

A Decision-Making Model for In-Grade Retention (Nonpromotion)

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Research on retention (also known as in-grade repetition or nonpromotion) is inconclusive to date. There are as many studies for it as against it with some highly questionable research methodologies on both sides. Disregarding the research, to make a decision for or against retention on the basis of statistical evidence rather than on an in-depth analysis of all factors contributing to each individual situation seems foolhardy.

The decision-making model that follows is one of rational problem solving. Four categories for each factor are possible: for retention, against retention, undecided (evidence weighted equally for and against), and not applicable. The factors themselves are not weighted because it is the individual student who must give weight to the factors. For example, a second grader may be so large as to establish physical size as a critical factor well beyond its meaning for an average size second grader.

CHILD FACTORS

Physical Disabilities

Children who suffer from cerebral palsy, deafness, blindness, congenital heart defects, arthritis, and other physical abnormalities may demonstrate limited readiness skills, poor language development, and deficient knowledge or awareness of their surroundings caused by limited experience.

Physical Size

Size may be considered in terms of small, medium, and large. Obviously, small stature would be associated with "for retention," while largeness would tend to mitigate against it. In extremes of very small and very large, physical size takes on important value.

Academic Potential

Potential is defined in terms of learning rate, which may range from better than appropriate to appropriate to slow to the point of continuous, compounded underachievement. The distinction to be made here is between chronic underachievement (which should not necessarily be a criterion for retention) and the need for prolonged periods of practice when preliminary learning takes place (which may be a criterion for retention). A distinction should also be made between those students assessed as having more permanent slow-learning attributes and those who exhibit behaviors suggesting that their slow learning is temporary. In the former case, special education may be warranted apart from retention considerations. The latter case suggests a "for retention" factor.

Psychosocial Maturity

An indication that psychosocial maturity should be a factor in a "for retention" decision often comes from a description of the child as being a "baby" by either his parents or teacher. The behaviors associated with this

term are most often normal in younger children — e.g., thumbsucking, inability to delay gratification, inability to take turns, inability to attend for more than a few minutes at a time, and a demonstrably greater interest in all forms of play and fantasy activities.

On the opposing side some children are described as “little old men and women.” These children give a strong impression that they are able to fend for themselves in an independent manner and seem to engage adults in adult-level social repartee. They are not so much well adjusted as adjusted to an adult world. Sometimes these children have difficulty in relating to peers. Certainly the psychosocial maturity continuum is broad, and there is an infinite number of points between extremes.

Neurological Maturity

Again this is a situation in which behaviors considered normal in younger children are persistently manifested in older youngsters. Immature behaviors generally fall into one or more of the following conditions: hyperactivity, gross motor deficits, fine motor coordination difficulties, language and articulation problems, distractibility, short attention span, and many different types of perceptual disturbances. The lack of establishment of handedness and other confusions associated with body awareness and movement also contribute to what is considered to be neurological immaturity. This factor is especially significant for educational practices because it directly challenges chronological age, which is the deciding factor in initial grade placement.

It is apparent that neurological maturity deserves an extremely important consideration in school entry. Many retentions are corrective measures for school intake based solely on chronological age.

Child's Self-Concept

For purposes of making a decision for or against retention, self-concept is primarily considered in terms of self-esteem. This involves the child's values and judgment of his own goodness, badness, or worth. A major question in the decision-making process is the impact of retention on the child's self-concept. The concern is the possibility of detrimental impact when the child becomes convinced that he is looked upon as a failure.

Depending on grade placement, this problem is often more difficult for the adults involved with the child than for the child himself. Children at certain ages seem far

more adaptable to retention than they are credited. However, many factors have bearing on this point. The important questions seem to be

(1) If the child has a good self-concept, will retention debilitate him and given him a long-lasting, low self-concept?

(2) If the child has a low self-concept, will retention debilitate him further to the point of consigning him to a school career fraught with misery?

(3) If the child has a low self-concept, is it the result of low achievement, and will retention foster his achievement, which will in turn, enhance his self-concept?

A popular misconception should not be overlooked in trying to answer these questions. Students, by virtue of retention, do not automatically go to the top of the class in the repeated grade. More often they enter somewhere in the middle.

Child's Ability to Function Independently

This factor is highly significant because as children progress through the grades, greater and greater responsibility for independent learning and performance is expected. When a child requires constant supervision to maintain attention, to exhibit appropriate behavior, to be task oriented, and to perform the dictates of the task correctly, he may be high risk for satisfactory school learning. Motivation as a volitional quality is not considered here. A willful lack of task performance is almost never used as a factor in retention because the retention may represent disciplinary action, which is considered to be highly inappropriate. It is likely that children who need constant supervision as the result of physical, cognitive, or emotional factors or all of these will require a great deal of small group instruction usually outside the context of the regular classroom. Retention should *never* be substituted for special education.

Grade Placement

A reasonable rule of thumb suggested by research is that retention presents a valuable programmatic option for kindergarten through second grade. Fourth grade and beyond is usually frowned upon, and third grade is regarded as pivotal. Students retained beyond fourth grade are usually the victims of inappropriate disciplinary action or a lack of special education services or both. Also, self-concept issues seem to take on much greater importance beyond third grade.

Chronological Age

It has been noted in the research that students at highest risk for primary grade failure are males who are also the youngest or close to being the youngest in the class. This data should not be considered in isolation but in conjunction with psychosocial and neurological maturity. Another age-related phenomenon has been noted. Parents will occasionally keep a child out of school until the child is one year older in an effort to ensure academic or physical-motor (sports) success or both. This practice is highly questionable, especially for those children who would experience success at their age-appropriate grade.

Previous Retentions

One retention is usually enough. However, with certain handicapped children for whom regular class placement is eventually intended, it may not be completely inappropriate for an age span of two or three years between classmates to exist. Taking into consideration physical, social, emotional, and mental development, some 9- or 10-year-old children are well suited for classroom interaction with 6- and 7-year-old children.

Nature of the Problem

Two major problems are noted in retention issues: behavior and learning. Retention is almost always considered on the basis of a learning-related difficulty. The gray area arises when a behavior problem contributes to a learning deficit. In that event, determination of first cause may help. Certainly this is very complex and requires in-depth evaluation. Retention should not be considered as a program alternative for a child whose primary problem is behavior unless the behavior is traceable to neurological or psychosocial immaturity or both. Nor should it ever be a substitute for psychotherapeutic intervention for those children whose behavior is traceable to an emotional disorder.

Sex

When it comes to school-related problems, males outnumber females from four to one to nine to one. Implications are that many more males will be considered for retention than females, although what this might mean for decision making is undetermined. The percentage of actual retentions in relation to children suggested for retention may be greater for girls than for boys. Hypothetically, for school personnel to suggest retention

for a girl she must be so deficient and the factors so overwhelmingly in favor of it that merely suggesting it indicates it is a foregone conclusion.

Chronic Absenteeism

Children fall behind in school because of nonattendance. If it can be demonstrated that a child's record of absenteeism is so severe that it becomes an important factor in the child's underachievement, retention might be considered as a way of providing him with the instruction he has missed.

Basic Skill Competencies

This factor stands out more than any other because it is the reason most often cited when an educational system wishes to retain a student. For purposes of decision making, competence in grade-level skills may be thought of as adequate, inadequate, or severely deficient. Basic skill deficiencies may result from a multitude of factors that interrelate in complex, subtle ways, of which many have already been described. A student who is inadequate or severely deficient in his basic skill acquisition will require an in-depth analysis of the reasons for his difficulties by a multidisciplinary team.

Peer Pressure

The important questions to answer are

- (1) How susceptible to peer pressure is the student, and what might its impact be on his self-concept?
- (2) Does the student have very close friends with whom he has formed long-lasting ties, and how will retention affect these relationships?
- (3) What is the nature of the student's peer relationships outside of school, and with whom does he have these relationships?
- (4) Does the student live in close proximity to age-mates and classmates, and will retention be a continuing source of embarrassment for him?

Child's Attitude toward Retention

At a time when student input is becoming more and more a part of the educational planning process, it behooves us to turn to the student for the student's own reaction to a possible retention decision. Due to age and maturity factors this often may not be feasible. Although 6-, 7-, and 8-year-old children are usually capable of listening and responding to such a discussion, their understanding

and ability to judge their own best interests remain questionable. Nevertheless the child's voice should be heard, especially in cases of strenuous personal objections or affirmations.

FAMILY FACTORS

Geographical Moves

It does not appear uncommon for some children to be enrolled in five different schools in six years. The impact on the continuity of the child's education can be staggering. Methods and materials are inconsistent; goals and objectives change; learning, study, and performance patterns are never clearly established. Family transiency may be one of the only factors suggesting retention at grades higher than second or third. It seems easier to retain a student when he is entering a school for the first time. A child entering sixth grade for the second time in a new school system might be given the competitive edge he needs to succeed in junior high school.

Foreign Language Emigrants

This is not necessarily a meaningful factor in and of itself. However, when a language other than English is spoken in the home or the child enters school with a limited exposure to the English language or American culture, this factor may loom larger on the "for retention" side.

Attitude toward Retention

This extremely crucial factor is often a combination of a number of lesser factors:

- (1) Personal history of retention. One or both parents were retained during their school careers. They have specific, possibly highly emotional thoughts about it in relation to themselves and their children.
- (2) Cultural attitudes. In certain cultures, open knowledge of school failure in the form of retention is to be shunned at all costs.
- (3) Pressure from friends, neighbors, and relatives. Because most families are part of a social context comprised of groups of families, this can take on a high measure of significance. Such groups tend to establish rules and norms of their own that tend to be acceptable to even larger social groupings such as neighborhoods, communities, towns, etc. Individual families can be highly susceptible to pressure to conform to these groups. Almost all family groupings strongly value unflawed

children who proceed through development and schooling in a normal fashion. Retention implies a flaw that can easily develop into a social stigma in the eyes of the parents of the retained child. Rational problem solving, which presents and weighs clear-cut advantages and disadvantages, is a viable alternative to emotionally charged decision making.

Age of Siblings and Sibling Pressure

This can be a highly significant factor against retention. Younger brothers and sisters who achieve in school can be an ongoing source of irritation and misery for underachieving children. The younger siblings become permanent mirrors, reflecting all that is wrong with the older child's school performance. To be stigmatized by one's peers is no easy burden, but to be stigmatized within one's family may be psychologically overwhelming. The situation that most strongly mitigates against retention may be a highly competitive family in which a younger child is perceived to be performing better in school than an older sibling, and the children are separated by only one grade. Thus if the child were to be retained, he would find himself in the same grade as his younger brother or sister, with potentially devastating results.

Involvement of Family Physician

In many cases of a child's school failure, the family physician is the first professional consulted outside of the school setting. Pediatricians' knowledge of childhood education is extremely variable. Similarly the physician's influence on any particular family varies significantly. However, when this influence does exist and the family physician holds and expresses strong opinions either way, it would be optimal if the education personnel would include the physician in the decision-making process.

SCHOOL FACTORS

School System Attitudes toward Retention

Unfortunately, some systems, by superintendent edict or school board policy statement, declare that retention is not a policy of the school system. Any decision of this nature diminishes the flexibility of the educational system, and decreases in flexibility tend to diminish educational systems. Policy statements regarding retention and other issues are antithetical to the rational decision-making

model proposed in this paper. It is hoped that reason will ultimately triumph over doctrine.

Principal's Attitude toward Retention

The building principal is usually able to set policy within his or her domain. The statements made under "School System Attitudes toward Retention" are applicable here.

Teacher Attitude toward Retention

All school factors previously mentioned apply. Let us assume however that a given teacher is neither for nor against retention but is in conflict over the advantages and disadvantages for an individual student. In such a case, a decision-making model can be of assistance. The classroom teacher who has attempted to teach the child and has not succeeded due to a number of factors may be in the best position to evaluate the potential efficacy of retention. Many times the essential difficulty besides evaluating potential retention is evaluating the nature of the instruction that has been tried and has failed. Usually it is only the individual teacher who can make the assessment of teaching behavior and technique.

Availability of Special Education Services

Retention without some form of special education involvement is meaningless because the child may find himself again in the failing situation that originally led to his retention. Any discussion of retention should always imply a need for services over and above and perhaps different from unmodified, regular classroom programming. The advantages of retention are dealt a serious blow without a provision for special services. It is doubtful that retention in and of itself will work to the benefit of the child.

Availability of Other Programmatic Options

This may be considered a potentially acceptable alternative to retention or special education services or both. Such options might include special language development classes in the primary grades and transition classes. Transition classes that require three years to complete two grades differ from retention primarily in semantics (i.e., a child goes from first grade into a first-second grade combination and then the following year into second grade). The child is essentially being retained. Nevertheless this arrangement is often more acceptable to parents and school personnel because retention tends to lose

social stigma if it is presented in the form of a transition class. In settings where a variety of programmatic options exist, retention will be less likely to appear as a primary choice for dealing with the special needs of children.

Availability of Personnel

One rule of thumb might be that the child should never repeat a grade with the same teacher. The reasons are obvious. The child has already failed with this teacher and has established a pattern of teaching-learning interaction with the teacher that has not resulted in successful achievement. The teacher may be frustrated in attempts to teach the child and may have developed negative feelings toward the youngster. The teacher has already tried to modify teaching strategies without beneficial results, and there is no reason to believe that further modifications will result in success.

On the other hand some teachers feel that with some children it takes an inordinate amount of time to assess behavior, habits, learning style, and approaches that will foster maximum performance. These teachers usually feel confident that after one year of working with this child that they can now work together effectively. The answer to this dilemma is found in the amount of trust and confidence that parents and administrators have in the particular teacher.

An important consideration in assigning the child to a new teacher is the possibility of moving the child to a different school within the same system or neighborhood or both. A perceived fresh start with no attendant history of failure in the new surroundings could be beneficial to the child. The newness of the situation would more than likely outweigh any conflicts resulting from the retention.

The purpose of this presentation is to promote rational decision making on the part of school personnel and parents with regard to retention. If it is useful, the ultimate beneficiaries will be the children.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laurence M. Lieberman received his doctorate in special education for the neurologically impaired from Teachers College, Columbia University. From 1970 to 1973 he was learning disabilities coordinator in the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, U.S. Office of Education, Washington, D.C. He was the chairman of the Special Education Doctoral Program at Boston College from 1974 to 1978. Currently Dr. Lieberman is a consultant to numerous school systems in Massachusetts and throughout the United States. Requests for reprints should be addressed to him at 28 Sheffield Rd., Newtonville, Mass. 02160.