

2002

Retention in the primary grades

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Retention in the primary grades

Abstract

Every year children are retained because of teachers' recommendations. When teachers recommend retention, the major reason is that children are having difficulty keeping up with their peers, or they are not functioning at grade level on district or state tests. Teachers may also recommend retention if children are smaller than peers, immature, have a late birthday, have excessive absences as a result of illness, or a move, or when English is a Second Language. This study examined the benefits, problems, as well as alternatives to retention. Conclusions and recommendations were determined based on the written research on retention.

RETENTION IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

A Graduate Research Paper

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Early Childhood Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Joni Gunter

July, 15 2002

This research paper by: Joni Gunter

Titled: Retention in the Primary Grades

Has been approved as meeting the research requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Abstract

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background of the Study.....	1
Purpose of the Study.....	5
Need for the Study.....	6
Limitations.....	7
Definitions.....	7
CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	8
Benefits of Retention.....	8
Negative Effects of Retention.....	12
CHAPTER 3 ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION.....	18
Approaches and Strategies to aid students.....	18
CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	24
Summary.....	24
Conclusions.....	27
Recommendations.....	27
REFERENCES.....	29

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

In the 1800s, grade levels were established, and ever since, grade level retention has been the result for low achieving students (Reynolds, 1992). After the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, mass education began as a way to handle large numbers of students. Even then, schools were focusing on the issue of how to determine if a student should advance to the next grade level. Consequently, two aspects form this issue that has been debated for years. Should promotion be based on academics, or should it be based on social and emotional factors? (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983).

Does retention work or not? Some research studies overwhelmingly say yes, and some say no. It depends on which study you read (Reynolds, 1992). Retention is favored when the study focuses on the same grade comparisons; same age comparisons do not favor retention, they favor promotion (Kerwait, 1999). Retention has been applauded, and it has been condemned, for studies have not yet resolved which way is best (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994).

The effect of retention has to do with level of maturity, and if children receive help and support with social and emotional issues. Retaining and recycling children through the same grade does little to help the student socially or academically (Robertson, 1997).

In some school districts, retention frequently is used in kindergarten and first grade. In the United States, the percentage of students being retained has been estimated between 15 percent and 19 percent each year (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997). Retention has been a controversial subject among professionals, for some do not believe that retention helps children to catch up. Other professionals believe that social promotion simply pushes children through the system without regard to whether they have mastered skills needed for them to advance to the next grade level. Some educators believe that the cost of retention is so high that schools need to be aware of this concern as well. Nationally, it has been estimated that retention costs school districts \$5,028 per student per year (Dyer & Binkey, 1995).

Teachers who advocate retention are not likely to change their teaching style to meet children's needs. One of the stated

reasons for retention prior to first grade is immaturity; but starting with first grade, the major reason changes to academic difficulties (Sevener, 1990).

A survey involving teachers who teach kindergarten through seventh grade was conducted by Tomchin and Impara (1992), to see if these teachers believed that retention was an acceptable practice. The study revealed that these teachers believed that retention was an acceptable practice for all grade levels.

In 1994, it was estimated that every year, 2.4 million students are retained. The school retention policy in most schools is vague, and teachers typically make the decision on whether or not to retain a student. The common practice is to retain a child in the primary grades, especially in kindergarten and first grade (Setencich, 1994).

Age entry to first grade has increased since 1970. At that time, almost all six year olds were in first grade (about 4% of six year old boys and 8% of six year old girls were enrolled below first grade). In 1996, 18% of six year olds were enrolled below the first grade. Part of that change was due to holding children back in kindergarten. Many students are held back during elementary and secondary school. Nationally among children who entered school in the late 1980s, 21% were enrolled below the usual grade at ages nine to eleven; 31% at ages twelve and fourteen; and this rose to 36% at ages fifteen to seventeen. Not counting kindergarten and the later grades of high school, this means that at least 15% of children, and probably 20%, have been held back at some time in their childhood. (Hauser & Heubert, 1999, p. 285)

Child Health Survey (CHS) in 1988 collected data to determine what percentage of children were retained in kindergarten or first grade. The survey indicated that the percentage was 7.6. The National Household Education Survey (NHES) conducted phone interviews in 1991 with selected parents to see if their child or children had been retained. Eleven percent said that their first grade child or children were either repeating first grade or had been retained in kindergarten. That percentage declined in 1993 to 10% and in 1995 to 7.1%. These studies conducted by NHES and CHS indicated that the percentage of children being retained by the end of the first grade was between seven and eleven percent (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics, 1988; National Center for Education Statistics, 1997).

Children are more likely to be retained if they are not Caucasian, are males, if they have a low mobility level, if a disability is present, or if they are in poor health. If children come from a large family, live in the South, are Chapter 1 students, are the youngest in the class, have moved frequently, are absent a lot, are doing poorly on assignments, are highly active, are living in an urban area, or attend a high poverty school, then they are more likely to be retained.

On the other hand, children are less likely to be retained if they have attended a preschool, have mothers who have attained higher educations, have higher family incomes, have had teachers who rated them as motivated, or are children who have had no attention problems. Such children are more likely to be promoted (Reynolds, 1992).

Another major reason retention may be suggested is if children do not perform well on district-wide or state assessments. The wave of the future is to tie academic success or failure to children's performance on these assessments. Teachers will be evaluated and paid according to how well their students do on these tests (Darling-Hammond, 1997). This issue raises the following questions: Will this cause more retention or less? Will teachers teach just the skills needed for their students to pass these tests? How will this influence teaching? These questions can not be answered as of yet, for they are still being debated by federal and state government officials.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine whether retention is beneficial to students in the primary grades (K-3), or if it negatively affects students' academics and social and emotional growth, and to look at alternatives to retention.

To accomplish this purpose, this paper will address the following questions:

1. What are the reported or perceived benefits in retaining students in the primary grades?
2. What are the negative effects caused by retaining students in the primary grades?
3. Are there any alternatives besides retention to assist students in the primary grades?

Need for the Study

The research on retention has shown that it is not the answer to students' achievement; neither is social promotion. Yet, the educational pendulum continues to swing between these two practices. This situation occurs because schools are forced by political pressures to demonstrate accountability for student achievement (Reynolds, Temple, & McCoy, 1997).

In January of 1999, then President Clinton announced his new agenda for education during his State of the Union Address. In it, Clinton proposed adding a provision to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that would encourage states and school districts to end social promotion. During that same time, then Texas Governor George W. Bush also called for the end of social promotion. His proposal stated that all third, fifth,

and eighth grade students should be required to pass state exams in reading and math in order to be promoted (Johnston, 1999). The implication is that retention would be used.

Limitations

The majority of the research examined for this study focused on negative outcomes of retention. There was very little research that included child developmental concerns. Current research tends to overlook theories of child development, and how they are related to a child's readiness for school. Also, some important articles were not available, while other articles were three and four decades old, and did not relate to current concerns about retention.

Definitions

In the literature reviewed for this study, researchers used the terms retention and social promotion. These terms are defined to aid in understanding their use in this study:

Retention: A procedure of keeping a student in the same grade for a second year.

Social promotion: The act of passing students from grade to grade, often regardless of whether they have mastered required material and are academically prepared to do the work at the next level (Clinton, 1998).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Benefits of Retention

For retention to be successful, children need a strong support base from their parents. When retention is successful, academics, social skills, and maturity improve (National Association of School Psychologists, 1988).

If a child is developmentally not ready for a particular grade level then an extra year to mature is needed. This rationale is based on the belief that developmental readiness cannot be rushed, even with intervention. A child who does not master curriculum content in the prescribed time is more likely to succeed with repeated exposure to the same materials and methods. This rationale is based on the belief that the problem is with the child, not the instruction. Failure to progress to the next grade will motivate under-achieving students to try harder. This rationale is based on the belief that fear of failure can motivate students who otherwise wouldn't do their best. (Karweit, 1991, p. 7)

Students who have a positive self-image, good peer relationships, and adequate skills to catch up to their peers are less likely to have a negative experience if they are retained. Also, if students have missed a lot of school because of illness or moving frequently, then retention may help them. This is if attendance or health issues have been resolved and no lengthier absences are expected. When retained children are only a year

older than other children in their class, then retention is a good option (Sakowicz, 1996).

When President Clinton was in office, he sent a memorandum addressing the issue of helping schools end social promotion.

He stated the following:

I have repeatedly challenged States and school districts to end social promotion- to require students to meet rigorous academic standards at key transition points in their schooling career, and to end the practice of promoting students without regard to how much they have learned. As every parent knows, students must earn their promotion through effort and achievement, not simply by accumulating time in school. (Clinton, 1998)

A study was conducted in the Baltimore City Schools to determine if retention reduced the gap between retained and promoted students. It revealed that retention significantly reduced the size of the gap that existed prior to retention (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994). Students who have difficulties because of the lack of opportunity to receive proper instruction benefit from retention if they receive the proper instruction during the year they are retained. "Retention supplies the extra time needed by some to perform at acceptable levels" (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994, p. 4).

Students need to be held accountable for achieving the content at their grade level. If they are not achieving the

standards necessary to reach the next level, then by promoting them before they are able to do the required work, they will suffer emotionally and will drop further behind in their school work. This rationale assumes that students will catch up if given more time and that repeating a grade is less traumatic than low achievement (Balow & Schwager, 1990).

The Center for Policy Research in Education in Washington, DC, (1990) noted that one of the fears about social promotion is that deficient students will be passed on endlessly. Thus, a positive effect of retention is that it provides additional time for learning, and it is possible that retention may prevent a child from having to receive special services intervention.

Some parents and teachers believe that when placement is appropriate, then certain children will benefit from retention, for it would allow them an extra year to mature. Determining which students will gain the most and enjoy a positive experience can prove difficult. The child who has a positive self-image, support of parents, and appropriate peer interaction will tend to have a positive experience.

Some children benefit from retention more than others. Immature children benefit the most from retention. The extra year gives them time to mature both emotionally and socially (Grant, 1997).

A study by Sandoval and Hughes (1981) was designed to determine what types of children benefit from retention. Children who demonstrated greater success after repeating first grade displayed mastery of some academic skills, usually in reading. This study further revealed that these children had good self-concepts and adequate social skills and had parents who were involved in the school. Also, their parents had favorable attitudes towards retention. The children were retained because of their lack of exposure to the content being studied. This deficiency usually occurred because of a school transfer, or high absenteeism. These children benefited from being retained because they received substantially different curricula and methods of instruction during the year they were retained.

Retention is supported by a majority of parents, teachers, and administrators (Grant, 1997). Why are they supporting retention? This question was answered by Grant (1997). He found that when children are not developmentally ready for the next grade, they need an extra year to mature. This is especially true when they are the youngest in their grade, are *late bloomers*, are of average ability, or are small. Also, if children

have not mastered the grade level content, another year at that level with additional exposure to the material will aid these children in mastering the required knowledge.

The fear of retention will motivate some children to do their best. Also by retaining children, educators are giving them time to catch up and not to drop any further behind. Thus, the children will be able to achieve at a higher level. They will also be less likely to become traumatized by being promoted to the next level and by being unable to function at that achievement level. Students who were retained progressed at a faster rate than before, and they also narrowed the gap between themselves and their peers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994).

Negative Effects of Retention

Research has shown that retention has a negative effect on retained students. The negative aspects outweigh any positive effects. The mindset that retention allows most children to catch up is a myth, when in fact most children do not catch up, and any gains will diminish over time. Children's self-esteem plays a major role in how they will adapt to being retained (National Association of School Psychologists, 1988).

The stress of retention to some children has been linked to having the same emotional outcome as a major tragedy to their family, or to themselves. In addition, children who have been retained are twice as likely to drop out of school when compared to children at the same developmental level who were promoted (Sevener, 1990).

The National Association of School Psychologists in 1988 identified three negative effects of retention: (a) most children do not catch up after retention; (b) although some do better, they often fall behind again; also, (c) the retained students tend to get into trouble, dislike school, and have a negative self image.

Sevener (1990) found that retention research revealed certain negative effects for children who have the following needs: (1) Who function at a lower ability level than their peers, (2) who are unmotivated, (3) who have an emotional disability, (4) who have been absent a lot, (5) who acted older than their age, (6) who have a low self esteem, and (7) who have a multitude of problems. In addition, "There is evidence that children who have been retained may have more mental health problems than those who are not" (Dawson, 1998, p. 29).

It has also been concluded that there is no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial

than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties. Educators who retain pupils in grades do so without valid research evidence (Natriello, 1996). Retention has caused some children to develop a negative attitude toward school, toward academic achievement, and toward themselves. Retention did not improve academics or achievement (Meisels & Leaw, 1993).

Shepard and Smith (1989) observed that, despite research findings on the negative effects of retention, many teachers, administrators, parents, and the public still remain convinced that retention could enable a student to break the cycle of failure. This view stresses that retention raises academic achievement, and that it does little lasting harm to students' self-esteem. Teachers often over-exaggerate the positive benefits of retention. They believe that early retention will prevent problems, or failure later on. Information on how well the retained children are progressing through school is lacking. The teacher who retained the child in kindergarten or first grade usually never receives any information on how the student is progressing in the later grades (Shepard & Smith, 1986).

A comparison between a retained student and a promoted student revealed that a retained student did make some progress in closing the gap, but this study also showed that the retained

child would have made just as much, if not more, progress without retention. In general, children did not improve over time, especially if they were retained in first grade (Reynolds, Temple, & McCoy, 1997).

Sakowicz (1996) observed that gains that were made during the year of retention faded over time. Also, the more times a child is retained, the greater the chances are that the child will not complete school. Students who are most likely to be retained are boys, children from minorities, children from low-income families, and children who have difficulties adjusting socially. Retention does not increase learning.

Children who are retained in kindergarten have the tendency to suffer from social stigma as a result of retention. In addition, retention does nothing to boost children's academic achievement. Retention in kindergarten creates additional demands on children in first grade. Within a group of children who had the same academic difficulties in kindergarten, those students who were promoted to first grade did better than those who spent a year in a transition room. The gains that children experienced by retention did not persist into the next grade. The children ended up at the same percentile rank as their new grade peers, and the promoted at-risk children did as well in first grade as the retained children (Gredler, 1984).

The Gesell School Readiness Test is used widely by schools to determine if children are ready to be promoted. It has been determined that the test has an error in measurement equivalent to six months (Kaufman & Kaufman, 1972). This error in measurement suggests that if children were rated at 5 years in their development, they could easily be at a 4 ½ or 5 ½ year developmental level; thus, the children could be or could not be ready for kindergarten. Using this test, the percentage of children that will be mis-identified as unready to start kindergarten could be as many as 30% to 50% (Shepard & Smith, 1986). This may be the reason why teachers believe that some children who are retained do better the second year, for they are able to attend longer to tasks and follow rules better. Also, it is less of a struggle to get children to do seat work. This could be related to teachers who were unaware of the data and the discrepancy.

Children who are retained in kindergarten are aware that they did not advance with the other students and that something is wrong. This knowledge and the attitude that emanates from it may cause retained children to develop disruptive behaviors, or it may have traumatic effects on them (Shepard & Smith, 1986).

Other concerns about retention have been raised by a state agency. These concerns include the following:

The effects of grade level retention has consistently shown that having a student repeat a grade or delaying entry to kindergarten or first grade when the child is of appropriate chronological age does not help students academically or personally. (Texas Central Education Agency, 1996, p. 361)

Retention at any point did not improve academic, personal, or social outcomes for affected students. The research has concluded that an extra year of schooling did not measurably improve students' academic achievement (Meisels & Liaw, 1993).

At best, retention leaves students who were already lagging behind their peers even further behind. At worst, retention has negative effects on measured achievement (Sakowicz, 1996).

Chapter 3

Alternatives to Retention

Approaches and Strategies to Aid Students

What are the alternatives and different approaches that the literature offers to assist in avoiding retention or social promotion? There are several, but regardless of which one is chosen, certain strategies and criteria must be considered.

When considering alternatives to retention, Riley (1999) observed that care must be given to the following:

Neither passing students on when unprepared, nor retaining them in the same grade are good options. Being promoted without regard to effort or achievement or retained without extra help regrettably tells students that little is expected of them. (p. 1)

Darling-Hammond (1998) offered four criteria for school administrators to employ when they seek options to retention.

These criteria are the following:

(a) enhancing professional development for teachers to ensure they have the knowledge and skills they need to teach a wider range of students to meet standards; (b) redesigning school structures to support more intensive learning; (c) ensuring that targeted supports and services are available for students when they are needed; and (d) employing classroom assessments that better inform teaching. (p. 20)

Early intervention or identification of specific difficulties can assist children with specific skills that they

may need to be successful in their school career. Retention should be used rarely, and new approaches to curriculum development, school restructuring, and student instruction should become more of the focus of academic improvement (Meisels & Liaw, 1993).

One option for such a new approach is multiage grouping. It involves grouping students according to their abilities and competencies rather than by age, or grade. Thus, pressure to achieve a given standard by a certain time of the academic year is alleviated. This is particularly useful in the elementary years when the range of development among students is most uneven. In many schools, the use of multiage classrooms has eliminated the need for retention. Thus, some teachers have learned to support students' development (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

A second alternative is a multiyear assignment, or looping with the same teacher. Students stay with the same teacher for more than a year. This eliminates time in adjusting to a new teacher and leaves more time to focus on learning. This structure gives children more time to catch up and it delays retention decisions. Students also experience a much greater success in schools when they create a close relationship among their peers and teachers. Behavior problems have also been found to be less

prominent and higher achievement levels have been obtained (Educational Research Service, 1998).

A third effort is an early intervention program. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1991) strongly recommended the implementation of early intervention programs. One of the ways to do this is to offer preschool education in the private sector and in public schools. Many schools are recognizing that they can meet children's needs and greatly improve students' success in kindergarten by teaching them effectively in preschool. Preschool programs not only influence children early, but they also offer training and information for parents to learn how to support the learning process. Preschool programs need to meet the needs of children, for "the weight of the research evidence indicates that early childhood education can produce sizeable and consistent effects on grade retention and student achievement" (p. 22).

A fourth option is individualized instruction; it is used when instruction is focused on the way the child learns. By using this approach, the teacher is able to match instruction to each child's individual learning style. By understanding each student's individual learning style, a teacher can help children to master the curriculum better. Tutoring could also be included

in individualized instruction. Tutoring is defined as helping students individually in areas in which they are having difficulties (Robertson, 1997).

A fifth alternative is home assistance programs. This type of program provides parents with specific information on ways to assist their children with school work, study, and work habits. When schools offer home assistance programs, programs should involve parents, not only in their child's academic success, but should also encourage parents to be more involved in the school (Robertson, 1997).

A sixth type of alternative is teacher intervention teams. These teams are another way to meet the needs of students. The National Association of School Psychologists (1988) suggested that teaching teams should be another intervention approach. The team discusses the learning or behavior problems of a specific student, and jointly develops an intervention that the student's teacher can use in the classroom to aid in each child's academic success.

A seventh option is a summer school program. Research has shown that summer school can help low-achieving students improve their performance. It can provide students with the opportunity to review material in a more focused and individualized environment in order to master material they

previously failed to learn. With this option, students receive additional instruction in the summer to help them maintain what they have learned, or to continue to learn content and skills so they can advance to the next grade (Robertson, 1997).

An eighth way to help students to be successful is to have smaller class sizes. Students in smaller classes outperform similar students in larger classes. Reducing class size is a powerful tool that schools can use to help children who are failing to perform at grade level. Smaller class sizes in the primary grades will promote more individualized instruction (Clinton, 1998).

A ninth alternative is Reading Recovery. This program includes one-to-one assistance in which specially trained teachers work intensely with students in the early grades who are having difficulty with learning to read. Reading Recovery has been found to be effective in aiding students to gain skills that help them to be successful and confident readers. Also, this program educates participating teachers by offering them techniques they may never have encountered (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

A tenth way is to enhance professional development. By receiving enhanced professional development, teachers can develop skills and knowledge to meet the needs of their students.

In an analysis of the alternatives, the one which was suggested the most in the literature is early intervention. The reason early intervention is mentioned the most is because when children learn skills early, and build on those skills by refining them, they tend to learn and use those skills better.

Working with parents is a vital aspect to the success of any program. This premise is especially true when dealing with retention. Parents must be involved in the decision concerning retention. This premise is more likely to occur when teachers receive professional development training to develop skills, and knowledge in working more effectively with parents in a team effort for the benefit of children.

Chapter 4

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine if retention is beneficial to students in the primary grades (K-3), or if it negatively affects students' academic, social, and emotional growth. The benefits and disadvantages of retention were explored in this paper. Several factors contributing to the results of the literature were compared to aid in answering the three questions that this paper addressed:

1. What are the benefits of retaining students in the primary grades?

The research has shown that retention has limited benefits. No other educational practice has had such overwhelming negative research findings. For some students, retention may be appropriate, but those situations are not the norm. If students have been absent a long time because of illness, or they have moved during the year, then retention would benefit them. Retention is needed when students have missed the knowledge and skills that are required so they can advance to the next grade level (Sakowicz, 1996).

2. What are the negative effects caused by retaining students in the primary grades?

If students are retained, they will probably not receive a different curriculum or instructional approach. The chances are that students will not overcome all the issues which resulted in their retention. It is more likely that they will drop out of school. For a student to be successful in academics and to develop a positive self-esteem, school districts need to prevent early school failure (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Educators need to search out ways to provide appropriate instruction, taking individual students' background and ability levels into account. Less time should be spent mulling over the retention versus social promotion issue as well (Karweit, 1992).

3. Are there any alternatives besides retention to assist students in the primary grades?

The research has shown that there is a need for alternatives besides retention. The need is there to provide early intervention. Besides providing excellent preschool and kindergarten programs, society needs to make them affordable and accessible to all (Alexander, 1994). Other alternatives include the following:

1. Reduce class sizes in the early grades because no child should leave the third grade unable to read.

2. Districts must have support in place to assure that each child can read.
3. Schools, parents, and outside agencies must look at other ways to meet children's needs.

Some of the ways mentioned in the literature to meet students' needs involve reducing class sizes, providing additional instruction, requiring early intervention, establishing multiage grouping, supporting summer school, encouraging multiyear placement with the same teacher, adapting teaching styles to meet different learning styles, and by teachers and parents working closer together for the benefit of children.

Students who are retained because of low achievement, problem behavior, or lack the academic skills to go on, do not benefit from being retained, or being socially promoted (Darling-Hammond, 1998). As the debate over grade repetition versus social promotion continues, children continue to fall further behind (Karweit, 1992).

The choice of study design and the type of comparison can either favor retention or promotion (Karwait, 1999). Since this is the case, a better choice would be an alternative to retention or promotion.

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Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from this study:

1. Teaching needs to be more adaptable to meet the needs of all children and to aid children to be more successful in school.
2. Teachers may not agree with the practice of retention or social promotion, but they have few alternatives available to them.
3. Teachers are going to be judged on every child's ability to succeed in the classroom. Not all children are able to succeed in the same way, or at the same rate. Teachers need alternatives and more information to support them in helping their students to succeed.
4. Schools should seek an end to retention and social promotion and focus on alternatives to these choices.
5. All decisions involving retention must involve parents.

Recommendations

Based on a review of the literature, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. A better way is needed to aid students in acquiring skills they need to be successful in life and learning

instead of retaining them in a program where they failed.

2. Teacher training programs and professional development are needed to provide educators with new knowledge and strategies concerning alternative programs to meet their students' needs, and for working more closely with parents.
3. All teachers need to be trained in child development and child developmental theories.
4. Schools need to implement alternative programs to alleviate the continuous practice of retention or social promotion.
5. Further research is suggested to determine which alternative to retention and social promotion is the best practice.

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