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Translating theory into practice: Grade retention in the pre-schooling years

Abstract: There has been considerable investment in high quality research to inform best practice in our educational systems. However, there remains some disparity between educational research and some educational practices. Early intervention practices such as delayed school entry and grade retention are not only common practices found in many Western educational systems but they are also increasing as well. Such increases are occurring despite the accumulating evidence from research which warns of their ineffectiveness and possible harm to children. In the light of the disparity between research and such practices, this paper seeks to understand, from teachers' perspectives, why some teachers continue to invest in practices that a growing body of research warns against.

Introduction

Many Western educational institutions, particularly those associated with Australia and the United States, practice grade retention. In some cases, it can be more frequently employed at the preschool or kindergarten level, because it is believed that at this level, its possible negative impact would be minimal. Grade retention is an intervention practice that requires children to remain in the same year level for a second year to address underachievement at, or low levels of readiness for, school. A related intervention practice, delayed school entry or voluntarily holding children out of school when they are age eligible, more often includes giving children a second year of preschool or kindergarten (Anderson, 2008). However, these well-intentioned practices have not only been questioned by some researchers (Jimerson, 2001, 2004; Shepard, 2004; McGrath, 2006), but they are being increasingly used in some Western educational institutions (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland [DETAEQ], 2007; Morrison, 2007).

The Discrepancy between Research and Practice

Despite increasing research to the contrary (Jimerson, 2001, 2004; Shepard, 2004), there is a widely held belief among teachers that grade retention is a beneficial educational practice to assist underachieving children or children who are believed to be 'unready' for school (Anderson, 2008; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Tanner & Galis, 1997; Xia & Glennie, 2005). Teachers generally favour grade retention for several reasons. Firstly, they believe that by giving children a second year of preschool or kindergarten, children will be better prepared for school particularly if they have lower levels of achievement than other children or if they are relatively young for their year level (Anderson, 2008). However, teachers have often based such beliefs on the short-term evidence following the child's repeated year. When a child's achievements during their repeated year are compared to their achievements during their first year, the repeated child has often made progress (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 2003; Mantzicopoulos, 1997). Grade retention may therefore appear to be an effective educational practice to address underachievement at, or low levels of readiness for, school (Xia & Glennie, 2005). However, research has shown that such gains are likely to diminish several years after the children have been repeated (Dawson, 1998; Jimerson, Rottert, Carlson, Egeland & Sroufe, 1997; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). Other research has shown that if children progress to the next year level of schooling, they are likely to make similar or even more progress than if they were repeated (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Tanner & Galis, 1997). Thus when teachers only see the short term effects of repeating children, they may reach "false conclusions" regarding the benefits of repeating children at preschool or any other year level of schooling (Xia & Glennie, 2005, p. 2).

Secondly, teachers generally believe that children who are among the youngest for their year level are academically and socially disadvantaged in comparison to their year level peers and may be 'at risk' of school failure (Griffin & Harvey, 1995). Some studies have shown that while some differences in achievement between younger children and older children may exist when they commence school, the differences are minimal and diminish by mid-primary school (Grissom, 2004; Jimerson, 2001). Such children may be repeated at preschool or kindergarten level due to low levels of 'maturity' (Anderson, 2008; Hong & Yu, 2006) in the belief that during their repeated year, they will reach a developmental stage 'ready' to commence school. The view that younger children are less ready for school is generally influenced by the child development theories of Piaget (Morrison, 2007). However, more recent understandings of child development argue that a child's environment also influences development and learning and some environments are more conducive to school learning than others (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Morrison, 2007). From this perspective, it is argued that repeating preschool or kindergarten may impede social and cognitive growth if children are placed in an environment that has less age-relevant social and learning activities. If promoted to the next year level, as more recent research suggests (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005), children are more likely to display increased cognitive outcomes than if they had remained at kindergarten. While a second year of kindergarten for younger children to prevent possible school failure is undoubtedly well-intentioned by teachers and parents, research (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005) and current understandings of how children learn (Morrison, 2007) do not support this view.

Thirdly, some teachers may believe that confining children to a year level which better suits their 'ability levels' by repeating them reduces the stress and frustration of the next year level expectations. However, if early learning programs were flexible and suited to the learning needs of individual children as many prominent early childhood curriculum bodies suggest (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECSSDE), 2000; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 1997), then all programs would meet all children's ability levels.

Fourthly, many teachers repeat children at school, preschool and kindergarten because they are unaware of the research on grade retention (Anderson, 2008). In one Australian study of preschool retention practices, Anderson found that most teachers were unaware of research findings on grade retention in any area of schooling (2008). Bowser (1998) similarly argues that in the United States, many teachers are unaware of research on grade retention at any level of schooling. However, concerns are held by a growing body of researchers regarding its effectiveness (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Saturday, 2000; Jimerson, 2001) and possible harm to children at all levels of schooling including preschool or kindergarten (Anderson, Whipple & Jimerson, 2002; Jimerson, 2004).

What the research says about kindergarten and school retention

Shepard and Smith have researched kindergarten retention in the United States for several decades (Shepard, 1989, 1997, 2004; Shepard & Smith, 1986, 1990, Smith & Shepard, 1987). From research conducted in the United States from 1984–88 on kindergarten (preschool) retention, Shepard concluded:

1. Kindergarten retention does nothing to boost subsequent academic achievement
2. Regardless of what the extra year may be called (grade repetition, delayed school entry), there is a social stigma for children who attend an extra year
3. Retention actually fosters inappropriate academic demands in first grade (1989, p. 64).

In a more recent study, in the United States, Hong and Raudenbush examined the impact of kindergarten retention on children's cognitive growth in reading and mathematics (2005). Their study revealed similar results (Hong and Raudenbush, 2005). They found:

The empirical evidence from this study refutes the arguments that adopting a kindergarten retention policy boosts achievement on average, that such a policy improves the learning of

children who would in any case be promoted, or that grade retention helps children experiencing difficulty in kindergarten (Hong and Raudenbush, 2005, p. 221).

A study of kindergarten retention by Hong and Yu led to similar conclusions about kindergarten retention particularly in relation to its benefits in later school achievement, “[W]e find no evidence that kindergarten retention brings benefits to the retainees’ cognitive development during the elementary years” (2006, p. 1). Two decades earlier, Shepard and Smith found that children who repeat kindergarten “are just as likely to end up at the bottom of their first or third grade class” as children who are not repeated (1989, p.75). The NAECSSDE, one of the more prominent educational bodies in the United States, argues that policies and practices that promote kindergarten retention assign “the burden of responsibility to the child, rather than the program”; they place “the child at risk of failure, apathy towards school and demoralization”; they fail “to contribute to quality early childhood education”; and they “label children as failures at the outset of their school experience” (2000, p. 3).

Although teachers may believe they are employing the best practices to ensure children are ready for school or each year level, a growing body of research from the United States argues that kindergarten retention has little value (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Hong & Yu, 2006) and may be harmful (NAECSSDE, 2000; Shepard, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1989). The social stigma believed to be attached to repeating kindergarten can negatively impact on a child’s self esteem and attitude towards school (NAEYC, 1997).

Xia and Glennie argue “the majority of published studies and decades of research indicate that there is usually little to be gained, and much harm that may be done through retaining students in grade” (2005, p. 1). From her studies in the area of grade retention in the United States, Dawson argues that “no researcher has found long-term, substantial benefits to the practice of grade retention” (1998, p. 29). Following his meta-analyses of 83 studies, which included preschool/kindergarten retention, Jimerson raised the question of whether or not retention at any year level should be considered “educational malpractice” (2004, p. 72). He argues, “the concept of educational malpractice emphasizes the responsibility of educational professionals to provide intervention strategies that are either promising or proven (based on empirical evidence) to be effective in facilitating students’ academic success” (Jimerson, 2004, p. 72). Jimerson concluded that “the confluence of results from educational research warrant serious consideration” of retention practices (2004, p. 72).

Research on delayed school entry

As noted previously, delayed school entry refers to the practice of voluntarily holding children out of school when they are age eligible, Delayed school entry is often based on the belief that children ‘younger for their year level’ are less ready for school (Lewitt & Baker, 1995; McGrath, 2006; Routley & de Lemos, 1993). Parents who delay their children’s entry into formal schooling for an extra year believe that delaying children’s entry to school enables such children to become the oldest in their class, and thus gain “a competitive advantage in school” (Smith & Shepard, 1988, p. 5). The NAECSSDE in the United States argues, however, that “belief in the pure maturational viewpoint underlies many [...] deleterious practices” of pre-schooling, such as those associated with grade-retention and delayed school entry (2000, p. 12).

Some studies suggest that delayed school entry raises children’s pre-reading and pre-numeracy achievement (West, Denton & Germino-Hauskin, 2000) and may increase a child’s confidence and social competence (Spitzer, Cupp & Parke, 1995). However, other studies argue that younger pre-school children make similar progress in pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills as older children (Datar, 2003; Shepard & Smith, 1986). Further studies have shown that although younger children may have lower levels of cognitive and non-cognitive abilities when they commence pre-school, they can catch up with their older counterparts by mid-schooling (West, Meek & Hurst, 2000). In a study of 476 kindergarten and First Grade children, youngness was not related to social competence (Spitzer, Cupp & Parke, 1995). Further, in one Australian study, younger children outperformed their older peers in a range of assessment areas (Thorpe et al., 2004).

Graue and DiPerna argue that there is a higher likelihood for “redshirts¹ and retainees [...] to receive special education than their peers who enter and are promoted on time” (2000, p. 1). Byrd, Weitzman & Auinger further argue that a higher incidence of behavioural problems exists among children who have delayed school entry compared with those who do not have delayed school entry (1997). Drawing on a cross-sectional analysis of parental reports in a sample of 9079 children aged 7 to 17 years, Byrd et al. found that “16 percent of students with delayed kindergarten entrance demonstrated extreme behaviour problems, compared to 7 percent of students who entered on time” (1997, p. 654).

Alternatives to grade retention

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) argues, from data gathered worldwide, that the prevalence of grade retention in “any education system is more a manifestation of failure than an initiative likely to generate success” (1998, p. 21). There are other countries in the world where grade retention is not practised, including developed countries such as Japan and Finland, where the educational systems are considered to be among the best in the world (OECD, 1998). In countries where grade retention is not practised, such as Finland and Japan, achievement among its students is generally not lesser than other countries (OECD, 1998). This would have to “cast serious doubt on the effectiveness of repetition as an educationally approved approach” to addressing underachievement or unreadiness for school (OECD, 1998, p. 21). As a result, grade retention “has been abandoned by some countries – including Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Norway and the United Kingdom” (Kovacs, 1998, p. 2).

Indicators from the OECD show that the achievement level is relatively high amongst students from countries such as Japan and Finland where repeating children at school is never or rarely practised. School achievement indicators have been drawn from PISA, a program of the OECD set up to measure student achievement across a range of countries worldwide. In the PISA 2000 and PISA 2003 assessments, students aged 15 years were tested in reading, mathematics, science and problem solving literacy (OECD, 2003). The results were then collated and compared across countries (OECD, 2003). Results from the PISA assessments scores showed that in countries such as in Finland and Japan, students received among the highest scores on PISA assessments (Dawkins, 2007). Despite the fact that interventions such as grade retention are never or rarely practised in Finland or Japan (OECD, 1998), students from such countries received assessment scores that are among the highest in the world.

The most recent results from PISA assessments conducted in 2006 revealed similar results, particularly in regard to Finland (OECD, 2007). Finnish students were the top performers in science, among the top performers with Korea, Chinese Taipei and Hong Kong China in mathematics and ranked second in reading after Korea. While Japan’s rankings were lower in 2006 than they were in 2003, they were rated “statistically significantly above the OECD average” in science and mathematics (OECD, 2007, pp. 22, 47).

Results drawn from the PISA 2000, 2003 and 2006 assessments of reading, mathematics, science and problem solving literacy of children aged 15 years (OECD, 2003, 2007) may call into question the educational benefits of grade retention when countries such as Finland do not practice it and consistently have among the highest educational outcomes in the world. While it is acknowledged that other factors are likely to impact on Finland’s high educational outcomes, it has nevertheless shown that it is possible to achieve high educational outcomes without the use of grade retention.

¹ The belief that underpins the practice of redshirting is derived from American college sports where an athlete might voluntarily refrain from competition for a year until she/he is bigger and more mature, giving her/him a competitive advantage in that sport. The term ‘redshirt’ originated from the practice that required ‘redshirted’ players to wear a red jersey during practice with regular players. A similar concept applies to academic redshirting children’s entry to school; it is postponed for similar reasons (Graue & DiPerna, 2000).

Recommendations

Given the weight of empirical evidence that argues against grade retention at all levels of schooling (Jimerson, 2004; Hong & Yu, 2006), and given that countries such as Finland do not practise grade retention and have student outcomes that are ranked among the highest in the world (OECD, 2003, 2007), it is recommended that teachers reconsider the practice of grade retention and replace it with more positive learning approaches. Philosophies and pedagogical practices that are underpinned by a 'ready for all children' approach can meet school accountability requirements, meet the learning needs of all children, and value all children's prior-to-school cultural and linguistic resources (CCS, 2007; Janus & Offord, 2000; Meisels, 1999; Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), 2007). The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) which supports a 'ready for the children' approach suggests an ecological model (2007). This model relies on families, schools, communities and community services in preparing children for, and supporting children through, school (ARACY, 2007; CCS, 2007; Janus & Offord, 2000; Meisels, 1999; QSA, 2007).

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