

**A Comparison of the Academic and Social Attitudes of Eighth Grade Special Education
Students with and Without a History of Elementary School Retention**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to compare the academic and social attitudes of 8th grade special education students that have been retained and those that have not. This is important because a students' attitude can affect their success in life and school. The null hypotheses are that there are no statistically significant difference in the mean Social Attitude, Academic Attitude, and Total School Attitude scores in eighth grade special education students that have a history of elementary school retention and age, gender, race, and special education classification matched to students that do not. This study compared the academic and social attitudes of students that were retained (n=9) and that were not (n=9). The researcher created a survey to assess the student's social and academic attitudes. The mean Social Attitude score was significantly lower for the retention group (Mean = 21.56, SD = 7.89) than for the non-retention group (Mean = 35.33, SD = 6.91) [$t(8) = .007, p < .01$]. The mean Academic Attitude score was also significantly lower for the retention group (Mean = 24.11, SD = 8.10) than for the non-retention group (Mean = 40.67, SD = 3.39) [$t(8) = .002, p < .01$]. Finally, the mean Total School Attitude score was significantly lower for the retention group (Mean = 45.67, SD = 15.67) than for the non-retention group (Mean = 76.00, SD = 9.08) [$t(8) = .003, p < .01$]. Implications of the findings and ideas for future research are discussed. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The researcher has been an eighth grade special education teacher since August 2013. Special education students are typically a few grade levels behind in their academic skills when they enter the eighth grade. To help these students that are not performing on grade level, retention is often used as an intervention (Thomas, 1992). It is the researcher's belief that students that are held back come to school with a low self-concept and low motivation toward school. With their negative attitudes, it is hard for students to make academic gains; therefore, they end up being in special education. Research indicates that retention causes negative effects to students' academic and social attitude (Bleyaert, 2009).

The researcher believes that having a positive attitude toward school and a positive self-concept will lead to academic success. Research has shown that a large percentage of students that are held back are also dropping out of high school (Bleyaert, 2009). If retention is a possible reason behind the dropout rates, why are schools still using it as an intervention?

This study was initiated because students are being held back as an intervention to help improve their academic skills. The researcher believes that potential negative consequences of retention deserves more research. This study will examine the social and academic attitudes within the school setting of eighth grade special education students. The attitudes of the students that have a history of elementary school retention will be compared to the attitudes of those that have not, in hopes of shedding some light on the effects of retention.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to compare the differences in academic, social, and overall attitudes toward education between eighth grade special education students that have history of elementary school retention and special education students that do not.

Hypothesis

The null hypotheses are that there are no statistically significant difference in the mean Social Attitude, Academic Attitude, and Total School Attitude scores in eighth grade special education students that have a history of elementary school retention and age, gender, race, and special education classification matched to students that do not.

Operational Definitions

In this study a *special education student* is defined as a student that receives special education services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). All of the special education students in this study are in eighth grade. These special education students are all classified as having a Specific Learning Disability (SLD), or Other Health Impaired (OHI). All of the OHI students in this study received their special education eligibility through an Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) diagnosis.

Social attitude can be defined as a student's feelings about how they feel socially at school. This includes how well they think they fit in, are accepted by peers and adults, etc. It is objectively measured by the Academic Attitude score, which is based on ten questions on the Student Attitude Survey.

Academic attitude can be defined as how well a student thinks they are performing scholastically as well as their feelings about the importance of education. This includes success with class

work, and other academic related tasks. Total School Attitude reflects both social and academic attitudes and is based on twenty items on the Student Attitude survey.

Total School Attitude reflects both social and academic attitudes and is based on all twenty items on the Student Attitude survey.

Retention is defined as a student needing to repeat a grade level due to academic, social, or attendance concerns. Children were not classified as retained if they needed to attend summer school for promotion but were ultimately moved up to the next grade level after summer school.

Elementary school retention is when a student was retained in elementary school. In this study all students were retained between kindergarten and fourth grade.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This literature review examines the effects retention has on students' academic performance. The first section reviews what retention is and why educators make the decision to retain students. Section two describes how retention has affected short and long-term academic achievement and success. Section three presents literature related to the relationship between retention and dropout rates. The final section provides examples of interventions and other strategies that can be used instead of retention.

Retention

Retention is when a student is held back to repeat a grade level in school. Students can be held back due to their birthday/age, upon parental request, or due to reasons related to their academic or social development. School systems attempt to limit the number of students retained due to the social stigma that is sometimes attached to retention. Many people feel that promoting students to the next grade level without mastering the grade level's necessary skills is detrimental to the student. Schools will then use social promotion, and its practice may cause students to continue to fall farther behind each year. This will create an even larger achievement gap between students in their age appropriate grades (Cooke & Stammer, 1985). Some states require students to take grade level tests or pass standards to be promoted to the next grade level (McCombs, Kirby, & Mariano, 2009). This can affect retention rates because if a student does not pass the assessment they will be held back. Students are held to high standards that need to be met before being promoted. "The goal of ending social promotion, although not necessarily replacing it with retention in grade, especially when students return to the same curricula taught

in the same manner, was endorsed by President Bill Clinton in 1998 and by the U.S. Department of Education in 1999” (Lorence, Dworkin, Toenjes, & Hill, 2002, p. 14). The goal of retention is to allow students to be exposed to curriculum and grade-level standards a second time so they do not continue to be behind. The hope is that they will achieve grade-level skills with peers in their classes and then continue to work at an appropriate level. Whether students should be promoted or held back is a debate among many researchers and school officials.

Retention in Special Education

After retention some students are placed into special education if they are not finding academic success. Schools often use retention as a step before special education. Retention is supposed to help catch the struggling learners up so that they will not require an IEP. However according to research, “retention is not effective for students with academic, behavioral, or immaturity problems” (Gaffney & Zaimi, 2003, p. 2). Schools have held back students due to a lack of maturity, but it is not always the best solution. Research supports that retention is ineffective, but schools still continue to retain struggling learners. In 1996, “approximately 72% of students with learning disabilities were retained at least once before being referred for special-education evaluation” (Gaffney & Zaimi, 2003, p. 2). Retention in comparison to special education is not investigated often; even though many special education students have been held back. State reports are also not including data based on retention in special education students. States are providing data reports about how dropping out is a risk factor for special education students, but they are refraining from including how retention is involved.

Effects of Retention on Academic Achievement

Several studies have assessed how retention affects the academic success of students. Previous research showed that holding a student back helped them learn the skills that they were previously missing. However, new research is showing that holding back a student does not provide any long-term positive effects to their academic success. One study found that "... those who were retained tended to show higher academic achievement than their counterparts who had been promoted, but the initial advantage disappeared after three years" (Lorence et al., 2002, p. 15). Students may exhibit academic improvement initially when being held back, but these gains may be short-lived. Students will feel accomplishment at first but will then begin to regress and lose their academic confidence. Regression can lead to emotional side effects and eventually dropping out of school all together.

A study in New York compared elementary students who were retained with a random selection of students that were not. The conclusion was that, "retention may be a component of an effective academic intervention for children with academic difficulties, in contrast to no intervention (i.e., social promotion). However, without additional attention to the root causes of these children's academic difficulties and without optimal motivational support by parents and teachers, holding children back may not work" (Pierson & Connell, 1992, p. 307). The study found that retention was more successful than social promotion, but it was still not the best solution to academic difficulties. Retention can lead to success for some students, but may not be the solution for all.

A 21-year longitudinal study showed a greater likelihood of poor educational and employment outcomes for retained students compared to promoted students at the same level of

achievement (Martin, 2011). Studies reviewed suggest that while retention is being practiced in many schools, it is not showing lasting academic advantages for many students.

Effects of Retention on Dropout Rates

Students' dropout rates have increased in recent years. There are many reasons students drop out of school which relate to economics, social and academic factors. According to research, "retention increases the risk of dropping out between 20% and 50%" (Bleyaert, 2009, p. 1). Students who drop out are likely to have been retained at least once in their lifetime. Academic regression and emotional stress due to retention is a leading factor in students dropping out of school. Retention is not the cause of dropping out, but there is a strong relationship between the two. In Northern Indiana, researchers noted that schools were not preparing their students for success that caused them to drop out. Additionally, they found that students were being held back for invalid reasons and at a younger age than what is beneficial, and did not meet success later in secondary education. This rendered them less likely to graduate (Mansfield, O'Leary & Webb, 2011).

Alternatives to Retention

Schools often avoid retaining students if possible. Schools are trying to implement other interventions and strategies so students can succeed without having to repeat a grade level. The Oregon State School Board describes the negative effects of holding students back a grade level. They believe that the research supports implementing interventions and alternatives to retention. Their new motto is, "prevention not retention" (Thomas, 1992, p.45). The state's philosophy suggests educators should do their best to help students achieve academically early on so that retaining a student is not necessary. They feel that school should explore alternatives so that retention is the last possible solution if used at all.

Along with providing interventions to students, there are other alternatives that can impact retention, such as professional development for teachers. Education is changing and educators need to be taught ways to reach struggling learners, and how to prevent academic failures early in the educational process. Implementing more supports in the classrooms and providing students with more intensive learning opportunities is another possibility. The assessments used should be aligned with instruction so they are valid and reliable. The students should be prepared for an assessment that tests their knowledge on what was taught (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Options besides retention should be assessed to determine which lead students to greater success.

Conclusion

The decision to retain a student is difficult and complex and is based on student factors and by policy and input from staff and parents (Bleyaert, 2009). There are many different reasons to consider retaining children and they should be considered carefully as retention can impact children academically, socially and emotionally. Research has shown that long-term effects of retention do not promote success for many children (Pierson et al., 1992). Students who are held back often are at a higher risk of dropping out of school later. Schools can provide students with other strategies and interventions so that they may not need to be held back. Hopefully this would impact graduation rates for the better. Each child is different and decisions about retention should be based on reliable research to ensure the decision is the best one to meet each individual child's needs.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

This study examines the academic, social, and overall attitudes toward education between eighth grade special education students that have history of elementary school retention and special education students that do not. This study had a casual comparative design using a convenience sample of eighth grade students; pairs of students were matched based on age, sex, and special education disability coding but differed as to whether or not they had a history of early elementary school retention. The independent variable was whether or not the student had a history of early elementary school retention. The dependent variable was the academic score, social score, and overall scores from the School Attitude Survey.

Participants

Participants in this study were students in a rural public middle school of about 930 students in Maryland. The sample consisted of 18 eighth grade students that currently receive special education services. There were six students that were coded as having an Other Health Impairment (OHI); specifically Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and twelve students that had a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). There were six female and twelve male students. Nine of the students had been retained before receiving special education services and nine had not. All of the students in this study considered themselves to be Caucasian.

The researcher did a record review of all 40 eighth grade special education students to identify students with a history of retention. The seven students with disability codes of Intellectual Disability or Autism were excluded. The record review identified 9 students with a history of retention that did not meet exclusion criteria. The researcher then found matches for

each of the 9 students based on age, sex, and disability coding. Since the retained group consisted of older children, it was not possible to have close age matches. However, the retained students were matched with the oldest among the non-retained students who were the same for sex and disability coding. The age range in the retention group was from 14 years and 2 months to 15 years and 3 months. The age range in the non-retention group was from 13 years and 8 months to 14 years and 6 months. In both groups, there were 9 students in eighth grade that had a current IEP. There were 3 students with the coding OHI, and 6 with the coding SLD in each group. There are also 3 female and 6 male students in each grouping.

Instrument

The School Attitude Survey was designed by the researcher based on the researcher's understanding of the literature about attitudes and retention (please see Appendix A). Participants had five choices “Strongly Disagree,” “Disagree,” “Neither Disagree or Agree,” “Agree” and “Strongly Agree.” The survey consisted of twenty statements. Ten for students’ attitudes towards school academically and ten about their attitudes toward school socially. The survey yields three scores; academic, social, and overall. The statements were phrased such that more positive attitudes would produce higher scores. The statements where the participant chose “Strongly Disagree” got one point, “Disagree” got two points, “Neither Disagree or Agree” got three points, “Agree” got four points, and “Strongly Agree” got five points. There are 10 questions that relate to the academic score and 10 that relate to the social score. The total score was based on all 20 questions. The scores ranged from 10-50 for the scales and 20-100 for the total score. In order to preserve validity, participants were not told the categories of the rating scale. As the instrument was created by the researcher, there is no validity or reliability data available.

Procedure

Prior to selecting any participants, permission to proceed was granted by the school principal. Participants of this study were approached before and during homeroom. The 18 students were split up into two groups of four and two groups of five at random. Each group completed the survey during a different time in an empty classroom so there would not be any distractions. Before the survey was distributed, the researcher told the students the survey would be anonymous and not graded. The participants were told to circle the word that best showed their honest feelings about each statement. The researcher read each statement aloud due to the fact that many of the participants had deficits in reading due to their disability. The questionnaire was filled out independently and collected by the researcher. The mean scores for each of the scales for the retained group were compared to the mean scores for each of the scales for the non-retained group with a paired sample *t*-test.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes of 8th grade Special Education students to see if there was a difference in students that were retained to those that were not. The Attitude Survey scores were designed to evaluate each student's attitude toward school academically and socially. There was also a total attitude score that was calculated as well.

The mean Social Attitude score was significantly lower for the retention group (Mean = 21.56, SD = 7.89) than for the non-retention group

(Mean = 35.33, SD = 6.91) [$t(8) = .007, p < .01$]. The mean Academic Attitude score was also significantly lower for the retention group (Mean = 24.11, SD = 8.10) than for the non-retention group (Mean = 40.67, SD = 3.39) [$t(8) = .002, p < .01$]. Finally, the mean Total School Attitude score was significantly lower for the retention group (Mean = 45.67, SD = 15.67) than for the non-retention group (Mean = 76.00, SD = 9.08) [$t(8) = .003, p < .01$]. See Table 1.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and t-statistics for Scale Scores by Group

<u>Group and Scale</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std.</u> <u>Deviation</u>	<u>t-statistic</u>
Retention Social Attitude	21.56	7.89	3.58*
Non- retention Social Attitude	35.33	6.91	
Retention Academic Attitude	24.11	8.10	4.65*
Non-retention Academic Attitude	40.67	3.39	
Retention Total School Attitude	45.67	15.67	4.29*
Non-retention Total School Attitude	76.00	9.08	

N = 9 pairs of students

*Statistically significant at $p < .01$

The null hypotheses were that there would be no statistically significant differences in the mean Social Attitude, Academic Attitude, and Total School Attitude scores between eighth grade special education students that have a history of early elementary school retention and (approximate) age, gender, race, and special education classification matched students that were not. All three null hypotheses were rejected because the retention group had significantly lower mean scores for all of the scales.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes of 8th grade Special Education students to see if there was a difference in students that were retained from those that were not. The null hypotheses were that there is no statistically significant difference in the mean Social Attitude, Academic Attitude, and Total School Attitude scores in eighth grade special education students that have a history of elementary school retention and age, gender, race, and special education classification compared to students that do not. The null hypothesis was rejected because students that were retained had lower Academic, Social, and Total scores.

Theoretical Implications

The results were consistent with research that retention has negative side effects of students socially. The students that were retained had overall lower scores than those that were not retained. This study was consistent with other research done about retention.

Implication of the Results

Based on the results of this research, it seems that retention has a negative effect on the academic and social attitudes of students who eventually end up in Special Education. The survey results show that students that were retained had lower scores than those that were not. The mean scores for the Academic score, Social score, and Total score were all lower for students that were retained in every matched pair. Higher scores indicate that students feel positively about the social and academic aspects of school. Lower scores show that the students have a more negative attitude about social and academic aspects of school. The data suggests that if students are retained, they are likely to develop a negative attitude about the social and academic aspects of school.

Educators and administrators should consider this data when making retention decisions. Even if some students make academic gains in the year in which they are retained, this benefit may not offset the negative impact of retention on attitude. Interventions may need to be put in place with children who have been retained in order to improve their attitudes and make sure that they stay in school.

Connections to Previous Literature

There was a study done in New York and they found that retention was not the solution to struggling learners. “Without additional attention to the root causes of these children's academic difficulties and without optimal motivational support by parents and teachers, holding children back may not work” (Pierson et al., 1992, p. 307).

The research and studies that have been done recently indicate that being held back may not provide students with the success that it was originally intended. Research has shown that retention, “increases the risk of dropping out between 20% and 50%” (Bleyaert, 2009, p. 1). Research shows that students that have dropped out of high school have likely been retained at least once in their life-time. Students that experience academic and emotional stress due to retention are factors leading to dropping out of school (Mansfield et al., 2011). The results of this study obviously do not address whether or not students who had been retained dropped out of school. However, the current results are consistent with the literature that suggests that retention can have negative emotional consequences and lead to negative feelings about education.

Threats to Validity

There were several factors that could have affected the validity of the results. The small sample size, 18 students, reduced the validity since the results were based off of a low number of people.

A threat to external validity was that there was limited variability in the participants, which limited the extent to which the results can be generalized. The sample was selected based on convenience because they were easily available to the researcher. The participants came from similar ethnic backgrounds (all white) and Socioeconomic Status (predominantly lower socioeconomic status). The sample included only 8th grade students, so the age of the students could have affected the results. Younger children or older children may have different attitudes. The subjects all were classified as LD or OHI. Other special education groups may respond differently to retention.

A critical threat to internal validity was that the students had not been randomly assigned to retention or non-retention groups. The students may have differed in characteristics, such as the retained group of students perhaps having greater learning difficulties that may have contributed to their current differences in attitude. This particular survey did not include data on students' previous attitudes prior to being retained. Consequently, it is possible there were differences in attitude prior to retention.

There were some threats to internal validity related to instrumentation. The survey was developed by the researcher, so there was no reliability or validity data on the survey. Students taking the survey were also all in special education. The students may not have fully understood a question, which could affect the results.

Another threat to internal validity is the effort that was put forth when answering the survey.

The survey was done in the morning when many students are tired and not motivated. They may have circled random answers without giving a lot of thought to the question in front of them.

Implications for Future Research

This study indicates that elementary school retention negatively impacts attitude towards school. There has been some research to support the negative effects of retention, but there needs to be more. Future research could be done over a long period of time to get a better idea of the long term-effects that retention has on students. If there was a large group of students that were followed over a long period of time, the researcher could analyze how the attitude of the children changes or stays the same over time. Studies could look at attitude and its relation to retention rates.

Future research should also include different types of students in their sample. The research would offer more generalizable data if it included students from different schools, ethnic backgrounds, ages, and special education classification.

This particular study only assessed the students' attitudes toward school. Future research could analyze how a student is doing academically before and after being held back. This way the data could show whether retention improves a students' academics rather than attitude.

Future research should also randomly assign struggling students to a retention or non-retention track or else find school systems that are highly similar that differ in whether or not retention is used as an intervention and compare the attitudes of retained and non-retained students who were struggling in elementary school once they are older. This would help control for pre-existing differences. A related consideration is that this study did not include a pre-assessment, so it is hard to say if the scores were a result of retention. Future research should assess the students' attitude toward school before and after retention.

Summary

The study included special education students in 8th grade at a rural middle school that were from a low socioeconomic status. They were matched based on gender, disability classification, and being closest in age. Matched students differed in whether or not they were retained in elementary school, prior to entering special education. Students completed a questionnaire assessing academic and school related social attitudes. The results of this study suggest that retention negatively affects students' attitudes toward school academically and socially. Students with a history of retention had lower Academic, Social, and Total scale scores. However, there were many factors that affected the validity of the results. More research needs to be done to investigate whether retention was the basis of the differences in attitude. There needs to be a way to help struggling learners that takes into account academic and social attitudes in addition to academic skills.

APPENDIX

Student Number: _____

Date: _____

Student Attitude Survey

For each question, circle the response that best describes how you feel.

Question					
1. I am confident in my school work.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
2. My teachers like me.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
3. I have friends in school.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
4. I learn new skills at school quickly.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
5. I feel like I fit in at school.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
6. I like it when I get to work with groups of other students.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
7. I do my homework most of the time.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
8. I feel like an important part of my school.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

9. Going to school is important to me.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
10. I feel respected by other students at school.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
11. I do well in school.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
12. I think it is fun spending time with other kids at school.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
13. I plan on staying in school until I graduate because I want to have the skills for a job or more schooling.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
14. I feel respected by teachers at school.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
15. I participate in clubs at school.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
16. I want to get good grades.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
17. I try hard in school.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

18. Other students look up to me at school.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
19. I enjoy learning new things.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
20. I am successful as a student.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

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