sense of relief. Student R2 stated being retained gave him another chance to learn all the things he missed the first time. By relearning the skills, he would be better prepared, making the following year of school easier.

Student R3 expressed sadness because she would not be with her friends anymore and would be in the same grade as her sister. Student R4 stated, “It made me feel dumb because I knew I could do it, but I was being stupid and not trying.” Student R5 was angry because he had to go back a grade. Finally, Student R6 indicated that his retention made him feel better socially because he had more friends in the grade below and could go through school with them. Bowman (2005) reported grade retention is too costly to a student’s self-esteem.

However, with appropriate interventions, including academic support from teachers and changes in the learning strategies employed by students, grade retention can be a positive experience (Stone & Engel, 2007).

Interview Question 3. What were some of the academic areas you struggled in during the year you were retained?

Four of the six students stated that math was the subject in which they struggled. Communication arts and science were listed by three of the six students as classes they struggled in, and only one student indicated social studies was a difficult subject to

master. Student R5 generalized his answer by stating most of the classes were a struggle for him to pass.

In Missouri, math, communication arts, and science are the three subjects assessed at the elementary and middle school levels through the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP). Each school district is evaluated based on student scores in math and communication arts due to NCLB requirements. Because of the high expectations schools face at the state and federal levels, students' answers reflected these same expectations.

Interview Question 4. Were you taught differently in the year you were retained? How?

Five of the six students indicated they were taught differently during their retained year, and according to Schmoker (2006) the *how* in teaching and learning is extremely important. Students R1 and R6 believed the difference in teaching took place because they had different teachers during their retained school year. These students were in large schools; therefore, there were two different core teams of teachers for each grade. Each student was placed with a different team of core teachers during their retained year in an effort to increase the opportunity for success. Student R1 stated:

They have different teaching styles, and that has been helping me a lot more. My math teacher this year always uses games and stuff for us to play, and my science teacher lets us go outside and pitch baseballs and stuff, which is really fun, and it just helps me better. I have to interact with something to get it.

Student R2 felt he was taught differently during his retained year. He stated the teachers pulled him aside and helped him individually when he was struggling.

This extra effort from teachers encouraged him to try harder by completing his homework and he focused on the instruction more intently.

Student R3 was the only student who did not feel the instruction was different during her retained year. She stated, “I think it is about the same, but I’m not distracted as much as I was last year. I’m still struggling the same, but I have to pay attention more so I don’t get held back again.” For Student R3 to have a different academic outcome, changes need to take place within her educational program.

Student R4 indicated she was taught differently because she was trying harder. According to Student R4, once the teachers saw she was trying harder and not giving up, the teachers began to work harder to help her succeed. Student R6 indicated he had a teacher who was very mean, but during his retained year, the teacher was replaced with a new, nicer teacher. According to Student R6, receiving a new teacher allowed him to be successful academically. If educators expect students to be successful during their retained year, a change in delivery from the previous year should take place (Buffum et al., 2009). Repeating the same instructional strategies and expecting a different result will not likely take place

Interview Question 5. How did your parents react when you were retained?

Student R1 indicated his parents felt good about his grade retention knowing he would receive more help and would probably be successful during the retained year. His parents were encouraged by the thought of him possibly earning better grades. Student R2 stated his mother was unhappy at first because he was capable of so much more, and she did not feel he needed retained. The student also stated after some time passed, his mother was happy because being retained would be a second chance for him. Student R3

stated her parents were really upset. She said her parents yelled at her when they were first notified, and eventually tried to avoid the subject all together. Student R3 indicated her parents joked about the topic to make her feel better.

Student R4 believed her mom was really disappointed in her. Her mother's disappointment hurt Student R4 because she felt her mother no longer trusted her. When asked how his parents reacted to his grade retention, Student R5 commented, "I don't know. They wanted me to learn, and I wasn't learning what I needed to." Student R6 indicated his dad was completely in favor of his grade retention. Originally, the principal was not going to retain him, but his dad argued, "No, you need to hold him back."

Interview Question 6. When you were retained did you see improvement in your grades and attendance?

All six students indicated their grades and attendance had improved. Researchers report grade retention does not increase student achievement (Bowman, 2005); however, these six students saw an improvement in their grades. Grades were better because the students were trying harder and because two of the students had different teachers who were making the difference. Attendance was better because the students were not getting in trouble as often, which meant they had not been suspended from school. The students appeared to have a better attitude about school, contributing to better grades and increased attendance.

Interview Question 7. What do you believe are the most important things the school can do so you can be successful?

Two of the students focused more on what they (the students) should do to be successful, rather than what the school can do for them. Student R1 stated he would like

to see the school have more interactive studies. He explained by having to learn new concepts through homework assignments, it was more difficult to remember what was learned the previous day. Student R2 felt it was not the school's responsibility, it was his.

Student R2 commented:

They (the school) are already doing the best they can. They are already teaching me and helping me. It's what I have to do. I have to listen to the work, and if I have problems, I have to be able to make it to tutoring or after school activities to learn that and get help with it. In my opinion, the school is already teaching me. I just have to learn it and understand it.

Student R3 felt the teachers needed to be more understanding of the students. She understood the students need to pay more attention and take responsibility for their learning, but would like it if the teachers did not get as frustrated with struggling students. Student R4 stated teachers should give students as much help as possible. If the teacher noticed a student having trouble, the teacher needs to pull the student aside and help. Student R4 indicated it was important to know someone was there to help her through the struggles and somebody actually cared. Student R5 wanted the school to "make it where I could understand what I am learning." Student R6 stated, "If I had more class time to work, then I could be more successful."

Interview Question 8. Describe the relationship you have with your teachers.

All of the students agreed their relationships with their teachers were positive. Student R1 indicated the positive relationships he had with his teachers were because he was listening more. He stated his attitude was much better than during the previous school year. Student R2 stated the positive relationships he had with the teachers were

because he was staying more focused and asked more questions when being taught a difficult concept. His teachers were seeing more effort from him; therefore, they were more positive towards him.

Student R3 indicated she worked well with most of her teachers. Student R3 indicated her relationships were “off balance a bit” with two teachers because she did not respect the teachers and talked back to them. Student R4 indicated the positive relationships with the teachers were because she tried her best and showed progress. She also believed her teachers were proud of her. Student R5 stated the relationships with his teachers were “good.” He said he could talk with them when he struggled, and the teachers made sure he understood the concepts they were trying to teach. Student R6 believed his teachers were much more talkative, which helped to build positive relationships.

Interview Question 9. Describe the relationship you have with your classmates.

Four of the six students felt the relationships they had with their new classmates were positive. Student R1 stated he did not get in as many fights during the retained year, so he felt the relationships were good with his new classmates. Student R2 indicated at the beginning of the year the relationships were “a little shaky” with his new classmates. He went on to say, currently, the relationships with his new classmates were perfectly fine and was friends with many of them. Student R2 stated, “To me they are just like my friends that I had in 7th grade (the previous year).”

Student R3 indicated the relationships she had with her new classmates were “a lot better than last year because last year there was a lot of drama.” Student R4 did not state whether her relationships were positive or negative with her new classmates, but

described the relationships by saying, “At first they were all kind of like, ‘she’s a trouble maker. She’s probably just going to give up again.’ I knew I had to show everybody different and that I had changed.” Student R5 indicated the relationships with his new classmates were worse. He stated some of the classmates he “got along” with, but some of them he did not. Student R6 stated, “It wasn’t very hard (building relationships) because the group of kids I hung out with were in a grade lower than me already.”

Interview Question 10. How did the school help you the next year so you could be successful?

Student R1 indicated the school has implemented privilege time every Friday for students who behave appropriately and complete all their school work. He liked being rewarded for doing the right things and felt it motivated him to be successful. Student R1 stated if he did not get privilege time he no longer became angry, he just became more motivated to work harder. Student R2 indicated the teachers were giving him more individual attention this year, and helped him to see where his mistakes were. He also attended tutoring more consistently which helped to complete his homework assignments in a timely manner. Student R3 indicated the teachers were offering as much support as possible and continuing to build positive relationships with her.

Student R4 indicated the teachers were always there for her. She stated, “When I went to them (teachers) and asked for help, they helped me out. If I needed to talk to somebody, I could talk to somebody.” Student R5 indicated by placing him with the same teacher the following year, this allowed him to be more successful. Student R6 stated the teachers were more involved with him instructionally. During the year, Student R6 struggled, he indicated the teachers did not provide additional assistance once he received

assignments. The following year, Student R6's teachers were more helpful through constant communication and assistance while he was working on assignments.

Interviews: Socially promoted students. To assure anonymity, each student was assigned a data code. For example, socially promoted student number one was coded Student SP1 and socially promoted student number two was coded Student SP2.

Interview Question 1. Why do you think you were promoted to the next grade?

All five students felt they had the potential to do better, and their teachers agreed. Student SP1 said he was promoted because "everyone thought I was a good student, and I was going to try harder. They gave me a chance." Student SP2 referred to his effort and stated, "I was not only trying while in school, but actually trying to stay in school." He indicated in years past he did not care if he was in school and did not pay attention at all to the teachers. Student SP2 felt he had changed and the teachers and principal could see the difference.

Student SP3 felt he was promoted because it was a way to keep him from falling further behind. Student SP4 felt she was promoted because she went to summer school and made up for the poor grades from the regular school year. Student SP5 indicated attending tutoring and receiving additional help kept her from being retained; thus, being promoted to the next grade. According to Berlin (2008), students know educators have no intention of retaining them so their academic performance during the school year is lacking, and promotion to the next grade level occurs.

Interview Question 2. When you were promoted to the next grade, despite failing grades, how did that make you feel?

Student SP1 felt “bad” when he was promoted because he received low grades and struggled academically. He did not indicate why he felt this way, but only that he was not encouraged by the decision. Student SP2 had an opposite reaction. He was very positive about the promotion and stated, “Oh, it made me feel really good that the teachers would accept me into the eighth grade and promote me into their classes.”

Student SP3 was encouraged by the principal’s decision to promote him. He indicated the decision made him feel better because he did not want to be in junior high anymore. Student SP3 would be turning 16 years old and did not want to think about being in the eighth grade again. Student SP4 was relieved to move on to the next grade. She was glad she did not have to repeat the grade again and be with the same teachers. Student SP5 felt she was given another chance and an opportunity to try harder.

Interview Question 3. How did your parents react when you were promoted?

Four of the students indicated their parents were happy the principal socially promoted them. Student SP4 was in foster care at the time, so she did not have a response to question three. Student SP1 believed his parents were happy the school gave him a second chance and he should try harder the next school year. Student SP2 stated his parents were excited and encouraged to see him go on to the next grade. Student SP3 believed both his parents were happy he was promoted because “they didn’t think I was going to ever go to the next grade.” Student SP5 stated her mom was relieved and told her to “go to tutoring, summer school, and to pay attention more in school.”

Interview Question 4. What were some of the academic areas you struggled in after being promoted?

Four of the five students who were socially promoted stated they struggled in math. Three of the five students stated science was a struggle during their promoted year, two students struggled in social studies, and only one student had difficulty in communication arts. Math was also the class more retained students struggled in during their retention year. One of the reasons math may be a constant struggle for some students is because new concepts continuously build from existing concepts. If a solid math foundation was not built at an early age, students may often struggle in math throughout school.

Interview Question 5. When you were promoted did you see improvements in your grades and attendance?

Student SP1 believed he had not seen improvement in his grades, but his attendance had improved over the previous year. Student SP2 indicated there had been a little improvement in his grades, but he still struggled in his classes. He stated he had fewer tardies during his socially promoted year, but his overall attendance percentage was worse than the previous year. Student SP3 stated his grades were “a lot better,” but his attendance was not improved over the previous year. Student SP4 indicated both her grades and attendance improved from a year ago, and with only one suspension, she had been in school just about every day. Student SP5 stated she had seen an improvement in her grades but not in her attendance. According to the responses given from the five students interviewed, it was inconclusive social promotion made a positive impact on students academically, nor did it improve the students’ desire to be in school.

Interview Question 6. What do you believe are the most important things the school can do for you to ensure your success?

Student SP1 did not respond to question number six. Student SP2 believed the school needed to give easier work. He wanted the teachers to instruct more clearly which would help to get him back on track. Student SP3 wanted the school to help him “learn better, go to high school, and go to college.” Student SP4 wanted the school to “make things simpler.” Regarding her math class, Student SP4 responded:

...they (teachers) try to explain to me every way to do it instead of one way that I get. They try to explain why it works like that, and if I just know how to do it, I don't want to know why. Then it confuses me.”

Student SP5 wanted the school to offer more days of tutoring so she could receive additional help.

Interview Question 7. Describe the relationship you have with your teachers.

Four of the five students indicated they had positive relationships with their teachers. Student SP1 described the relationships with his teachers as “good.” Student SP2 gave comments about each of the teachers as he went through his class schedule. His first hour teacher was “pretty good”, second hour teacher was “decently good”, felt he was “getting along” with the third hour teacher, the fourth hour teacher was “not that helpful”, his fifth and sixth hour teacher was the same and was “not all that bad,” and said he “gets along ok” with the seventh and eighth hour teachers.

Student SP3 stated his teachers were all fun and nice. Student SP believed the relationships with her teachers were not very good at the beginning of the year, but indicated they had improved because she was staying out of trouble. Student SP5 was the

only student who felt the relationships she had with the teachers were not good. Student SP5 commented, “I don’t think my teachers like me very much, or at least we don’t get along. I don’t know, it’s probably mostly on my part.”

Interview Question 8. Describe the relationship you have with your classmates.

Four of the five students described the relationships with their classmates positively. Student SP1 was somewhat neutral in his response by stating the relationships were “alright, but sometimes I have trouble with some of them.” Student SP2 felt he did not have any enemies and he was friends with everyone. Student SP3 stated his classmates did not bother him or try to fight with him. He felt they were friendlier. Student SP4 was positive regarding the relationships she had with her classmates. She stated, “I have a really good relationship with my classmates. I have not had very many problems this year compared with last year. Everything is a lot different than it was last year.” Student SP5 described the relationships she had with her classmates as “good.”

Interview Question 9. How did the school help you the next year so you could be successful?

After a long pause, Student SP1 talked about a teacher allowing him to bring a gaming system to school and play it in class if his grades improved. Student SP2 stated the pre-algebra teacher helped him some by keeping him on task and making sure he did not fall asleep in class. Student SP2 indicated falling asleep had been an ongoing problem in the past. Student SP3 commented:

The teachers care a lot differently. Like, if you need help, they will talk to you one-on-one, and I like that. In other schools, they just told you to do it, and you

did it. I was always scared...I was a shy kid, and I never raised my hand up or anything, but here I raise my hand up because I actually like the teachers.

According to Jacob and Stone (2005), “The majority of teachers and principals believe that ending social promotion positively influenced educators’ behavior and their school district’s instructional focus” (p. 50).

Student SP4 indicated the continuous communication the principal and teachers had with her dad made a big difference during the socially promoted year. She indicated her dad’s involvement with the school increased accountability, which kept her in school more. Student SP5 stated the school put in place an intervention strategy which helped with her behavior. The intervention made her more successful academically. For student success, interventions should be implemented following the year that a student struggled but was not retained (Buffum et al., 2007).

Summary

The results from the quantitative and qualitative data were inconsistent with prior research. Despite previous grade retention data and its connection to high school dropout rates, the five principals in this study continued to use grade retention at the middle school level. The principals used retention to hold students accountable academically, not because it was in the best interest of the students. The students who were retained seemed encouraged by their principal and teachers’ decision to retain them, and most of the students felt they had shown improvement. Research indicated retained students need to be taught differently during their repeated year (Buffum et al., 2009), yet many schools were not able to accommodate this change due to the limited number of teachers per grade level.

The students who were socially promoted appeared to lack the confidence necessary to be successful. Academically, the socially promoted students were not successful because they were not at grade level when the school year began, and did not have a solid foundation for achievement. Interventions were in place for the eleven students interviewed, but appeared to have only helped some of these students. Educators continued to be challenged with providing targeted, systematic interventions for struggling learners, while teaching students at or above grade level.

In Chapter Five a summary of the findings was discussed. Conclusions to the study were completed. Implications were addressed, and recommendations were suggested concerning grade retention and social promotion with middle school students.

Chapter Five: Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The use of grade retention and social promotion with middle school students is still evident in schools today. Educators continue to argue both for and against social promotion and grade retention. Making the right decision for at-risk students is critical for their future academic success. This study explored, in depth, the use of grade retention and social promotion among middle school students. In this final chapter, the research questions that guided the study were answered and data were presented to support the findings. The results were summarized and implications for practice were discussed. Recommendations were given regarding the use of grade retention and social promotion in middle schools.

Summary of Findings

For the purpose of this study, four research questions were posed to obtain quantitative and qualitative data about grade retention and social promotion. Following an analysis of the survey data and an examination of the student and principal responses, findings were summarized and applied to the corresponding research question.

Research Question 1. What are the opinions of middle school students who have been retained regarding their current grades as compared to grades from the previous year?

When asked whether grades had improved during their retained year, all six students indicated their grades had improved. Researchers have reported grade retention does not increase student achievement (Bowman, 2005); however, the six students who were interviewed realized an improvement in their grades. Student R1 exclaimed, “Oh

yeah! I'm making like As, Bs, and Cs. I have maybe one D, and that is in gym class. I lost my gym uniform, but I'm bringing that grade back up."

Grades were better since the students were trying harder, and because two of the students were assigned different teachers that were making a difference. Student R3 commented, "First semester my grades were really good, but I'm starting to struggle again, so I just have to make sure that I keep my grades up." The students appeared to have better attitudes about school and better grades, which they attributed to improved behavior.

Students were asked what they believed were the most important things the school (teachers) can do for them to be successful. Student R4 stated, "When I went to them and asked for help, they helped me out. If I needed to talk to somebody, I could talk to somebody." Students' responses also included included: more interactive studies, more understanding teachers, an increase in help from teachers, having teachers that care about students, and to make instruction where it is more understandable. Student R3 reported, "I was expecting people to make fun of me because I failed and everything, but they really haven't. So, I guess they are just trying to get along with me, and they are supporting me as much as they can."

All of the students reported the relationships they had with their teachers were positive, causing an improvement in grades. Four of the six students stated the relationships they had with their new classmates were also positive. When the students were asked what changes took place during their retained school year that helped them to be successful, the students gave the following reasons: privilege time for appropriate behavior and completed school work, more individual attention, tutoring, positive

relationships with teachers, and more involvement instructionally. Student R2 stated, “They have pulled me aside and talked to me personally about what they think is wrong that I am doing, and they help me through it.” Student R6 stated, “She (the teacher) just didn’t give you an assignment, talk for five more minutes, and then go to her desk. She would give us the assignment, and then she would talk and let us do the work at the same time.”

Research Question 2. What are the opinions of middle school students who have been socially promoted regarding their grades as compared to grades from the previous year?

According to the responses given from the five students interviewed, it was not conclusive that social promotion made a positive impact on students academically, nor did it improve the students’ desire to be in school. The answers varied when the students were asked if they saw improvement in their grades. An increase in grades was realized by a few students, but others had seen no improvement. Student SP4 lamented, “Yeah, I think (I’m struggling with) most of them (classes) right now.” Student SP2 commented, “There’s been a little bit of improvement, but I’m still getting kind of bad grades.” The students continued to struggle in math and science and, Student SP3 stated, “I’ve always struggled in math. This year, now, I’m struggling in English, and I always had A’s in English.”

Students indicated if they were given easier and simpler work, with additional help from their teachers, they could be more successful. Student SP1 commented, “Easier work. I guess they could maybe teach more clearly and helpfully to get me back on track. The teachers should use shorter words instead of longer words.”

Student SP2 stated, “The teachers are more intense and strict, always telling you to get on task, so you won’t get distracted with your classmates.”

Students who did experience some success during the socially promoted school year gave the following reasons: privileges for doing the right thing, teachers keeping students on task, teachers caring about the students, teachers communicating with parent more regularly, and interventions for academics and behavior. Student SP4 commented, “They call my dad a little more than they used to, because last year I probably skipped a lot. My dad has been a lot more involved, so they have been contacting each other a lot more, so I can’t really skip.” Student SP3 stated, “They (teachers) are clearer about stuff, and they teach it in different ways. They give more information about it, and if you don’t get it the first time, they will say it in another way, and they will help you out.”

Research Question 3. What are the perceptions of students and principals regarding grade retention and social promotion?

Six of the students who were interviewed had been retained while in middle school. Their reasons for being retained focused around their lack of academic success. The students indicated poor grades were the strongest factor for their grade retention. Two of the students stated inappropriate behavior also contributed to their grade retention. The students had mixed emotions concerning their retention, with three of them glad and relieved, and three were angry and humiliated. Five of the six students felt they were taught differently during their retained school year, which may be a factor if different results were to occur. When the students’ parents were notified of their child’s grade retention, the parents’ reactions varied. Based on student responses, three of the parents were pleased because their child would receive a second chance.

Three parents demonstrated disappointment and anger with their child, because the parents felt their child was not working to his or her potential.

Five of the students who were interviewed had been socially promoted while in middle school. The students felt they had been socially promoted to the next grade level despite having poor grades in their core classes because they had the potential to improve. According to the students, their teachers and principals agreed with this reasoning. Four of the five students were relieved and encouraged by their principal's decision, felt accepted by their new teachers, and seemed to have increased confidence. The parents reacted similarly when informed their child would move on to the next grade. Grade retention can be looked at negatively, so the parents were happy about the decision. Four of the five students indicated the relationships they had with their new teachers were positive. Four of the five students stated the relationships they had with their classmates were positive.

Of the public middle school principals completing the survey, 68% reported using grade retention at the middle school level, and 78% of the principals socially promoted students. Ironically, 70% of the principals were neutral or disagreed that their school district's policies and procedures on grade retention was researched based. Over half, 61% of principals disagreed or strongly disagreed with using grade retention as an effective intervention. Most of the principals, 95% of principals stated they agreed or strongly agreed several people need to be involved in the decision of retaining a student. When principals were questioned if students should never be retained or socially promoted, 78% disagreed or strongly disagreed, which is reflective of the continued use of grade retention and social promotion in their schools.

Five public middle school principals were interviewed and stated they retained students at their respective school when the students did not demonstrate the necessary skills to be successful in the next grade. Four out of five principals indicated they socially promoted students to the next grade despite the student not demonstrating the necessary skills for success. When the principals were asked what warranted grade retention, all five principals agreed student achievement was their main focus. However, when the same question was asked regarding social promotion, the responses varied with each principal. Responses included age, maturity, mastery of concepts, discipline, and dropout risk. The principals were asked if they involved parents in the decision to retain or socially promote, and four of five principals agreed parents should be involved in this decision. The level of parent involvement varied among principals.

All six principals agreed the curriculum did not change for retained and socially promoted students. The principals did indicate instructional strategies and delivery methods needed to be different to give students a better chance for success. Changes for retained and socially promoted students involved interventions that were put in place for these students. Interventions included attendance contracts, guided study hall, computer based instruction, advisory programs, tutoring, and regular meetings with the school counselor. The principals of two schools indicated if students were retained, the students would have a different team of teachers the following school year. The other three principals stated changing teachers was not possible because the size of the school did not lend itself to more than one core team of teachers per grade level.

The success of a retained or socially promoted student was measured by improved attendance, better behavior, higher achievement, improved self-esteem, positive attitude,

and appropriate social skills. All of the principals indicated their school's policies and procedures for grade retention guided them in the decision whether to retain or socially promote students. Three of five principals had policies in place, yet only used the policies for guidance and often made decisions based on each student's individual situation. The other two principals followed their policies verbatim, and when a student did not meet the criteria listed in the policy for promotion, the student was retained without exception.

Research Question 4. What criteria are used by school districts when educators are considering retention and social promotion?

The following criterion were reported during the principal interviews regarding student retention and social promotion: opportunity for success, capability of the student, maturity, student grades, social skills, age, level of deficiency, at-risk for dropout, safety of others, and discipline record. The criteria listed are directly connected to each school's policies and procedures for grade retention.

From the survey, the principals were given three separate circumstances to choose that were appropriate for student retention. The choices were: health reasons, high absenteeism, and family or social situation. Eighty-two percent of the principals felt high absenteeism was an appropriate reason for retaining a student, 50% of the principals surveyed chose health reasons, and 43% of principals believed a student's family or social situation could warrant grade retention.

Principals were given several choices to choose when asked what criteria they used in their school for grade retention. Grades (90%), parent input (80%), and teacher input (86%) were selected by most principals, and very few principals (4%) believed a student's gender should be of no importance when deciding whether to retain.

Gender was selected by 6% of principals as a criterion to consider when deciding to socially promote a student. Similarly, with grade retention, parent (75%) and teacher input (79%) were criteria principals used in their school when considering social promotion. Seventy-eight percent of principals selected a student's age (see Figure 9).

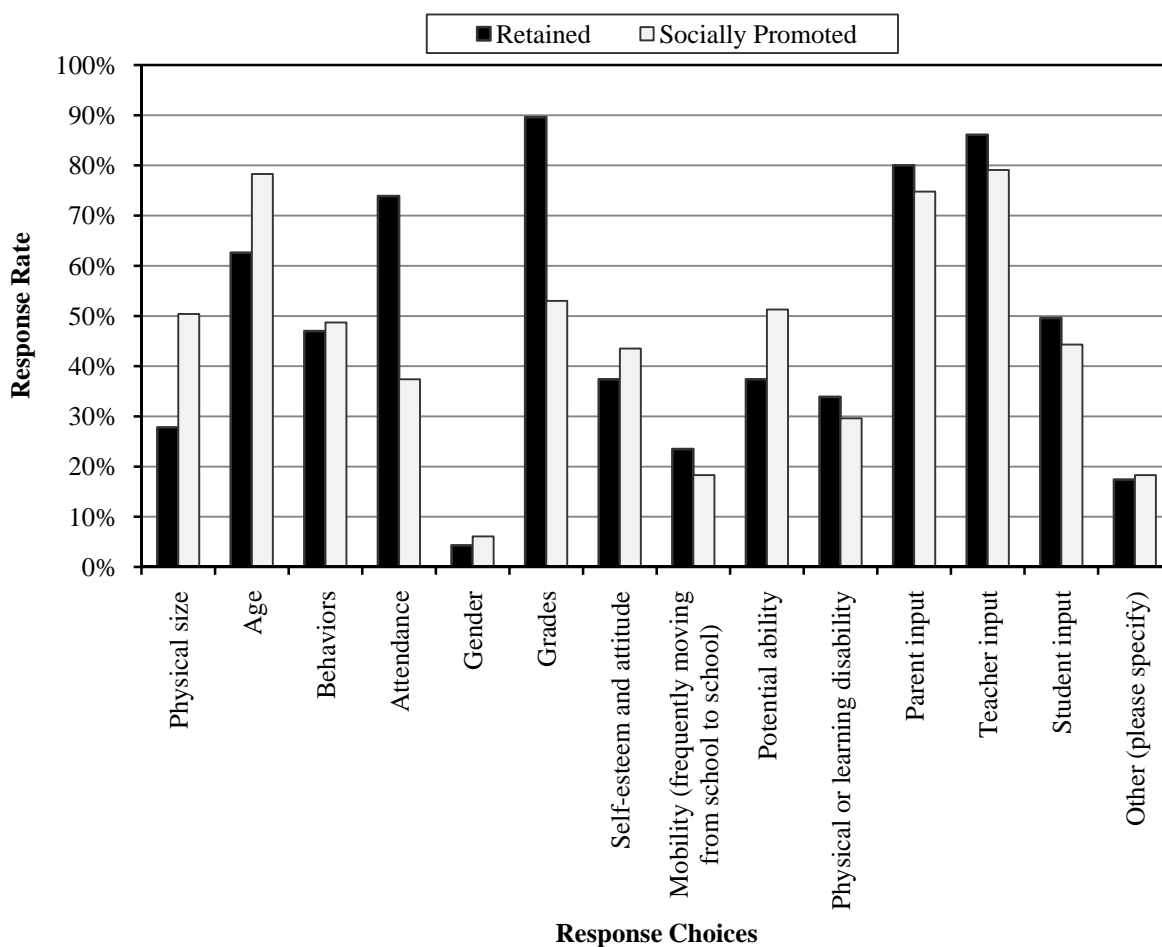


Figure 9. Comparison of criteria used for retention and social promotion. (Percents are rounded to the nearest whole number.)

Conclusions

Middle school principal perspectives. According to Mattos (2008) and Penna and Tallerico (2005), students who are retained not only experience a decline in achievement during their retained year, but retention greatly increases the likelihood of dropping out. However, 68% of middle school principals who completed the survey used retention in their schools. Despite what researchers have found, school leaders continued to use retention as an accountability tool, even though grade retention may not be the best solution for students. Middle school principals agreed a student's grades were the largest contributing factor for grade retention. If students did not show they had demonstrated the necessary skills for success, the majority of principals surveyed felt students should not be promoted to the next grade.

Seventy-eight percent of middle school principals who completed the survey socially promoted students to the next grade despite not showing academic proficiency. School districts' policies on grade retention are often used only as guidelines and indicators, rather than nonnegotiable consequences for low academic achievement. A student's age was selected by 78% of principals as criteria to consider when socially promoting a student. A student's grades were only selected by 50% of principals when choosing to socially promote. Parent input (75%) and teacher input (79%) were also selected as important criteria by principals who completed the survey when deciding to socially promote. Principals who were interviewed stated specifically they did not want a 16 year old student in middle school with other 12 year old students, and was reflected in the survey by 78% of principals when considering social promotion for students.

However, promoting students to the next grade level despite failing grades demonstrated to the students academic achievement was not as important as their age.

Retained student perspectives. The students who were interviewed understood their failing grades contributed to grade retention. The students' emotions were inconsistent regarding their retention, with students feeling positive about being retained and others angry and sad. The educators involved in the decision to retain may have had an impact on the students' attitudes towards their retention. If the students were shown compassion and felt the teachers cared about them, this might have given the students a positive outlook on their future. If the students were made to feel like failures from their teachers, principal, and parents, then their experiences in school might not be as positive.

All of the retained students who were interviewed indicated they had seen improvement in their grades and attendance. With five of six students indicating they were taught differently during their retained year, this instructional difference possibly had a direct impact on the students' learning and their desire to be in school. Had the students been taught the same as the year before, their achievement levels may not have increased and the students' attendance could have decreased as well because of their failing grades. The students' success could also be contributed to the positive relationships they had with their teachers and their new classmates. When the students felt welcome and safe in the classroom, the opportunity for success was much greater. Since the students had positive relationships with their teachers, this motivated the students to try harder and to please their teachers with increased effort. These students experienced success during their retained year, which is contrary to the findings of Mattos (2008).

Socially promoted student perspectives. The interviewed students who were socially promoted felt they were capable of higher achievement, which was one of the reasons their teachers and principals agreed to promote the students to the next grade. The majority of the students interviewed were pleased with their principals' decisions because negativity can be connected to retention. Despite the students' promotion, not all of them felt they had been successful in the areas of academics and attendance. The students indicated positive relationships with both their new teachers and classmates. Having good relationships with teachers may help students be successful; however, if students lack the necessary skills for their current grade placement, failure may be inevitable. Socially promoting students does not hold them academically accountable and often sets students up for failure the following year (Mohl & Slifer, 2005).

Implications for Practice

The six retained students who were interviewed in this study stated they had seen improvement in their grades and attendance. The retained students indicated the reason for increased achievement was due to the teachers' awareness of the students' deficiencies. The teachers were able to implement targeted strategies and interventions which contributed academic success. However, the five socially promoted students who were interviewed in this study did not see the same results. These students were promoted to the next grade even though they were not prepared academically; therefore, they did not have the foundation necessary for success.

The students' new teachers were not aware of the students' specific needs; consequently, targeted strategies and interventions were not in place.

Student success after grade retention may encourage administrators to use grade retention more consistently in their school instead of social promotion. Based on the results from this study, retaining more students may increase academic achievement. However, according to Penna and Talerico (2005), retaining students increases their probability of quitting high school by 35%, and middle school students actually see a decline in their achievement if retained (Mattos, 2008). Retention policies and procedures need to be refined, so grade retention and social promotion are not the only options for students who have failed.

The principals who were interviewed in this study believed the interventions in place for retained and socially promoted students were a contributing factor to the students' success. According to Buffam et al. (2009), without systemic, targeted interventions, struggling students cannot succeed. Gagne's (1985) theory also implies that the conditions of learning must meet the students' needs for higher achievement to occur. The implementation of differentiated instruction and research-based strategies have been proven to increase achievement of students (Marzano et al., 2001). Since principals continue to retain and socially promote students, effective interventions need to be in place to assist these students with academic deficiencies. If a pyramid of interventions was created for struggling students, academic success would be inevitable (Buffum et al., 2009). Principals should provide teachers with professional development on implementing research-based instructional strategies and interventions to ensure success for students.

Recommendations

Retaining middle school students in the same grade when they have failed a core class usually means the student repeats all classes when that is not necessary. If students were to fail all core classes for the entire year then the student should be retained in the same grade level. Socially promoting students to the next grade level, despite not showing academic success in the core classes, does not hold the students accountable for their learning and sets them up to fail again the following school year. The use of social promotion should not be practiced in middle schools unless the student has previously been retained. Traditionally, principals have only retained or socially promoted students who have not shown academic success.

Updated policies and procedures regarding grade retention need to be considered to address the individual, specific needs of students who fail core classes. At the high school level, if students do not pass a class they are required to retake the class in order to earn credit for graduation. This same policy needs to be implemented for students as early as grade six. Policies on grade retention need to be written so administrators can enforce the importance of passing core classes.

Requiring students to retake classes they have previously passed causes them to resent teachers and principals. When students are required to retake only the classes they failed, this ensures students will master the necessary standards to be successful in the next grade. Such a policy ensures students are held accountable for their learning and not promoted because of behavior or their age. Scheduling modifications for students who fail classes may present a challenge for educators; however, an increase in accountability and specific interventions for these students would enable higher achievement.

In the event a student turns 16 while in middle school, then an alternative placement for the student may be appropriate and should be considered.

Gagne's (1985) conditions of learning need to be present in all schools to provide an optimal learning environment. Students need to be presented with various instructional strategies if teachers aspire to see different outcomes. According to Gagne (1985), "Events of learning maneuver the learner in ways that constitute the conditions of learning" (p. 29). Operations throughout the instructional event must also vary to achieve a range of outcomes (Gagne, 1985). Educators must understand what intellectual skills need learned by students so correct instruction can follow (Gagne, 1985). If implemented, Gagne's (1985) conditions of learning may increase student achievement with all students, not just those who have been retained or socially promoted.

Educators should master instructional strategies so all students may achieve gains in their achievement (Marzano et al., 2001). When students identify similarities and differences in text, they will see achievement gains of 45% (Marzano et al., 2001). Reinforcing effort and providing recognition results in a 29% gain in achievement (Marzano et al., 2001). Students who were interviewed in this study yearned to have teachers who cared about them and recognized their accomplishments.

Marzano's instructional strategies can be mastered if administrators provide high-quality, consistent professional development for teachers. Marzano's strategies are proven to increase student achievement; therefore, it is essential these strategies are monitored by administration after implementation. Instructional strategies need to be revisited throughout the school year and modeled for clarification.

Schools need to have a pyramid of intervention in place for students who struggle, so they may receive assistance in specific, targeted areas (Mattos, 2008). Universal (Tier I) strategies for all students must be implemented by teachers consistently. Unfortunately, not all students will be successful with Tier I strategies and will need targeted, small group instruction (Tier II) (Buffum et al., 2009). Students who qualified for Tier II interventions will receive more individualized assistance; however, some will still not achieve academic gains. Students not successful with Tier II strategies will be placed in Tier III giving each of them individualized, daily instruction. Students will receive as much support through tutoring, focused study time, alternative school, and possibly an IEP (DuFour et al., 2004). An RtI approach ensures all students have the best opportunity for academic success.

Summary

Each year middle school students continue to be retained in the same grade and socially promoted to the next grade despite a lack of success. Retention and social promotion may not address the specific needs of each student. These two options for students are inconsistent, but often seem to be the easiest, most convenient decision regarding at-risk students who do not demonstrate proficiency. Grade retention continues to be used for academic accountability (Larsen & Akmal, 2007), while social promotion does not hold students accountable for their learning (Mohl & Slifer, 2005). Nevertheless, 68% of middle school principals surveyed retained students, while 78% of middle school principals surveyed socially promoted students despite not demonstrating the necessary skills for success.

Although the retained students who were interviewed realized an increase in achievement and attendance, prior research shows they have a greater likelihood of dropping out (Penna & Talerico, 2005). Grade retention offers a short-term, immediate solution for students who have failed, without considering the possible long-term ramifications (Anderson et al., 2003). Socially promoted students are not held accountable for their failed classes, and are set up to fail the following school year because they lack the necessary skills for success (Doyle, 2004).

Principals need to revisit their school district's policies and procedures and determine if the whole student is being considered. Students need to retake classes they fail, and different instructional strategies must be implemented for divergent results to occur. Gagne's (1985) conditions of learning provide the solid foundation for student success, while Marzano et al, (2001) offers instructional strategies that are proven to increase achievement. Specific, targeted interventions for students are crucial to ensure academic success (Mattos, 2008). All students are different, so the way they are taught must be individualized to meet their needs and avoid failure (Tomlinson, 2003). If grade retention policies focus on the whole student and research-based practices are implemented, student success is more likely to occur.

Appendix A

Lindenwood University
 School of Education
 209 S. Kingshighway
 St. Charles, Missouri 63301

<Interview – Principal>

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

“Grade Retention and Social Promotion Among Middle School Students”

Principal Investigator: Travis Shaw

Telephone: 417-243-4055 E-mail: tcs953@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Participant_____ Contact info_____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Travis Shaw under the guidance of Dr. Sherry DeVore. The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of grade retention and social promotion on student achievement.

2. a) Your participation will involve:
 - Verbally answering open-ended questions in a face-to-face interview to obtain your opinion, as a middle/junior high school principal, regarding retention and social promotion and to identify the policies, procedures, and criteria used to determine whether a student is to be retained or promoted.

 - All middle/junior high school principals who have students participating in the qualitative study have been selected to participate in this study. Approximately six (6) principals will be involved in the interview process.

 - The interview will take place upon completion of the student(s) interviews.

- b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be approximately 60 minutes. The face-to-face interview will be audio-taped.

***I give my permission for the interview to be audio-taped (participant’s initials_____).**

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.

4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge about student retention and social promotion.

5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.
6. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study and the information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location for five years and then destroyed.
7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, would like a copy of the results, or if any problems arise, you may call the Primary Investigator, Travis Shaw (417-243-4055) or the Supervising Faculty, Dr. Sherry DeVore (417-881-0009). You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs at 636-949-4846.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

 Participant's Signature

 Date

 Participant's Printed Name

 Primary Investigator's Signature

 Date

 Primary Investigator's Printed Name

Appendix B

Lindenwood University

School of Education
209 S. Kingshighway
St. Charles, Missouri 63301

<Student >

Informed Consent for Parents to Sign for Student Participation in Research Activities

“Grade Retention and Social Promotion Among Middle School Students”

Principal Investigator: Travis Shaw

Telephone: 417-243-4055 E-mail: tcs953@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Participant (Student’s Name) _____

Parent Contact Information _____

Dear Parent,

1. Your child is invited to participate in a research study conducted by Travis Shaw under the guidance of Dr. Sherry DeVore. The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of grade retention and social promotion on student achievement.

2. a) Your child’s participation will involve:
 - Verbally answering open-ended questions in a face-to-face interview. A copy of the interview questions are attached to this document.

 - Your child will be one of twelve student participants who has been either retained or socially promoted. Each student participant will answer the same questions in a face-to-face interview setting. The interviews will be audio-taped and take place in your child’s school building during a non-core academic class. The principal and/or counselor will be present during the interview. You are welcomed to attend if you wish.

***I give my permission to audio-tape the interview with my child. [Parent’s initials_____].**

Approximately 12 students in middle/junior high schools across southwest Missouri may be involved in this research.

- b) The amount of time involved in your child’s participation will be approximately 30 minutes in a face-to-face interview with Travis Shaw. The building principal and/or

counselor will be present during the interview. You are invited to attend if you choose.

3. There are no anticipated risks to your child associated with this research.
4. There are no direct benefits for your child's participation in this study. However, your child's participation will contribute to the knowledge about retention and social promotion.
5. Your child's participation is voluntary and you may choose not to let your child participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent for your child's participation at any time. Your child may choose not to answer any questions that he or she does not want to answer. You and your child will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to let your child participate or to withdraw your child.
6. We will do everything we can to protect your child's privacy. As part of this effort, your child's identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study.
7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, would like a copy of the results, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Travis Shaw (417-243-4055) or the Supervising Faculty, Dr. Sherry DeVore (417-881-0009). You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your child's participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs at 636-949-4846.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records.

I consent to my child's participation in the research described above.

Parent's/Guardian's Signature Date

Parent's/Guardian's Printed Name

Child's Printed Name

Primary Investigator's Signature Date

Primary Investigator's Printed Name

Appendix C

Lindenwood University
School of Education
209 S. Kingshighway
St. Charles, Missouri 63301

<Permission Letter: School District>

<Date>

Dear Superintendent _____,

I am conducting a research study titled, *Grade Retention and Social Promotion Among Middle School Students*, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at Lindenwood University.

The research gathered should assist in providing insight into the effects of grade retention and social promotion on student achievement. The findings from this study may provide middle school principals with practices and procedures that when implemented in place of or along with retention and/or social promotion will allow students to be successful.

For the study, twelve students, who have either been retained or socially promoted, will be interviewed about their perceptions of grade retention or social promotion. The students will be selected by their principal. The principal of the building will also be interviewed.

I am seeking your permission, as Superintendent of the <Name Here> School District, to allow the principal of the <Name Here> school building to select students in your district who have been retained or socially promoted to participate in a face-to-face interview. Parents of the students will be notified first by the principal, and then I will notify them in writing. Permission must be granted by the parents before the student is interviewed.

Each student will be interviewed separately in the presence of the principal and/or counselor. Parents are invited to attend. The interviews will be audio-taped in order to accurately transcribe the responses. A copy of the interview questions and informed consent letters are attached for your review.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary. The participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The identity of the participants and school district will remain confidential and anonymous in the dissertation or any future publications of this study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns about participation (phone: 417-243-4055 or e-mail: tcs953@lionmail.lindenwood.edu). You may also contact the dissertation advisor for this research study, Dr. Sherry DeVore, (phone: 417-881-0009 or e-mail: sdevore@lindenwood.edu). A copy of this letter and your written consent should be retained by you for future reference.

Respectfully,

Travis Shaw
Doctoral Candidate
Lindenwood University

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I understand it is my responsibility to retain a copy of this consent form if I so choose. I consent to participation in the research described above.

Superintendent's Signature Date

Superintendent's Printed Name

Primary Investigator's Signature Date

Primary Investigator's Printed Name

Appendix D

Letter of Participation

<Principal Interview>

<Date>

<Title> <First Name> <Last Name>

<Position>

<School District>

<Address>

Dear <Title> <First Name> <Last Name>,

Thank you for participating in my research study, *Grade Retention and Social Promotion Among Middle School Students*. I look forward to talking with you on <date> <time> to gather your perceptions and insights into grade retention and social promotion. I have allotted one hour to conduct our interview.

Enclosed are the interview questions to allow time for reflection before our interview. I have also enclosed the Informed Consent Form for your review and signature. If you agree to participate in the study, please sign the consent form.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Confidentiality is assured. If you have questions, please call (417-243-4055) or e-mail (tcs953@lionmail.lindenwood.edu). Once this study has been completed, the results will be available to you by request.

Sincerely,

Travis Shaw
Doctoral Candidate
Lindenwood University

Appendix E
Letter of Participation
<Student Interview>

<Date>

<Title> <First Name> <Last Name>
<Address>

Dear <Title> <First Name> <Last Name>,

Thank you for allowing your child to participate in my research study, *Grade Retention and Social Promotion Among Middle School Students*. I look forward to talking with your child on <date> <time> to gather <his/her> perceptions and insights into grade retention and social promotion. I have allotted 30 minutes to conduct our interview.

Enclosed are the interview questions to allow time for reflection before our interview. I have also enclosed the Informed Consent Form for your review and signature. If you agree to allow your child to participate in the study, please return the signed consent form to your principal.

Your child's participation in this research study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Confidentiality is assured. If you have questions, please call (417-243-4055) or e-mail (tcs953@lionmail.lindenwood.edu). Once this study has been completed, the results will be available to you by request.

Sincerely,

Travis Shaw
Doctoral Candidate
Lindenwood University

Appendix F

On-line Survey: Middle School Principals

1. Do you retain students at your school when they have not demonstrated the necessary skills to be successful in the next grade? Yes No
2. Do you promote students to the next grade level even though they have not demonstrated the necessary skills to be successful in the next school year? Yes No

The following statements will be rated as:

Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree.

3. Grade retention is an effective intervention.
4. The policies and procedures regarding retention and promotion in my school's handbook are research-based.
5. It is important to have several people involved in the decision of retaining or socially promoting a student.
6. Students should never be retained.
7. Students should never be socially promoted.
8. In what circumstances might retention be appropriate? (Check all that apply)
 - a. Health reasons
 - b. High absenteeism
 - c. Family or social situation

9. In your school, what criteria are used to determine if a student should be retained?

(Check all that apply)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Physical size | <input type="checkbox"/> Mobility (frequently moving from school to school) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Age | <input type="checkbox"/> Physical or learning disability |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Behaviors | <input type="checkbox"/> Parent input |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attendance | <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher input |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gender | <input type="checkbox"/> Student input |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grades | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (comment) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self-esteem and attitude | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Potential ability | |

10. In your school, what criteria are used to determine if a student should be socially promoted? (Check all that apply)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Physical size | <input type="checkbox"/> Mobility (frequently moving from school to school) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Age | <input type="checkbox"/> Physical or learning disability |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Behaviors | <input type="checkbox"/> Parent input |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attendance | <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher input |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gender | <input type="checkbox"/> Student input |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grades | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (comment) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self-esteem and attitude | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Potential ability | |

Appendix G
E-mail Recruitment Letter

<Principal Survey>

Dear <Title> <First Name> <Last Name>,

This is an invitation for Missouri Middle/Junior High Principals to participate in a survey for a research study entitled, *Grade Retention and Social Promotion Among Middle School Students*. I am completing this study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctoral degree in Educational Administration through Lindenwood University. If you would like to participate in this study, please click here: <link> to access the letter of informed consent.

Sincerely,

Travis Shaw
Doctoral Candidate
Lindenwood University

Appendix H

Lindenwood University
 School of Education
 209 S. Kingshighway
 St. Charles, Missouri 63301

<Principal – Survey>

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

“Grade Retention and Social Promotion Among Middle School Students”

Principal Investigator: Travis Shaw

Telephone: 417-243-4055 E-mail: tcs953@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Participant _____ Contact info _____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Travis Shaw under the guidance of Dr. Sherry DeVore. The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of grade retention and social promotion on student achievement.

The purpose of the survey is to obtain the perceptions of middle school principals on retention and social promotion and to identify the policies, procedures, and criteria used to determine whether a student is to be retained or promoted.

All middle/junior high school principals in Missouri (approximately 350 principals) will be invited to participate in this survey.

2. a) Your participation will involve:
 - Completing a brief online survey (SurveyMonkey) concerning student retention and social promotion.
 - The online survey will be open for 14 consecutive days.

b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be approximately 10 minutes.
3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.
4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge about student grade retention and social promotion.

5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.
6. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study and the information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location for five years and then destroyed.
7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, would like a copy of the results, or if any problems arise, you may call the Primary Investigator, Travis Shaw at 417-243-4055 or the Supervising Faculty, Dr. Sherry DeVore at 417-881-0009. You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs at 636-949-4846.

By completing the survey, you consent to participate in this study.

Thank you for your time,

Travis Shaw
Doctoral Student
Lindenwood University

Date

Revised 1-21-2010

Appendix I

Student Interview: Retained

1. Why do you think you were retained?
2. When you were retained in the same grade, how did that make you feel?
3. What were some of the academic areas you struggled in during the year you were retained?
4. Were you taught differently in the year you were retained? How?
5. How did your parents react when you were retained?
6. When you were retained did you see improvements in the following areas:
 - a. Grades
 - b. Attendance
7. What do you believe are the most important things the school can do so you can be successful?
8. Describe the relationship you have with your teachers.
9. Describe the relationship you have with your classmates.
10. How did the school help you the next year so you could be successful?

Appendix J

Student Interview: Socially Promoted

1. Why do you think you were promoted to the next grade?
2. When you were promoted to the next grade, despite failing grades, how did that make you feel?
3. How did your parents react when you were promoted?
4. What were some of the academic areas you struggled in after being promoted?
5. When you were promoted did you see improvements in the following areas:
 - a. Grades
 - b. Attendance
6. What do you believe are the most important things the school can do for you to ensure your success?
7. Describe the relationship you have with your teachers.
8. Describe the relationship you have with your classmates.
9. How did the school help you the next year so you could be successful?

Appendix K

Interview: Middle School Principals

1. Do you retain students at your school when they have not demonstrated the necessary skills to be successful in the next grade?
2. Do you promote students to the next grade level even though they have not demonstrated the necessary skills to be successful in the next school year?
3. When do you believe grade retention is warranted?
4. When do you believe social promotion is warranted?
5. Are parents involved in the decision to retain or socially promote the student?
If yes, in what way?
6. Are there curriculum changes made the following year for students who are retained?
If yes, what changes are made?
7. Are there curriculum changes made the following year for students who are socially promoted? If yes, what changes are made?
8. Are specific interventions in place for retained and socially promoted students? If yes, what interventions are used?
9. How do you determine success or failure for retained and socially promoted students?
10. Are changes made to the students' schedules, teacher assignments, and school climate? If yes, what changes are made?
11. In your opinion, what main criteria should be considered when deciding to retain a student?
12. In your opinion, what main criteria should be considered when deciding to socially promote a student?
13. What is your school district's policy and procedures for student retention?
14. What is your school district's policy and procedures for social promotion?

Appendix L

11-08
IRB Project Number

Lindenwood University**Institutional Review Board Disposition Report****To: Mr. Travis Shaw****CC: Dr. Sherry DeVore**

The IRB has reviewed the resubmission of your application for research has approved the application.

Ricardo Delgado

10/11/10

Institutional Review Board Chair

Date

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Vita

Travis C. Shaw began his undergraduate studies in pursuit of an elementary education degree while attending Fort Scott Community College from 1991 to 1993. Prior to leaving Fort Scott, Shaw earned an Associate's of Science Degree. In the fall of 1993, Shaw enrolled in Pittsburg State University where he later completed his Bachelor's of Science Degree in Elementary Education, with a Minor in Coaching, in 1996. Shaw began his teaching career at St. John's Military School in Salina, Kansas, where he taught sixth grade, Algebra and Pre-Algebra, and coached football and basketball. Shaw taught two years at St. John's Military School, and after a year away from teaching, moved to St. James, Missouri, in 1999. While in St. James, he continued to teach middle school mathematics and coach high school football and baseball. During his tenure in St. James, Shaw enrolled in William Woods University to pursue a Master's Degree in Education Administration and completed his graduate degree in the fall of 2003.

Shaw accepted his first administrative position in 2004 as principal of Stockton Middle School in Stockton, Missouri. He was employed for two years as the district's Middle School Principal, Athletic Director, and Transportation Director. In the spring of 2006, Shaw accepted a position at Hollister R-V School District, in Hollister, Missouri, where he was hired as the district's junior high principal and continues in that position. Shaw began taking classes with Lindenwood University in the summer of 2008 to pursue a doctoral degree in Educational Administration.