

THE ROLE OF TEACHER BELIEFS IN GRADE
RETENTION

By

ANITA RUTH EDE

Bachelor of Science
University of Miami
Miami, Florida
1980

Master of Education
Northeastern State University
Tahlequah, Oklahoma
2003

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By

Anita Ruth Ede

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Thesis Approved:

Dr. Kathryn Castle
Thesis Adviser

Dr. Hongyu Wang

Dr. Gretchen Schwarz

Dr. Mona Lane

Dr. A. Gordon Emslie
Dean of the Graduate College

Preface

This study was conducted to determine what teachers believe about grade retention, the practice that requires a student who has been in a given grade for a full year to remain at the same grade level in the subsequent school year (Jimerson and Kaufman, 2003), at a time when research does not support this practice. Specific objectives of the research were to understand beliefs teachers have about (a) academic outcomes of retention, (b) social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes of retention, (c) the relationship between dropping out of school and retention, (d) the effectiveness of retention in kindergarten or first grade, (e) gender and retention, (e) English language acquisition and retention, (f) the availability of alternatives to retention, and (g) student performance as a reflection of their own teaching abilities. Responses to the Teacher Belief Survey were analyzed for patterns related to demographic data and data from interviews with teachers were analyzed for emergent themes.

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*“Whatever one believes to be true either is true
or becomes true in ones mind.”*

John C. Lilly

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Grade retention is an important issue in early childhood education and beyond because of its potential impact on a child’s future academic performance as well as emotional, social, and behavioral adjustment. Research has shown that retention not only fails to correct academic difficulties; it actually predisposes a child to academic, social, emotional and behavioral problems he or she may not have otherwise experienced. Initial gains in retained children’s test scores often disappear within two years and continue to lag behind those of their equally low performing but promoted classmates for the rest of their school careers (Singer, 2001). Retention sends a clear message to students that they are not performing as well as their peers and it may be difficult for them to overcome this blow to their self-esteem. Young children often view retention as a form of punishment while older students harbor feelings of frustration with a subsequent disengagement from school. Behavior problems are often associated with retained students who are a year or two older and significantly larger than their classmates. There is also a strong association between retention and dropping out of school.

Based on the premise that beliefs are constructed from one's own life experiences, this inquiry seeks to clarify what beliefs teachers have constructed that cause them to consider grade retention a sound pedagogical practice.

Background

Grade retention began in the United States in the late 1800s when it became common practice to group children by grade with promotion to the next grade level being dependent on a particular level of academic performance (Owings and Magliaro, 1998). If the requisite level of academic performance was not achieved, students remained at the same grade level for an additional year. By the late 1930s researchers were reporting the negative effects of retention and a meta-analysis conducted by Goodlad (1954) found that academic performance was not improved by retention. Otto (1951) found that the academic gains made by retained children were actually smaller than those of equally low performing but promoted children. Retained students were also found to have a much greater likelihood of dropping out of school (Berlman, 1949.) It is not surprising that retention gradually fell out of favor as an intervention strategy for low academic performance. By the 1960s, the pendulum had shifted primarily towards social promotion and away from retention.

It was not until the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, which attributed declines in student achievement on standardized tests to lenient practices of social promotion, that retention was again viewed as an intervention strategy. The interpretation given to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 by individual states has

continued this trend by linking standards and accountability to decisions related to promotion and retention.

The Problem

Until quite recently I was of the opinion that retention provides academically unsuccessful students with a much-needed opportunity to improve their skills. My concern with this issue began during a conversation with a second grade teacher when I casually inquired as to how well some of my former students were doing. To my surprise, she described the progress of several students who had repeated first grade in rather negative terms. I was very confused since these students had been near the top of the class during their repeating year and I began to make similar inquiries of third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers who voiced many of the same sentiments. My confusion about what I had considered to be a sound pedagogical practice brought about an intense interest in the subject of retention and what teachers believe about retention.

At the present time there is a dichotomy between research findings and pedagogical practice. The fact that teachers continue to retain students contradicts research findings as to its effectiveness. Teachers either do not believe what the research says, are unaware of current research or believe that retention is a sound pedagogical practice for other reasons.

Teachers may view retention as a kindness for students seen as too young or immature for their curriculum or placed in the wrong grade to begin with (Alexander, Entwisle and Kabbani, 1999). Retention may also be viewed as an effective solution for problems associated with present (Shepard and Smith, 1987) or future academic failure

(Roderick, 1995). Among my group of teacher colleagues, retention was often viewed as the only alternative when faced with a student's academic failure.

Elementary school teachers are likely to witness students' initial boost in test scores and academic performance in the year immediately following retention, yet it is highly unlikely that they will see the long-term effects of retention such as increased behavior problems, lack of school attendance and eventual school dropout after students leave elementary school. By seeing only the initial positive effect, teachers may construct the belief that retention is a positive and desirable intervention strategy for correcting current and preventing future academic failure.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to clarify what beliefs teachers have constructed that cause them to consider grade retention a sound pedagogical practice. It is acknowledged that legislative or district mandates may take decisions regarding retention out of teachers' hands; however, that is not the case in all schools. Teachers in the school district in which this study was conducted were free to approach retention decisions from their own perspectives and based on their own beliefs about what is best for children. It appears that teachers' individually constructed and strongly held beliefs about grade retention, independent of research findings, may be an important factor when it comes to grade retention.

My questions about the effect of teacher beliefs on the practice of grade retention were not answered by conducting a literature search for several reasons. I found relatively few studies that were specifically related to teacher beliefs about retention and

those that I did find were limited by their small size. Another problem was the age of the studies – some had been conducted close to twenty years ago and I was unsure that their results would be relevant today.

Objectives of the Study

The focus of this inquiry was to clarify what beliefs teachers have constructed that cause them to consider grade retention a sound pedagogical practice. My research question was: What beliefs do teachers have about retention? Subquestions included: What beliefs teachers have about (1) the academic outcomes of retention? (2) social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes of retention? (3) the relationship between dropping out of school and retention? (4) the effectiveness of retention in kindergarten or first grade? (5) gender and retention? (6) English language acquisition and retention? (7) the availability of alternatives to retention? (8) student performance reflecting on their own teaching abilities?

Significance of the Study

Since research has not found retention to be a sound pedagogical practice, it is important to understand what beliefs teachers have constructed about grade retention that encourage them to continue its practice (Nagoaka and Roderick, 2004) (Hong and Raudenbush, 2005). This study is significant because it has added to the body of knowledge that informs teacher beliefs about grade retention and may be used by practicing teachers, pre-service teachers and teacher educators to assist them in uncovering their own constructed beliefs.

Conceptual Assumptions

All persons construct their own complex set of beliefs as a result of their experiences, culture, and environment. Therefore, it is not surprising that teachers embrace a wide variety of opinions with regard to grade retention - all of which are deeply rooted within a complex set of interacting beliefs. A belief is an item of knowledge that a particular individual holds to be true (Shepard and Smith, 1987). Beliefs are not necessarily rooted in facts and knowledge and their roots often cannot be clearly identified. Beliefs may be based on solid evidence or they may be the result of feelings, hunches, inferences, word-of-mouth testimonials, or interactions with others. Regardless of what prompted the construction of beliefs, they exert a significant influence over all decisions individuals, specifically teachers, make.

Theoretical Perspective

I believe that each teacher constructs his or her own beliefs about grade retention through interaction with others and their environment. I also believe that teacher beliefs are highly individual and cannot be construed as “truths” nor can they be applied to teachers as a collective entity. Reality, as an entity, does not exist because each teacher paints their own view of reality relative to the beliefs they have constructed. Based on my own perspective as to how teachers construct beliefs, I used a constructivist theoretical perspective to inform my inquiry. Constructivism is a theory of knowing that focuses “exclusively on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind” (Crotty, 1999, p. 58) and finds no objective truths waiting to be discovered; rather, individual meanings are constructed based on a person’s interaction with a particular phenomenon

(Crotty, 2003). Teacher beliefs are viewed as highly individual meanings which teachers (and other humans) construct based on their experiences. Constructivism recognizes multiple realities experienced from an individual's point of view. Teacher beliefs are highly individual and each teacher's construction of reality is singular to them. In relation to constructivism, Patton (2002) asks, "How have the people in this setting constructed reality? What are their reported...beliefs? What are the consequences of their constructions for their behaviors...?" (p. 96). These questions mirror what this inquiry has attempted to find out: How has each teacher constructed their own reality with regard to what they believe about grade retention and what are the consequences of those beliefs?

Definition of Terms

In order to prevent misconceptions and confusion due to linguistics, terms used throughout this study are defined.

Retention: This term refers to the practice of requiring a student who has already completed a given grade to repeat that grade in the subsequent school year. Retention differs from delayed school entry in which a young child is held out of school for an extra year prior to enrollment in kindergarten. Other terms that will be used interchangeably with retention are nonpromotion and extra-year placement. The overall purpose of retention is to allow students who have failed to attain academic proficiency to remain in the same grade for an additional year in order to catch up so as to prevent future school failure.

Academic proficiency: This term indicates that the student competently meets or exceeds the standards set forth for a particular grade level. These standards are a series of minimum proficiencies that a student is expected to master by the end of each grade level and may originate with the classroom teacher, the school district within which the student resides, or may be legislated by individual states.

Social Promotion: This term refers to the practice of promoting students to the next grade level who have not fully mastered the material of the previous grade level.

Teacher Beliefs: This term refers to certain propositions about how children learn that individual teachers hold to be true. Teacher beliefs may be conscious or unconscious and may range from merely a suspicion to absolute conviction.

Scope and Limitations

This inquiry was limited by its size and care must be taken that results are viewed in context and not extrapolated beyond its scope. The small sample size found in this study poses limitations in terms of generalizing the findings to a larger population. The results of this inquiry apply only to those teachers who participated in the study and caution should be employed in drawing conclusions about teachers in other school districts, states, or regions without conducting further studies. Further studies, conducted in different geographic, socio-economic, and cultural regions of the United States, would add a more balanced perspective as to the beliefs teachers hold about retention.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this literature review is to build a framework for understanding what teachers believe about grade retention. These beliefs are constructed within the teacher's culture and environment as well as reshaped by what teachers know, believe they know, or do not know about the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral effects of grade retention on students.

Teacher Beliefs About Retention

Teachers hold a wide variety of beliefs with regard to the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes of retention. These personal beliefs become important variables and clearly play a role in any decisions teachers make as to the efficacy of retention.

Teacher beliefs found in this literature review are the belief that retention: Prevents or remedies academic failure, remedies a lack of readiness or maturity, remedies poor work and attendance habits, may be seen positively or negatively by students depending on how it is viewed by their parents, and may prevent teacher colleagues from forming a negative opinion of one's teaching abilities. The predominant view expressed by teachers is that retention benefits students (Shepard and Smith, 1989).

Academic Failure

Teachers often view retention as a way to prevent academic failure before it occurs or as a remedy once it has taken place. In a study conducted in a rural, southeastern state, K-7th grade teachers consistently viewed retention as a means of building a solid foundation in basic skills thereby insuring future academic success (Tomchin and Impara, 1992). Some teachers in this study based retention decisions solely on student's academic performance. Others referred to unmet objectives on state mandated standards as providing a firm basis for retention. Overall, 65 percent of the teachers in this study believed that retention would lead to improved academic performance. This same sentiment was echoed by 65 percent of the teachers surveyed in a large, southwestern city who indicated strong support for retention when students lacked basic skills and seemed destined for academic failure (Byrnes and Yamamoto, 1986). Not only American teachers view a lack of basic skills and the promise of future academic success as a valid reason for retention - second grade teachers in Fribourg, Switzerland who valued achievement as a decisive criterion were also found to utilize retention if academic objectives were not met (Bonvin, 2003.)

Poor academic performance and the prevention of academic failure in the future are not the only reasons students are retained. At times, teachers do not believe that students are ready to be in a particular grade.

Lack of Readiness

Some teachers recommend retention because of a belief that the student does not possess the readiness or maturity he or she needs in order to perform tasks that will be

required at the next grade level. Readiness may be defined as a quality that equips the child to participate successfully in a regular public school curriculum (Carlton & Martha, 1999). Quite similarly, maturity may be defined as “having arrived at a certain stage of development” (Merriam-Webster Online, 2006).

In a study of kindergarten teachers’ beliefs about children’s readiness/maturity (Smith and Shepard, 1988), the researchers found that teachers fell into one of four categories depending upon their beliefs about the nature of child development. Of the forty teachers who were interviewed, 19 were labeled Nativists who believed that children acquire school readiness along what amounts to an evolutionary continuum, which is completely outside of the influence of others. Teachers labeled as Nativists had significantly greater rates of retention than did others in the study.

The remainder of the teachers fell within one of three groups according to what type of intervention they believed would influence the child’s readiness. Teachers labeled as Remediationists believed that all children of the appropriate kindergarten age, regardless of readiness, would be able to learn the material if additional instruction were provided by teachers, parents, or tutors. Teachers labeled as Diagnostic-Prescriptive sought special education services in order to address any specific difficulties the child was having. They believed that once specific deficits were dealt with, the child would have acquired the requisite readiness. Teachers labeled as Interactionists believed that children move through specific stages of development in their journey towards readiness, which is what Nativists believed as well. This group was different because they believed that parents as well as teachers play a role in guiding children’s development towards

readiness. Interactionists believed that once parents and teachers provide the appropriate interactions with learning experiences, children would catch up.

Byrnes and Yamamoto (1986) surveyed 145 teachers and found that 68 percent of them retained children based on the belief that students were developmentally immature and would be unable to deal responsibly with tasks required at the next grade level. Teachers also believed that some children require more than one year to meet the standards set forth for their present grade level (Tomchin and Impara, 1992). Others viewed retention as a means of insuring that children eventually become more self-confident students, experience less stress in their school life and emerge as class leaders (Shepard and Smith, 1989).

Sometimes students may appear to be “ready” or “mature” yet still be academically unsuccessful. Some teachers have attributed this to students’ work and attendance habits.

Work Habits and Attendance Habits

Issues such as poor work habits and poor school attendance also enter into teacher’s beliefs about retention. Some teachers believed that even if students with poor work habits were not motivated to try harder the second time around, the more impressionable students would notice that failure to work hard caused retention (Tomchin and Impara, 1992). In the event of poor attendance, some teachers saw retention as an opportunity for students to be exposed to material that they missed the first time.

Research shows that teacher beliefs are not only influenced by the actions of their students; they are influenced by the actions of their students’ parents as well.

Parent Beliefs

Parents that feel strongly that retention has positive academic and socio-emotional effects on children were found to convey those beliefs to their children and their children's teachers as well (Smith and Shepard, 1988). Conversely, parents who believed that retention would exert a negative influence on their children conveyed those beliefs to their children's teachers as well.

What Will Other Teachers Think

I would like to think that teachers have the best interests of their students at heart when pondering decisions with far reaching implications such as retention. However, beliefs about how they themselves are viewed in relation to the academic performance of their students may impact teachers' decisions about retention as well. Low performing students who are promoted to the next grade may give the impression that the teacher maintains low academic standards (Tomchin and Impara, 1992). Some teachers harbored concerns that students' low performance would be viewed as a negative reflection of their teaching abilities. Other teachers interviewed by Byrnes (1989) mentioned a fear of being ridiculed by their colleagues in the following grade if they were to send them poorly prepared students.

It is evident that a wide variety of beliefs enter into decisions teachers make about grade retention. These beliefs may also be affected by what teachers know or do not know about the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral effects of grade retention on students.

Academic Outcomes of Retention

Academic outcomes are those outcomes related to a student's individual performance on graded classroom work as well as on standardized tests that reflect a student's performance in relation to the performance of other students. The most common reason for retaining a student is academic failure – most commonly when there is a deficiency in reading skills in grades 1-6 or when a student fails a course in grades 9-12 (Smink, 2001).

In 1996, Chicago Public Schools instituted promotional guidelines based on students' scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) in the third, sixth, and eighth grades in an effort to improve the academic performance of students. As a result, between 7,000-10,000 students have been retained in these three grades annually because they failed to meet the promotional guidelines. Nagoaka and Roderick (2004), researchers with the Consortium on Chicago School Research, found that in 1998 and 1999, less than 60 percent of third and sixth grade students were able to raise their ITBS scores to the promotional cut off even after attending summer school. When comparing third grade students who had been retained to third graders who had scored just above the cutoff and been promoted, there was a slight, initial increase in test scores with no substantial positive effects two years after the retention. Retained sixth grade students were significantly outperformed by promoted sixth graders who had scored just above the cutoff in the first year after retention. The gap in sixth grade performance widened even more the second year after retention. Researchers concluded that retention had little or no positive effect on student achievement in the third grade and a decidedly negative effect on student achievement in the sixth grade.

In another study, Reynolds (1992) compared the academic achievement of fourth grade students who had been retained to the performance of students who had not been retained. The reading performance of students who had been retained underwent a consistent decline from year to year relative to promoted children. This decline was especially steep for students who had been retained in the first grade. Jimerson (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of grade retention studies published between 1990-1999. Of the 20 studies that were examined, 16 of the studies (80 percent) did not yield a positive academic outcome. The four studies (20 percent) that found an initial positive academic outcome, noted that gains in performance were not maintained after the first year. In fact, low-achieving but promoted students consistently outperformed retained students after one year.

Holmes (1989) conducted a meta-analysis of 63 controlled studies in which retained students were compared to equally low performing but promoted students. Fifty-four of the studies showed overall negative academic effects resulting from retention. Nine studies yielded short-term positive academic results which diminished over time. Holmes concluded that retention most often has a negative effect on students.

Even when retention takes place very early in a child's school career it does not appear to have a positive impact on future academic success. In fact, students held back the earliest such as in the case of kindergartners or first graders, are often the ones who continue to have the most severe academic difficulties (Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber, 2003). Shepard and Smith (1989) compared 40 children who had repeated kindergarten to children that had been equally low performing in kindergarten but promoted. The retained children performed no better than the children that had been promoted by the end

of first grade on teacher ratings of reading and math achievement. In another study, the academic performance of 53 retained kindergarten students was compared to that of a matched sample of kindergarten students who were promoted (Mantzicopoulos and Morrison, 1992). Their academic performance was better in the year they repeated; however, once they entered first grade their reading and math achievement were no better than the equally low performing but promoted group of students.

A more recent study conducted by Hong and Raudenbush (2005) found that children who were retained in kindergarten demonstrated less growth in reading and math than their equally low performing, yet promoted, peers and the researchers concluded that retaining children in kindergarten was not an effective practice.

Not all studies have yielded a negative academic outcome for retained students. Pierson and Connell (1992) conducted a study in a suburban New York school district in which they compared the performance of retained students in the third through sixth grades with the performance of randomly selected students and students who had been recommended for retention but had been socially promoted. A single composite score for academic performance was computed from report card grades and standardized test scores. Retained students scored significantly lower than the random sample but significantly higher than those who had been socially promoted for as long as two years after retention. The authors of the study concluded that early academic difficulties tend to persist and that while retention does not eliminate them, social promotion may only make them worse. Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (1999) found that children retained in the first grade did not show significant improvement in their academic performance while children at higher grade levels did improve. One suggestion that was given for the

discrepancy in results was that the first graders had more complex and severe problems to begin with. The authors concluded that retention had a positive academic impact because it had prevented an even greater decline in students' academic achievement.

Karweit (1999) examined retentions in grades 1-3 with more than half of them occurring in the first grade over a period of three years. Reading and math achievement were assessed in the fall and repeated in the spring. In the fall, the retained group of students scored significantly lower on standardized tests than their non-retained classmates regardless of the fact that their classmates were younger and had not been in that grade before. By midyear, the achievement gap had narrowed somewhat and by the end of the school year the retained students were still lower performing than their classmates but the gap had narrowed significantly. In subsequent years the achievement gap tended to widen but the differences were never as large as they were prior to retention.

Dworkin (1999) reviewed 10.2 million standardized tests in Texas and found that in 1994, 20 percent of Texas third graders failed the reading section of the test and 1.2 percent of this group of students was retained. When the subsequent performance of these students was compared over time with that of students who had been socially promoted, he found that students who had been retained in the third grade gained approximately twenty points on the next year's standardized reading tests, while those who had been socially promoted showed very little gain. The retained students continued to outscore the socially promoted students in later years leading him to conclude that retention had a positive effect on the student's academic performance.

Pomplun (1988) conducted a two year study of students who had been retained in the first, second, third, fourth, seventh, and eighth grades. Academic achievement significantly increased in reading, language, and math for first, second, third, and fourth grade students, however this trend did not persist for students in the seventh and eighth grades.

Although some research findings suggest that grade retention may benefit children academically, the majority of research indicates that retention fails to improve low academic achievement and contributes to a long-term decline in academic achievement. Regardless of initial improvements in the year following retention, students continue to struggle academically and demonstrate less academic proficiency than their equally low performing but promoted peers. This holds true no matter what grade level the retention took place. Teacher beliefs as to the efficacy of retention may be strengthened by the fact that students characteristically show improved academic performance in the repeated year. Unfortunately, most teachers do not have the opportunity to follow the retained student's progress over time or to compare the retained student's progress to that of equally low performing but promoted students.

Emotional Outcomes of Retention

Retention impacts the whole child; the emotions the child experiences, the social interactions the child engages in, and the behaviors a child exhibits. Repeating a grade becomes an emotional issue because the knowledge that one is being retained impacts the psyche – the very core of how a person feels about him or herself. Retention has been found to have an overall negative effect on a child's emotions regardless of age or grade

level. Fifty-four of 63 controlled studies included in a meta-analysis of retention studies by Holmes (1989) showed that retained children were worse off than their equally low performing but promoted peers in areas of personal adjustment such as attitudes towards school and attendance.

Children may also view retention as a form of punishment. Interviews with retained children ages 6-12 indicate that retention is frequently perceived as a form of punishment (Byrnes and Yamamoto, 1986) and a stigma, not as something that will help them. In another study, 87 percent of the children that were interviewed referred to retention as making them feel bad, sad, upset, or embarrassed (Byrnes, 1989). It is interesting to note that both high achieving as well as retained students in this study viewed retention as a form of punishment imposed on children as a result of bad behavior or not learning classroom lessons.

Many children are fearful of retention. In a study of childhood stressors by Yamamoto (1980), retention, as well as the prospect of retention, were rated as more stressful than losing control of their bladder or bowels in class or having the other children catch them in the act of stealing. Only going blind and losing a parent were rated as more stressful events in this study. Similar results were obtained in a more recent study of stressful childhood events conducted in four schools in the United Kingdom (Yamamoto, Whittaker, and Davis Jr., 1998) in which children associated retention with fear and embarrassment.

Age and grade level do not appear to affect the emotional response children have to being retained. Children, as young as kindergarten, viewed retention in negative terms

and were found to have a negative attitude toward school in the repeating year (Shepard and Smith, 1987).

In a study of retained sixth grade students, retention was named as the single most stressful life event in their lives; even more stressful than the loss of a parent (Anderson, Whipple and Jimerson, 2002). Older retained students had lower rates of school attendance than their promoted peers which is a predictor of dropping out of school altogether.

Not all research paints such a bleak picture for retained students. Pierson and Connell (1992) compared retained students to socially promoted students in the third through sixth grade and found that retention was not harmful to their feelings of self-worth and relationships with peers. This stands in direct contrast to the results found by Shepard and Smith (1987) who concluded that retention had a negative effect on self-concept. Pierson and Connell (1992) suggested that these differences might be due to the fact that both studies were conducted using different methodologies. Pierson and Connell (1992) asked students directly to report on their feelings of self-worth. Students who were retained at the primary level were found to have a positive self-concept and an increased level of motivation at the beginning of their retained year. Shepard and Smith (1987) asked parents and teachers to report what they perceived as the students' feelings of self-worth. Another difference in these studies is that Shepard and Smith (1987) asked parents and teachers how students felt about repeating a grade while they were in the repeating year and concluded that students felt very badly about the experience. In contrast, Pierson and Connell (1992) waited an entire year before asking students how

they felt about being retained and found that retained students experienced no significant deficits in general feelings of self-worth or peer relatedness.

Although not all research indicates that retention has a negative effect on children's emotions, the majority of studies indicate that retention is a frightening event for many children. It must also be noted that the retained students who suffered no ill emotional effects from being retained in the studies conducted by Pierson and Connell (1992) had the benefit of a variety of specific interventions and did not merely repeat the same curriculum.

Social and Behavioral Outcomes of Retention

Retention alters students' social status by removing them from their peer group and placing them in a group that is a year younger. Negative behavioral effects have been found to accompany this change in social status. Byrd, Weitzman, and Doniger (1996) found that students who were older than their peers were more likely to smoke cigarettes, chew tobacco, consume alcohol, drive in a car with someone who had been drinking, or use illegal substances. The National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health (Resnick, et.al, 1997) which included over 12,000 students in grades 7 through 12, found that students who were old for their grade reported higher levels of emotional distress, substance abuse, violent incidents, and an earlier onset of sexual intercourse.

Even though the behavioral effects are not as dramatic for younger students, Shepard and Smith (1989) found no evidence to indicate that retained children become class leaders, increase their attention span or develop more self-confidence in a study of retained kindergarten students.

Some students reported more positive social relationships after being retained than before retention. Students who had difficulty relating to their peers or had experienced being ignored or rejected prior to being retained, were found to have more positive peer relationships after retention and the researchers suggested that this may be attributed to being surrounded by younger peers (Pierson and Connell, 1992). In another study, retained students in middle school were perceived to have increased social status among their peers which the researchers suggested may have been due to the retained students being older than their peers or because they were more experienced at middle school life (Gottfredson, Fink, and Graham, 1994). The same study compared school attachment and attitudes of retained sixth and seventh grade students to promoted students and found that retention was not associated with negative effects on self-esteem, peer associations, and attitudes toward school. The retained students were found to be more attached to their school than non-retained students, which the researchers suggested might be due to the fact that the academic work was easier for them the second time around. Gottfredson, Fink, and Graham (1994) did not find a causal relationship between retention and problem behaviors and believed it was more likely that problem behaviors were a result of characteristics, beliefs, and attitudes that were already present before retention.

Incidence of Retention

In view of the fact that there has been a great deal of research in the field of retention, most of which has failed to demonstrate any long lasting, positive effects; it is perplexing and troubling to note that retention rates continue to rise. In 1992, 11.1

percent of all students across the United States were retained (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 1995). By 1995, the nationwide retention rate had increased to 13.3 percent (NCES, 1995). In a nationwide survey conducted by the American Federation of Teachers, 19 percent of U.S. students were found to be repeating a grade at least once (Feldman, 1997). The same survey found that as many as 50 percent of all students in large, urban schools have been retained at least once.

English language learners are retained at higher rates than their native English-speaking counterparts (Haney, 2000). In a study conducted in the mid 1990s, Haney (2000) found that 30 percent of all Hispanic students were retained in 9th grade. Barton (2006) describes what he calls the “ninth grade bulge” (p. 15) – a disproportional number of students in the ninth grade compared to the number of students in eighth grade in the previous year. He notes that in 2001 there were 440,000 more students enrolled in the ninth grade nationwide than had been enrolled in the eighth grade the previous year indicating that a great many students had been retained in the ninth grade.

It must be acknowledged that teacher beliefs are not the only reason the incidence of grade retention is on the rise. State and district mandates and legislated cut-off scores on standardized tests serve as the basis for decisions about grade retention in states such as Texas, New York, Florida, Massachusetts, and California.

Rising retention rates represent an ominous trend because grade retention has been associated with dropping out of school prior to graduation.

The Drop Out Issue

When comparing high school dropouts to high school graduates, it becomes evident that a large number of dropouts have been retained at least once. The argument could be made that students with below average achievement would be more likely to be retained and, therefore, also more likely to drop out than high achieving students. This argument does not stand up to close inspection because low achieving students that are promoted do not have as high a drop out rate as low achieving students that are retained. Grissom and Shepard (1989) examined the school records of thousands of students in Austin, Texas and found that retained students with low academic achievement had a dropout rate of 75 percent while their equally low achieving, but promoted, counterparts had a 45 percent dropout rate.

In a review of 17 studies of school dropouts (Jimerson, Whipple and Anderson, 2002), even after controlling for variables such as socio-economics, ethnicity, parental level of education, and parental level of involvement, retained students were found to be between 2 and 11 times more likely to drop out of high school. This study noted that grade retention increased the risk of dropping out of high school from 20 percent to 50 percent regardless of what grade the student had repeated.

In a five-year study of the Texas school system, Haney (2000) noted that for every 10 students who had been retained, 7 eventually dropped out of high school prior to graduation.

Findings obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics, using data from the 1995 Census Population Survey, illustrates the relationship between grade level and dropping out of high school. Nationwide, 10.1 percent of students who were not retained dropped out of high school compared to 24.1 percent of those who had been

retained. When one examines only the high school dropouts who were retained, 19.9 percent of them were retained between kindergarten and 3rd grade, 28 percent were retained between the 4th and 8th grades, and 30.1 percent were retained between the 9th and 12th grades. Students whose last school retention occurred in the late elementary/middle school years (grades 4-8) and high school years (grades 9-12) were found to be more likely to drop out than those retained in the early elementary grades. Students who had experienced two or more retentions were nearly four times as likely to drop out as students who had not been retained (39.3 percent versus 10.1 percent) and almost twice as likely to drop out as students who were retained only once (39.3 percent versus 10.1 percent).

A more recent analysis comparing the population cohort that would be of graduation age in the spring of 2000 (using the most recent census count) to the number of public and private high school diplomas awarded that year (using National Center for Education Statistics data) found that only 69.6 percent of the students who were of graduating age had received their high school diploma (Barton, 2006). In order to compare high school graduation rates over time, Barton (2006) analyzed data for the year 1990 and found a high school completion rate of 72 percent, which indicates that the rate of high school drop out is on the rise.

A study of the nation's largest 35 cities found that more than 50 percent of retained students eventually drop out prior to graduation (Powell, 2001). In Philadelphia, 57 percent of the students who repeated ninth grade eventually dropped out of school, compared to just 11 percent of the students who were not retained (Powell, 2001).

Research indicates that there is a relationship between retention and dropping out of school. Research also indicates that the incidence of retention is increasing even though retained students may suffer from negative academic, social, behavioral, and emotional problems as a result.

Although not all research demonstrates a negative outcome for students who have experienced grade retention, a preponderance of research indicates that retention, and the timing of retention, are associated with negative academic, emotional, social, and behavioral outcomes for students.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This was a qualitative, descriptive study that also included some quantification of the data. Quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis are not opposites; they are interconnected. Qualitative data are rich, descriptive data obtained by a variety of methods. Teacher interviews and narrative comments on surveys served as qualitative data sources for my inquiry. Quantitative data are represented by numbers (Patton, 2002). I used a Likert scaled survey to collect quantitative data related to teacher beliefs and grade retention. The data obtained from these surveys were analyzed to identify trends in the practice of retention related to specific beliefs and demographic characteristics. The use of a Likert rating scale implies that a qualitative judgment was made related to the item that was checked. Clearly, there is a relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002).

Procedures

1. An application for permission to conduct research (A copy of my IRB application) was submitted to the school district in which I wished to conduct research.

2. I spoke with principals at three elementary schools and two middle schools and asked for permission to come to their schools and conduct research.
3. Written permission to conduct research was obtained from the school district and each of the principals.
4. An application for permission to conduct research was requested from and granted by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).
5. I went to three elementary schools and two middle schools, read the recruitment script and Informed Consent form and distributed surveys to those teachers who wished to participate.
6. I collected all completed surveys and left a locked box with a letter-size opening at the top (labeled with my name) in the school office in which teachers placed surveys that were filled out at a later time.
7. I returned to the school one week after distributing the materials and picked up the locked box.
8. Informed consent, name/phone number information, and surveys were sorted into separate files. The files were kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home office and taken out only for data analysis purposes. I was the only person who had access to these materials.
8. Ten participants who had volunteered their name and phone number were called for a telephone interview.
9. All informed consents, personal information, surveys, and field notes from telephone interviews will be destroyed by shredding upon final approval of the dissertation.

Participants

Participants in this study include teachers from three elementary schools and two middle schools in a large urban, mid-western school district. Teachers self-selected themselves for participation in this study after hearing a short explanation of the study (Recruitment Script, Appendix O) and having the Informed Consent form read to them. Staff sizes at the three elementary schools range from 33-51 teachers per school and 43-49 teachers per middle school. Therefore, 99-153 elementary school teachers and 86-98 middle school teachers were potential participants in my study. I distributed 75 surveys to elementary school teachers attending staff meetings and 55 surveys (73 percent) were completed and returned to me. I distributed 70 surveys to middle school teachers attending staff meetings and 48 surveys (69 percent) were completed and returned to me. I received a total of 103 completed surveys; 87 from female teachers and 16 from male teachers. The schools in which these teachers work represent a diverse group of students including Hispanic, African-American, Asian-American, and European-American children from varying socio-economic circumstances.

Data Sources

A two-part survey form: The Teacher Opinion Survey and the Personal Experiences and Professional Practices section was used for data collection. Participants self-selected themselves for interviews by providing their name and phone number on a piece of paper stapled to the survey. Ten teachers who were home at the time of the phone call were interviewed.

Personal Experiences and Retention Practices (PERP)

The personal experiences and retention practices section is located at the top of the TOS. The purpose of this section of the survey is to provide quantifiable data related to professional status, retention practices, a personal or family history of retention, and familiarity with current research in the field of retention.

The following items constituted the PERP section:

1. Grade Level: The purpose of eliciting what grade level the participant teaches was to identify any patterns or trends in retention practices related to grade level.
2. Number of Years Taught: The purpose of eliciting the number of years a participant has taught was to identify any patterns or trends in retention practices related to length of teaching.
3. Average Number of Boys/Girls Retained Annually: The purpose of eliciting the average number of girls/boys retained annually was to identify any patterns or trends in retention practices related to gender.
4. Average Number of English Language Learners Retained Annually: The purpose of eliciting the average number of English Language Learners retained annually was to identify any patterns or trends in retention practices related to English language proficiency.
5. Participant/Family Member Retention: The purpose of eliciting whether or not a participant or family member has been retained was to identify any patterns or trends in retention practices related to this phenomenon.

6. Familiarity With Research on Grade Retention: The purpose of eliciting the extent of participants' familiarity with current research about grade retention was to identify any patterns or trends in retention practices related to this familiarity.

Teacher Opinion Survey (TOS)

The TOS is a quantitative instrument consisting of 12 six-choice (strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree, strongly disagree) Likert-scaled belief statements. Each TOS is tagged with a letter ("E" for elementary and "M" for middle school) and a number. The number was used to refer to the participant being interviewed. The purpose of the TOS is to quantify what teachers believe about retention in relation to academic achievement, the social, emotional, and behavioral effects of retention, immaturity, gender, the opinions of their colleagues, English language learners, dropping out of school, and alternatives to retention. The researcher designed the survey using the literature review the basis for the content.

The 12 belief statements are:

1. Retention provides children an opportunity to raise their current level of academic achievement. The purpose of this statement was to learn what teachers believe about retaining students with low academic achievement. Past research has indicated that teachers believe retention will improve academic performance.
2. Retention provides children an opportunity to prevent future academic failure. The purpose of this statement was to learn what teachers believe about retaining students in order to prevent academic failure in the future.

3. If I were to send students with low academic performance to the next grade level, their teachers may form a low opinion of my teaching abilities. The purpose of this statement was to learn what teachers believe about low student performance and colleagues' perceptions of their teaching abilities.
4. Retention injures children's self-esteem. The purpose of this statement was to learn what teachers believe about the effect of retention on children's emotions.
5. Retention is most effective when it takes place in kindergarten or first grade. The purpose of this statement was to learn what teachers believe about the relationship between the timing of retention and its effectiveness.
6. Retention is an effective intervention strategy for boys. The purpose of this statement was to learn what teachers believe about retention as it relates to gender.
7. Retained students are more likely to exhibit behavior problems than non- retained classmates. The purpose of this statement was to learn what teachers believe about the relationship between retention and behavior.
8. Retention allows English language learners additional opportunities to master language skills and academic material. The purpose of this statement was to learn what teachers believe about retaining students for whom English is a second language.
9. Retention provides immature children an opportunity to catch up to their peers. The purpose of this statement was to learn what teachers believe about retaining children who are immature in relation to their peers.

10. Retention is my only alternative when students do not successfully master grade level material by the end of the school year. The purpose of this statement was to learn what teachers believe about alternatives to retention that may be available to them.
11. Retained students are more likely to drop out of school before graduation than non-retained students. The purpose of this statement was to learn what teachers believe about the relationship between dropping out of school and retention.
12. Retention is an effective intervention strategy for girls.
The purpose of this statement was to learn what teachers believe about retention as it relates to gender.

Personal Information

A separate piece of paper was stapled to the back of the TOS/PERP form on which participants were asked to write their name and telephone number if they wished to be called for a telephone interview. The piece of paper containing personal information was separated from the TOS/PERP form as soon as it is collected. It was coded with an 'E' for elementary and an 'M' for middle school as well as a number corresponding to the TOS/PERP form. This made it possible to contact participants who gave responses that warranted clarification and/or explanation.

Telephone Interviews

Telephone interviews were conducted with ten participants who provided a telephone number. The purpose for conducting telephone interviews was to probe or

clarify responses that were given on the surveys in order to gain a deeper understanding of teacher beliefs related to retention.

Telephone questions included but were not limited to:

1. What are your thoughts about grade retention? This is a warm-up question to elicit teacher's general thoughts and feelings about grade retention.
2. What are some characteristics of a successful student? Since successful students are not usually retained, this question is intended to identify what characteristics make a student successful in the opinion of the teacher.
3. What are some characteristics of an unsuccessful student? Since unsuccessful students are more likely to be retained, it is important to identify what characteristics make a student unsuccessful in the opinion of the teacher.
4. On what criteria do you base your decisions to recommend retention? Since students are most often retained on the recommendation of the classroom teacher in this district, it is important to identify criteria on which teachers base decisions to recommend retention.
5. Can you tell me about a time when you recommended retention? The examination of specific situations in which teachers have recommended retention will provide a personal picture of what prompted a teacher to recommend retention.
6. How did you arrive at your views on retention? Having teachers reflect as to how they arrived at their views on retention will provide a response that may clarify how teachers come to hold certain beliefs.

Other questions were asked in the course of interviews in order to probe or clarify particular responses.

Data Collection Plan

After securing written consent from the school district in which I planned to conduct research, principals at the participating schools, and Oklahoma State University's Institutional Review Board, I contacted each of the principals by e-mail in order to make an appointment to bring the surveys to their school in January of 2006. Each elementary school principal responded with an invitation to attend a staff meeting after school at 3:00 PM on a Monday. Each middle school principal responded with an invitation to attend a staff meeting before school at 7:45 AM on a Tuesday.

On the appointed days, I arrived early for the staff meetings, met with the principals ahead of the meeting time, placed two sets of consent forms (one to sign and one to keep), the TOS/PERP form and an extra piece of paper for names and telephone numbers at each seat prior to the teachers' arrival. I had extra forms and pens as needed. I had a black plastic, file-folder size box with a lock on it. The box had a letter-size hole cut into the top and my name written on the front. After being introduced by the principal at the beginning of the meeting, I read the Recruitment Script (Appendix O) and Informed Consent Form (Appendix K) out loud to the teachers. I showed them the box and explained that they could place completed surveys into the box which I would leave in the school office to be collected in one week. Teachers at all of the elementary schools and one of the middle schools asked if I could stay for the duration of the meeting because they preferred to hand me the surveys rather than placing them in the box. I

agreed to this and sat in the back of the room during the meeting. Afterwards teachers came by my seat and handed me the completed consent forms, surveys, and papers with names and phone numbers. All of the teachers but one at the last middle school I went to asked that I remain at the meeting so that they could hand me the surveys when they were done with them. One teacher said she preferred to take her survey home and place it in the box. I left the locked box in the school office and returned one week later to pick it up. Her survey was inside.

I had originally planned on interviewing participants who provided vastly different answers on their surveys, but in actuality I had to interview participants who were available when I called. I had also planned on interviewing similar numbers of male and female teachers as well as similar numbers of elementary and middle school teachers. This plan also had to be adjusted due to difficulties in reaching participants. In actuality, I interviewed seven female elementary school teachers, one female middle school teacher, and two male middle school teachers.

Informed Consent forms, TOS/PERP forms, and papers with teachers' names and phone number were considered private and confidential. At no time was any identifying information released. All of the Informed Consent forms were placed in one file folder and locked in a file cabinet in my home office. All of the TOS/PERP forms were separated into two stacks – one for elementary and one for middle school and placed in separate file folders. These were locked in a file cabinet in my home office. Papers with teachers' name and phone number were placed into two separate folders (elementary and middle school) and placed in a locked file cabinet in my home office. No one other than myself had access to these files and they were removed from the locked file cabinet only

for the purpose of data analysis. I will destroy all of my data by shredding upon final approval of this dissertation.

Content Validity

In order to insure that data collected by research instruments in this study truly reflect the construct I envisioned, it was necessary to establish content validity. Content validity refers to the extent that a measurement instrument reflects the content material that it is intended to measure (Rubio, Berg-Weger, Tebb, Lee, and Rauch, 2003). The literature review is the basis for establishing what content material the data collection instruments measure.

Teacher Opinion Survey

1. Retention provides children an opportunity to raise their current level of academic achievement. Research has shown that poor academic performance may result in retention (Bonvin, 2003). Responses to this statement were intended to clarify to what extent teachers agree with this construct in our current school environment.
2. Retention provides children an opportunity to prevent future academic failure. Research has shown that students may be retained in order to prevent future school failure (Byrnes and Yamamoto, 1986). Responses to this statement were intended to clarify to what extent teachers agree with this construct in our in our current school environment.
3. If I were to send students with low academic performance to the next grade level, their teachers may form a low opinion of my teaching abilities. Teachers' concerns about what colleagues will think of their teaching abilities may influence

retention decisions (Byrnes, 1989). Responses to this statement were intended to clarify to what extent colleagues' opinions influence decisions related to retention in our current school environment.

4. Retention injures children's self-esteem. Children may view retention as a form of punishment (Byrnes and Yamamoto, 1986) or refer to themselves as bad, sad, upset or embarrassed (Byrnes, 1989) all of which reflect negatively on self-esteem. Responses to this statement were intended to clarify to what extent teachers are aware of retention's negative impact on children's self-esteem.
5. Retention is most effective when it takes place in kindergarten or first grade. The greatest number of retentions occur in kindergarten and first grade (Karweit, 1999). Responses to this statement were intended to clarify to what extent teachers believe that retention is most effective in kindergarten and first grade in our current school environment.
6. Retention is an effective intervention strategy for boys. And 12. Retention is an effective intervention strategy for girls. In some school systems boys are retained at twice the rate girls are (Jimerson and Kaufman, 2003). Responses to this statement were intended to clarify what current teachers believe about the effectiveness of retention in relation to gender.
7. Retained students are more likely to exhibit behavior problems than non-retained classmates. Children who have experienced retention have been found to experience a larger number of negative behavior than children who have not been retained. Byrd, Weitzman, and Doniger (1996) found that students who were old for grade "were more likely to report being regular smokers, chewing tobacco,

drinking alcoholic beverages, driving in a car with someone who had been drinking, or using illicit drugs” (p.470). Responses to this statement were intended to clarify what current teachers believe about how retention impacts children’s behavior.

8. Retention allows English language learners additional opportunities to master language skills and academic material. English language learners are retained at higher rates than their English speaking counterparts (Haney, 2000). In a study conducted in the mid 1990s, Haney (2000) found that 30 percent of all Hispanic students were retained in 9th grade. Since retention is known to contribute to dropping out of school entirely, this seems to be an ominous trend. Responses to this statement were intended to clarify what teachers believe about the efficacy of retaining English language learners.
9. Retention provides immature children an opportunity to catch up to their peers. Byrnes and Yamomoto (1986) surveyed 145 teachers and found that 68 per cent of them retained children based on the belief that students were developmentally immature and would be unable to deal responsibly with tasks required at the next grade level. Retention has also been viewed as a means of insuring that children eventually become more self-confident students, experience less stress in their school life, and emerge as class leaders (Smith, 1989). Teacher responses to this statement were intended to clarify what current teachers believe about using retention as a remedy for immature students and an opportunity for students to catch up to their peers.

10. Retention is my only alternative when students do not successfully master grade level material by the end of the school year. Teacher responses to this statement were intended to clarify whether or not a lack of alternatives is a factor in retentions.
11. Retained students are more likely to drop out of school before graduation than non-retained students. In a review of 17 studies of school dropouts (Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple, 2002), even after controlling for variables such as socio-economics, ethnicity, parental level of education, and parental level of involvement, retained students were found to be between 2 and 11 times more likely to drop out of high school. This study noted that grade retention increased the risk of dropping out of high school from 20 percent to 50 percent regardless of what grade the student had repeated. Teacher responses to this statement were intended to clarify to what extent current teachers believe that retention leads to dropping out of school prior to graduation.
12. See statement 6.

Subjectivity

The issue of researcher bias and subjectivity are acknowledged as important components in data collection and analysis (Peshkin, 1988). I consider myself an “insider” when it comes to my research study. As a teacher, I found that I had easy access to other teachers. Being a teacher was also problematic because at times it was difficult to separate my own beliefs from those of the teachers in this study. Because of my insider status, I had a tendency to drift into “insider lingo”(language terms that are specific to teachers and schools) which I do not recognize as such because it is so familiar

to me. I have also retained students and therefore, I have my own beliefs about grade retention. I am also female, white, and middle-class; the same as many of the teachers participating in my study which means that I viewed the data through a particular lens – an important consideration when many students who are retained are male, non-white, and from lower socio-economic circumstances. I am also a parent which adds another dimension to the way in which I view data.

Being an insider is not a good or a bad thing – it simply exists and begs acknowledgement. If I were not an insider, I would have never thought of grade retention, nor would I have conducted any research on this subject.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted on April 1, 2005 in order to determine whether or not teachers found the Teacher Opinion Survey easy to understand and find any problem areas that would have to be corrected prior to the actual study. Verbal consent was obtained from the principal of a mid-size, Title I elementary school (256 students) in a medium-sized mid-western city. The TOS was placed in thirty teachers' mailboxes. There was no identifying information on any of the surveys. A total of twelve surveys were returned to my mailbox by the end of the week.

Analysis of the pilot study results, although extremely limited by its small size, indicates that teachers were able to understand and respond to the belief statements as written. No questions were asked about the survey nor were any suggestions for improvements made. All of the respondents responded to all of the belief statements

using the Likert scale and filled in the personal experiences and retention practices spaces.

Pilot Study Results

Retention provides children an opportunity to raise their current level of academic achievement. All respondents at all grade levels responded positively to this statement. This included both high retaining kindergarten teachers, averaging of 3.5 retentions annually, and low retaining third grade teachers, with zero retentions annually. The positive response cut across gender lines (eleven female and one male) as well as years of experience (0-5 yrs. to 16+ yrs.). None of the respondents had been retained, however four had family members who were. Four teachers who agreed with this belief statement noted that they were familiar with grade retention research. Three of the four commented: “It hurts more than it helps.” It may or may not be helpful.” Not very successful.”

Retention provides children an opportunity to prevent future academic failure.

All respondents at all grade levels responded positively to this statement. Both male and female teachers, regardless of years of experience or familiarity with grade research, responded positively to this statement. None of the respondents had been retained, however several had family members who were. Four teachers who responded positively to this belief statement noted that they were familiar with grade retention research.

If I were to send students with low performance to the next grade level, their teachers may form a low opinion of my teaching abilities. Both kindergarten teachers (0-5 years experience and averaging 3.5 retentions each annually) responded positively to this belief

statement. One of the kindergarten teachers claimed to be familiar with grade retention research. None of the first, second, third, and fourth grade teachers were in agreement with this statement. Three fifth grade teachers (one male, two female; experience ranging from 6-16+ years) responded positively to this statement. Even though all three of the fifth grade teachers responded positively, only one female teacher with 16+ years experience retained students (3) each year. None of the fifth grade teachers claimed familiarity with grade retention research.

Retention injures children's self esteem. One kindergarten teacher who retains two students each year responded positively to this statement and claimed some familiarity with retention research. Another kindergarten teacher who retains five students per year gave a negative response and claimed no familiarity with retention research. One first grade teacher who claimed familiarity with retention research and retains two students annually responded positively to this statement. One second-grade teacher who does not retain children responded positively to this statement and one who retains two children each year disagreed with this statement. Both second grade teachers claimed familiarity with retention research. Both third grade teachers, neither claiming any familiarity with grade retention research, responded negatively to this statement. Both fourth grade teachers, one of which retains one student per year and neither of which claims familiarity with grade retention research, responded positively to this belief statement. All three fifth-grade teachers, regardless of retention habits, responded negatively to this belief statement.

Retention is most effective when it takes place in kindergarten or first grade.

All respondents at all grade levels responded positively to this statement regardless of grade retention practices or familiarity with research.

Retention is an effective intervention strategy for boys. One kindergarten teacher who retains only boys (2 per year) responded positively to this statement. Another kindergarten teacher who retains girls and boys (5 per year) responded negatively to this statement. One first grade teacher, who responded positively to this statement, retains children of either gender (2 per year). One second-grade teacher, who retains children of either gender (2 per year), retains children of either gender (2 per year). One third-grade teacher responded positively and one responded negatively, neither retains students, to this statement. Both fourth grade teachers, one who retains (1 per year) and one who does not, responded positively to this statement. All three fifth grade teachers responded positively to this statement whether they retain students or not. One of them was a male teacher.

Retained students are more likely to exhibit behavior problems than non-retained classmates. One kindergarten teacher, who retains two children per year and claimed familiarity with grade retention research, responded positively to this statement. Another kindergarten teacher, who retains five children per year, responded negatively to this statement. One first grade teacher, who claimed familiarity with retention research and retains two students annually, responded negatively to this statement. Both second grade teachers, each claiming familiarity with grade retention research, responded negatively to this statement. Both third grade teachers, neither claiming any familiarity with grade retention research, responded positively to this statement. Both fourth grade teachers,

neither claiming any familiarity with grade retention research, responded negatively to this statement. All three fifth grade teachers, none claiming familiarity with retention research and regardless of retention practice, responded negatively to this practice.

Retention allows English language learners additional opportunities to master language skills and academic material. All kindergarten, first, second, and third grade teachers responded positively to this statement. One fourth-grade teacher, who does not retain students, responded positively to this statement and one, who retains students (1 per year), responded negatively to this statement. Neither claimed familiarity with grade retention research. Two fifth-grade teachers, neither of which retain students, responded positively to this statement. The other fifth grade teacher, who retains students (5 per year), responded negatively to this statement.

Retention provides immature children an opportunity to catch up to their peers.

All respondents at all grade levels responded positively to this statement.

Retention is my only alternative when students do not successfully master grade level material by the end of the school year. All kindergarten, first, second, fourth, and fifth grade teachers and one third-grade teacher responded negatively to this statement. One third-grade teacher responded positively.

Retained students are more likely to drop out of school before graduation than non-retained students. One kindergarten teacher, who claims familiarity with grade retention research and retains two students per year, responded positively to this statement. The other kindergarten teacher, who does not claim familiarity with grade retention research and retains five students annually, responded negatively to this statement. First, second, and third grade teachers, all of whom claim familiarity with grade retention research

responded negatively to this statement. One fourth-grade teacher and one fifth-grade teacher responded positively to this statement. All of the other fourth and fifth grade teachers responded negatively to this statement. None of the fourth and fifth grade teachers claim any familiarity with grade retention research.

Retention is an effective intervention strategy for girls. The first grade teacher, one of the second grade teachers, one third-grade teacher, and all of the fourth and fifth grade teachers responded positively to this statement. One second and one third-grade teacher responded negatively to this statement.

Pilot Study Discussion

Although very limited due to the small number of respondents, the data collected in the pilot study highlights some interesting trends. The belief that retention corrects and/or prevents academic failure is pervasive (100 percent of participants agree) across all grade levels. The belief that retention is most effective when it takes place in kindergarten or first grade enjoys 83 percent agreement across all grade levels. Five of twelve teachers (42 percent) were concerned about other teachers forming a low opinion of their teaching abilities if they were to send students with low academic performance to the next grade level. Clearly, teachers worry about what their coworkers think. Fifty-eight percent of the participants did not believe that retention injures children's self esteem. The belief that retention is an effective intervention strategy for boys is shared by 75 percent of the teachers in this pilot study and 67 percent of the participants believe that retention is an effective intervention strategy for girls as well. None of the teachers

in the pilot study had been retained so that was clearly not a factor in retention beliefs for this group of teachers.

Two interesting trends emerged from this pilot study. First, only four participants (25 percent) claimed any familiarity with grade retention research. It is interesting to note that three out of four teachers who claimed familiarity with retention research (75 percent) continue to retain students. Years of teaching experience did not seem to have a relationship to teacher familiarity with retention research: One teacher taught for 0–5 years, one taught for 11-15 years, and two teachers taught for 16+ years.

The second trend that emerged from this pilot study was related to family members and retention practice. Four participants (25 percent) noted that a family member was retained and of these four teachers, only one of them retains students. One teacher whose brother was retained in the third grade notes, “It hurts more than it helps.” Another whose child was retained in the second grade notes, “Not very successful.”

Lessons Learned

The Teacher Opinion Survey proved to be a workable instrument that required no clarification and elicited no comments as to its construction from respondents

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Participant Demographic Data

The following section presents an overview of participants' demographic data related to years of experience, gender, retention practices, personal and family history of retention, and familiarity with grade retention research for teachers at each grade level. Data are grouped by: Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) through second grade; third through general elementary; and sixth through general middle school teachers (Table I). The general elementary (GE) category consists of counselors, principals, special education teachers, and English language and literacy coaches. The general middle school (GM) category consists of counselors, English language and literacy coaches, and teachers who teach more than one grade.

Experience

The largest group of teachers in this study also had the most experience. Forty-one percent of the participating teachers had sixteen or more years of experience. Teachers with zero to five years of experience comprised twenty-six percent of the participant group followed by twenty percent of the participants who had six to ten years

of experience. The least represented group of teachers in this study had eleven to fifteen years of experience and comprised thirteen percent of the total group.

Gender

Eighty-four percent of the teachers participating in this study were female and sixteen percent were male. The majority of male teachers were found in the sixth grade to general middle school group.

Retention Practices

Forty-five percent of the teachers participating in this study did not retain students. Twenty-five percent claimed that they usually retained students and thirty percent of the participants left this section blank. This parameter was excluded from consideration because of the large number of teachers who provided no response.

Retention History

Personal: Three teachers in the sixth to general middle school category were retained as children.

Family: Twenty-six (25 percent) teachers from the entire group of participants had a family member who was retained such as a child, spouse, parent, or sibling.

Familiarity With Research

Overall, seventy-nine percent of the participants were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Table I

Summary of Participant Demographic Data By Grades

| Demographic Data | Pre-K – 2 nd | 3 rd – GE | 6 th – GM | Total (103) |
|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Experience: | | | | |
| 0-5 Years | 4 | 9 | 14 | 27 |
| 6-10 Years | 7 | 6 | 8 | 21 |
| 11-15 Years | 4 | 2 | 7 | 13 |
| 16+ Years | 12 | 11 | 19 | 42 |
| Gender: | | | | |
| Female | 27 | 26 | 34 | 87 |
| Male | 0 | 2 | 14 | 16 |
| Retention Practices: | | | | |
| Retain | 12 | 3 | 11 | 26 |
| Do Not Retain | 11 | 18 | 17 | 46 |
| No Answer | 5 | 8 | 18 | 31 |
| Retention History | | | | |
| Personal | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Family | 12 | 6 | 8 | 26 |
| Research | | | | |
| Unfamiliar | 22 | 22 | 37 | 81 |

Analysis of Teacher Opinion Survey

The following section presents data from the Teacher Opinion Survey. Data related to each of the belief statements are presented numerically on a table as well as summarized to highlight the most significant aspects. Each numbered item refers to one of the twelve belief statements on the survey.

1. Retention provides children an opportunity to raise their current level of academic achievement.

The highest rate of agreement with this belief statement comes from teachers with 0-5 years of experience (93 percent agree) compared to teachers with 11-15 years of experience who have the lowest rate of agreement (69 percent) (Table II).

Rates of agreement with the belief statement were similar for male and female participants. Eighty-two percent of the female teachers agreed with the belief statement compared to 81 percent of the male teachers.

Thirty-two percent of the teachers who agreed with this belief statement had personal or family experiences with grade retention. These experiences were especially common in the Pre-K through 2nd grade participant group in which close to half (43 percent) have a family member who has been retained.

Eighty percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement were unfamiliar with grade retention research and one teacher with 16+ years of experience who claimed familiarity with retention research wrote, “Children feel confident when they are familiar with skills previously taught.”

Summary: This belief statement enjoyed widespread agreement among teachers from all levels of experience, grades, both genders, and teachers with or without family members who experienced retention. It is notable that over three-fourths (80 percent) of the teachers who agreed with this belief statement were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Table II

Summary of Pre-Kindergarten – Eighth Grade Teacher Agreement With Belief Statement
One Relative to Demographic Data

| Demographics | Pre-K – 2 nd (N=27) | 3 rd ,4 th ,5 th ,GE* (N=28) | 6 th , 7 th ,8 th , GM** (N=48) | Total (N=103) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|------------------|
| Agreement By Experience | | | | |
| 0-5 Years (N =27) | 4 | 8 | 13 | 25 |
| 6-10 Years (N =21) | 7 | 5 | 7 | 19 |
| 11-15 Years (N = 13) | 2 | 2 | 5 | 9 |
| 16+ Years (N = 42) | 10 | 9 | 12 | 31 |
| Total | 23 | 24 | 37 | 84 |
| Agreement By Gender | | | | |
| Female (N = 87) | 23 | 22 | 26 | 71 |
| Male (N = 16) | 0 | 2 | 11 | 13 |
| Agreement By Retention | | | | |
| History: | 10 | 6 | 11 | 27 |
| Agreement By Unfamiliarity | | | | |
| With Retention Research | 18 | 20 | 29 | 67 |

Note. *GE = General Elementary (Counselors, principals, special education teachers, English language and literacy coaches). **GM = General Middle school (Counselors, English language and literacy coaches, teachers who teach more than one grade).

2. Retention provides children an opportunity to prevent future academic failure.

Close to three-fourths of participating teachers from all grades agreed that retention provides children with additional opportunities to prevent future academic failure (Pre-K – 2nd = 74 percent; 3rd-General Elementary = 71 percent and 6th- General Middle = 75 percent) (Table III).

The highest rates of agreement came from teachers with 0-5 and 6-10 years of experience (both at 81 percent) and the lowest rate of agreement came from teachers with 11-15 years of experience (62 percent). One teacher described his son's experience with retention in kindergarten, "My son benefited, now he is in a gifted and talented class and does math 2-3 grade levels above."

Male teachers agreed with the belief statement 81 percent of the time compared to female teachers who agree 72 percent of the time.

Thirty-two percent of the participants who agreed with this belief statement have experience with retention in their own lives.

Seventy-eight percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Summary: The majority of teachers from all levels of experience, grades, and both genders agreed that retention prevents future academic failure. It was notable that teachers with less experience agreed in significantly greater numbers than those with more experience.

Table III

Summary of Pre-Kindergarten – Eighth Grade Teacher Agreement With Belief Statement

Two Relative to Demographic Data

| Demographics | Pre-K – 2 nd (N=27) | 3 rd , 4 th , 5 th , GE* (N=28) | 6 th , 7 th , 8 th , GM** (N=48) | Total (N=103) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|--|------------------|
| Agreement By Experience | | | | |
| 0-5 Years (N =27) | 4 | 6 | 12 | 22 |
| 6-10 Years (N =21) | 6 | 5 | 6 | 17 |
| 11-15 Years (N = 13) | 2 | 1 | 5 | 8 |
| 16+ Years (N = 42) | 8 | 8 | 13 | 29 |
| Total | 20 | 20 | 36 | 76 |
| Agreement By Gender | | | | |
| Female (N = 87) | 20 | 18 | 25 | 63 |
| Male (N = 16) | 0 | 2 | 11 | 13 |
| Agreement By Retention | | | | |
| History: | 8 | 6 | 10 | 24 |
| Agreement By Unfamiliarity | | | | |
| With Retention Research | 14 | 16 | 29 | 59 |

Note. *GE = General Elementary (Counselors, principals, special education teachers, English language and literacy coaches). **GM = General Middle school (Counselors, English language and literacy coaches, teachers who teach more than one grade.

3. If I were to send students with low academic performance to the next grade level, their teachers may form a low opinion of my teaching abilities.

Close to one-half of participating teachers agreed that student performance may reflect poorly on their teaching abilities (52 percent Pre-K- 2nd Grade; 46 percent 3rd-General Elementary and 50 percent 6th-General middle) (Table IV).

The highest rate of agreement came from teachers with 0-5 years of experience (63 percent agree) and the lowest rate of agreement came from teachers with 16+ years of experience (36 percent agree).

Male teachers agreed with the belief statement 69 percent of the time compared to female teachers who agreed 46 percent of the time.

Twenty-seven percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement had experience with retention in their own lives.

Seventy-five percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Summary: Less experienced teachers agreed with this belief statement most often while the most experienced teachers had the lowest rate of agreement. Male teachers had a higher rate of agreement than female teachers and three-fourths of the agreeing teachers were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Table IV

Summary of Pre-Kindergarten – Eighth Grade Teacher Agreement With Belief Statement

Three Relative to Demographic Data

| Demographics | Pre-K – 2 nd (N=27) | 3 rd ,4 th ,5 th ,GE* (N=28) | 6 th , 7 th ,8 th , GM** (N=48) | Total (N=103) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|------------------|
| Agreement By Experience | | | | |
| 0-5 Years (N =27) | 1 | 6 | 10 | 17 |
| 6-10 Years (N =21) | 4 | 3 | 4 | 11 |
| 11-15 Years (N = 13) | 4 | 1 | 3 | 8 |
| 16+ Years (N = 42) | 5 | 3 | 7 | 15 |
| Total | 14 | 13 | 24 | 51 |
| Agreement By Gender | | | | |
| Female (N = 87) | 14 | 11 | 15 | 40 |
| Male (N = 16) | 0 | 2 | 9 | 11 |
| Agreement By Retention | | | | |
| History: | 4 | 2 | 8 | 14 |
| Agreement By Unfamiliarity | | | | |
| With Retention Research | 11 | 10 | 17 | 38 |

Note. *GE = General Elementary (Counselors, principals, special education teachers, English language and literacy coaches). **GM = General Middle school (Counselors, English language and literacy coaches, teachers who teach more than one grade.

4. Retention injures children's self-esteem.

Sixty-nine percent of middle school and 3rd-General Elementary school teachers believed that retention injures children's self-esteem compared to 59 percent of the Pre-K-2nd grade teachers (Table V). One middle school teacher who retained her son in the first grade wrote, "Retention affected my son for years – he believed he was a failure – only during [his] teenage years did everything finally make sense."

The highest rate of agreement came from teachers with 6-10 years of experience (76 percent agree) and the lowest rate of agreement came from teachers with 16+ years of experience (60 percent agree).

Male teachers agreed with the belief statement 81 percent of the time compared to female teachers who agreed 63 percent of the time.

Twenty-four percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement had experience with retention in their own lives.

Seventy-five percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Summary: Teachers of older students agreed most often that retention may injure children's self-esteem – perhaps due to self-esteem issues that are not readily apparent in younger children.

Table V

Summary of Pre-Kindergarten – Eighth Grade Teacher Agreement With Belief Statement
Four Relative to Demographic Data

| Demographics | Pre-K – 2 nd (N=27) | 3 rd ,4 th ,5 th ,GE* (N=28) | 6 th , 7 th ,8 th , GM** (N=48) | Total (N=103) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|------------------|
| Agreement By Experience | | | | |
| 0-5 Years (N =27) | 2 | 7 | 10 | 19 |
| 6-10 Years (N =21) | 4 | 5 | 7 | 16 |
| 11-15 Years (N = 13) | 3 | 1 | 4 | 8 |
| 16+ Years (N = 42) | 7 | 6 | 12 | 25 |
| Total | 16 | 19 | 33 | 68 |
| Agreement By Gender | | | | |
| Female (N = 87) | 16 | 17 | 22 | 55 |
| Male (N = 16) | 0 | 2 | 11 | 13 |
| Agreement By Retention | | | | |
| History: | 5 | 3 | 8 | 16 |
| Agreement By Unfamiliarity | | | | |
| With Retention Research | 12 | 12 | 27 | 51 |

Note. *GE = General Elementary (Counselors, principals, special education teachers, English language and literacy coaches). **GM = General Middle school (Counselors, English language and literacy coaches, teachers who teach more than one grade.

5. Retention is most effective when it takes place in kindergarten or first grade.

There was widespread agreement with this belief statement (96 percent Pre-K- 2nd grade teachers agreed; 89 percent 3rd-General Elementary teachers agreed and 88 percent of the 6th-General Middle School teachers agreed) (Table VI).

The highest rates of agreement came from teachers with 0-5 years of experience (96 percent agreed) and 16+ years of experience (90 percent agreed).

Male teachers agreed with the belief statement 81 percent of the time compared to female teachers who agreed 91 percent of the time.

Twenty-seven percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement had experience with retention in their own lives. A first grade teacher whose mother was retained in the fourth grade wrote, "Grade retention is most beneficial in the lower grades." A second grade teacher whose brother was retained in the first grade noted, "Retention is socially more acceptable prior to third grade." A sixth grade teacher who was retained in the second grade agreed strongly with this belief statement. One-third grade teacher who disagreed with this statement wrote that she retained her son in the fifth grade and retention "saved my son."

Seventy-five percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Summary: It is noteworthy that teachers with the least experience were at the forefront when it came to agreement and that so many participants believed grade retention to be most effective when it takes place in kindergarten or first grade. A lack of familiarity with grade retention research accompanied this belief.

Table VI

Summary of Pre-Kindergarten – Eighth Grade Teacher Agreement With Belief Statement

Five Relative to Demographic Data

| Demographics | Pre-K – 2 nd (N=27) | 3 rd ,4 th ,5 th ,GE* (N=28) | 6 th , 7 th ,8 th , GM** (N=48) | Total (N=103) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|------------------|
| Agreement By Experience | | | | |
| 0-5 Years (N =27) | 4 | 9 | 13 | 26 |
| 6-10 Years (N =21) | 7 | 4 | 7 | 18 |
| 11-15 Years (N = 13) | 4 | 1 | 5 | 10 |
| 16+ Years (N = 42) | 10 | 11 | 17 | 38 |
| Total | 25 | 25 | 42 | 92 |
| Agreement By Gender | | | | |
| Female (N = 87) | 25 | 23 | 31 | 79 |
| Male (N = 16) | 0 | 2 | 11 | 13 |
| Agreement By Retention | | | | |
| History: | 9 | 6 | 10 | 25 |
| Agreement By Unfamiliarity | | | | |
| With Retention Research | 19 | 20 | 31 | 70 |

Note. *GE = General Elementary (Counselors, principals, special education teachers, English language and literacy coaches). **GM = General Middle school (Counselors, English language and literacy coaches, teachers who teach more than one grade.

6. Retention is an effective intervention strategy for boys.

Third through Middle Elementary School teachers voiced the most agreement with this belief statement (66 percent agreed) while Pre-K – 2nd grade teachers agreed the least (37 percent agreed) (Table VII).

The highest rate of agreement came from teachers with 0-5 years of experience (67 percent agreed) and the lowest rate of agreement came from teachers with 11-15 years of experience (46 percent agreed).

Fifty-four percent of the female teachers believed that retention is an effective intervention strategy for boys compared to 69 percent of the male teachers.

Twenty-six percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement had experience with retention in their own lives.

Seventy-eight percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Summary: Teachers with the least experience voiced greater agreement than teachers with more experience in the 3rd-General Elementary and middle school groups. It is interesting to note that no Pre-K-2nd grade teachers agreed that retention is an effective intervention strategy for boys. Male teachers were in greater agreement with this belief statement than female teachers and unfamiliarity with retention research was a continuing trend.

Table VII

Summary of Pre-Kindergarten – Eighth Grade Teacher Agreement With Belief Statement

Six Relative to Demographic Data

| Demographics | Pre-K – 2 nd (N=27) | 3 rd ,4 th ,5 th ,GE* (N=28) | 6 th , 7 th ,8 th , GM** (N=48) | Total (N=103) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|------------------|
| Agreement By Experience | | | | |
| 0-5 Years (N =27) | 0 | 6 | 12 | 18 |
| 6-10 Years (N =21) | 4 | 5 | 3 | 12 |
| 11-15 Years (N = 13) | 1 | 0 | 5 | 6 |
| 16+ Years (N = 42) | 5 | 8 | 9 | 22 |
| Total | 10 | 19 | 29 | 58 |
| Agreement By Gender | | | | |
| Female (N = 87) | 10 | 17 | 20 | 47 |
| Male (N = 16) | 0 | 2 | 9 | 11 |
| Agreement By Retention | | | | |
| History: | 2 | 5 | 8 | 15 |
| Agreement By Unfamiliarity | | | | |
| With Retention Research | 7 | 17 | 21 | 45 |

Note. *GE = General Elementary (Counselors, principals, special education teachers, English language and literacy coaches). **GM = General Middle school (Counselors, English language and literacy coaches, teachers who teach more than one grade.

7. Retained students are more likely to exhibit behavior problems than non-retained classmates.

Middle school teachers voiced the greatest agreement with this belief statement (63 percent agreed) and Pre-K-2nd grade teachers voiced the least agreement (26 percent agreed) (Table VIII).

Teachers with 0-5 years of experience agreed somewhat more often (59 percent agree) than teachers with more experience.

Male teachers far outnumbered female teachers when it came to agreement with this belief statement (75 percent compared to 42 percent).

Twenty-six percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement had experience with retention in their own lives.

Experience with retention (25 percent had experience) and unfamiliarity with grade retention research (75 percent unfamiliar) varied little from previous belief statements.

Summary: It is noteworthy that middle school teachers agreed with this belief statement more often than teachers of younger students – perhaps because behavior problems related to retention are more apparent as children become older (see literature review). Gender may be an issue here as well because male and female teachers differed a great deal in their response to this belief statement.

Table VIII

Summary of Pre-Kindergarten – Eighth Grade Teacher Agreement With Belief Statement
Seven Relative to Demographic Data

| Demographics | Pre-K – 2 nd (N=27) | 3 rd ,4 th ,5 th ,GE* (N=28) | 6 th , 7 th ,8 th , GM** (N=48) | Total (N=103) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|------------------|
| Agreement By Experience | | | | |
| 0-5 Years (N =27) | 1 | 4 | 11 | 16 |
| 6-10 Years (N =21) | 2 | 2 | 7 | 11 |
| 11-15 Years (N = 13) | 1 | 0 | 3 | 4 |
| 16+ Years (N = 42) | 3 | 6 | 9 | 18 |
| Total | 7 | 12 | 30 | 49 |
| Agreement By Gender | | | | |
| Female (N = 87) | 7 | 10 | 20 | 37 |
| Male (N = 16) | 0 | 2 | 10 | 12 |
| Agreement By Retention | | | | |
| History: | 1 | 3 | 8 | 12 |
| Agreement By Unfamiliarity | | | | |
| With Retention Research | 3 | 9 | 25 | 37 |

Note. *GE = General Elementary (Counselors, principals, special education teachers, English language and literacy coaches). **GM = General Middle school (Counselors, English language and literacy coaches, teachers who teach more than one grade.

8. Retention allows English language learners additional opportunities to master language skills and academic material.

Third-General Elementary school teachers voiced the greatest agreement with this belief statement (75 percent agreed) and Pre-K-2nd grade teachers voiced the least agreement (48 percent agreed) (Table IX).

Teachers with the fewest years of experience agreed more often (77 percent agreed) than teachers with more experience (6-10 years = 62 percent agreed; 11-15 years = 69 percent agreed and 16+ years = 60 percent agreed).

Male teachers outnumbered female teachers when it came to agreement with this belief statement (males=88 percent agreed; females= 62 percent agreed).

Twenty-four percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement had experience with retention in their own lives.

Seventy-six percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Summary: Experience continues to be a factor as teachers with the least experience were the most convinced that retention allows English language learners additional opportunities to master language skills and academic material.

Table IX

Summary of Pre-Kindergarten – Eighth Grade Teacher Agreement With Belief Statement
Eight Relative to Demographic Data

| Demographics | Pre-K – 2 nd (N=27) | 3 rd ,4 th ,5 th ,GE* (N=28) | 6 th , 7 th ,8 th , GM** (N=48) | Total (N=103) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|------------------|
| Agreement By Experience | | | | |
| 0-5 Years (N =27) | 1 | 8 | 12 | 21 |
| 6-10 Years (N =21) | 5 | 5 | 3 | 13 |
| 11-15 Years (N = 13) | 0 | 2 | 7 | 9 |
| 16+ Years (N = 42) | 7 | 6 | 12 | 25 |
| Total | 13 | 21 | 34 | 68 |
| Agreement By Gender | | | | |
| Female (N = 87) | 13 | 19 | 22 | 54 |
| Male (N = 16) | 0 | 2 | 12 | 14 |
| Agreement By Retention | | | | |
| History: | 3 | 6 | 7 | 16 |
| Agreement By Unfamiliarity | | | | |
| With Retention Research | 8 | 17 | 27 | 52 |

Note. *GE = General Elementary (Counselors, principals, special education teachers, English language and literacy coaches). **GM = General Middle school (Counselors, English language and literacy coaches, teachers who teach more than one grade.

9. Retention provides immature children an opportunity to catch up to their peers.

As an overall group, middle school teachers voiced the greatest agreement with this belief statement (90 percent agreed); 86 percent of 3rd-General Elementary teachers agreed and 81 percent of Pre-K-2nd grade agreed) (Table X).

Teachers with 0-5 years (96 percent agreed) and 11-15 years (93 percent agreed) of experience voiced the most agreement with this belief statement and teachers with 16+ years of experience voiced the least agreement (74 percent agreed).

One hundred percent of male teachers agreed compared to 83 percent of the female teachers.

Twenty-four percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement had experience with retention in their own lives.

Seventy-six percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Summary: Experience makes a difference in whether or not teachers believed that retention was effective for immature children. Teachers with the least experience were the most sure that retention would provide immature children opportunities to catch up to their peers while teachers with more experience were not so convinced. It is notable that all of the male teachers agreed with this belief statement.

Table X

Summary of Pre-Kindergarten – Eighth Grade Teacher Agreement With Belief Statement

Nine Relative to Demographic Data

| Demographics | Pre-K – 2 nd (N=27) | 3 rd ,4 th ,5 th ,GE* (N=28) | 6 th , 7 th ,8 th , GM** (N=48) | Total (N=103) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|------------------|
| Agreement By Experience | | | | |
| 0-5 Years (N =27) | 3 | 9 | 14 | 26 |
| 6-10 Years (N =21) | 7 | 4 | 8 | 19 |
| 11-15 Years (N = 13) | 3 | 2 | 7 | 12 |
| 16+ Years (N = 42) | 9 | 8 | 14 | 31 |
| Total | 22 | 23 | 43 | 88 |
| Agreement By Gender | | | | |
| Female (N = 87) | 22 | 21 | 29 | 72 |
| Male (N = 16) | 0 | 2 | 14 | 16 |
| Agreement By Retention | | | | |
| History: | 8 | 8 | 12 | 28 |
| Agreement By Unfamiliarity | | | | |
| With Retention Research | 17 | 19 | 35 | 71 |

Note. *GE = General Elementary (Counselors, principals, special education teachers, English language and literacy coaches). **GM = General Middle school (Counselors, English language and literacy coaches, teachers who teach more than one grade.

10. Retention is my only alternative when students do not successfully master grade level material by the end of the school year.

This belief statement had lower rates of agreement than the others. Middle school teachers voiced the greatest agreement with this belief statement (44 percent agreed); 36 percent of 3rd-General Elementary teachers agreed and 26 percent of Pre-K-2nd grade teachers agreed) (Table XI).

Teachers with 6-10 years experience voiced the most agreement with this belief statement (48 percent agreed) and teachers with 16+ years of experience voiced the least agreement (31 percent agreed).

Forty-four percent of the male teachers agreed compared to 36 percent of the female teachers.

Eighteen percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement had experience with retention in their own lives.

Seventy-nine percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Summary: Middle school and 3rd-General Elementary teachers believed that retention was their only option more often than teachers of younger children – this may have something to do with standardized testing in those grades.

Table XI.

Summary of Pre-Kindergarten – Eighth Grade Teacher Agreement With Belief Statement

Ten Relative to Demographic Data

| Demographics | Pre-K – 2 nd (N=27) | 3 rd ,4 th ,5 th ,GE* (N=28) | 6 th , 7 th ,8 th , GM** (N=48) | Total (N=103) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|------------------|
| Agreement By Experience | | | | |
| 0-5 Years (N =27) | 1 | 4 | 4 | 9 |
| 6-10 Years (N =21) | 3 | 2 | 5 | 10 |
| 11-15 Years (N = 13) | 0 | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| 16+ Years (N = 42) | 3 | 2 | 8 | 13 |
| Total | 7 | 10 | 21 | 38 |
| Agreement By Gender | | | | |
| Female (N = 87) | 7 | 8 | 16 | 31 |
| Male (N = 16) | 0 | 2 | 5 | 7 |
| Agreement By Retention | | | | |
| History: | 0 | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| Agreement By Unfamiliarity | | | | |
| With Retention Research | 6 | 7 | 17 | 30 |

Note. *GE = General Elementary (Counselors, principals, special education teachers, English language and literacy coaches). **GM = General Middle school (Counselors, English language and literacy coaches, teachers who teach more than one grade.

11. Retained students are more likely to drop out of school before graduation than non-retained students.

Middle school teachers voiced the greatest agreement with this belief statement (52 percent agreed); 32 percent of 3rd-General Elementary teachers agreed and 44 percent of Pre-K-2nd grade teachers agreed (Table XII).

Teachers with 0-5 and 6-10 years of experience voiced the most agreement with this belief statement (48 percent agreement for each) while teachers with 16+ years of experience voiced the least agreement (40 percent agreed). One first year teacher agreed strongly with the belief statement and wrote, "Children are more likely to drop out of school; most likely to drop out after two retentions." A sixth grade teacher noted, "Retention increases the drop-out rate and is best used in the early grades."

Forty-three percent of the female teachers agreed compared to 56 percent of the male teachers.

Twenty-six percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement had experience with retention in their own lives.

Sixty-seven percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Summary: Middle school teachers voiced the most agreement with the belief that retention may lead to eventual dropping out of school - could it be that they are witnessing some of this while elementary school teachers are not.

Table XII.

Summary of Pre-Kindergarten – Eighth Grade Teacher Agreement With Belief Statement

Eleven Relative to Demographic Data

| Demographics | Pre-K – 2 nd (N=27) | 3 rd ,4 th ,5 th ,GE* (N=28) | 6 th , 7 th ,8 th , GM** (N=48) | Total (N=103) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|------------------|
| Agreement By Experience | | | | |
| 0-5 Years (N =27) | 2 | 5 | 6 | 13 |
| 6-10 Years (N =21) | 2 | 2 | 6 | 10 |
| 11-15 Years (N = 13) | 3 | 0 | 3 | 6 |
| 16+ Years (N = 42) | 5 | 2 | 10 | 17 |
| Total | 12 | 9 | 25 | 46 |
| Agreement By Gender | | | | |
| Female (N = 87) | 12 | 7 | 18 | 37 |
| Male (N = 16) | 0 | 2 | 7 | 9 |
| Agreement By Retention | | | | |
| History: | 4 | 4 | 4 | 12 |
| Agreement By Unfamiliarity | | | | |
| With Retention Research | 7 | 6 | 18 | 31 |

Note. *GE = General Elementary (Counselors, principals, special education teachers, English language and literacy coaches). **GM = General Middle school (Counselors, English language and literacy coaches, teachers who teach more than one grade.

12. Retention is an effective intervention strategy for girls.

Middle school teachers voiced the greatest agreement with this belief statement (58 percent agreed); 57 percent of 3rd-General Elementary teachers agreed and 41 percent of Pre-K-2nd grade teachers agreed (Table XIII).

Teachers with 0-5 and 6-10 years of experience voiced the most agreement with this belief statement (60 percent and 57 percent agreement respectively) while teachers with 11-15 years of experience voiced the least agreement (46 percent agreed).

Agreement by gender is close - 53 percent of the female teachers agreed compared to 56 percent of the male teachers.

Twenty-six percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement had experience with retention in their own lives.

Eighty percent of the teachers who agreed with the belief statement were unfamiliar with grade retention research.

Summary: Teachers with 0-5 years of experience who teach 3rd-General Elementary and middle school voiced the most agreement with the belief that retention is an effective intervention strategy for girls. None of the teachers with 0-5 years of experience in the Pre-K-2nd grade group voiced agreement with this belief. Eighty percent of the teachers who agreed with this statement were unfamiliar with retention research.

Table XIII.

Summary of Pre-Kindergarten – Eighth Grade Teacher Agreement With Belief Statement

Twelve Relative to Demographic Data

| Demographics | Pre-K – 2 nd (N=27) | 3 rd ,4 th ,5 th ,GE* (N=28) | 6 th , 7 th ,8 th , GM** (N=48) | Total (N=103) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|------------------|
| Agreement By Experience | | | | |
| 0-5 Years (N =27) | 0 | 5 | 11 | 16 |
| 6-10 Years (N =21) | 5 | 4 | 3 | 12 |
| 11-15 Years (N = 13) | 2 | 0 | 4 | 6 |
| 16+ Years (N = 42) | 4 | 7 | 10 | 21 |
| Total | 11 | 16 | 28 | 55 |
| Agreement By Gender | | | | |
| Female (N = 87) | 11 | 14 | 21 | 46 |
| Male (N = 16) | 0 | 2 | 7 | 9 |
| Agreement By Retention | | | | |
| History: | 6 | 5 | 10 | 21 |
| Agreement By Unfamiliarity | | | | |
| With Retention Research | 9 | 15 | 20 | 44 |

Note. *GE = General Elementary (Counselors, principals, special education teachers, English language and literacy coaches). **GM = General Middle school (Counselors, English language and literacy coaches, teachers who teach more than one grade.

Analysis of Teacher Interviews

Ten teachers who volunteered their names and telephone numbers were interviewed by telephone. Their selection depended on their availability at the time of the phone call. I used a telephone interview format for two reasons. First, I was concerned that teachers may not be willing to remain at school after work in order to be interviewed. Second, previous face-to-face interviews with teachers produced very little data regarding concerns they may have about their professional reputations if they were to promote poorly performing students. Transcribed interviews may be found in Appendices A -J.

Participants

Seventy percent of the interviews took place with elementary school teachers and 30 percent were with middle school teachers. Two interviews were with male teachers – both of whom teach middle school. Forty percent of the interviewed teachers had 0-5 years of experience, 20 percent had 11-15 years of experience and forty percent had 16+ years of experience. Data from participants' interviews were analyzed for recurring themes related to teacher beliefs about grade retention. All names are pseudonyms.

Low Academic Performance

“If they can't do on-level work, why pass them on,” was one teacher's response when asked what she thinks about grade retention.” Another teacher said, “If they can't do their work there's no sense in passing them on because the work just gets harder.” This comment was typical of teachers' responses to questions about academic

performance. Seventy percent of the teachers who were interviewed regarded below grade level work to be a strong indicator of low academic performance. A wide variety of academic difficulties contributed to an overall picture of low academic performance. A first grade teacher described a low-performing child in her class this way: “He is unable to read, unable to write between the lines, he still chooses the big fat lined paper with the dash in the middle. He draws pictures instead of using words in his spiral, [has] several letter reversals, number reversals [and is] unable to add higher than five.” Failure to complete classroom work was associated with low academic performance by fifty percent of the participants and thirty percent agreed that failure to regularly complete homework contributes to low academic performance. When discussing students who were academically low performing one first grade teacher said, “When I send home spelling homework with my seventeen kids, eight of them do not bring back anything.” Difficulties with reading as well as difficulties with sight words were viewed as characteristic of low performing students by thirty percent of the participants. One first grade teacher said, “They [her low performing students] can’t do sight words. If I show them ‘is’ they will say ‘cat’.”

A fifth grade teacher worried about sending students to middle school who were not “academically ready.” She noted, “It’s a big jump going from fifth grade to middle school and they have to be able to do fifth grade work before they go on. Once they get over there, it’s a whole different atmosphere. There won’t be anyone to work with them as closely as we do over here. So they have to be completely ready.” A male middle school teacher agreed with these sentiments and said, “You’re doing a disservice to the

child if you send him on if he's not ready, especially in fifth grade – if they can't do fifth grade work, how will they be able to function in sixth grade?"

Academic performance was one of the factors the participants considered when making decisions about grade retention. Another frequently mentioned factor was a set of behaviors often referred to as immaturity. Please see Table XIV for a complete list of low performance indicators named by the participants.

Immaturity

The concept of immaturity encompasses a wide variety of behaviors that teachers consider when making decisions about grade retention. Sixty percent of the participants associated a failure to follow instructions with immaturity. An elementary school teacher described immature students as not being able to "follow procedures." Similarly, a male middle school teacher said, "They have to be able to understand directions and follow them." This comment was typical of both elementary and middle school teachers.

Forty percent of the elementary school participants associated frequently getting up from one's seat with immaturity. One elementary school teacher said, "He was up and out of his chair all the time bothering other kids; he would even take other kid's papers and write his name on them."

Typical behaviors mentioned by more than one teacher included: Talking too much, poor group participation, acting as the "class clown" and throwing things. One second grade teacher described it this way: "Immature would be a second grader who is still crawling around on the floor, being really playful, not fitting in with social norms for that age." Another second grade teacher mentioned the same sentiments and added, "they

can't sit still, are throwing erasers in class, falling out of their chair, need to get a drink and go to the bathroom during work time, [and] talk out all the time about things that are unrelated to the lesson.”

The term, immature, is open to a great deal of interpretation. Please see Table XV for a list of behaviors associated with immaturity named by the participants. One thing that most of the participants agreed on was that parents play an important role in their children's lives.

Parent Support

“I just want a little bit of parent help,” was a common thread among the teachers who were interviewed. Carol, an eighth grade teacher, said, “Parents have an enormous impact both detrimental and positive.” This sentiment was repeated by each of the teachers I interviewed.

Seventy percent of the participants indicated that they expected parents to help their children with homework or look at it if no help was required. This expectation was not always met. A fifth grade teacher said, “One time I had parents throw a fit over the homework because their kids were spending two and three hours each night doing the homework – it was ten problems. I was told by my principal that my homework couldn't be more than fifteen minutes per subject.”

Thirty percent of the teachers expected parents to read to their children but this did not always happen. A second grade teacher noted, “When I ask about reading to their children at home they say they don't have time to do that. That explains why their kids aren't doing so well.”

Regular school attendance is another way parents show their support. Forty percent of the participants expected parents to bring children to school regularly and on time in order for them to be academically successful. One first grade teacher noted that an eight-year-old first grader, who is struggling academically in her class, came to school fifteen minutes to one-half hour late every day and an eighth grade teacher noted, “Attendance is a problem when girls have to stay home with younger siblings because mom can’t afford to take off from work.”

Forty percent of the participants viewed supporting the teacher as a characteristic of supportive parents. Supporting the teacher included upholding school rules and following through when the teacher calls them about a problem at school.

Communication with the teacher was mentioned by forty percent of the participants and included coming to parent-teacher conferences, answering phone calls, responding to letters, and corresponding with the teacher by e-mail. A first grade teacher said, “I have about six [students she is considering for retention] and I have been trying to contact parents since we came back from Christmas break in January [this interview takes place in March]...they don’t return my calls, I even mailed letters, they are unanswered.” Several teachers had similar responses when asked about parent support.

Although academic difficulties were most often associated with a lack of parental support by the participants, this was not always the case. At times an overabundance of support seemed to be causing a problem. One eighth-grade teacher said, “The mother is so over-controlling that her daughter has shut down.” She “treats her [daughter] like a baby e-mails me every day.” Participants in this study viewed parents as very important

to their children's success in school but, at times, other factors related to children's environment appeared to play a role in their academic success.

Please see Table XVI for a list of behaviors associated with parent support.

Environmental Factors

Participants described a variety of environmental factors that promoted low academic performance and may actually lead to grade retention. When describing children considered for retention, one participant noted, "Most of them come from a single-parent family." Another participant recalled a fifth grade girl she retained who "had a bad home situation." Her mother gave up custody to the grandmother and the child began to improve in school. Eventually the mother regained custody and she stopped making progress.

Poverty may also hinder academic progress. One teacher described a low-performing student as living in overcrowded conditions with few resources such as paper, pencils, and books. Another teacher responded to the question "What do you notice about children you are concerned about retaining?" by saying, "There is poverty in the home, they're unclean, messy, unkempt, dirty clothes, worried about breakfast and lunch and little else."

Professional Reputation

Three (43 percent) of the elementary school teachers I interviewed had concerns about how they were viewed by other teachers in relation to their students' academic performance. One second-grade teacher stated, "I have considered retention because I

consider if I pass them on what's that teacher going to think." She described hearing teachers "complain to anyone who will listen" when low performing students were promoted. A first grade-teacher who inquired how some of her low performing students were doing was asked, "What did you teach these children?" by the second-grade teacher. One teacher described a time "I got a lot of flack from the second-grade teacher because I didn't retain. She [the second grade teacher] made me feel like I didn't make a very good professional decision." It is clear that teachers are concerned about what their peers think.

Summary

Low academic performance and behaviors related to immaturity were important considerations when the participants in this study made decisions about grade retention, however, each is open to a great deal of interpretation. Parental support may take many forms and was considered important for academic success by the teachers in this study. A variety of environmental factors such as single-parent families and poverty were viewed as contributing to a lack of academic success by some of the participants. At times, unkind remarks made by other teachers caused teachers to reconsider whether or not to promote or retain a low performing student for fear that their professional reputation may be damaged.

Table XIV.

Summary of Characteristics Teachers Attribute to Students With Low Academic Performance

| Characteristics | Teachers | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|--------|
| | Elementary | Middle |
| Below grade level work | 3 | 4 |
| Difficulty with reading | 3 | |
| Difficulty writing “within lines” | 1 | |
| Difficulty spelling | 1 | |
| Drawing instead of writing | 2 | |
| Letter/number reversals | 1 | |
| Difficulty with sight words | 3 | |
| Difficulty with letter sounds | 1 | |
| Does not do homework regularly | 1 | 2 |
| Incomplete classroom work | 3 | 2 |
| Difficulty with multiplication tables | 2 | |
| Difficulty with “regrouping” | 1 | |

Table XV.

Summary of Behaviors Teachers Attribute to Immaturity

| Characteristics | Teachers | |
|--|------------|--------|
| | Elementary | Middle |
| Unable to sit “criss-cross applesauce” | 1 | |
| Talks too much | 2 | |
| Poor group participation | 2 | |
| Inattentive | 1 | |
| Does not follow instructions | 3 | 3 |
| Plays with hair | 1 | |
| Writes notes | 1 | |
| Sleeps in class | 1 | |
| Throws things | 2 | |
| Frequently out of chair | 4 | |
| Distracts others by touching | 1 | |
| “Class clown” | 1 | 1 |
| Lies | 1 | |

Table XVI.

Summary of Behaviors Teachers Associate With Parent Support

| Characteristics | Teachers | |
|--|------------|--------|
| | Elementary | Middle |
| Establish a routine at home | 2 | |
| Establish a regular bedtime | 2 | |
| Provide regular meals | 2 | |
| Help with and or look at homework | 5 | 2 |
| Read to child | 3 | |
| Get outside tutoring if needed | 1 | |
| Regular school attendance | 3 | 1 |
| Work with children during school vacations | 1 | |
| Encourage child to ask teacher for help | | 1 |
| Support the teacher | 4 | |
| Communicate with teacher | 2 | 2 |

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FINAL THOUGHTS

DISCUSSION

Discussion of the teacher belief survey and interview data begins with my research question: What beliefs do teachers have about grade retention? Further discussion highlights the inherent difficulty in defining the word, “immaturity,” uncovers where teacher beliefs about grade retention may come from as well as points out some puzzling inconsistencies in the data and possible alternatives to retention. Finally, I examine how experience, gender, grade level and unfamiliarity with retention research impact beliefs about retention for the teachers in this study.

What Do Teachers Believe About Grade Retention?

Retention and Academic Proficiency: Teachers across all grade levels, both genders and from all levels of experience believed that retention provided children an opportunity to raise their current level of academic performance as well as prevent future academic failure. Although this belief was widespread among teachers, a large body of research has found retention to be largely ineffective in raising children’s academic proficiency (Literature Review, p. 18).

I am deeply troubled by the overall prevalence of this belief, especially in those who teach kindergarten, first, and second grade due to the lack of consistency in defining the terms “grade level” and “academic performance.” Criteria related to what constitutes good or poor academic performance and grade level or below grade level work are subject to a great deal of interpretation by individual teachers and teachers are free to define each of these terms based on what they believe them to be. These beliefs were constructed from the life experiences of the teacher including their own educational background and their current work environment, which means that they are highly individualized and subjective. Academic performance criteria such as “difficulty with reading, spelling, letter sounds, sight words, writing within the lines, [and] letter/number reversals” (p. 83) leave a great deal of room for interpretation and ambiguity. I was especially troubled by the criteria, “difficulty writing between the lines [and] drawing instead of writing” because they are so clearly related to children’s physical and cognitive development. It is imperative that teachers reflect on their own expectations and practices when children experience difficulties in school. Is it developmentally appropriate to expect all children to read, spell and know their letter sounds and sight words without difficulty at a certain age or grade level? Have these children been enveloped in a developmentally appropriate curriculum in order to facilitate learning? Teachers must ask themselves these questions before rushing to developmentally inappropriate judgments.

The Timing of Retention: The majority of teachers believed that retention was most effective when it took place in kindergarten or first grade, yet research has revealed no benefits to children who were retained very early in their school careers versus those that

were retained later on (Literature Review, pp. 19-20). I believe this belief stems from the misconception that children will not notice or be troubled about retention at such a young age. It has been my experience as a first grade teacher that children are quite aware when they have been retained and that they often make comments such as, “I should be in second grade but I was held back.” The emotional trauma inflicted on children by grade retention is well documented in the literature but a great many teachers are wholly unaware of the shame and anger children suffer as a result of being retained.

Retention and Gender: A greater percentage of male teachers than female teachers believed that grade retention is an effective intervention strategy for boys. This was a surprising finding because I expected quite the opposite. I had assumed that male teachers would feel rather insulted by the notion that retention could be of more value to boys than girls and that most male teachers would disagree with the belief statement. This proved to be an incorrect assumption.

Retention and Behavior: Middle school teachers believed that retained students had more behavior problems than non-retained students. This finding supported previous research, which showed that retained adolescents had a greater likelihood of engaging in troublesome school behaviors than non-retained adolescents (Literature Review, pp. 25-26). Since research has shown that behavioral issues most often do not emerge until adolescence, it was not surprising that middle school teachers were more aware of them than elementary school teachers. Given the fact that elementary school teachers generally lose touch with their students when they move to middle school, they would be unaware of these problems. When viewed through a constructivist theoretical lens, it appears that elementary school teachers have attached certain meanings to the

phenomenon of “retained students with no behavior problems” which in turn caused them to form the belief that grade retention does not increase behavior problems. Middle school teachers experienced a different phenomenon and came away with different meanings which caused them to construct different beliefs from the elementary school teachers.

Retention and Language: The participants in this study viewed retention as an effective strategy for English language learners yet research shows that English language learners derive no significant benefits from being retained (Literature Review, p. 28). English language learners suffer the same negative effects from retention as do native English speakers and adding academic, social, emotional and behavioral problems to the challenges they already face in learning a new language is not helpful.

Retention and Drop Out: One-half of the middle school teachers and somewhat fewer elementary school teachers believed that retention was associated with dropping out of school. I suspect that the middle school teachers were witnesses to this event while the elementary school teachers were not aware of what happens to children once they have left their school. Research has demonstrated a connection between retention and dropping out of school (Literature Review, pp. 29-31). When viewed through a constructivist theoretical lens it again becomes apparent that teachers experience a widely different phenomenon when it comes to retained students depending on the grade level they teach. An elementary school teacher would not experience a retained student dropping out of school, such as a middle school teacher might. Therefore, the elementary school teacher would not attach the same meaning nor would he/she be likely to construct the belief that grade retention increases the rate at which students drop out of school.

Retention and Professional Reputation: One-half of the teachers who took part in this study believed that sending students who were not academically successful to the next grade may cause other teachers to form a low opinion of their teaching abilities.

Although this is not an overwhelming majority, the fact remains that many teachers consider what others would think of them when making decisions about retention. This belief has not been widely documented in the literature (Literature Review, p.17). Less experienced teachers agreed with this belief in greater numbers than more experienced teachers – perhaps from a lack of confidence in their own abilities or perhaps they are more prone to doubting their own judgment. They may also be somewhat more interested in “pleasing” other teachers and making a good impression on their peers by not sending them struggling students.

The belief that teachers judge one another’s abilities on the basis of their students’ performance is individually constructed and based on experiences teachers have with one another. The extent to which individual teachers believe this to be true, depends on the meanings they ascribe to the opinions of other teachers and the level of confidence they have in their own teaching abilities.

Defining Immaturity: The belief that grade retention is an effective strategy for immature students elicited widespread agreement from the participants in this study. Not only is this belief unsupported by research, it is made more complicated by the fact that there is no consistent definition for the term “immature.” The term, immature, actually refers to a set of behaviors that children may exhibit and it is up to each teacher to define which behaviors will be included in his or her particular definition.

I am concerned with the wide range of behaviors attributed to immaturity by the teachers in this study (Table XV, p.85). Behaviors such as “unable to sit criss-cross applesauce, talks too much, inattentive, frequently out of chair”, and “poor group participation” are not negative – rather, they are developmental. Young children are active learners and require an environment that supports their development without penalizing them for behavior they cannot control. I believe that the majority of teachers who view such behaviors as immature do so because they are unfamiliar with early childhood development. The schools in which this study took place do not require first, second, and third grade teachers to be certified in Early Childhood Education and even those who are certified may have taken the test without taking any classes in early childhood development. Without the benefit of factual knowledge about early childhood development and curriculum, teachers are left to form their own ideas as to what constitutes mature or immature behavior based on their own life experiences and the educational practices they witness in their school. Unfortunately, this approach brings with it a lack of consistency and makes immaturity an extremely subjective and developmentally inappropriate criterion on which to base retention. (Literature Review, pp. 14-16).

When the construct “immaturity” is viewed through a constructivist lens it becomes apparent that it is highly individualized and depends on the meanings individual teachers have ascribed to a variety of experiences. Teachers who have constructed the belief that mature children are quiet and sit still, regard those who do not meet these criteria as immature. Conversely, teachers who have constructed the belief that children

are active learners with different learning styles are less likely to label children in such a manner.

Where Do Teacher Beliefs Come From

Teacher beliefs are examined relative to the thought processes that may underlie them in order to clarify the variety of beliefs teachers hold about grade retention, including: non-reflective practice, tradition, authority, common sense, and science/research results (Mertler and Charles, 2005).

Non-reflective Practice: “Retention? I’ve never thought about it,” replied one elementary school teacher when I brought up the subject of grade retention. This statement was characteristic of non-reflective thinking as it relates to teaching practice. Some teachers had not engaged in a great deal of reflection about grade retention – a fact that was evidenced by their practice. Non-reflective thinking may be viewed as the absence of thinking processes that lead to reasoned instructional decisions and practice (Risko, Vukelich, Roskos, and Carpenter, 2002). Teachers who engage in reflective thinking assess the facts associated with a particular situation and evaluate their actions in light of the consequences that may be attached to them (Risko, Vukelich, Roskos, and Carpenter, 2002). Conversely, teachers who do not engage in this kind of thinking do not engage in reflective practices. Reflective thinking is a complicated process because each teacher has different personal characteristics and surroundings; therefore, it is unlikely that two teachers would engage in the same level of reflective practice given the same set of circumstances (Risko, Vukelich, Roskos, and Carpenter, 2002). It is interesting to note that although several teachers at each school I visited made comments similar to the one

at the beginning of this section when they handed me their completed surveys, only one teacher actually wrote it down. Teacher comments during interviews indicated that teachers engaged in thinking about grade retention yet often continued its practice. One second-grade teacher commented, “I don’t think it works, when I look at a child who was retained in the first grade and he still has the same kind of behavior problems that he had. It hasn’t helped him at all.” This comment indicates that she had looked at a child who was retained and evaluated whether or not it was helpful before coming to the conclusion that it was not – an indication of reflective thought.

Authority: “I have considered retention because if I pass them on what’s that other teacher going to think.” One half of the teachers who filled out the survey believed that if they were to send a poorly prepared student to the next grade level that teacher would form a low opinion of their teaching abilities. It appears that teacher’s thinking about retention and subsequent retention practices are impacted by concerns about what certain teachers may say to them or about them. The “other” teacher is endowed with an air of authority which may be real if the other teacher is their supervising teacher or principal. The air of authority may also be strictly perceptual if he or she is a coworker. Regardless of whether the authority is real or perceived, it influences the thinking processes and practices of those who are susceptible to it. One teacher who chose to ignore someone she viewed as authoritative had to live with the consequences.

I got a lot of flack from the second grade teacher because I didn’t retain her [low-performing student]. She wanted certain skill levels in place; they have to sit [and] focus. She made me feel like I didn’t make a very good professional decision.

An experience such as this shapes teachers' thought processes about grade retention as well as their retention practices.

Common Sense: Another approach to teacher's thinking about grade retention was the application of common sense. "If they don't understand it, they need to stay back." "If they can't do on-level work, there's no sense in passing them on because the work just gets harder." Statements such as these from a middle school and a first grade teacher, respectively, illustrated a common-sense approach to thinking about and practicing grade retention. The common-sense approach to thinking about grade retention in terms of "either you are successful or you will be retained" appeared to be widespread. A majority of teachers in this study believed that retention provides children an opportunity to raise their current level of academic performance as well as prevent future academic failure. Common sense is defined as "sound and prudent judgment based on a simple perception of the situation or facts" by the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. I find this definition to be problematic when it is used to refer to thought processes and beliefs about grade retention. Who decides what is sound and prudent? There is nothing simple about a child's low academic achievement – a condition most often accompanied by a plethora of complex and confusing factors. If teachers reduce this issue to common sense, they disregard its complexity and overlook that which lurks underneath.

Tradition: From the time grade levels were established, students who were perceived as unready or ill prepared for the next grade level were required to repeat the school year (Goodlad, 1954). This practice has continued long enough to be considered a tradition, yet not a single teacher mentioned thinking about retention in terms of maintaining its traditional role in the schools

Science/Research Results: Seventy-seven percent of the teachers who filled out the survey were unfamiliar with research about grade retention. When teachers were asked about this topic during the interviews, most responded with: “Honestly, not much.” “Absolutely nothing.” “Nothing at all.” “I haven’t paid too much attention.” and “I haven’t done much on that.” Although I believe that thought processes can be affected a great deal by research findings, I do not believe this to be the case with the majority of the participants in this study.

Puzzling Inconsistencies

At times a particular response, or a lack of response, on the Teacher Opinion Survey was difficult to understand because it was inconsistent with other responses the participant had given. One of the most puzzling inconsistencies in this study was the lack of response from approximately one-third of the participants to the Personal Experiences and Retention Practices section of the Teacher Opinion Survey: I usually retain ___ boys per year; I usually retain ___ girls per year; and I usually retain ___ English language learners per year. This omission seemed out of place when the rest of the survey was complete. I have indulged in a great deal of reflection on this topic and can only speculate as to what motivated these omissions on the part of the participants. Perhaps they believed data related to retention practices to be so personal that they preferred not to share it with a stranger (researcher). Maybe they felt somewhat ashamed or embarrassed about retaining students and did not want to “admit” to it. Regardless of what prompted the omission, in itself, it was a powerful statement – one that will have to stand apart from the rest of the data.

Another inconsistency in this study is related to the belief that retention injures children's self-esteem. While a majority of the teachers in this study believed that retention injures self-esteem, they also believed that retention improves academic performance. This seemed to be a confusing position because a child who has low self-esteem is unlikely to aspire to great academic performance. I was puzzled by the participants' overall lack of awareness as to the contradictory nature of these positions.

At times, responses on individual surveys were inconsistent and puzzling. One teacher who was familiar with grade retention research wrote, "It is ineffective," and agreed that retention injures children's self-esteem as well as adds to behavior problems and school dropout rates. At the same time he believed that retention improves children's academic performance and was effective for English language learners. He retained students each year. I was unable to understand this teacher's complete lack of awareness as to the contradictory nature of his position.

Another teacher who was familiar with grade retention research wrote, "Retention increases drop-out rate. [It] works best in the early grades." This was a confusing quote because he had accurate information when it came to retention and dropping out of school, while at the same time he did not appear to have accurate information about retention and grade level. This teacher did not retain students. I was curious to know if this teacher was aware of the contradictory nature of his beliefs and had resolved this problem by deciding not to retain students?

An elementary school teacher wrote, "Retention affected my son for years – he believed he was a failure – only during his teenage years did everything finally make sense." She believed retention to injure children's self-esteem and increase the likelihood

of behavior problems and school dropout, which is understandable since she had lived with this issue since her son was retained in the first grade. At the same time she believed that retention improved current and future academic performance, provided opportunities for English language learners and was appropriate for immature students, yet she did not retain any students of her own. This teacher had highly contradictory beliefs about grade retention – was she aware of them? Even though she still harbors some faith in retention she may have resolved her contradictions by choosing not to retain students.

At times, the participants' responses are puzzling and contradictory and I must question whether or not teachers are aware of these contradictions. None of the participating teachers voiced any awareness of the contradictory nature of some of their responses and I question if this is simply due to a lack of recognition or a lack of willingness to confront them. Many participants said, "I've never thought about it," when I asked about retention which may be a clear indicator of the lack of thought which this topic has inspired.

Searching For Alternatives

Although some teachers viewed retention as their only alternative, a large number of teachers who took part in this study suggested alternatives they considered preferable to retention. Having children tested for learning disabilities was the most frequently mentioned alternative. One teacher, who was interviewed, made a case for testing children who were experiencing difficulties in school when she said, "One little boy I had for his second year of first grade only made one little step of progress for the whole year I

had him. In the third grade he was tested...he was MR [mentally retarded]. Retention wasn't what he needed.”

For children who did not qualify for special services, some teachers suggested after school tutoring or tutoring during school hours as alternatives to retention. Others would like to see special programs for children who are in danger of being retained such as smaller classes with several teaching assistants so that children receive a great deal of one-on-one help.

A second grade teacher suggested using a different classroom structure, such as multiage [more than one grade level per classroom], as an alternative to retention. She said, “When I taught multiage I used to worry about some that were struggling with their reading but by the time they're in second grade their light comes on.”

This study found teachers to have constructed complex and highly individual sets of beliefs about grade retention. At times, certain factors appear to contribute to those beliefs.

Possible Contributing Factors

Data analysis revealed patterns in teacher responses to the belief statements relative to their years of teaching experience, gender, grade level and unfamiliarity with retention research. These patterns provided insights into possible factors that may play a role in beliefs about grade retention for the teachers in this study.

Teaching Experience: Teachers with the least classroom experience (0-5 years) viewed retention more positively than teachers with more years of experience. This group viewed retention as an opportunity to raise children's current level of academic

achievement and prevent future academic failure – especially in kindergarten and first grade. I was troubled by this finding because of the highly individual and subjective nature of criteria used to determine what academic achievement looks like. Teachers with little classroom experience would have very limited experiences on which to base their beliefs as to what constitutes academic achievement. (Table XVII, p. 100)

Teachers with the least classroom experience (0-5 years) strongly supported the use of retention for students whom they deemed immature compared to their peers. I am concerned that this group of teachers does not have a great deal of experience from which to draw when making decisions about what immature behavior looks like. There is a great deal of room for subjectivity on this topic. (Table XVIII, p. 101)

Teachers with the least classroom experience (0-5 years) also voiced the greatest support for retaining English language learners who have not yet mastered grade level material. I wonder if less inexperienced teachers were simply less familiar with second language acquisition strategies or if they simply believed retention to be the best strategy. (Table XVIII, p. 101).

Data from the Teacher Opinion Survey (TOS) show that teachers with the fewest years of experience were the most concerned about how their professional abilities would be viewed relative to students' academic performance. Unfortunately, there appears to be some reluctance to discuss this issue because only one of the four teachers with 0-5 years of experience whom I interviewed verbalized this topic. She spoke about hearing comments such as, "What did they teach these children in kindergarten?" and "What was that teacher doing?" Comments such as these clearly make an impression on

inexperienced teachers who have not yet developed confidence in their own teaching abilities. (Table XVIII, p. 101)

Table XVII

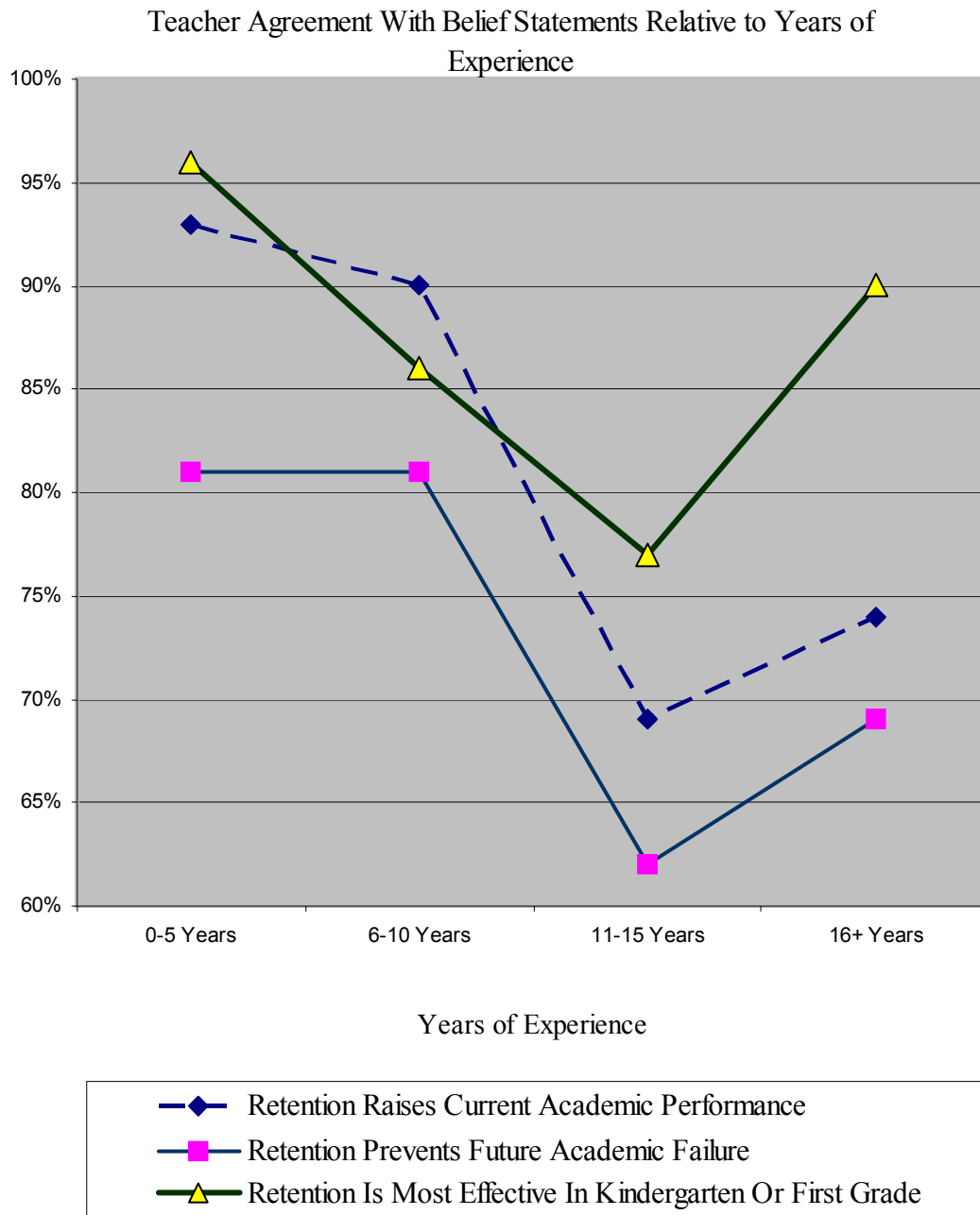
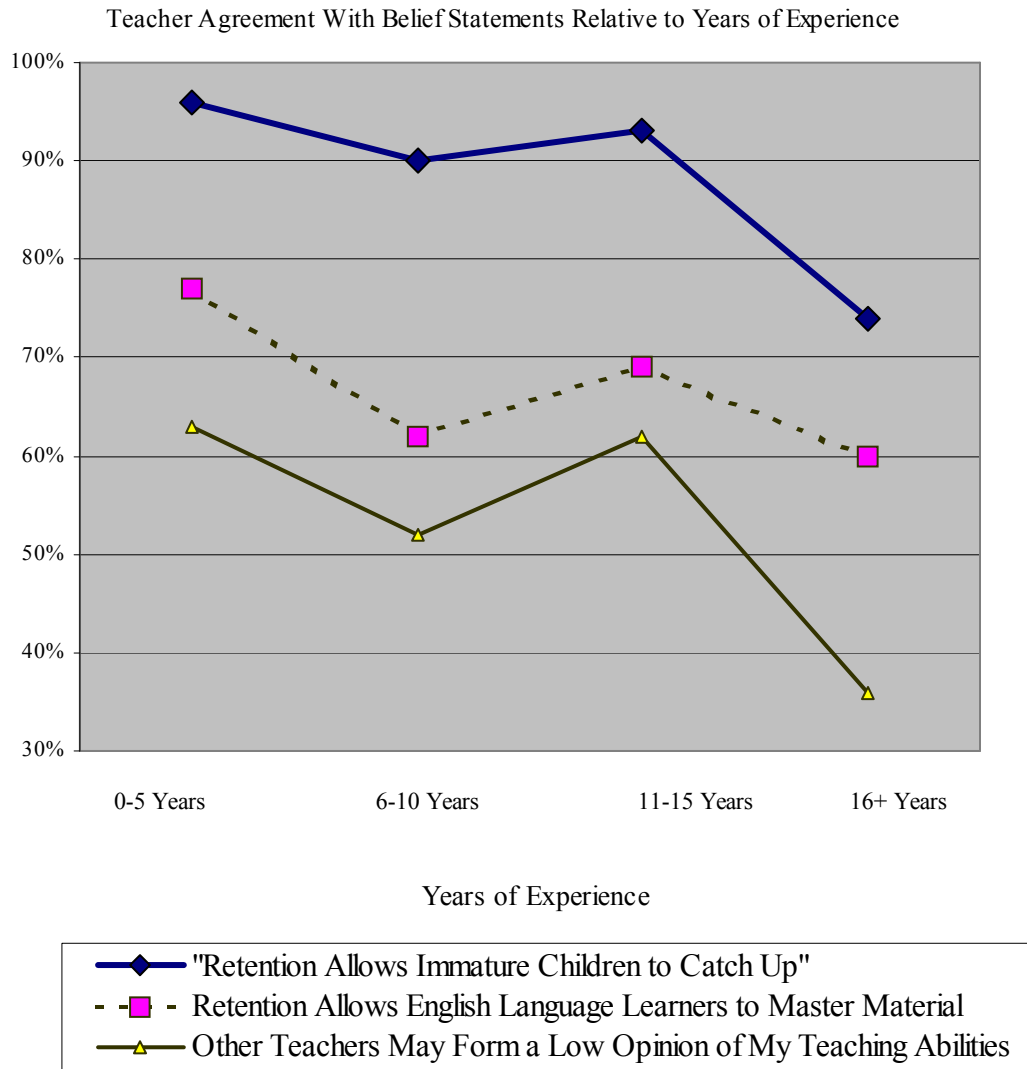


Table XVIII



Gender: Male teachers more readily agreed that sending students with low academic performance to the next grade level may cause other teachers to form a low

opinion of their teaching abilities than female teachers on the TOS. Unfortunately, none were willing to discuss this topic during an interview. (Table XIX, p. 103)

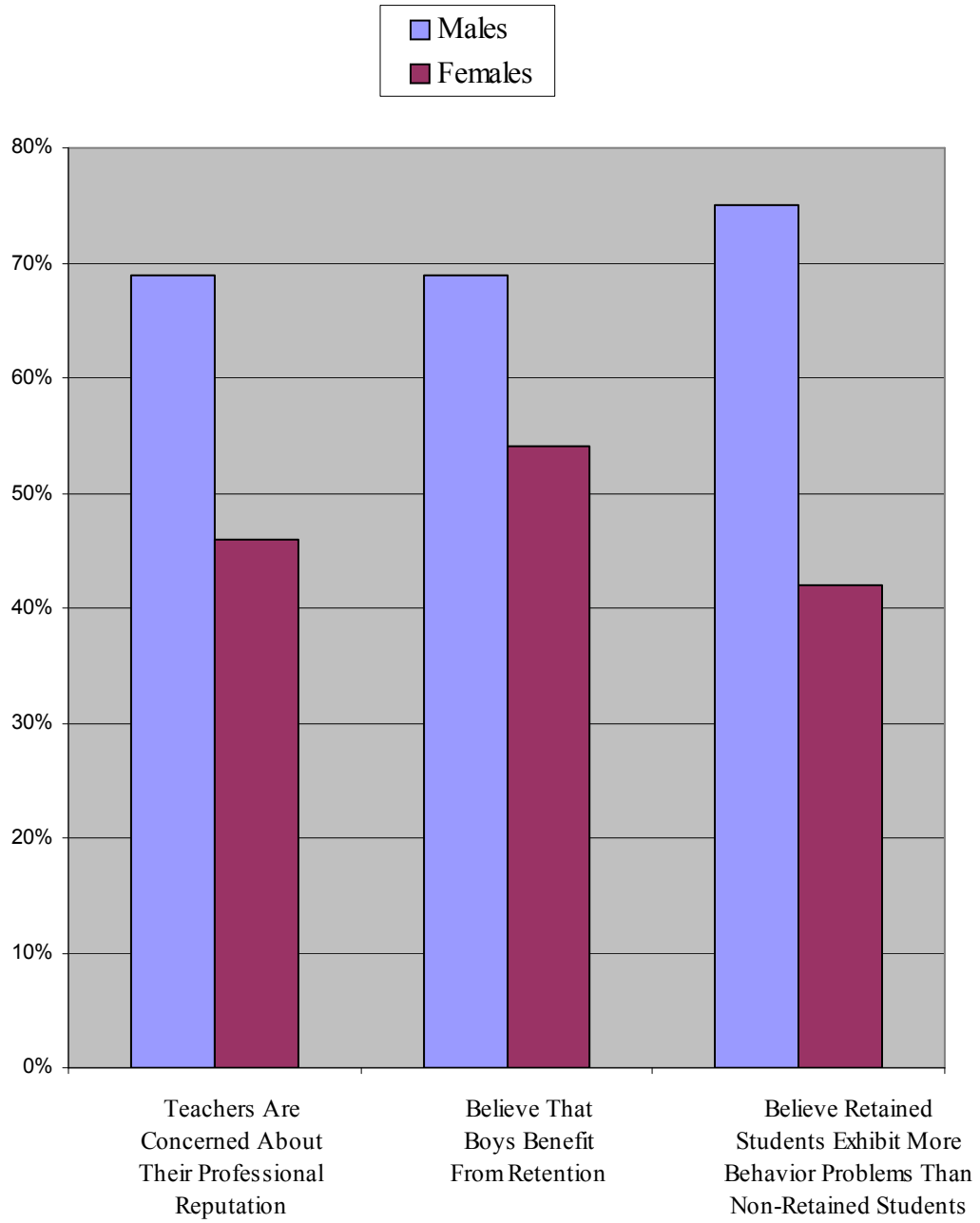
Male teachers regarded grade retention as an effective intervention strategy for boys more often than female teachers and one male teacher said, “If they don’t understand it they need to stay back.” Another explained it this way, “You’re doing him a disservice if you send him on when he’s not ready.” I am not trying to imply that male teachers were insensitive to the possible repercussions of retention – they were not. In fact, male teachers had higher rates of agreement with the belief that grade retention injured children’s self-esteem than female teachers. (Table XIX, p. 103)

Male teachers were in far greater agreement than female teachers with the belief that retained students exhibit more behavior problems than non-retained students. I am curious if students actually misbehave more in front of a male teacher or if male teachers are more likely than female teachers to interpret certain behaviors as “misbehavior.” This topic needs to be studied further in order to gain a clearer understanding. (Table XIX, p. 103)

Clearly, gender and experience have an impact on what teachers believe about retention. Another factor that impacts these beliefs is the teacher’s grade level.

Table XIX

Teacher Agreement With Belief Statements Relative to Gender



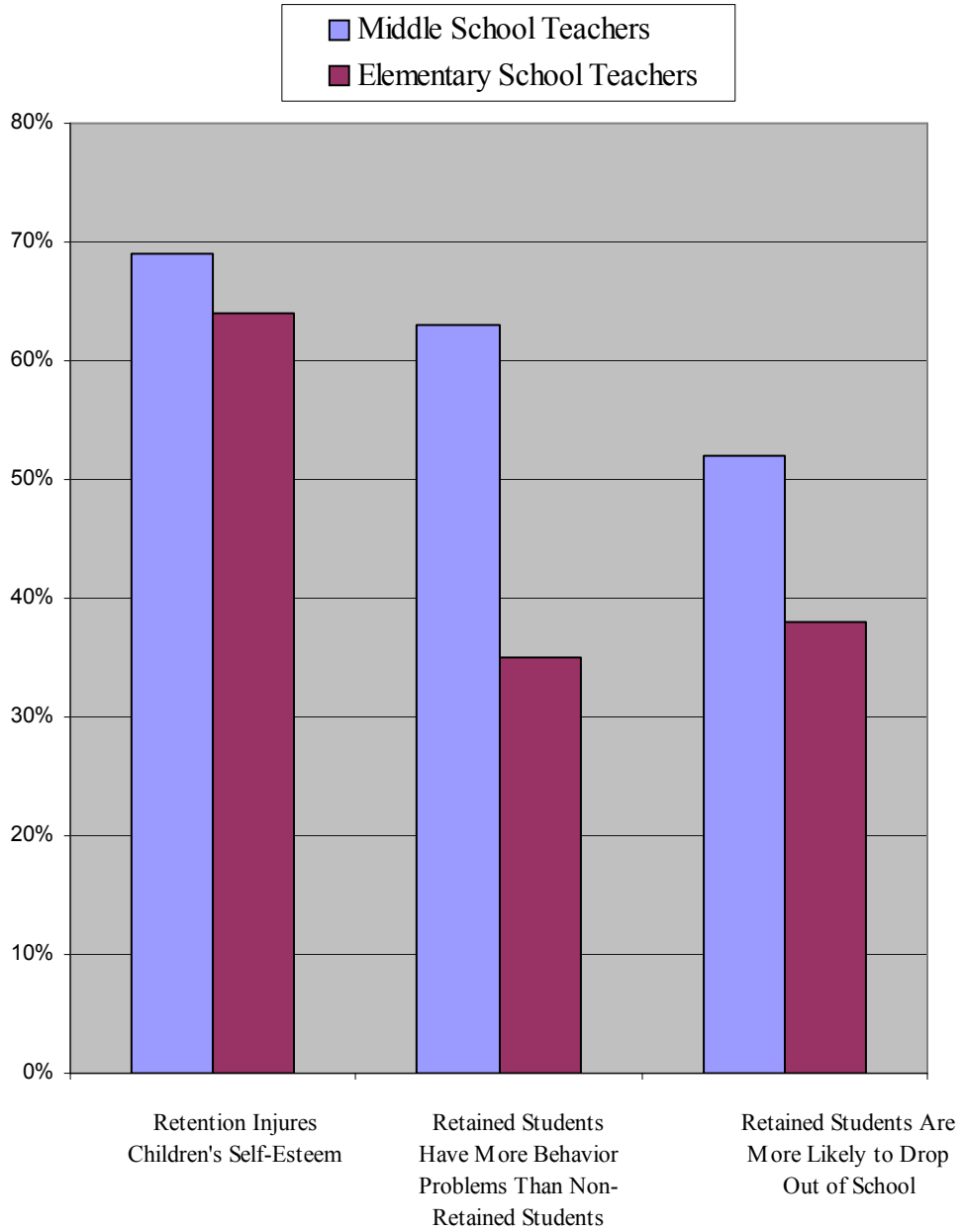
Grade Level: Middle school teachers displayed the greatest awareness of three negative outcomes of grade retention: Injury to children's self-esteem, increased behavior problems and the likelihood that retained students will drop out of school before they graduate. This was not unexpected since all of these outcomes have been found to occur more often in the middle and high school grades (Literature Review, pp. 25-26, 29). I suspect that middle school teacher's beliefs towards grade retention were influenced by their day-to-day familiarity with these negative outcomes. (Table XX, p. 105)

Pre-K-2nd grade teachers were in almost complete agreement that retention is most effective in kindergarten or first grade. This was not an unusual finding because research shows that the greatest numbers of students are retained in the early grades (Literature Review, p. 18). (Table XX, p. 105)

Close to three-fourths of the 3rd-General Elementary teachers in this study viewed retention as an opportunity for English language learners to master skills and academic material. It may be possible that the standardized tests elementary schools are required to administer in third and fifth grade in order to qualify for Annual Yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act play a part in this decision making process. (Table XX, p. 105)

Table XX

Teacher Agreement With Belief Statements Relative to Grade Level

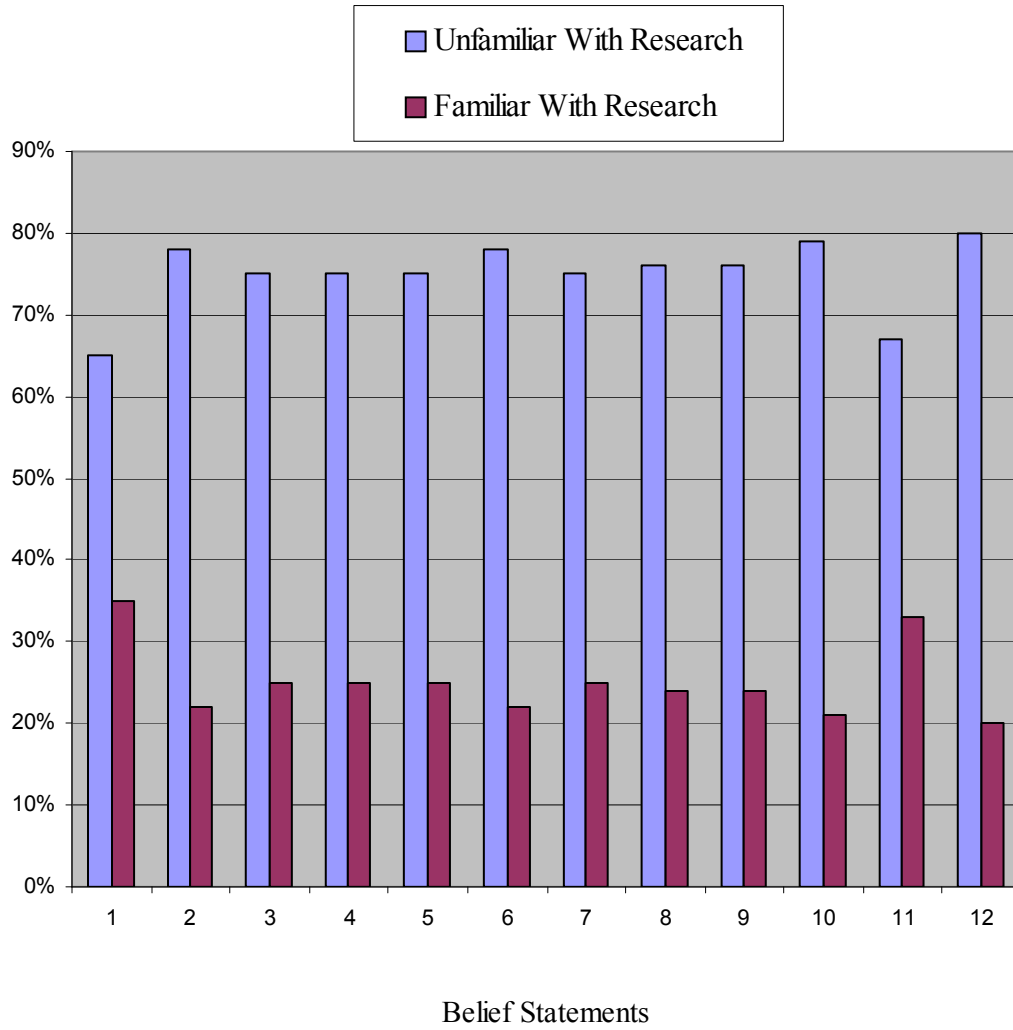


Unfamiliarity With Retention Research: Of all the factors that accompanied teacher beliefs about retention, unfamiliarity with research was by far the largest. The vast majority of teachers who participated in this study were unfamiliar with grade retention research. At times, even teachers who claimed to be familiar with research appeared to have incorrect information. I suspect that teachers' overall unfamiliarity with grade retention research may be one reason so many view retention as a viable option. (Table XXI, p.107)

Teacher beliefs about grade retention vary widely and depend on a variety of factors such as grade level, gender, and teaching experience. It is unfortunate that so few teachers are familiar with the topic of grade retention and its potential repercussions for students at a time when the incidence of retention continues to climb.

Table XXI

Teacher Agreement With Belief Statements Relative to Familiarity and Unfamiliarity With Grade Retention Research



IMPLICATIONS

“Retention? I’ve never thought about it,” was a frequent response when I asked teachers about grade retention. Few teachers in this study have thought, heard or read much about retention – a life-changing event in the lives of children over which teachers exercise considerable control – yet many of them espouse similar beliefs. I question if these similarities exist because teachers in this study truly believe similar things about grade retention or if they are responding in “teacher talk”- telling me what they think a teacher should say. Regardless of what prompted teachers’ responses, it is imperative that the topic of grade retention is addressed both at the pre-service and in-service levels.

I believe the vast majority of teachers have their student’s best interests at heart and would never intentionally engage in practices that are detrimental to their students. Unfortunately, teachers are often uninformed or misinformed about the practice of grade retention believing it to be helpful thereby unintentionally exposing their students to academic, social, emotional and behavioral problems they may not have otherwise experienced. A lack of factual knowledge about retention cannot serve as an excuse to promulgate a practice with serious consequences for the children who are entrusted to our care. Teachers can become advocates for their students by informing themselves about grade retention through discussions with colleagues, workshops, professional conferences, book study groups and Internet support groups in order to make informed decisions that will be in the best interests of their students.

Teachers can support one another rather than intimidating and shaming each other into retaining students who may not be a shining example of one’s professional competence. I believe the best way to do this is to work with grade level teams that

provide a support structure for teachers. For those who feel more comfortable sharing concerns with another person rather than a group, a long-term mentor may be helpful. Schools traditionally assign a mentor to first-year teachers but after the first year, teachers are basically on their own. I believe it would be helpful if new teachers maintained their mentoring relationship with another teacher for the first three –five years of practice.

Teachers can become advocates for and implementers of developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms so that children have opportunities to learn in environments that meet their needs rather than labeling children as “immature” when their behavior does not meet inappropriate expectations. I support making a degree in early childhood education a mandatory requirement for teachers who wish to teach first and second grade in addition to those who teach four-year-olds and kindergarten as presently required. In this way, school districts will have some certainty as to the familiarity of its early childhood teachers with developmentally appropriate expectations, curriculum and assessment. For those already employed in the field, I highly recommend implementing grade level teams, professional book study groups, mentoring programs and grade-level inter-school networks so that teachers have opportunities to engage with current literature as well as one another as they strive to become better informed about grade retention practices.

Educators of future teachers hold the keys to changing the future. I believe that pre-service teachers often arrive in university classrooms with their own beliefs about grade retention firmly in place. Teacher educators can assist students in recognizing these beliefs and constructing new knowledge about grade retention. I plan to begin this process in the Development of Early Childhood Programs class, a class commonly taken

in students' junior or senior year. This class lends itself well to addressing retention because it includes special topics related to early childhood education. Students will fill out the Teacher Opinion Survey and use it as a basis for classroom discussion. Students will also write a reflective paper that allows them to analyze where some of their beliefs about retention have come from. Finally, students will write a research paper about an aspect of grade retention that is of particular interest to them.

I plan to address alternatives to grade retention in the senior level Organization and Implementation of Early Childhood programs class. Students taking this class will be asked to explore a variety of teaching strategies and curriculum models – learning about alternatives to grade retention fits well within this topic.

It is vital to the academic, emotional, social and behavioral health of our children that no teacher ever again says, “Retention? I’ve never thought about it.” This topic must be personally reflected upon, openly discussed and well researched so that children no longer have to suffer its consequences.

Implications for Future Research

Data analysis reveals several issues that are beyond the scope of this study, which may be of interest to future researchers. One such issue is teacher’s reticence to supply information about their retention practices. Perhaps a survey dealing exclusively with those practices would provide more complete data about this topic in the future.

Another issue that is open to future research has to do with teacher’s perceptions of what constitutes “misbehavior.” The data in this study revealed that male teachers perceive retained students as “misbehaving” more often than female teachers. Future

research is needed to identify what behaviors male and female teachers categorize as “misbehavior” and whether or not students engage in those behaviors more often in front of male or female teachers.

I wish to conduct further research in order to learn what beliefs pre-service teachers hold about grade retention when they begin their teacher education program; how these beliefs change through reflection, discussion and the acquisition of new knowledge and in what way(s) these [revised] beliefs are applied once students graduate and begin teaching.

FINAL THOUGHTS

My feelings are mixed as this study comes to a close. I am encouraged to realize that there is something I can do to impact teacher beliefs about grade retention. I am a teacher-educator, which gives me an opportunity to provide my pre-service students with factual knowledge related to grade retention research. It is my goal that the future teachers who sit in my college classes will never claim to be unfamiliar with grade retention research. I am also encouraged to realize that I may be able to change what practicing teachers and administrators believe about grade retention by presenting my findings at professional conferences and in professional journals.

I am profoundly uncomfortable by the lack of discomfort evidenced by many participants in this study when it comes to the topic of grade retention and disconcerted by the depth of their convictions. I am all the more uncomfortable because I am treading on familiar ground – I have retained students based on what I believed to be in their best interests at the time. I cannot change what happened to my former students but I will do my best to change the way in which future teachers approach the practice of grade retention.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW ONE

Interview one takes place on the telephone on March 7, 2006 at 8:00 PM in the evening. Ann is a first grade teacher with 0-5 years of experience.

Interviewer: Hi, my name is Anita Ede and I am the OSU student who came to your school with the grade retention survey. Would this be a good time to interview you?

Ann: Oh sure.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about retaining children?

Ann: I think that if they can't do their work there's no sense in passing them on because the work just gets harder. If they can't do on-level work why pass them on.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when you had a student that was low performing that you wanted to retain?

Ann: I have not been able to retain any students. Every time I bring it up I am told no. Last year I taught kindergarten and this year I teach first grade and I have the same students and they are still not performing at grade level. Sometimes I try doing kindergarten work for the day and they still are unable to do it.

Interviewer: Is there a rule against retention?

Ann: It depends on their age, if they've been retained before, if they're going to be a lot older than their peers. One that I wanted to retain was younger but his mother said no and my principal said no.

Interviewer: What are some of the characteristics of a low-performing student that you might want to retain?

Ann: Usually it's a child that cannot do on-level work. If they are just a little bit behind, I can give mom something to do over the summer to help them get caught up. In the area where I teach parents are not willing to work with their children over the summer. The little boy I told you about had no help over the summer – he is just now at mid-kindergarten level, unable to read, unable to write within the lines, he still chooses the big fat lined paper with the dash in the middle. He draws pictures instead of using words in his spiral, several letter reversals, number reversals, unable to add higher than five.

Interviewer: Have you ever retained anybody?

Ann: No, none will let me because the principal and the parent has to agree to it and sometimes I can't even get it past the principal.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when you sent a low performing student on, what was the teacher's reaction?

Ann: When I ask the other teachers about how some of my low ones are doing now they say "they're getting there – they're not up with the rest of them yet- but they're getting there". I know they're still behind. Several

teachers have said, “ What did they teach these children in first grade or kindergarten? They should have learned this in kindergarten or in first grade. What was that teacher doing?” We had a second grade teacher who passed all of her students and I often heard the third grade teachers say, “They can’t even read – why are they in the third grade?”

Interviewer: What, if any, have you heard or read about retention research?

Ann: No I haven’t heard or read anything about retention. My children have developmental first grade (D-1) in their school district and some friends’ children went to D-1. One of them is still on an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) and he is in the tenth grade. They didn’t catch it until later. With help, everybody, not just the teacher the child can learn and progress. You can’t do it just for six and a half hours while they’re in school. Can’t be just Monday through Friday. Can’t be just while they’re at school. It needs to be while they’re at home, at night, during the summer, on spring break, on Christmas vacation. If they’re having a problem understanding, you need to keep giving them information all the time so they can catch up with their peers.

Interviewer: What kind of support are you looking for from parents?

Ann: When I send home spelling homework with my seventeen kids, eight of them do not bring anything back. I don’t do it every night. Now and then I send home a math sheet – eight or nine will not bring it back every time. I just want a little bit of parent help. If a parent values education, then their child will value education as well. If the parent says, “Well that

stupid teacher's sending home stupid homework why can't she teach them while they're at school, you gotta help your kids.

Interviewer: Do you have any children this year that you are thinking about retaining?

Ann: I have about six and I have been trying to contact parents since we came back from Christmas break in January so I can show them what they child is doing and what they should be doing. Some gave me a bad phone number, they don't return my calls, I even mailed letters, they are unanswered.

Interviewer: What do you notice about those children that you are concerned about retaining?

Ann: I hate to say this because I am a single parent but most of them come from a single parent family. Not all single parents value education like I do. One is a dad only and the rest of them come from a mother only. There is poverty in the home, they're unclean, messy, unkempt, dirty clothes, worried about breakfast and lunch more than anything else.

Interviewer: What do you notice about their performance overall?

Ann: The perception I get from them is, "Mama made me come. I'm here because it's free day care. You get two meals at school so go to school. I don't care if you're 15-20 minutes late. I don't care if I don't pick you up till 5:00 at night."

Interviewer: What about them academically?

Ann: They are so far behind. They are on a pre-school level. One little boy I'll call Bartholomew – he'll get the B right – that's all. About half are very

immature – they act like a 3-4 year old. The others are extremely grown – like thirty. Bartholomew is almost eight in first grade so retention is out for him, we are trying to get him tested for special ed (special education services). It's like he's tired all the time, he lounges, lays across desk, he falls asleep in class, he gets to school 15 minutes to one and one-half hour late. We have breakfast in the classroom and the first thing he asks me is, "Can I have some breakfast?" I never deny him food. An hour later we go to lunch. He always hoards food in his cheeks and tries to sneak it out of the cafeteria. When we sit on the floor and do floor activities the ones that need to be retained cannot sit criss-cross-apple-sauce they are too busy talking, they don't participate in any group activities, when I do one-on-one flash cards alphabet/math they'll throw out any number. They can't do easy sight words. If I show them "is" they will say "cat." They can't tell me the letter sounds. I used to sound out my spelling words and the average score was 60 percent. I stopped doing that and now my average score is 30 percent. They are just really low. I think a lot of it has to do with where I'm teaching, low socio-economic area.

Interviewer: What sort of an impact do you see socio-economics making?

Ann: Yes I do but I have five students in my class who come from a low socio-economic home but it's a two-parent family and they do fine. Their parents all work but I don't think they get paid very much. The five that are on welfare, seem to struggle a lot more.

Interviewer: Is there anything that I have not asked that you would like to add?

Ann: I don't know. I feel like I really beat up on single parents. It seems like in the area I teach education is not a priority – it's more like free day care.

Interviewer: I would like to thank you very much for talking to me tonight. I really appreciate it.

Ann: You're welcome

Interviewer: Thanks again, Bye-bye.

Ann: Bye-bye.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW TWO

Interview II takes place on the telephone on March 11, 2006 at 7:30 PM in the evening.

Bev is a fifth grade teacher with 0-5 years of experience.

Interviewer: Hi, my name is Anita Ede and I am the OSU student who came to your school with the grade retention survey. Would this be a good time to interview you?

Bev: Yes, I'll do the best I can.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about grade retention?

Bev: A lot of people want to hold children back in kindergarten but I think you should let kids go on to first grade, if you still think they should be held back first grade is the logical place to do that because they learn so many of their reading skills in first grade. When you get up to second grade they should know their numbers and letters and be starting to read. Some children do a lot of growing in the summer. They learn so many basics in first grade it wouldn't hurt any child to repeat first grade.

Interviewer: Could you tell me about some of the children you have retained?

Bev: I have never held a child back but right now I'm testing one. My administration would not like it. It takes a leap of faith to hold a child back. We are basically told to push them through as much as you can – I know that sounds awful but that's where I'm at right now. I hope this won't be told to anybody.

Interviewer: Absolutely not. I do not even know what school you are from.

Bev: That's good. I've been told to do what you can with this child and it's out of your hands when you're done.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Bev: I don't know. I know that it bothers me to see that especially teaching fifth grade. If you push them through like that you may lose them when they get to middle school. I tell my kids that I'm not just here to teach you academically, I am here to teach you socially too. If you push them on through not knowing their academics, their world is a whole bunch of other things – not academics. Middle school is such a massive transition – the kids are just doing what they can to stay above. I don't know why people are letting them go on. I know a lot of the time they look at age that could be a problem. Right now I am testing a girl that I don't think has what she needs to go on to middle school – the only avenue I have to go on is to test her.. I don't know why she hasn't been tested before this. She took a Briganz test and she failed it. That was just preliminary to make sure we're on the right track. I put it off a little bit thinking she was just not motivated, just goofing off, but then I realized that she didn't

know what she was doing and so we've been doing some testing. If I was to hold her back I wouldn't be stood behind. She is not the only one – probably 50-60% of all of our classes don't read on grade level so I'm in a pretty low socio-economic school. I bet not half of my class reads on grade level. I have sixty-five kids.

Interviewer: When you say someone is goofing off what does that look like?

Bev: Not paying attention, talking, drawing, not listening to instructions, messing with their hair, writing notes, stuff like that.

Interviewer: When you have a student that is low performing, what does low performing look like?

Bev: They can't subtract, borrow numbers, can't multiply, don't know multiplication tables. I use flash cards, Unifix cubes, games, I don't know why they don't get it. I don't have a lot of parent support either.

Interviewer: What do you look for in parental support?

Bev: I look for parents that will ask the kids about their work, are concerned about academics, if I call them I look for us to work together to help the child. Some parents I could call daily and I would still have a behavior problem the next day. I don't get any help from my administration.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Bev: They are more concerned with pleasing the community, people pleasing. If you come down harder on the child than they do at home then you are not pleasing that family. It's more political. It's hard because you have parents who don't watch their children and don't make sure their

children's homework is done and then they come to class and they expect to act the same way. And then you have a class with about ten that want to act out that takes your time away from every other child in there.

Interviewer: What does acting out look like?

Bev: Here's an example – We were having a classroom discussion and in the middle of the lesson this girl raised her hand and asked, "Did you know there's a new brand of dog food?" The other day a boy threw a shoe across the room as the principal walked in the door and I was helping another student at the time. The second day of school they had an eraser fight in my classroom. I went to put something down on my desk and three erasers went across the room. Those little pink erasers. Some talk across the room to each other in sign language or writing on paper and holding it up. They don't care if you see them.

Interviewer: What do you do?

Bev: We have a detention room. We can stick them in there. We can call parents. If I send a child to the office it looks like I can't control my classroom.

Interviewer: Are the children that act out low performing or is it across the board?

Bev: At first it was just the low ones but as the year has gone on even the high ones are doing it. The low ones act out more physically throwing things. The high performing do more back talking –trying to run the show. They do it a different way. I have one boy that I have to ask all day long to sit down. The office is well aware of it. I do have some ED (Emotionally

Disturbed) kids in my classroom. I can handle a lot. I try to come across pretty strict so they don't think they can run all over you. I get told "you are too hard on them we are still in elementary school, they are still our babies."

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when you sent a low performing student on did you get any feedback.

Bev: No, but some of my kids have come back and told me they are doing well and some of them have fallen between the cracks. I try my best to prepare them but sometimes I don't get any support. One time I had parents throw a big fit over the homework because their kids were spending two and three hours each night doing the homework – it was ten problems. I was told by the principal that my homework couldn't be any more than 15 minutes per subject and I told them that it depended on their level of performance. Right now I don't give homework any more because the other teacher gives them language arts homework and if I give them any more homework it will be longer than fifteen minutes. When they're with me they do lots of math. I assign everything on Monday and it's due on Friday. I've been told we can't grade homework and the parents and kids know that so if they don't bring it back there's nothing telling them it has to be done. Last year I had a student I had a question about – they had talked about putting her back in fourth grade, she was very bright but she didn't do any of her work, never turned in anything but her grades on the

tests were through the roof. They wouldn't let her be held back. She never did any work for me. She never turned anything in.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what you have heard or read about grade retention research?

Bev: Not really. No. I haven't done much on that. I can give you an opinion but I don't know what research says.

Interviewer: Is there anything that I have not asked that you would like to add?

Bev: No.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for allowing me to interview you this evening. I appreciate it very much.

Bev: You're welcome.

Interviewer: Good-bye.

Bev: Good-bye.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW THREE

Interview III takes place on the telephone on March 14, 2006 at 7:20 PM in the evening.

Carol is an eighth grade teacher with 16+ years of experience.

Interviewer: Hi, my name is Anita Ede and I am the OSU student who came to your school with the grade retention survey. Would this be a good time to interview you?

Carol: Sure.

Interviewer: Thank you so much. What are your thoughts about grade retention?

Carol: Frankly, I feel like it's ineffective. I can see that at the middle school level you don't want fifteen and sixteen year olds in there with twelve year olds but I don't think it's addressing the problem of remediation. I have sat on committees that decided to retain a student. I have worked at five or six different schools. It's different everywhere you go. Some places it's a counselor who retains students but in most middle schools it's a committee.

Interviewer: Can you recall a student that was low performing and eventually retained – what was that like?

Carol: I have two students right now that were in my class last year and I have them again because they were retained. One of them is female student and even though we are covering the same curriculum she is still between a D and an F.

Interviewer: What is her performance like in class?

Carol: She is not motivated to succeed. She gets motivated in spurts, She's not a terrible attendance problem but it's just enough that it really hurts. There are some kids that make it to school once or twice a week, she makes it several days a week but not a full week. When she comes she doesn't always turn in her work. When she does it's usually incomplete or incorrect.

Interviewer: What do you attribute that to?

Carol: I don't know. I don't know if her problem is low reading ability but I don't think that's the whole problem, I don't think she's real motivated to succeed. I don't know what her home life is like. Most children realize that at some point they are going to be age-bumped up to high school. The other student I have is a male student. He's not a horrible behavior problem, I think he was suspended more than once last year, he's just not motivated to succeed, I think he frequently copies his work from other students.

Interviewer: When you say not motivated what does that look like?

Carol: Someone that's not paying attention, comes to class without their homework, they start working and then as soon as you quit watching them

they stop working, they're unprepared, frequently tardy, don't have any supplies, they're just lackadaisical.

Interviewer: What kind of home support do these two students have?

Carol: The male student has a younger sibling at our school who is much higher performing. The male student is much bigger than his peers – very overweight. He is not an overt bully but he is a covert bully. Last year I watched him manipulate other students into arguing and getting into trouble and he likes to watch. He gets other people mad at each other and sits back and watches. I don't know why but he was convinced that he would be allowed to move up to ninth grade at semester but they don't allow that.

Interviewer: Was his retention a committee decision?

Carol: I think so.

Interviewer: What kinds of things do you think they looked at?

Carol: Different administrations have different philosophies. The group of teachers I work with now feel very strongly that credits matter, we feel under the gun as far giving the benchmark tests.

Interviewer: What are credits?

Carol: When you take a class and pass that's a credit. Each semester is one half a credit. You have to have a certain number of credits to move on to the next grade but that's not cut and dried.

Interviewer: Don't you have to pass the core classes?

Carol: Not all of them. If you're right on the line you can go to summer school to see if you can make it up.

Interviewer: What about students who have difficulty speaking English?

Carol: We have an ELL (English language learner) program and if you can't speak any English you would go in a self-contained classroom and then you would be mainstreamed into electives and then you are mainstreamed into multiple classes. They are on a different grading system and they are pulled out and tested. Once they demonstrate their competency on the tests they are treated just like anyone else.

Interviewer: How do you see home support at the middle school level?

Carol: Parents have an enormous impact, detrimental or positive. At my previous school we had a significant ELL population there were ELL students who were some of my top performers and some were among the absolutely lowest performers. Frequently these students live in a two-bedroom apartment with fourteen people and if anyone was ill the teenage girl has to stay home. Attendance is a problem when girls have to stay home with younger siblings because mom can't afford to take off from work. I've seen it all when it comes to parental involvement. Right now I have one whose mother is an elementary school principal. The mother is so over-controlling that her daughter has shut down. Her mother is not letting her move on to handle her own things by herself. When parents are over-controlling it may cause a child to act out.

Interviewer: What do you see as over-controlling at an eighth grade level?

Carol: You ask really hard questions. At some point the goal is for the child to make good grades for their own sake and not due to some external motivation. When they're not doing that....This particular mother treats the kid like she's a baby. She e-mails me almost every day and lately the kid has stopped working and she's a very capable young lady. Generally the parents who care and are involved have a child who does well and does their homework.

Interviewer: What do you look for in a successful middle school student?

Carol: They should be reading close to grade level, they should be motivated to succeed, internal motivation, they have to know that this is for themselves, the good students feel that way, they should exhibit the ability to work in groups, have to get along with peers and staff..

Interviewer: What about unsuccessful students, what kinds of behaviors do you see?

Carol: The child I fear the most is a child who comes from such poverty that if they have no respect for possessions. These are people that do not regard possessions, they do not have any of their own. They do not respect my equipment, steal for no reason, these kids cannot do their homework, their apartments are too full of people. I had a child a couple of years ago who lived in an apartment over a bar and slept on the couch. He could not even go to sleep at night until the bar closed around three AM. He didn't have any paper to do his work on, no stapler, no books.

Interviewer: Is there anything that you would like to add that I have not asked you?

Carol: No.

Interviewer: Thank you very much. I appreciate your answering all of my questions.

Carol: You're welcome.

Interviewer: Good-bye.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW FOUR

Interview IV takes place on the telephone on March 15, 2006 at 7:10 PM in the evening.

Donna is a second grade teacher with 11-15 years of experience.

Interviewer: Hi, my name is Anita Ede and I am the OSU student who came to your school with the grade retention survey. Would this be a good time to interview you?

Donna: Sure.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about grade retention?

Donna: It's a decision that needs to be weighed case by case, there shouldn't be any set rules for it because all aspects need to be looked at: maturity, grades, test scores, all the factors need to be looked at – the whole child, the age of the child matters too.

Interviewer: When you say maturity, what does that look like.

Donna: Immature would be a second grader who is still crawling around on the floor, being really playful, not fitting in with social norms for that age, if it's truly interfering with his learning and ability to perform. Some of those children have really delayed language for some reason.

Interviewer: What are some of the characteristics of a successful student?

Donna: Able to read, basic sight words for the grade level, they have some independence they're not still hanging on to you. They try before they say "I can't do it", they can sit for a while, complete tasks, work well with others.

Interviewer: What might an unsuccessful student look like in your classroom?

Donna: They rarely turn in completed work, they're out of their chair all the time, they distract others by touching or talking, trying to get others' attention. The children that don't have the bedtime and the follow-through at home are hurting the most. I worry about them. Children who bounce around from school to school are usually less successful.

Interviewer: What kind of support are you looking for from children's parents?

Donna: I want my kids to feel loved at home. I can tell which ones are loved and which ones are floundering. The parents that show up for conferences, the parents who show up for lunch once a year, may pick up the child after school, volunteer to do something at school, regular bedtime, regular eating habits all play a big part in the child having a successful school year.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when you had an unsuccessful student that you retained, what was that like?

Donna: When I worked in Florida I was required to retain children strictly based on a test score and that was the most uncomfortable feeling I ever had. That happened several years ago. Same thing happened in Texas.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when you retained a child here in Oklahoma?

Donna: I'm getting ready to – this is my first year in Oklahoma. I have four students, one is an ELL student (English language learner) who I don't think I'm allowed to retain the other three don't have a good sight word base. They know their kindergarten words. Two of them have good listening comprehension but they can't read. The other has a lot of anger issues. He does better when he's mad. I think he may have delayed language.

Interviewer: What does his anger look like?

Donna: He stomps his feet or whines or throws his books on the floor. A temper tantrum which shows his maturity level.

Interviewer: How about the delayed language – what does that look like?

Donna: His speech is poor so his writing and handwriting are poor. I think he's very loved but I don't think there's anyone at home who helps him. He was sick a lot when he was younger and I don't know if that has anything to do with his delayed language.

Interviewer: Besides academics, what are some of the factors you consider when making retention decisions?

Donna: Academics are the heaviest, their ability to do the tasks, can they keep up, can they follow multiple step directions, maturity alone will, not cause me to retain a child. There's got to be more to it. Academics is the heaviest. Not just test scores – it's the everyday stuff.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when you sent on a student that was low performing did you have any feedback from the teacher at the next grade level?

Donna: Those are children that move around a lot, it's hard to get information about them, I move around a lot too.

Interviewer: Do you think the teacher at the next grade level would think less of someone that sent them a student who was not performing well?

Donna: I don't know? I try not to do that – half my class is like that this year. I just have a longer way to go with these kids.

Interviewer: When you lived in Florida and you had to retain second graders...

Donna: First graders

Interviewer: How did you feel about that?

Donna: Uncomfortable but out of six first grade classes we had enough for a whole class. I wasn't alone.

Interviewer: What were the criteria for retaining that many children?

Donna: It was that test. I don't think it's fair. It's not right.

Interviewer: Do you find that you're thinking of retaining more children or fewer than you used to?

Donna: Well this year I'm thinking of retaining four. That's a lot for me.

Interviewer: Can you tell me some of the things you have read or heard about retention research?

Donna: I heard that the later it's done the harder it is on the child.

Interviewer: Is there anything that I have not asked that you would like to add?

Donna: No I guess not.

Interviewer: I want to thank you very much for allowing me to interview you this evening. You have been very helpful.

Donna: You're very welcome.

Interviewer: Thanks again, bye-bye.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW FIVE

Interview V takes place on the telephone on March 21, 2006 at 7:10 PM in the evening.

Eve has 16+ years of teaching experience. She is an elementary school counselor and has spent ten years teaching at the elementary school level.

Interviewer: Hi, my name is Anita Ede and I am the OSU student who came to your school with the grade retention survey. Would this be a good time to interview you?

Eve: Sure.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about grade retention?

Eve: I'm not a big fan of it. I've seen several cases where it worked out but for the most part it doesn't. Right now we have this list of third grade students who are still not reading on grade level, with the mandate thing we have to send out this letter, I could say "Let's retain" but we're still behind so I think we need more remediation. Kids talk when they're ready to talk and read when they're ready to read. Running them through the same thing again – I don't know.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when you retained a student or you saw a student retained, what was that like?

Eve: I have one right now, a fifth grader, he was a positive retention, he had time to grow up, settling time, very positive. I retained one little boy because he moved around three times during the school year and he never caught on. I have a child that was requested for retention and I refused. I am still working on maturity issues now and then and some remediation. I think I made a good choice. It would have hurt her self-esteem watching her peers move on if she stayed behind.

Interviewer: What grade level was this?

Eve: Kindergarten, She is a preemie and has ear tubes.

Interviewer: You had mentioned maturity, what does that look like?

Eve: She was tiny but I'm only five foot tall. Didn't sit real still. There is a big difference between kindergarten and first grade. Once they get to first grade they are expected to sit still all day. No more centers. A hard transition, I taught first grade, sometimes kids struggle.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when you had a student in your class that you thought about retaining?

Eve: I had one that was low performing. Not because she couldn't do it, was not focused, could not get seatwork done, was a pretty good reader. I got a lot of flack from the second grade teacher because I didn't retain her. She was diagnosed with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) later on.

Interviewer: When you say the second grade teacher gave you a lot of flack what was that like?

Eve: She wanted certain skill levels in place, they have to sit, focus.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel?

Eve: She made me feel like I didn't make a very good professional decision and it wasn't all about me because the parents didn't want to retain her either. In my own case, my daughter's kindergarten teacher wrote huge on the report card that she wanted to retain her but parent didn't want to. I wrote her a letter that said I thought it was unprofessional for her to write that on the report card. I was always told never to write things like that on the report card.

Interviewer: Would you make that same decision again?

Eve: Yes, the first thing kids tell you is "I should be in first grade but I'm not because I was held back." There's a girl in my daughter's second grade class who tells everybody "I should be in third grade but I was held back" and you can tell, she's a lot more mature than everybody else in body, size, and what she can do.

Interviewer: What might a low performing student look like?

Eve: A year behind what they should be doing, on the pre-primer level at the end of first grade, a second grader that should be at the end of second grade level but they are still struggling with beginning of the year second grade skills; a student that struggles with skills that are taught; can't get multiplication facts, can't regroup. One little boy that I had for his second year of first grade he only made one little step of progress for the whole year I had him. In the third grade he was tested, his family was against it,

the family was very difficult to work with, he was MR (mentally retarded).
Retention wasn't what he needed.

Interviewer: What does a successful student look like?

Eve: Not necessarily gifted, masters skills that are taught at grade level, reads fluently, knows Dolch word list, can follow procedures.

Interviewer: In what way may support from home be a factor in a child's school success?

Eve: That's a big factor. I used to work at A. and we got little home support, there was no routine at home, no help with homework, no one to read to the child, parents didn't want to come to school many hadn't finished school themselves so they didn't feel comfortable.

Interviewer: What types of things do you expect from supportive parents?

Eve: Read with the child, look over spelling, look over papers that come home, look at notes that come home from school, how willing are they to get outside help or tutoring for their child.

Interviewer: You had mentioned that you thought of retaining the little boy who moved around so much, what are some other things you might consider as far as retention goes?

Eve: What that child can do, people talk about maturity a lot especially with boys, maturity comes when it comes and retaining them may not make maturity come any faster. Skill level is important because when we sent on a child that was very low he became a huge behavior problem because he was so frustrated because he couldn't do the work. He was up and out of

his chair all the time, bothering other kids, he would take other kids' papers and write his name on them.

Interviewer: What about maturity, what might that look like?

Eve: That's a hard issue. Being able to attend, follow procedures, being responsible, independent, finish work.

Interviewer: What, if anything, have you read or heard about grade retention research?

Eve: My daughter's kindergarten teacher gave me a book to read about retention, it was about fifteen-years-old, it talked about maturity, stature, self-esteem. The research I looked up said remediation was more important than retention and many retained children drop out of school because they are frustrated with school, they are not happy because they are with children that are younger than them.

Interviewer: Is there anything that I have not asked you that you would like to add?

Eve: No, thank you, good luck.

Interviewer: Thanks again, good-bye.

Eve: Good-bye.

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW SIX

Interview VI takes place on the telephone on May 8, 2006 at 7:30 PM in the evening.

Faye is a fifth grade teacher with 32 years of experience.

Interviewer: Hi, my name is Anita Ede and I am the OSU student who came to your school with the grade retention survey. Would this be a good time to interview you?

Faye: Yes

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about grade retention?

Faye: I am definitely for retention if a student has poor attendance or didn't learn the content.

Interviewer: Can you recall a specific time when you retained a student?

Faye: One fifth grader I retained was a girl. She had a bad home situation. First she was given up by mom and went to live with the grandmother – she did better in school when she lived with grandma. Then the mom got her back and she stopped making progress. She stopped doing her homework and didn't finish her classroom work. It's like she lost her motivation. Another time I retained a boy who was having a hard time in fifth grade. He knew he was having a difficult time and talked to me about how

hard reading and math were for him. I talked to him about retention and he was for it because he felt that he was not ready to go to sixth grade. He said to me, "I'm not ready to go to middle school." He did real well his second year in fifth grade. I had another fifth grade boy that I retained mainly because he had missed so much school and he was working way below grade level. His second year wasn't really successful because he still had very poor attendance. He still couldn't do math and reading at grade level.

Interviewer: What are some of the thing you look at when you retain a student?

Faye: Mainly academics, it's a big jump going from fifth grade to middle school and they have to be able to do fifth grade work before going on. Once they get over there it's a whole different atmosphere. There won't be anyone to work with them as closely as we do over here. So they have to be completely ready. They have to be able to participate in the game of life. Parent make a big difference too. If they sit down and help their child with the homework and help them with their spelling and special projects...those kids are ahead but then you have those that won't and those kids struggle through.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when you sent a low performing student on? What was the teacher's reaction?

Faye: I haven't really heard anything because I don't ever hear from the sixth grade teachers. They probably talk among themselves about it but you never hear from them over here.

Interviewer: Do you retain more students than you used to?

Faye: Actually I retain less than I used to because the principal we have now is not for retention. We have to present everything we have on a student to him before we even talk to the parents and he never agrees to it so it never goes any further than that.

Interviewer: What, if anything, have you heard about grade retention research?

Faye: Nothing at all.

Interviewer: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you would like to add.

Faye: No

Interviewer: Thank you very much for allowing me to interview this evening.

Faye: You're welcome, bye.

Interviewer: Good-by.

APPENDIX G

INTERVIEW SEVEN

Interview VII takes place on the telephone on May 9, 2006 at 7:15 PM in the evening.

George teaches computer science and has 0-5 years of experience.

Interviewer: Hi, my name is Anita Ede and I am the OSU student who came to your school with the grade retention survey. Would this be a good time to interview you?

George: Sure

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about grade retention?

George: It has its benefits and downfalls. I'm not against it because you're doing a disservice to the child if you send him on when he's not ready, especially in fifth grade – if they can't do fifth grade work how will they be able to function in sixth grade?

Interviewer: When you say not ready what does that look like?

George: It's the total picture – personality, maturity, intelligence, academics. Do they put forth effort? Are they on grade level? Are they the class clown? Are they organized? Do they turn in assignments? Are they completed? Are they on time?

Interviewer: What are some things that need to be considered when retaining a student?

George: You need to look at whether or not they are doing grade level work in that subject area. I can't retain but they won't pass if they don't do the work or it's not completed or in on time. They have to be able to understand directions and follow them. It's something that has to be done on a case-by-case basis.

Interviewer: What, if anything, have you heard or read about grade retention research?

George: Absolutely nothing. Sorry but I need to get going.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for talking to me, I really appreciate it.

George: Sure, bye.

Interviewer: Good-bye.

APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW EIGHT

Interview VIII takes place on the telephone on May 15, 2006 at 8:00 PM in the evening.

Hannah is a second grade teacher with 16+ years of experience.

Interviewer: Hi, my name is Anita Ede and I am the OSU student who came to your school with the grade retention survey. Would this be a good time to interview you?

Hannah: Okay

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about grade retention?

Hannah: I don't think it works. Well.....when I look a child that was retained in the first grade and he still has the same kind of behavior problems and learning problems that he had. It hasn't helped him at all. It just delayed him going on. It delayed him getting help.

Interviewer: When you say learning problems what types of learning problems do you see?

Hannah: Usually struggling with reading, same problems they had the year before. It's not maturity – it's another problem that needs to be addressed.

Interviewer: What about his behavior?

Hannah: Acting out for attention, he has trouble telling the truth – that's his biggest problem.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when you considered retention for a student?

Hannah: I have considered retention because I consider if I pass them on what's that teacher going to think. Sometimes they're kids that are just slow to catch on to things, they don't have any real learning problems, it just takes them extra time to figure out reading. When I taught multiage I used to worry about some that were in first grade because they were struggling with their reading but by the time they're in second grade their light comes on and you think "Oh my gosh what would have happened if I had retained him?" I retained a child one time and if I had to do it over again I wouldn't have done it. She was Hispanic now they really frown on that, it was about fifteen years ago. She didn't have the language skills

Interviewer: What kinds of things do you look at with grade retention?

Hannah: Sometimes a child is immature and doesn't fit in or they aren't on grade level or acting out behavior.

Interviewer: What does immaturity look like?

Hannah: They can't sit still, their language skills aren't on level with their peers, acting out because they can't keep up with the class – throwing erasers in class, falling out of chair, crawling around on the floor, need to get a drink and go to the bathroom during work time, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), impulsive, talk out all the time about things that are unrelated to the lesson

Interviewer: What about parent support and children's school success?

Hannah: It really depends on the family. I get really frustrated sometimes. This year I have nine Hispanic students. They have the most supportive parents. School is so important to them, their children get to school on time, they have good attendance, their children follow the rules. I have some Black families that it's important to. I have some white families that it's important to. Then I have some Black and White families that if they get there sometime during the day that's OK. Homework never comes back, when I ask about reading to their children at home they say, "I don't have time to do that – that explains why their kids aren't doing so well.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time you sent a low performing student on, what was that teacher's reaction?

Hannah: They complain and sometimes they'll come and talk to you. Sometimes they'll just complain to anyone who'll listen. But sometimes those kids that start out low at the beginning of the year end up on grade level by the end of the year. You want to place them with someone who'll show them a little compassion.

Interviewer: When you have a student that is academically successful what do you think factors into that success?

Hannah: Some I think have a lot of natural ability. Some have parents who work with them a great deal and expect a great deal. Some push themselves. There is no one thing that determines success. Sometimes they're just successful in one area. This year I have a little girl who is having a lot of

trouble reading but she blows everybody out of the water when it comes to math – she goes to the gifted class for math.

Interviewer: What, if anything, have you heard about retention research?

Hannah: There articles that say retention is great, their growth is amazing and then you have the other side of the coin where it says it lowers their self-esteem, it doesn't do any good, there isn't any proof that they're doing any better later on. I heard that children who are retained drop out.

Interviewer: Is there anything that I have not asked you that you would like to add?

Hannah:Um-um.

Interviewer: I would like to thank you very much for allowing me to interview you.

Hannah: You're welcome.

Interviewer: Bye-bye

Hannah: Bye

APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW NINE

Interview IX takes place on the telephone on May 16, 2006 at 7:15 PM in the evening.

Ian is a middle school math teacher with 0-5 years of experience.

Interviewer: Hi, my name is Anita Ede and I am the OSU student who came to your school with the grade retention survey. Would this be a good time to interview you?

Ian: Sure

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about grade retention?

Ian: If they don't understand it they need to stay back. If they do not have a working knowledge or basic understanding of that material they need to stay back or retake that class in some other form. That goes for elementary and middle school.

Interviewer: What are some things you look at when you consider retaining somebody?

Ian: If they're in the eighth grade and they read at the first grade level something needs to happen, they just can't go on. It's all academics.

Interviewer: What are some things you look for in a successful student?

Ian: Someone that listens to complete directions before they start to ask questions because if you listen from beginning to end ninety-nine percent of your questions will be answered. You can't start asking questions when

you haven't heard the problem. Positive influences from teachers and parents – I have a system where I give parents my e-mail address and we correspond on a weekly basis, I send out the spelling list on Monday, parents can ask about their child's performance, behavior, anything and I will respond in 2-3 hours. Right now I only have thirty out of sixty parents on my e-mail list. Fifty percent is actually very good.

Interviewer: What does an unsuccessful student look like?

Ian: Someone that doesn't try or doesn't perform well in class and then make 100 on the test, they're bored and they act out in class. A child that has given up, not really trying, they are not getting the support they need at home. Parents have to look at the homework. and if their child is having trouble they have to prod him to come in and ask the teacher for help because kids won't do that on their own.

Interviewer: Have you personally ever retained anyone?

Ian: No because my class is not a core class.

Interviewer: What are some of the things, if any, that you have heard or read about grade retention research?

Ian: Honestly, not much, honestly not much. I just think that there are times when it is highly applicable.

Interviewer: Is there anything that I have not asked you that you would like to add?

Ian: As I said before I don't think education should stop at school. It's got to have parental support at home. There has to be communication between

the parent, school, and student and the student has to be able to talk to both of them.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for allowing me to interview you this evening.

Ian: No problem, bye.

Interviewer: Bye-bye

APPENDIX J

INTERVIEW TEN

Interview X takes place on the telephone on May 18, 2006 at 7:30 PM in the evening.

Jan teaches gifted and talented elementary school children and has 11-15 years of experience.

Interviewer: Hi, my name is Anita Ede and I am the OSU student who came to your school with the grade retention survey. Would this be a good time to interview you?

Jan: Okay, sure

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about grade retention?

Jan: I think for some kids it's appropriate but for many it's not. It's an OK thing. It needs to be used very carefully. I would rather see a special program set up for kids who need that extra help because a lot of times when they're in elementary school they're so much bigger than the other kids and sometimes there's a maturity difference that's not very good.

Interviewer: What does a maturity difference look like?

Jan: I have a group of kindergarten kids and one of them is a year older because he was retained last year. He's more in control of his body, behavior, attitude. That's not always the case because sometimes kids are

retained because they're immature – they don't really fit – they're still very young. I don't know why he was retained but he knows all the answers.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when you retained a student?

Jan: I've never done it because I've always taught gifted children.

Interviewer: What might a special program look like that's geared towards students that are not successful?

Jan: Very small classes, a lot of small group work, one-on-one work where you can give kids what they need. Not just putting kids in classes of twenty to thirty kids and the kids with special needs are lost. That way you kid work on special skills to bring that child up to grade level. Not regular curriculum.

Interviewer: What do you look for in a successful student?

Jan: That they understand the curriculum, grasp it at close to mastery level, taking responsibility for their own actions.

Interviewer: What sorts of things contribute to students' school success?

Jan: Home life has a lot to do with it. A lot of kids are not encouraged at home to ask questions, look things up, create curiosity, turn off the TV and play games, take kids to the library. Parents need to support the teacher and the school and not badmouth the teacher in front of the student. I think that's very detrimental. Issues should be handled appropriately. Smaller class sizes would help, more aides, It helps to have teachers who are creative,

interested, and get up from behind their desk occasionally. Sometimes it seems like kids are stagnant for a year.

Interviewer: What have you noticed about students who are not successful?

Jan: It's not one particular thing. I think each kid has their own particular situation. I can think of a couple of mine who totally fell apart at the beginning of the year because of a divorce in the family. One boy will be leaving fifth grade this year - we were his fifth school in the area - his parents were never satisfied - there was no consistency.

Interviewer: What, if anything, have you heard or read about grade retention research?

Jan: I haven't paid too much attention. It seems like the research says that you should not retain but we retain at my school, obviously it's acceptable. I have heard through the grapevine that there are schools who don't allow it. I have heard that it's not a good idea but it doesn't make any sense to just keep passing them along either.

Interviewer: Is there anything that I have not asked you that you would like to add?

Jan: No

Interviewer: I want to thank you very much for allowing me to talk to you today.

Jan: You are welcome.

Interviewer: Bye-bye

Jan: Bye

VITA

Anita Ruth Ede

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: THE ROLE OF TEACHER BELIEFS IN GRADE RETENTION

Major Field: Education

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Duisburg, Germany, On January 20, 1953, the daughter of John and Ruth Baum. Married to Kenneth F. Ede and the mother of Ashley and Jessica Ede.

Education: Graduated from North Miami High School, Miami, Florida in June 1970; received an Associate of Science degree in Nursing from Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, Florida in December 1972 and a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing from the University of Miami, Miami, Florida in May 1980. Completed the requirements for a Master of Education degree at Northeastern State University, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma in May 2003.

Experience: Employed as a nurse at Variety Children's Hospital in Miami, Florida; employed as a nurse by the City of Faith and Saint Francis Hospital in Tulsa, Oklahoma; employed as a teacher at Betty Rowland's Nursery School in Tulsa, Oklahoma; employed as a teacher by Tulsa Public Schools, Tulsa, Oklahoma; employed as an instructor in the College of Education at Northeastern State University, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, 2006 to present.

Professional Memberships: Association for Childhood Education International, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, American Educational Studies Association, Oklahoma Educational Studies Association, National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Name: Anita Ede

Date of Degree: December, 2006

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: THE ROLE OF TEACHER BELIEFS IN GRADE RETENTION

Pages in Study: 172

Candidate for the Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: Education

Scope and Method of Study: The purpose of this study was to clarify what beliefs teachers have constructed that cause them to consider grade retention a sound pedagogical practice. Participants in this study were 103 elementary and middle school teachers from a large, urban, mid-western school district. Each participant completed the Teacher Opinion Survey, survey of Personal Experiences and Retention Practices and ten out of one hundred-three participating teachers were interviewed. Data were analyzed to identify trends in the practice of retention related to specific beliefs and demographic characteristics.

Findings and Conclusions: The belief that grade retention improves current academic performance as well as prevents future academic failure was found to be prevalent. English language learners and students identified as immature or unready were widely believed to benefit from retention. Kindergarten and first grade were believed to be the optimal grades for retention. Unfamiliarity with grade retention research was the single largest factor that accompanied teacher beliefs about grade retention. Fifty percent of the teachers in this study consider what other teachers will think of their professional abilities when making decisions about retention. Patterns in teacher responses revealed that teachers with the fewest years of teaching experience viewed retention more positively than teachers with more experience. Teachers with the fewest years of experience and male teachers were the most concerned about how their professional abilities might be viewed by other teachers if they were to promote poorly performing students. Middle school teachers were found to believe that retention injures children's self-esteem, increases behavior problems and leads to dropping out of school before graduation. Teachers considered immaturity, a lack of parental support and environmental factors such as single-parent families and poverty to be factors that negatively affect children's academic performance.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. Kathryn Castle