

The Perceptions of Primary Grade Teachers and Elementary Principals about the Effectiveness of Grade-Level Retention

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the attitudes of primary grade teachers and elementary principals about grade retention. Because grade retention is typically initiated in the primary grades, it is important to understand educators' beliefs about it as a viable option for low-performing students. A paper survey was sent to teachers and principals in one school district, inviting them to provide their perceptions about the reasons for grade retention, the most appropriate time to retain students, and the effectiveness of interventions in deterring the use of grade retention. Overall, teachers and principals believed students should be retained because of academic performance and perceived parental involvement as the most promising intervention to deter the use of grade retention. Teachers agreed significantly more than principals that retention helps prevent future failure and maintain standards, helps teachers provide additional math support, and motivates students to attend school. Additionally, teachers and principals perceived a benefit to self-concept when students are retained in the primary grades, especially in kindergarten, but did not differ significantly concerning their views about the most appropriate time to retain students.

Opponents of social promotion, advancing students to the next higher grade despite being developmentally behind peers, contend that it does low-performing students a disservice by placing them into classrooms in which they are ill-equipped to be successful (Burkam, LoGerfo, Ready, & Lee, 2007; Martin, 2009). As a result, grade retention, requiring students to repeat a grade because they have not demonstrated mastery of the curriculum (Beswick, Sloat, & Willms, 2008), continues to pervade public schools. The use of grade retention has resurfaced due to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) and the adoption of high stakes promotion policies in states such as Florida and Texas, as well as in large school districts such as New York and Chicago (Burkam et al., 2007; Murray, Woodruff, & Vaughn, 2010). As a result, about 10% of students in kindergarten through eighth grade have been retained at one time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

However, the political push to use grade retention does not align with the majority research that concludes retained students are harmed academically and socio-emotionally (Bowman-Perrott, Herrera, & Murry, 2010; Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Mathews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001). Although some research suggests retained students show short-term gains in achievement, this is usually followed by a fade in progress as well as negative attitudes toward school (Burkam et al., 2007; Ou & Reynolds, 2010). In the United States and internationally, researchers have estimated that grade retention costs

educational systems more than 14 billion dollars annually with little return in learning (Ehmke, Dreschsel, & Carstensen, 2010; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007).

Thus, Biegler (2000) succinctly stated that if the preponderance of research suggests grade retention is of little use in remediating learning difficulties, the onus should shift as to why practitioners continue to recommend retention for low-performing students. This study attempts to fill this void and examines the attitudes of primary grade teachers and elementary principals about grade retention in three areas. Specifically, it highlights their views on reasons for retention, the most appropriate time to retain students, and the best interventions to deter the use of retention.

Literature Review

The literature review that follows is designed to frame the direction of the study. First, an overview of the effectiveness of grade retention, including research that reports both its pros and cons. Secondly, the review spotlights interventions that have been found to increase the outcomes of low-performing students. Finally, the review highlights literature concerning educators' beliefs about retention, with an emphasis on why researchers believe practitioners' positive views about grade retention exist.

Effectiveness of Grade Retention

Literature reporting the effectiveness of grade retention focuses on two student outcomes: (a) the academic achievement of students (Chen, Liu, Zhang, Shi, & Rozelle, 2010; Greene & Winters, 2009; Lorence & Dworkin, 2006; McCombs, Kirby, & Mariano, 2009), which includes increasing the likelihood students will drop out (Allensworth, 2004; Jacob & Lefgren, 2007; Ou & Reynolds, 2009), and (b) the socioemotional outcomes of students (Anderson, Whipple, & Jimerson, 2002; Hong & Yu, 2008). Empirical research in both areas is inconsistent due to variable research designs (Allen, Chen, Willson, & Hughes, 2009; Burkam et al., 2007; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2010), yet grade retention is strongly characterized as negative.

First, the results of most longitudinal studies find retention does not benefit students academically (Xia & Glennie, 2005; Xia & Kirby, 2009). Although some studies indicate students exhibit short-term benefits, these gains quickly fade (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Beswick et al., 2008; Wu et al., 2010; Xia & Glennie, 2005), especially when students move into the secondary grades (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008; Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002). For example, Griffith, Lloyd, Lane, and Tankersley (2010) found that retained students' reading achievement was worse than a low-performing but promoted peer group during the retention year with deficiencies still prominent when students reached the 10th and 12th grades. This longitudinal decline also seems to explain why researchers report that a higher percentage of retained students eventually drop out of school (Jimerson, 1999; Jimerson et al., 2002; Xia & Glennie, 2005). However, other studies have concluded that retention benefits students academically (Greene & Winters, 2004; 2006; 2007; 2009; Griffith et al., 2010; House, Chen, Thoemmes, & Kwok, 2010; Ladner & Burke, 2010). Many of these studies were conducted in states or districts in which students were held to competency standards before being promoted. For example, Lorence and Dworkin (2006) concluded that Texas's high-stakes promotion policy improved the reading performance of students.

Secondly, although to a lesser extent, retention's negative impact on students' socioemotional outcomes is discussed in the literature (Gleason, Oi-man, & Hughes, 2007). Recommendations from these reports also make it difficult to draw any firm conclusions (Bonvin et al., 2008). For example, Martin (2009) found that retention caused serious harm to students' self-esteem, and Anderson et al.

(2002) found sixth graders viewed retention as the most significant negative life event they could experience. Additionally, other studies found grade retention negatively impacted retainees' attitudes toward school, with these students exhibiting more behavior problems (Murray et al., 2010). Yet, McCombs et al. (2009) found the emotional well being of retained students was not negatively impacted, even four years after the retention year. Similarly, Gleason et al. (2007) reported that grade retention increased the peer acceptance of first grade students the following year.

In sum, grade retention research in both areas is inconclusive, resulting in Murray et al. (2010) arguing that educational researchers, policy makers, and practitioners would be better served in studying formative interventions aimed at improving the outcomes of struggling students. Unlike grade retention, formative interventions are less costly and most have literature bases that are less polarizing than grade retention research.

Interventions to Deter Retention

When educators encounter students who struggle with curriculum, they have a variety of interventions to administer; the most summative (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011) and least proactive is grade retention. Retention is a relatively easy intervention to administer, and most schools simply cycle students through the same curriculum with which they did not find success the first time (Abbott et al., 2010; Burkam et al., 2007; Range, Dougan, & Pijanowski, 2011). Because grade retention research does not provide a clear picture of its effectiveness (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011), its application makes little sense in light of more cost-effective interventions (Murray et al., 2010; Thompson & Cunningham, 2004).

The most promising practice to decrease grade retention rates is early identification of low-performing students (Bowman-Perrott, 2010; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Murray et al., 2010; Range et al., 2011a), followed by intense, formative interventions. Interventions include extending the school day with tutoring, summer school, supplemental reading programs taught by trained tutors, flexible scheduling to allow for more reading instruction, smaller class size, and personalized learning plans (Clay, 2005; Davenport, Selgado, Meisels, & Moore, 1998; Jimerson & Kauffman, 2003; Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2007; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2004). Interestingly, past studies indicate educators viewed parental involvement as the most important intervention for struggling students (Range, 2009; Range, Yonke, & Young, 2011) and recommend using extended family as support, meeting in facilities that are convenient to parents, offering afterschool and evening programs for families, hosting parent education programs about literacy, and encouraging student-parent reading time (Benson & Martin, 2003; Meir & Sullivan, 2004). As a result, continuing to explore practitioners' beliefs about grade retention and interventions that might decrease its use is an important research endeavor (Range et al., 2011b).

Educator Beliefs and Retention

Although there has been considerable research about the effects of retention on student outcomes, research about why educators recommend it for students is underdeveloped (Bonvin et al., 2008). This research area is important to understand because, "retention is typically viewed as a school-level decision made by principals and teachers" (Bali, Anagnostopoulos, & Roberts, 2005). Past inquiries have found teachers' beliefs about retention are influenced more by peers rather than by research (Bonvin et al., 2008; Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004), causing teachers to recommend retention for students who have similar characteristics such as being male, minority, and from low socioeconomic

backgrounds (Burkam et al., 2007; Cannon & Lipscomp, 2011). The most frequent reasons cited by teachers for recommending retention include poor academic achievement and lack of maturity (Range et al., 2011b; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Expanding on this, Beswick et al. (2008) reported educators perceive immaturity as the cause of early learning problems and believe students simply need more time to develop. Others argue that when low-performing students are retained, resulting classrooms will be more academically homogeneous, which in turn improves teachers' ability to differentiate instruction (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Finally, researchers have found most teachers feel retention should occur in kindergarten rather than later grades (Range et al., 2011b; Silberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006).

Principals' beliefs concerning grade retention are also important to understand (Bowman-Perrott, 2010), especially since there is little research concerning their attitudes about retention (Murray et al., 2010). Principals serve as instructional leaders for schools and help shape teachers' beliefs about child development as well as informing them about the consequences of interventions, including retention. Interestingly, principals' views about retention are similar to teachers' in that they report low academic performance and maturity as reasons to retain students and feel retention should occur in kindergarten as opposed to first or second grade (Cannon & Lipscomp, 2011; Range, 2009). Additionally, Murray et al. (2010) found principals identified parental support as a vital characteristic of students who were good candidates for retention.

Despite the one-sided nature of research that argues grade retention is not effective, why do educators continue to perceive grade retention as beneficial? Research in this area is underdeveloped, necessitating further exploration (Biegler, 2000; Range et al., 2011b; Witmer et al., 2004). Additionally, very few studies differentiate the attitudes of teachers and principals about grade retention (Murray et al., 2010; Range, 2009), and as a result, the findings of this study are important in explaining educators' beliefs about the use of retention.

Methodology

The goal of the study was to illuminate how primary grade teachers and elementary principals in one school district perceive grade retention. Thus, four research questions guided the study:

1. How do primary grade teachers and elementary principals differ in their perceptions of reasons for grade retention?
2. How do primary grade teachers and elementary principals differ in their views about when grade retention is appropriate?
3. What interventions do educators (primary grade teachers and elementary principals) consider most effective at keeping struggling students from being retained?
4. Overall, how do primary grade teachers and elementary principals differ in their views about reasons for grade retention and the most appropriate time to retain students?

The study followed a descriptive tradition and used a survey to measure respondents' perceptions. Dillman's (2007) protocol for surveying a sample was used and consisted of: (a) a precontact letter, (b) a cover letter with survey, and (c) a postcontact letter with survey. Prior to the survey being mailed out, precontact with all 332 possible respondents was made with a precontact letter that notified the teachers and principals the survey would be arriving soon. Two weeks later, the survey was sent to all teachers and principals in a sealed envelope. Surveys were coded so researchers could determine who

participated in the study. Two weeks later, a second letter reminder and a second copy of the survey were sent to teachers and principals who had not responded to the original survey. Of the 293 teachers who received the survey, 206 returned surveys, and all 39 principals returned surveys. Thus, the overall response rate for the study was 74%.

Instrument

The instrument used in data collection was a revised version of the Teacher Perceptions about Retention Survey (TPARS) developed by Tomchin (1989) and used in other retention studies (Hurt, 2001; Pouliot, 1999; Quarterman, 2004; Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Witmer et al., 2004). In sum, section one of the survey included 18 Likert scaled items (4 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree) and consisted of the following constructs: (a) nine statements concerning reasons for retention, and (b) nine statements concerning timing of retention in the primary grades. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for all 18 Likert scaled items and was 0.82.

Section two of the survey asked primary grade teachers and elementary principals to select one factor they considered to be most important when making a decision to retain a student. The third section of the survey asked teachers and principals to rate the effectiveness of interventions at keeping a struggling student from being retained. These interventions are grounded in the literature and were prevalent in the school district's culture. They included the following: (a) additional reading programs, (b) summer school, (c) parental involvement, (d) public school tutoring (carried out by employees of the school district after hours), (e) private tutoring (hired by parents for a fee), (f) direct instruction strategies, (g) formative evaluations, (h) multiage classrooms, (i) smaller class sizes, (j) mental health support, (k) before- and afterschool programs, (l) personal learning plans, (m) special education services, (n) cooperative learning, (o) group work, and (p) looping. The survey concluded by asking respondents one open-ended question about their overall beliefs concerning grade retention and one forced choice item asking their feelings concerning grade retention based on prior experiences retaining students.

Context

This study was conducted in a school district located within a state with a mandatory retention statute at the fourth grade, leading to 83 student retentions in the primary grades during the school year (kindergarten = 52; first grade = 22; second grade = 9). The school district's total student population was 24,247 students, and of that population, 45% qualified for free or reduced lunches. Population by race was as follows: 86% Caucasian, 7% African-American, 3% Asian, 3% Hispanic, and less than 1% Native American. The district contained 39 elementary schools, configured in one of three ways: (a) prekindergarten through fourth grade, (b) kindergarten through fourth grade, or (c) kindergarten through fifth grade. These schools employed 293 prekindergarten through second grade teachers, and 39 elementary principals supervised these teachers for a total of 332 possible respondents.

Study Participants

Of those primary grade teachers who responded to the survey, most were female (97%) and Caucasian (99%). A majority of the teachers taught kindergarten (33%), while 30% taught first grade and 31% taught second grade. The age range was distributed as follows: 27% in the 40–49 age group, 26% in the 50–59 age range, 21% in the 20–29 age group, and 22% in the 30–39 age group. Most teachers

reported that they held a masters degree (61%), and 37% reported that they held a bachelors degree. The average years of teaching experience for the entire sample was about 13 (M = 12.98).

A majority of the elementary principals were female (69%) and Caucasian (97%). The age range was distributed as follows: 25% in the 30–39 age group, 44% in the 40–49 age group, and 71% in the 50–59 age group. Forty-six percent of the principals held a specialist degree; 28% held a masters degree; and 26% held a doctorate. The average number of years in administration was about nine (M=8.90).

Findings

Quantitative survey items were analyzed descriptively and inferentially using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18.0. For Likert scaled items, both means and standard deviations were calculated. Qualitative responses to the open-ended question that asked respondents about their overall view of grade retention were coded and recoded by the researchers until 100% agreement was reached (Hatch, 2002). Principals’ responses to the open-ended item resulted in only one theme: that grade retention was *not effective* at remediating struggling students. For teachers, themes identified as to why students might be retained included *maturity* and *size/age in relation* to other students.

For those who had retained students in the past, respondents were asked one forced choice item concerning their current views about retention. Approximately 64% of teachers and 68% of principals stated they would use retention again. Only 3% of teachers and 8% of principals reported they would not recommend retention again based on the outcomes of their previous decisions. Additional findings are organized by each research question.

Research Question One

The first research question addressed how primary grade teachers and elementary principals differ in their perceptions of reasons for grade retention. This question was answered by nine statements in section one of the survey. Table 1 lists their responses, including means, standards deviations, t-test results, and effect sizes. An overall significance level of .05 was used for the t-tests. Using a Bonferroni adjustment to control for Type I error, the significance level was set at .006 (.05/9) for each of the nine t-tests. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen’s D (Cohen, 1988).

Table 1
Teachers’ and Principals’ Perceptions of Reasons for Grade Retention

Reasons	Teacher		Principal		t (p)	ES
	M	SD	M	SD		
Prevents future failure	2.80	0.74	2.31	0.66	3.85 (p<.001)	0.70
Maintains standards	2.43	0.73	2.00	0.65	3.75 (p<.001)	0.62
Prevents wide ranges in ability	1.89	0.61	1.82	0.68	0.65 (p=.515)	0.11
Increases student motivation	1.90	0.62	1.62	0.54	2.67 (p=.008)	0.48
Increases parent motivation	2.61	0.66	2.36	0.67	2.18 (p=.030)	0.38
Provides support for non-supported students	2.14	0.70	1.89	0.65	2.02 (p=.045)	0.37
Provides support in communication arts	2.32	0.66	2.08	0.66	2.09 (p=.037)	0.36
Provides support in math	2.17	0.58	1.87	0.47	3.05 (p=.003)	0.57
Motivates students to attend school	2.74	0.67	2.39	0.68	2.94 (p=.004)	0.52

Note. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree; bold type indicates significant differences at p < .006.

In sum, teachers agreed with the following reasons ($M > 2.50$): retention prevents future failure ($M = 2.80$), retention motivates students to attend school ($M = 2.74$), and retention increases parent motivation ($M = 2.61$). These reasons were also present in teachers' responses to the open-ended item. For example, one teacher indicated that she retained a student because he ended his kindergarten year without displaying first grade readiness skills (*prevents future failure*), and another teacher retained a student because she had approximately 60% attendance (*motivates students to attend school*). Principals' top reasons for student retention were not similar to the teachers' reasons, and none of their ratings revealed a mean of 2.50 (agreement) or greater.

When comparing teachers' and principals' perceptions of these nine reasons for retention, teachers agreed more with all of them compared to principals. Teachers agreed significantly more than principals that retention helps prevent future failure, maintain standards, helps them to provide additional math support, and motivates students to attend school. These four effect sizes were in the medium range, indicating that teachers are noticeably in more agreement than principals that these reasons can make a difference for students.

Research question one was also answered by asking teachers and principals to select one factor they considered most important when making a decision to retain students. Teachers perceived academic performance (58%) as the most important factor to consider. Ability level (20%) and emotional maturity (16%) were selected less frequently. Interestingly, principals concurred and selected academic performance (47%) as the most important factor, also followed by ability level (25%) and emotional maturity (22%). Factors chosen by both teachers and principals much less often were self-esteem, effort, and age. Principals commented on academic performance and ability in their open-ended responses as well. For example, one principal stated that his decision to retain students in the past was based on their *academic performance* and not their perceived *ability*. Another principal stated that although the student she retained would have been retained due to state statute, his academic performance in school was inadequate when compared to peers.

Research Question Two

The second research question asked how primary grade teachers and elementary principals differ in their views about when grade retention is appropriate. This was answered by nine statements in the survey. Table 2 displays teachers' and principals' responses, including means, standard deviations, t-tests, and effect sizes. An overall significance level of .05 was used for the t-tests. Using a Bonferroni adjustment to control for Type I error, the significance level was set at .006 (.05/9) for each of the nine t-tests. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's D (Cohen, 1988).

Table 2
Teachers' and Principals' Perceptions of Most Appropriate Time for Grade Retention

Time	Teacher		Principal		<i>t</i> (<i>p</i>)	ES
	M	SD	M	SD		
Kindergarten:						
Improves self-concept	3.16	0.57	3.03	0.67	1.14 (<i>p</i> =.254)	0.21
Aides immature students	3.14	0.69	3.05	0.56	0.91 (<i>p</i> =.366)	0.14
Should occur by the end of kindergarten	2.36	0.70	2.56	0.88	1.38 (<i>p</i> =.175)	0.25
First grade:						
Improves self-concept	2.84	0.66	2.67	0.84	1.22 (<i>p</i> =.227)	0.23
Aides immature students	2.77	0.75	2.51	0.72	1.95 (<i>p</i> =.052)	0.35
Should occur by the end of first grade	2.47	0.73	2.54	0.79	0.54 (<i>p</i> =.587)	0.09
Second grade:						
Improves self-concept	2.36	1.04	2.08	0.71	1.35 (<i>p</i> =.179)	0.31
Aides immature students	2.26	0.70	2.11	0.76	1.24 (<i>p</i> =.218)	0.21
Should occur by the end of second grade	2.54	0.83	2.56	0.85	0.16 (<i>p</i> =.877)	0.02

Note. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree

Teachers agreed that grade retention in kindergarten and first grade improved student self-concept ($M > 2.50$), but agreed most strongly that self-concept increased if retention occurred in kindergarten ($M = 3.16$). Teachers also agreed that grade retention in kindergarten aided immature students ($M = 3.14$) more than if it occurred in first grade ($M = 2.77$) or second grade ($M = 2.26$). Maturity and its connection to kindergarten retention was also evident in teachers' open-ended responses. For example, one teacher stated that kindergarten students who are younger compared to others exhibit maturity issues and are therefore more likely to be retained. Similarly, principals agreed that students' self-concept improved if grade retention occurred in kindergarten ($M = 3.03$) as opposed to first grade ($M = 2.67$) or second grade ($M = 2.08$). Principals also agreed that retention in kindergarten ($M = 3.05$) benefited immature students more than if it occurred in first grade ($M = 2.51$) or second grade ($M = 2.11$).

When comparing teachers' and principals' perceptions of these nine items related to the time when retention took place, teachers were generally more agreeable than principals. However, t-tests yielded no significant differences using the conservative significance level of .006. When examining effect sizes, teachers were moderately more agreeable than principals that retention in kindergarten leads to improved self-concept. However, the difference between their perceptions was greater for retention in the first grade and in the second grade. In other words, teachers agreed much more strongly that retention leads to improvements in self-concept compared to principals for children retained in the first or second grade. Generally, both teachers and principals perceived self-concept as being positively impacted by retention, but less so as the child reaches later grades. Small differences in perceptions between teachers and principals were shown when they considered retention helping immature students or when they considered if retention should take place in kindergarten, first grade, or second grade. Not only were the effect sizes small, but also retention in kindergarten was the only grade in which teachers and principals viewed a benefit for immature students. Overall, teachers and principals

saw a benefit to self-concept when students are retained in the primary grades; they differed greatest for benefits in the second grade, but not significantly. Both groups were generally in agreement with each other.

Research Question Three

Research question three asked what interventions educators (primary grade teachers and elementary principals) considered most effective at keeping struggling students from being retained. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 17 interventions as alternatives to retaining students. Table 3 displays the means and standard deviations for these interventions.

Table 3
Teachers' and Principals' Perceptions of Interventions to Deter Grade Retention

Intervention	Mean	SD	N
Parental involvement	3.78	0.49	242
Smaller class sizes	3.69	0.59	243
Additional reading programs	3.58	0.59	239
Direct instruction	3.33	0.72	242
Private tutoring	3.27	0.67	238
Special education	3.27	0.69	241
Public school tutoring	3.14	0.76	243
Personal learning plans	3.01	0.76	241
Mental health support	3.00	0.81	239
Summer school	2.90	0.78	243
Cooperative learning	2.79	0.82	242
Looping	2.70	0.84	237
Formative evaluations	2.58	0.88	239
Before and after school programs	2.54	0.84	242
Peer tutoring	2.50	0.72	242
Group work	2.34	0.90	242
Multiage classrooms	2.21	0.84	235

Note. 1 = no effect, 2 = slight effect, 3 = moderate effect, and 4 = great effect

Respondents perceived nine of the interventions as at least moderately effective at deterring grade retention ($M > 3.00$). The intervention rated the most effective by primary grade teachers and principals was *parental involvement* ($M = 3.78$). The idea of parent support being paramount to the success of grade retention was also present in both teachers' and principals' responses to the open-ended item. For example, one teacher and one principal stated that they did not feel a retained student benefited from the intervention due to lack of parental involvement and support for the decision. Respondents rated *group work* and *multiage classrooms* as least effective at preventing grade retention ($M < 2.50$).

Research Question Four

Research question four asked how primary grade teachers and elementary principals differed in their overall views of reasons for grade retention and the most appropriate time to retain students. This

question was answered by averaging the 9 items addressing reasons for retention and the 9 items related to time for retention; their averages were then compared using independent samples t-tests. Table 4 displays the overall means and standard deviations for teachers and principals related to reasons and time to use grade retention.

Table 4

Primary Grade Teachers' and Elementary Principals' Perceptions about Reasons and Time for Grade Retention

Factor	Teachers		Principals	
	M	SD	M	SD
Reasons*	2.34	0.42	2.04	0.39
Time	2.64	0.39	2.57	0.37

Note. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree;

* $p < .001$

Results of the independent sample t-tests indicated that overall, teachers agreed significantly more than principals that retention in the primary grades is effective ($t = 4.26, p < 0.001$). There was no significant difference between teachers and principals when comparing their overall views about the most appropriate time to retain students ($t = 1.05, p < 0.001$).

Discussion

The intent of this study was to illuminate how teachers and principals perceived and differed in their views concerning grade retention. Generalizability is limited in that data were obtained from one school district in one state. A majority of teachers (64%) and principals (68%) indicated that, based on past experiences using retention, they would use it again as an intervention for struggling students, a finding which reaffirms what other researchers have found concerning the supportive attitudes of educators about grade retention (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986; Oklpala, 2007; Range et al., 2011b; Witmer et al., 2004; Xia & Glennie, 2005). It appears that empirical research has done little to sway the views of primary grade educators who hold positive beliefs about grade retention, because they do not observe students immediately after they are retained nor follow their long-term academic trajectories (Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Range et al., 2011a; Shepard & Smith, 1989; Witmer et al., 2004).

Findings reaffirmed what other researchers have found in that teachers agreed that students who displayed poor academic performance were candidates for grade retention and retention prevents future failure and motivates students to attend school (Range et al., 2011b; Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Witmer et al., 2004). Although researchers have reported teachers believed grade retention prevents future failure (Lorence & Dworkin, 2006; Range, 2009), the notion that it will motivate students to attend school is usually not valid because parents control absenteeism in the primary grades, not students (Grant, 1997). Interestingly, teachers also believed that grade retention increased parents' motivation to work with their children, a reason not as prevalent in prior literature. This view of parental involvement and motivation as a reason for grade retention is important to highlight. Specifically, by attributing students' poor performance to reasons that are outside the teachers' control (i.e., parent involvement, socioeconomic status, lack of ability), these teachers send the message that some students are too difficult to teach given their backgrounds (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Grant (1997) concurred with this idea by stating that today's schools face a wide variety of societal problems

that make teaching all students difficult. However, effective teachers look past the obstacles and believe they can make a difference in all students' academic performance, despite differing demographic variables (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Principals did not agree with any of the reasons provided in the instrument as a reason to administer grade retention, but like teachers, they felt the most important factor to weigh when retaining students was their academic performance, a finding that concurs with others (Murray et al., 2010).

Few studies compare the view of teachers and principals concerning grade retention (Murray et al., 2010; Range, 2009; Witmer et al., 2004), an important focus of this study. When comparing teachers and principals on their perceptions of overall reasons for retention, teachers agreed significantly more than principals. Specifically, teachers believed retention helps prevent future failure, maintain standards, helps them to provide additional math support, and motivates students to attend school. Haberman and Dill (1993) suggest teachers support grade retention because they view themselves as accountable to groups of students and not to individuals, causing them to perceive anything that might interfere with group instruction as a hindrance to the learning of the group. As a result, their solution is to retain them, hoping eventually they will mature to the level of the group (Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

A handful of studies have looked at educators' beliefs about the most appropriate time to retain students (Silberglitt et al., 2006; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). In this study, teachers were again generally more agreeable than principals that retention in the primary grade is beneficial and leads to improved self-concept. Specifically, teachers agreed that grade retention in kindergarten and first grade improves student self-concept, with retention occurring in kindergarten as the most beneficial for immature students. This finding supports the literature in two ways: First, primary grade teachers believe that students in the primary grades are too young to be stigmatized by retention (Tomchin & Impara, 1992), and their self-concept is not negatively affected by repeating a grade (Wynn, 2010). Thus, primary grade teachers view early grade retention as a formative and not summative intervention (Silberglitt et al., 2006). Secondly, teachers in this study believed that early grade retention benefits immature students in kindergarten and first grade, also a finding of other studies (Range et al., 2011b). Grant (1997) calls the connection of grade retention to maturity the *readiness dilemma* in which teachers believe learning is sequential and primary grade students simply need more time to learn (Beswick et al., 2008; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). For principals, they too agreed that retention in kindergarten benefits immature students more than if it occurs in first grade or second grade, a finding that supports the notion early grade retention is more beneficial than later grade retention (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011).

Finally, there is limited research on what interventions educators believe are the most effective at preventing grade retention (Murray et al., 2010; Range, 2009; Range et al., 2011b, Thompson & Cunningham, 2004). Respondents perceived nine interventions as at least moderately effective at deterring grade retention, with the most effective being parental involvement. Others have highlighted the beliefs of practitioners who feel the decision to retain students and the immediate success of that decision is dependent upon parental involvement and support (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Murray et al., 2010; Grant, 1997). This rationale again supports previous discussions, namely that teachers view factors outside the classroom as not only reasons for administering grade retention, but also as interventions to deter it (Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

Why are these findings important and what do they mean? First, as standards-based education continues to be the norm, educators view grade retention as proof of their high standards (Frey, 2005), despite the preponderance of research that suggests it is not beneficial. With more states and districts adopting high-stakes promotion policies, this positive view of grade retention will likely expand. To

deter grade retention's use, Bowman-Perrott (2010) argue that intense early intervention implemented by knowledgeable practitioners is one key to preventing grade retention. Early identification coupled with teachers and administrators who advocate for policies that expand tiered intervention services, like Response to Intervention (RtI), as opposed to policies that mandate grade retention (Murray et al. 2010) might also help deter its use. Finally, research suggests that schools that adopt a *sense of community* when planning instruction and professional development devote considerable time to identifying and overcoming outside barriers that prevent struggling students from feeling connected and engaged to the classroom (Royal & Rossi, 1997; Wehlage et al., 1989). Identifying such barriers aids teachers in understanding student achievement variables with which they have direct control.

Conclusion

Educators in this school district clearly show what others have found: that current research does little to sway the views of practitioners. Most importantly, this study differentiated between the views of teachers and principals, with teachers being much more supportive of the use of grade retention. Universities must do a better job at educating preservice teachers concerning the negative consequences associated with retention and training them on research-based interventions that support struggling students. For further study, a qualitative analysis surrounding the reasons, timing, and interventions that might deter grade retention might help explain the findings of this study. Specifically, educators rated *parental involvement* as the most effective intervention to keep students from being retained, and further follow-up is recommended in this area. Parental involvement in schools can take on many forms. If educators perceive parental involvement as an effective intervention, the attempt to more clearly define what they perceive as effective parental involvement would be an important research endeavor.

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