



The Gift that Keeps on Giving: How Adults Who Repeated a Grade in K-12 Assess the Impact of Retention

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Abstract

Beginning in early 2020, COVID-19 forced educators across the United States to adopt learning platforms and strategies never before contemplated. Recent research suggests that, as classrooms return to face-to-face instruction, parents, teachers, and administrators are confronting gaps in student learning. Once again, grade retention has surfaced as offering lagging students a gift of time. This qualitative study relies on detailed interviews with adults, ages 43-67, who were retained in grade as children. Using narrative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015), we probed the perceptions of participants, seeking to understand the extent to which their experiences aligned with extant research. The study offers current education leaders and those who aspire to these leadership roles reminders of the long-term impact of a decision to retain a child in grade.

Keywords: Grade Retention, Impact, Perceptions in Adulthood, Antecedent Events

Introduction

An abundance of research has explored whether grade retention serves effectively as a corrective to lagging student academic and social progress. Several themes predominate: academic gains that accrue from repeating a grade are scant and fleeting (Shepard & Smith, 1989a); students who are retained often equate their repeating a year with being slow or bad (Byrnes, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 1998a; Darling-Hammond, 1998b; Jimerson, 2001; Shepard & Smith, 1989b; Thomas, 2000); and grade retention serves as a predictor that the student who repeats a grade will drop out of school (Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Kurtz, 2002; Parker, 2001; Roderick, 1993; Thomas, 2000; Whipple, 2002). A longitudinal review of extant research (Holt, Range, & Pajonowski, 2009) concluded that the data from earlier studies discouraged retention. A RAND study found that retention in an early elementary grade was less likely to increase the likelihood of dropping out than when retention occurred in seventh grade or later (Mariano, Martonell, & Berglund, 2018).

The grail of accountability has served as a starting point for many conversations focused on grade retention. A 2007 study reported that, despite research from the 1980s and 1990s that largely debunked the efficacy of requiring students to repeat a grade, “The push for educational accountability . . . has brought this issue back to the forefront of education debates” (Jacob & Lefgren, 2007, p. 2). Late 2019 brought first reports of a global health crisis that, by early 2020, prompted schools to resort to distance-learning platforms, a sweeping technological advent previously unthinkable to most education practitioners.

In the early months of the pandemic, as the U.S. and other countries careened into lockdowns and social isolation, schools rushed to adopt virtual learning platforms, a strange learning landscape for teachers and children alike.

Children spent months out of the classroom, where they were supposed to learn the basics of reading — the ABCs, what sound a “b” or “ch” makes. Many first- and second-graders returned to classrooms needing to review parts of the kindergarten curriculum (Goldstein, 2022).

New evidence shows that “about one-third of children in the youngest grades are missing reading benchmarks, up significantly from before the pandemic” (Goldstein, 2022).

Predicting how the COVID-19 pandemic might result in students falling behind academic achievement markers upon their returning to face to-face learning, a 2020 report stated, “Students who were already facing adversity [before the pandemic] will struggle in the coming year for multiple, intertwined reasons, including loss of

learning from the prior year, trauma, long-term stress, and declining family resources” (Allensworth & Schwartz, 2020).

Early indications of how student achievement has been affected by these instructional adjustments, and, more specifically, by remote learning, suggest that the impact has been broad and will likely manifest for years to come. “New research suggests students still haven’t regained the academic ground they’ve lost in the disruptions of the ongoing pandemic, and many high school students will continue to struggle after graduation” (Sparks, 2022). A decline in student achievement in the secondary grades has been documented through testing programs such as the ACT; however, “the learning losses were worse for lower grades” (Sparks, 2022).

While children from every demographic have been touched by the effects of learning modifications, “Black and Hispanic children, as well as those from low-income families, those with disabilities and those who are not fluent in English, have fallen the furthest behind” (Goldstein, 2022).

Anecdotal conversations we have had with our graduate and post-graduate students, all of whom are teachers or administrators in P-12 schools, suggest that grade retention is once again emerging as a proposed antidote for lagging student achievement. Parents initiate the conversation. School leaders and teachers may oppose a parent’s proposal that a child repeat a grade, but some parents insist that having their child remain in kindergarten, third, or sixth grade will fill gaps in math or reading rooted in virtual teaching and learning imposed at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Absent from extant research on the efficacy and outcomes of grade retention is an exploration of how, if at all, the effects, intended and unintended, on those who have failed a grade persist into their adulthood. What should guide current school administrators and those who aspire to these leadership roles as they navigate conflicting urges toward holding students accountable for their progress, on one hand, and, on the other, an understanding that, when that accountability manifests as a recommendation to retain a child in grade, that decision may portend unbidden consequences? The real-life stories of those who shared their experiences in this study remind us of the unintended outcomes that may follow from retention.

Method

This study employs narrative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015) as the qualitative vehicle for exploring the perspectives of participants. Through narratives, the researcher is able to explore participants’ lived experiences, including nuances such as intonation, pauses, and contradictions. “First-person accounts of experience constitute the narrative ‘text’ of this research approach” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 34).

The interviews from which data for the current study derived resulted from purposeful sampling. “Qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples, even single cases . . . , selected *purposefully* to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon *in depth*” (Patton, 2015, p. 52, emphasis in original). We identified six adults, ages 43-67, all of whom repeated a grade in elementary school. One of the participants was retained a second time in middle school. We used pseudonyms throughout the study, including for participants, school personnel, and school sites.

A constant comparative strategy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015) aided in analysis of interview data. As proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), constant comparative includes an examination of data collected to identify issues, themes, and recurrent ideas. Our inductive approach to the data we collected in interviews led to our identifying recurrent themes in our participants’ narratives (Strauss, 1987).

Narratives

Silence and secrets

“Lizette” was born and raised in northern California. She is African-American. At the time of our interview, Lizette was 52 years old, lived in a comfortable home in a suburb of a major city, and worked as an administrator in the urgent care unit for one of the major hospitals.

Lizette, along with her two older sisters and two younger brothers, attended St. Mary’s School, a parochial school. Because of her December birthday, she began kindergarten several months after she had turned 5. She has fond memories of the primary grades, recalling, among other events, churning milk until it turned to butter. One day, as the third-grade year was about to end, Lizette’s mother stood in the hallway outside her classroom at the end of the day. Her teacher, Sister Josephine, and her mother had talked about Lizette’s progress. “My Mom told me that they were going to keep me back in the third grade. I just broke down and started crying.” Mom tried to be reassuring as she gently played with Lizette’s bangs. “It’s not because you’re dumb,” Mom said. “It’s because you’re really quiet.” Lizette had no inkling that her inclination to be quiet raised a red flag. She thought she was on par with her peers academically. “I did the work; I got decent grades. They were just concerned with me socially.” More than 40 years had intervened between that hallway meeting with Sister Josephine and our interview. “I always go back to that whenever it’s time to share about your childhood or childhood experiences.”

As the next year began—Lizette’s second turn in third grade—she was again in Sister Josephine’s class. Her brother, one year younger than she, was now one of her third-grade classmates. The friends she had developed in the primary grades moved on to fourth grade while she remained in third. She remembers the embarrassment she felt, the sense that her former classmates looked down on her. “They weren’t my friends anymore,” she said, her voice falling to a whisper. “I didn’t keep any friends.”

Repeating third grade was the official consequence for not developing the social skills Lizette’s teacher identified as essential for advancement to fourth grade. But there was also a consequence at home. As her older sisters progressed through the elementary and middle school grades, they were allowed to attend parties and school dances. Her younger brothers enjoyed similar privileges. Lizette did not.

It was like they were keeping me back at home socially as well. I just couldn’t understand it. I was repeating the grade at school. At home, I was being kept back also, not just at school. So, it was a double whammy for me.

All four of her siblings earned driving privileges at age 16. Lizette learned to drive when she was 30, after she had married and moved to Los Angeles.

Being retained was not the only trauma that marked Lizette’s third-grade experience. “We were going to Mass—Saturday afternoon Mass—my two brothers and I. We walked through St. Mary’s School.” As they passed a secluded part of the school, an unfamiliar odor offended their noses.

We looked over the little brick wall, and we saw all this trash. We said, “Look at all this trash! Where are all the flies coming from?” And then we looked, and we saw a foot, another foot, a hand; then we saw the head with the mouth open. And it was someone under the trash that [pauses] had expired. We were shocked. And we were really young!

Though Lizette slept but fitfully for weeks after the discovery, there was no therapy and no attempt by adults to help Lizette and her brothers make sense of their experience. “And I just knew for a long time that, whoever it was that harmed her, he was coming after me. I was afraid for a long time.”

By her eighth-grade year, Lizette’s parents had divorced; and the family’s straightened circumstances meant Lizette would move to the public high school for grades 9-12. There she took summer school classes in an effort to speed her path to graduation. Lizette was 19 when she finished high school. She did not attend her graduation.

Our interview had reached its logical conclusion, the coda where the interviewer asks, “Is there anything I haven’t asked that should be a part of this conversation?” Lizette clutched the recorder. Seconds passed. Her voice almost a whisper, she began, “Well, maybe there is one more thing.” There were secrets.

My stepfather was an alcoholic. My mother was manic-depressed. She was not medicated until she was like in her 40s. There was a lot of violence in our home. We gave the appearance that everything was okay. But when we were at home, we weren’t allowed to play with other children—unless we were at school. We were kind of locked in the house, because we didn’t want other people to know how ugly it was on the inside. So, I think that was why I was so quiet.

Her mother’s manic-depression manifested in rages. “She raged a lot. And when I say raged, there was violence where there were holes in the walls.” When Mom was on a tear, Lizette and her siblings would stay out of sight. “I would run and hide to protect myself,” she said. Lizette reflected now on how her mother’s unmedicated ailment may have affected the experience of being retained. “Most moms would probably try to help you understand, to work through it. But I didn’t—we didn’t—have any of those tools.”

Reflecting on her own experience as a nine-year old, Lizette offers her perspective: “I think the student should be given an opportunity before they’re retained and enough time to discuss it so they can have time to overcome whatever it is to avoid being retained. How simple is that?”

Now more than 40 years distant from her experience of repeating third grade, Lizette views this event with lingering resentment. “I revert back to how they kept me back because I was quiet. It just didn’t make sense to me.” It still doesn’t make sense. “I wish that someone would have worked with me, or talked to me, or I had had some type of mentor, or someone to hold my hand through it,” she says. “I just never really understood why.”

Thanks, Mrs. Sanchez!

“Julie” has been a teacher in the San Joaquin Valley in northern California for the past 20 years. She is 53 years of age. Before starting her career in teaching, she worked for 10 years as a medical records specialist.

Julie recently completed California's requirements to be a school principal. She has also earned a master's degree in education, a teaching certificate, and a baccalaureate degree in hospital administration. Junior college classes that followed high school graduation led to an AA in medical records.

Julie's early childhood was marked by loss and sadness. Her father, an airman in the United States Air Force, died of a brain tumor when she was four. Though Julie's maternal grandparents, who lived in San Francisco, offered to have Julie's mother, Julie, and her older brother live with them, Mom chose to stay in the community near the Air Force base where Dad was stationed before he died. Mom found part-time work at St. Ann's Catholic Church. After completing kindergarten in the local public elementary school, Julie started first grade at St. Ann's.

Whereas Julie's brother, four years older than she, seemed to adjust easily to the loss of their father, Julie did not. She recalls,

During all of this, I had great trauma and anxiety over my father's death. We were not allowed to talk about it. I had a lot of difficulty. There were a lot of things, some medical, that were all related to stress because of my father's death. It was like a hush-hush thing, and I didn't understand it.

Although Mom found a tutor to help her daughter learn to read, Julie struggled through first, second, and third grade.

Fourth grade brought new challenges. As the year progressed, Julie's teacher, Sister Mary Catherine, identified seven of her students, including Julie, as lagging in their achievement. Julie and the other six students were assigned to sit at the back of the class.

She believed that either you had it or you didn't. The students who didn't went to the back of the class. And you sat there by yourself trying to pick things up. She spent less time with us because she felt we were not worthy.

It was a traumatic year.

The seven relegated to the back of the class were targets of demeaning comments from their teacher. Some of the seven, including Julie, reported to their parents what was happening in the classroom. Sister Mary Catherine denied allegations of impropriety.

As the school year ended, Sister Mary Catherine met with Julie's mother. Julie was present as the teacher told Mom that Julie needed to repeat fourth grade.

I will never, ever forget when we went to the conference. Sister said I really needed to be retained. She said, "There's something wrong with her. She's not right! She'll never be *anything!* She'll *never* even make it out of the eighth grade."

Julie's mother was devastated.

Over the summer, the school principal, also a nun, followed up on complaints she had received from parents about Sister Mary Catherine. Sister Mary Catherine was not on the faculty in the fall. Julie's six classmates whom the teacher had isolated at the back of the classroom did not return to St. Ann's. Instead their parents enrolled them in the public school. In the fall, Julie discovered a new teacher in her fourth-grade classroom. Mrs. Sanchez, whose husband was an airman at the Air Force Base, introduced Julie to a more focused, positive approach to learning. Whereas Sister Mary Catherine had belittled Julie and others who lagged in their learning, Mrs. Sanchez encouraged. Julie learned to read and learned to study; she learned to take notes. "I would stay up until all hours of the night, if my mother would let me, to get my work done for this woman," Julie said. "I would do anything she wanted."

At the time of our interview, more than 40 years had elapsed since Julie encountered Mrs. Sanchez. "I'm sure I have learning disabilities," Julie says. "I don't doubt that for a minute." Mrs. Sanchez's gentle but persistent nudging taught Julie that learning for her will take additional time. "Everybody doesn't learn the same way," Julie reflects. "Some people need more time."

Julie's second try in fourth grade was not without challenges. The children who had been in the class with Sister Mary Catherine but who had been promoted to fifth grade did not forget that Julie had been held back. Some of the taunts still sting.

I had glasses, so I was "dummy four-eyes." "That's why you had to stay back. Fourth-grade four-eyes!" They would come up with all kinds of things to remind me I was retained. "You don't know how to read, and people who are dumb don't know how to read!"

The relationships she had with classmates the previous years faded and vanished.

The year in Mrs. Sanchez's classroom was the turning point. "I excelled," Julie said. "I did *extremely* well. I wasn't the dummy who couldn't read." As she began the secondary grades, she participated in student government. As an adult she has found success as a hospital administrator and as an educator. So, was being retained in fourth grade a good thing or a bad thing? Julie acknowledges that, at the time she repeated fourth grade, she was angry and resentful. From her perspective as an adult, she views repeating fourth grade as the trigger point for the success she has experienced.

I often wonder what would have happened to me if I had just been pushed on, and pushed on, and pushed on, and ended up in high school still struggling, not having the strategies to know how to help myself and to be an independent learner. For me, I think it was, in a way, a divine intervention. What would have happened to me if I hadn't had Mrs. Sanchez? For *me*, retention was a positive thing.

And what became of Sister Mary Catherine? St. Ann's School celebrated its 50th anniversary a few years after Julie began teaching. Her mother encouraged her to attend the reunion. Among those in attendance was Sister Mary Catherine. Julie made a point of introducing herself. Though more than two decades had passed since the teacher's pronouncement that Julie must repeat fourth grade, Sister Mary Catherine remembered. "I retained you," the teacher began. "And did you ever make it through high school?" Yes, Julie replied. She had been quite successful, despite the Sister's prediction to the contrary. "Well, I just can't believe it," Sister Mary Catherine said incredulously. "And I'm sure she couldn't," Julie concluded.

Cinderella

"Jenny" is 43 years old. She and her two school-age children, a daughter, age 12, and a son, age 10, live in a semi-rural Pacific Northwest town nestled on the U.S.-Canada border. She chose not to marry her children's father. Over the years, she has held several jobs; at present, she works at a Mobil gas station.

Jenny was born in England and lived there with her parents until she was 4. Her family emigrated from England, settling first in Minnesota, then Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, then Vancouver, B.C. Her father, who was a musician, traveled frequently to perform gigs with his band. Her parents' marriage ended when Jenny was 5. Not long after, her father married again. Jenny's new step-mother had four children of her own. After resettling the family on the U.S. side of the border, her father and step-mother opened a restaurant. Her father continued his music career; her step-mother managed the family business.

In the primary grades, Jenny's academic performance was middling, at best. "I was pretty much a C student," she recalls. "I don't think I was F, but I wasn't great." There were some bright moments, like when she took a math class in summer school. And she enjoyed reading and spelling.

When she was 11, her step-mother put her to work in the restaurant. Jenny was in fifth grade. Her assigned tasks included scrubbing the floor, washing dishes, laundering tablecloths and ironing them, and getting everything set for the next morning.

My mom would make me work until midnight. Sometimes I'd spend the night there and just fall asleep. I think that really started the downfall of school for me. I was tired. I was working all the time.

Though Jenny's older step-siblings worked in the family's restaurant, their roles were different from Jenny's. "They did their shift, and they got paid. My step-mom would say, 'Oh, just leave. Jenny will clean up the tables and take your tips off the table. She'll finish the cleaning.'"

As sixth grade ended, her step-mother decided Jenny should repeat that grade. There was little discussion. "My stepmom just said, 'My daughters were all held back in sixth grade, and you're gonna be held back, too.'" And that was that. The school principal, Jenny recalls, attempted to dissuade her step-mother. Her step-mother remained adamant.

In the fall, Jenny began her second attempt at sixth grade. Her friends had moved on to seventh grade. At the end of each school day, she worked in the restaurant. School faded in importance. "I felt like an idiot. I felt like a loser," Jenny recalls. "At that point I kind of gave up. My life was dishes and laundry and ironing and housework." Her grades suffered.

At age 15, at the end of her eighth-grade year, Jenny dropped out of school—with her stepmother's blessing. "My stepmother said, 'You don't have to go to school. You can earn money. You'll get paid to work.' I was like, 'Okay!' I had no life. I didn't care about anything." Not long after she dropped out, Jenny had second thoughts. She wrote letters to some of the teachers she had had in school expressing her hope that she could return to school. Her younger brother carried her letters to school. She never received a reply.

In hindsight, Jenny sees her being retained in sixth grade as the precursor to a succession of unproductive decisions and developments that have followed her into adulthood. "I don't think retention was positive in any

way,” Jenny avers. “It’s not like I was retained and then I did a great job and my grades were great and it motivated me to finish school. If anything, it had a negative effect.”

In Jenny’s view, there is “no necessary reason for the average kid to have to fail.” The school should have been a safety net for her. Her teachers or a school counselor could have communicated with her parents, could have advocated for alternatives to retention. She was alone.

Findings and Recommendations

The narrative accounts we have incorporated offer a view of how being retained in grade may, in the short-term, affect the child deemed unprepared to advance with their peers to the next grade; more poignantly, participants’ accounts document that repeating a grade has continued to shape their self-perceptions and motivations in adulthood.

The current study suggests that those who were retained as early as the primary grades recall in minute detail the circumstances that surrounded the announcement that they would repeat a grade. Several themes emerge from the current study. Without exception, the trauma of being retained remains an indelible part of each individual’s memories. The academic deficiencies that parents or teachers identified as motives for retention were accompanied, in every instance, by circumstances that lay outside the school environment over which the child had no control.

Our findings lead us to recommend the following: (1) Having determined that a child’s progress in school portends a decision to have the student repeat a grade, school administrators and teachers should feel ethically bound to evaluate whether circumstances not observed in the classroom may be at the root of the child’s academic lag; (2) teachers, school leaders, and other school personnel, as well as parents, should explore interventions and alternatives to retention that might provide the child with the support needed to meet requirements for promotion, particularly as we emerge from COVID; (3) even at the youngest age, the child whose academic progress has introduced the possibility of retention in grade should be included in the conversation.

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