

THE RESEARCH ON YEAR LEVEL REPETITION: A SMART IDEA OR HOLDING STUDENTS BACK?

It would be difficult to find another educational practice on which the evidence is so unequivocally negative (House, 1989).

In his highly influential work on effect size, John Hattie identifies student grade retention 'as one of the few areas in education where it is difficult to find any studies with a positive effect'... 'Overall', he says, 'there are negative effects for students who are retained, and there are more positive effects in the long term for promoted students than for retained students – even when matched for achievement at the time of decision to retain or promote' (Hattie, 2009).

At a time of the year when schools around the country are faced with decisions about promoting individual students and parents are opening conversations about holding a child back to repeat a grade it is pertinent to examine the research in this area. Kenny (1991) estimates that approximately 14-18 per cent of all Australian students repeat a year and Martin (2011) puts the figure at 8-10%, suggesting the practice is less common than it was twenty years ago. Nevertheless retention continues and is most common in first four years of schooling despite the well-researched negative results of the practice. The reasons for this appear to be:

- a mistaken 'intuitive logic' that equates progress in life with doing things for a second time, although the research does not bear this out;
- history, which includes grade retention in our educational fabric as a default choice;
- it is relatively straightforward and easier than providing rich educational support over the short or long-term;
- it does not require innovation or change in school structure;
- schools and educational systems are unaware of the research about repeating;
- parents and teachers over-focus on short term outcomes. It becomes particularly difficult for schools because retention in the early stages can look like it works, often because parents believe it works. Teachers may also give too much credence to anecdotal reports by parents on 'supposedly' 'successful retention cases while taking less notice of 'unsuccessful'. They cannot see the potential long-term effects for the repeat students;
- parents and students are perceived as responsible for low achievement. That is, they work on a deficit model without giving consideration to the possibility that the school has not provided effective instruction or support to address individual student diversity;
- small differences are exaggerated, particularly in the early years, although research shows that by Year 3 there are no differences on the basis of age;
- teachers and parents underestimate students' reactions to repeating, particularly if the retention occurs in lower primary. A study by Byrnes (1989) concluded that most students saw repeating as a punishment and a stigma, not as a positive event which adults recommended to help them. Nearly all students who repeat report that they dislike the idea, seeing it as a sign of failure and loss of status and they feel very fearful of the social changes that they anticipate will occur and the teasing they might receive;
- parents and teachers make decisions on the basis of unjustified assumptions. Some of these assumptions include:
 - that teachers working with a repeat student manage that student's learning in a different way or that additional support is provided. This is usually not the case. In most cases repeating means 'doing it again' with the same content and skills taught;
 - some parents and schools think that repeating will motivate a student to try harder or even that it will lift a child's self-esteem because he is the oldest in the class. Research finds, however, the opposite occurs and these children lose self-confidence as they are out-performed by their younger peers;
 - the erroneous belief that a specifiable body of content and skills must be completed by a particular time before a student can move 'up' to the next level. This belief strongly defies current education research that bases improvement on catering for the individual child within an inclusive classroom and differentiated curriculum; and on understanding children develop at different rates. There is no research verification for the idea that simply recycling a student who fails to attain competence through the same curriculum in the company of younger students will magically solve academic difficulties; and
 - social and emotional maturity is most likely to occur when children are placed with other students who, although younger, are of similar emotional, social and academic maturity. However, this view of development is not supported by research. Studies confirm that maturity can be significantly increased through effective teaching (Martin, 2011; McGrath, 2006).

The concern for schools is not only that the reasons for grade retention are misguided and based on erroneous assumptions, but that retention can cause educational, emotional and social harm to the child.

According to Hattie (2009) the effect size of student grade retention is -0.15, where +1.0 is the equivalent of advancing achievement by 2-3 years. While this is of concern the greater concern is over time. After one year retained students score -0.45, that is, they are almost a year behind those matched students who were not retained; and this difference grows over time to reach -0.83 standard deviation units (over two years behind) for measures taken four or more years after the time of retention. What does this mean for academic achievement and social and emotional well-being?

Before answering this question it should be pointed out there is also some research to suggest that, while overall holding a child back is strongly negative there are some limited cases where there may be a positive effect; for example, early grade retention, where a student is happy to repeat, when the child has a say in the decision making, in the final year of schooling where a student needs a specific grade for a specific university course, and in the final year of schooling where illness or major interruptions have affected a student's grade. The evidence does not suggest that retention will necessarily make a difference in these cases but that it should only be considered, if precise education issues are also addressed. On the whole, however, retention does not improve outcomes for students.

In a paper entitled *To Repeat or Not to Repeat*, Dr Helen McGrath (2006) mounts a cogent argument against holding students back on the basis of the harm it does academically, socially and emotionally. She suggests there is 'no other educational issue on which the research evidence is so unequivocal...no other educational issue where there is such a huge gap between what the research says and the practices that schools continue to adopt', and she concludes from her reading of the research (Holmes, 1989; Holmes and Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001; Shephard & Smith, 1990) that, 'studies are clear-cut and unanimous: repeating a year does not improve academic performance, social competency or general behaviour for students at either the primary or secondary levels. On the contrary it creates low self-esteem and a negative attitude to school and places students at risk of further failure, increased anti-social behaviour and dropping out of school'.

A longitudinal study over 21 years (Jimerson, 1999) concluded the following:

- Repeating does not improve academic outcomes
- Repeating contributes to poor mental health outcomes
- Repeating leads to poor long term social outcomes
- Repeating contributes to a negative attitude to school and learning
- Repeating results in students dropping out of school
- Repeating decreases the likelihood that a student will participate in post- secondary schooling
- Repeated students demonstrate higher rates of behavioural problems
- There is no advantage to students in delaying school entry for a year in order to increase 'school readiness'
- There are huge costs associated with students repeating a year of schooling
- Some students are more likely to be recommended to repeat than others.

Jimerson found that more often than not, students who repeat never catch up academically and even where there are academic gains these are minimal and short-lived. Longitudinal comparisons have clearly identified that although many repeated students do make some academic progress during the year in which they repeat, these improvements have disappeared within 2-3 years. At about the Year 8 level, students who repeated a year at some stage of their earlier schooling are achieving at levels lower than or similar to those of matched students who did not repeat and are at that point a year ahead of them. One of the factors that may contribute to this overall deterioration is that repeating is a visible demonstration of 'failure' and may negatively influence many teachers' perceptions and expectations about the student for a long time (Nagin et al, 2003).

In relation to students who are held back before they enter school so they do not technically 'repeat' but begin school a little later than their peers, there appears to be no benefit to the delay. Although late beginners they have the same level of success in university applications in Year 12 as those of their peers who entered school when eligible to do so. Students who repeated a preschool year (mostly boys with late birth dates) were significantly more likely to receive special education services further down the track and showed few academic or social gains in return for their lost year (Graue & Diperna, 2000).

Even when handled sensitively and confidentially, students who repeat see themselves as failures. They feel ashamed they have been removed from their same-age peers and the shame is heightened because they are aware their peers also perceive them as failures. The stigma and loss of self-esteem has a profound effect on young people, particularly as many of the younger students in their new class out-perform them (Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber, 1994; Shepard & Smith, 1990). Repeating a year is a major source of stress for most students, to the extent that in a study by Anderson and colleagues (2005) Year 6 students reported they feared being repeated more than they feared losing a parent or going blind. Other negative effects included increased stress from awareness of being taller, larger and more physically mature than their younger classmates; missing their friends who moved on to the next year level; insensitive and negative comments by family and community members; and boredom from repeating similar tasks and assignments (Smith & Shepard, 1988, 1986).

The social behaviour of students who repeat is an argument against grade retention. Not only does behaviour not appear to improve any more than that of promoted peers with similar social difficulties, in many cases it deteriorates (Jimerson, 2001). The disruption of being removed from their peer group, the loss of status and self-esteem in being viewed as a 'failure', the attitude of other students towards repeaters and the observed disinclination of middle and upper primary students to play with students who have repeated, all feed into poor long-term social outcomes. Repeat students also display higher rates of behavioural problems and lower rates of school attendance (Shepard & Smith, 1990; Byrnes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001). There is also some evidence that the frustration and anger engendered by visible school failure contributes to later criminal and anti-social behaviour (Agnew, 2005). For many repeating students the humiliation and threat associated with school following grade retention means they are more likely to become permanently disengaged and 20 – 50% more likely to drop out of secondary school compared with students with similar levels of achievement or behaviour who were promoted with their age peers (Jimerson, 2001; Alexander et al, 2004; Temple et al, 2004). A study by Rumberger (1995) identified repeating a year as the single most powerful predictor of dropping out. The likely result of this was ongoing difficulties throughout life, including less successful work lives and lower incomes.

Poorer life outcomes can to a large extent be explained by the reduced likelihood of repeating students participating in post-secondary schooling. Students who finished secondary schooling, despite having repeated a year, were 50% less likely to enrol in tertiary education and the odds were worse for students who repeated between Years 5 and 10 (Fine & Davis, 2003; Jimerson, 1999; 2001).

Two other effects of students repeating a year should be considered. The first of these is the enormous cost involved. This includes the costs to parents of an extra year of schooling; the cost to government in supporting students for the extra year; the costs in supporting the student who is negatively affected by being forced to repeat; and the cost to society as a whole because of the increased likelihood of aggression, school dropout, involvement in crime, unemployment and welfare support, all identified from the research as a result of grade retention.

Finally, of concern is the fact that there appears to be discrimination in the choice of the types of students identified to repeat. On the whole, students recommended for grade retention over peers with similar low levels of achievement are likely to be male, from rural areas, from lower socio-economic backgrounds, physically smaller, slightly younger, from minority groups or ESL backgrounds, with diagnosed specific behaviour syndromes or negative classroom behaviour or students described as less confident or socially immature by their teachers (McGrath, 2006).

While the research is unequivocal about the negative effects of grade retention, the alternatives to support students who are achieving poorly or have social and behavioural issues are not simple. Simply promoting a student at the end of each year is not satisfactory either, unless the student receives enough support to lift achievement to the level of his/her peers. Since no one intervention strategy has been empirically proven to work, successful schools use a variety of interventions that may become costly and time consuming (ibid).

One thing the research does confirm is that holding a student back and intervening is not as effective as promoting students to the next grade and providing educational support (Martin, 2011).

Most schools at some time will be asked by parents to allow their child to repeat a year or a teacher might suggest a child will benefit from repeating. Although this might work in exceptional cases McGrath (2006) says 'for most students, providing them with more of what didn't work for them the first time around is an exercise in futility'. She suggests schools should consider their attitude towards repeating before a request is made, including developing a policy based on the research. Schools should also make the research available to parents as part of their annual education program so parents have time to consider and ask questions before a request is made.

One of the most important steps in making decisions about grade retention is to identify under-achieving students early, to identify precisely the nature of the educational issues, and to intervene immediately when student begins to fall behind. More effective teaching of these students is a perhaps the most effective way to assist. Specific interventions known to be useful are direct instruction of content, explicit teaching of curriculum materials, engaging programs that teach basic literacy and numeracy skills, deliberate practice of important skills and processes, worked examples to give step by step demonstrations of how to perform tasks, one-on-one attention, use of structured templates, teaching of social and emotional skills, and identification of a mentor and advocate known to connect well with the student (ibid).

McGrath suggests effective teachers use pedagogy that not only assists students who are falling behind, but also 'powers up' the whole class. The strategies she identifies include:

- cooperative learning strategies
- adopting problem-based learning approaches (Blumberg, 2000; De Lisle, 1997; McGrath and Noble, 2005)
- teaching a variety of mnemonic strategies to assist with recall of key concepts and information
- using rubrics for self-assessment
- relating classroom activities and curriculum to students' backgrounds, lives and current knowledge.

Differentiation of the curriculum, learning tasks and assessment is also an effective teaching strategy to assist all students. Differentiated instruction is about adjusting learning to the abilities of the individual. While the curriculum tells us what to teach, differentiated instruction tells us how to teach it to a range of learners using a variety of teaching approaches. In a differentiated classroom the teacher:

- uses a variety of teaching strategies in order to reach all learners
- scaffolds learning to move the student from one place to another, in terms of both the learning and the transferring of responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student
- involves students in establishing personal goals for learning
- builds a class profile of student strengths and needs and utilises a range of strategies to ensure the needs of all students are being addressed
- gives specific feedback to students that highlights next steps and factors that contribute to success
- establishes an environment that enables students to feel safe in taking learning risks
- provides 'tailored' assistance specific to the needs of the learner

- models learning by ‘thinking aloud’, verbalising the thought processes and steps in completing an activity
- varies complexity of language in instruction (oral and written) which may include simplifying and shortening instructions or providing cues, to ensure understanding by all students,
- always provides concrete examples for abstract concepts
- provides for guided practice - the student and teacher may work together to perform a task, the student may work with a peer or small group, then the student may engage in independent practice
- allows alternative ways for students to demonstrate knowledge and skills
- extends time limits for tasks as appropriate
- reduces the number of tasks used to assess a concept or skill
- allows for retesting of students as appropriate
- adjusts the amount of text on a page, changing text size or font, or using colour cues to assist student learning
- facilitates learning through the use of projects that may draw upon students’ strengths and interests
- explicitly teaches learning strategies to support students in ‘how to learn’, not just ‘what to learn’ (e.g., how to summarise, find the main idea)
- provides ‘graphic aids’ or organizers, cue cards, prompts, or classroom posters to aid student learning
- makes use of assistive technology as appropriate
- ensures that learning tools such as calculators and dictionaries are readily available
- arranges the room to allow all students to have clear sightlines for instruction
- builds a ‘community of learners’ within the classroom.

All of these strategies offer support for the student who is falling behind while benefiting other students also. Other approaches known to be successful in place of grade retention are:

- two or more years with the same teacher – a strategy which allows the teacher to know a child well and better understand how to adapt teaching to meet the academic needs of the individual;
- individual learning plans – widely used for students with ascertained disabilities, individual learning plans have potential for students who are falling behind to undertake programs specific to their learning needs;
- in class clustering of students – this allows explicit and direct instruction in the areas providing the most difficulties for individual students while allowing those students who understand the work to progress;
- strategies for increasing engagement and motivation – students who do not understand the work presented very quickly lose motivation and give up. It is critical to find ways to engage these students so they do not fall further behind;
- providing compensatory structures, scaffolding and assistive technology – including iPads, voice activated typing programs, educational apps, online reading which allows students to click on words for pronunciation and definitions, for example. These assistive technologies are also known to increase engagement and motivation;
- peer tutoring – known in the literature to be effective under certain conditions in helping those students falling behind (Benard, 1990; Britz et al, 1989; Cotton, 2002) ; and
- whole-class social skills and resilience programs, which benefit student perseverance and persistence in the face of short term failure (McGrath, 2006).

While there may be an occasional student who is an exception to the non-retention ‘rule’, the overall research findings strongly advocate against this approach for students who are falling behind. The cost in resources and time to provide workable interventions is high; but infinitely less than the cost of allowing a child to fail because the only solution tried is grade retention.

*While the **Holding Students Back Research Feature** is based on extensive research, decisions about how to respond to research are policy matters for individual schools. With regard to this month's feature, in particular, this is an issue for schools with Principals making the decision to hold a student back on a case by case basis. On all policy matters, this is the case. Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) supplies research and template policies but, a school board and Principal are responsible for all decisions about policy, within the framework of State and national legislative requirements.*