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ABSTRACT

This study examined kindergarten retention rates and their relationship to teacher beliefs and classroom practice. Data from a sub-sample of 22 teachers in a rural Georgia school district, who were classified as exhibiting either high or low levels of developmental appropriateness in their teaching, suggested that teachers whose practices were observed to be more child-centered were less likely to recommend retention for children. Unexpectedly, the study found inconsistency between teachers' self-reported beliefs about appropriate teaching practices and measures of their actual classroom practice. (Contains 23 references.) (EV)

Running Head: RETENTION

Recommendations for Kindergarten Retention:

Assessing Classroom Practices and their Relationship to Non-Promotion Decisions

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Abstract

This study examines kindergarten retention rates and their relationship to teacher beliefs and classroom practice. Data from a subsample of 22 teachers who were either classified as exhibiting high or low levels of developmental appropriateness suggest that teachers whose practices were observed to be more child-centered were less likely to recommend retention for children. Self-report teacher belief data is also presented and the findings are examined in light of the research on the congruence of teacher beliefs and actual practice. Recommendations for future research involving contextual factors are made.

Recommendations for Kindergarten Retention:

Assessing Classroom Practices and their Relationship to Non-Promotion Decisions

Despite the substantial body of literature that has accumulated against the practice of kindergarten retention, schools in the United States continue to advance the practice as a sound educational choice for children (Mantzicopoulos, 1997). The most current data collected in the fall of 1998 by the National Center for Educational Statistics suggest that there are some four million children attending kindergarten for the first time. Of these children, about 5% were not first-time kindergarteners (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000). The research literature is replete with studies on retention and its impact on academic achievement (Holmes, 1989; Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; Shepard & Smith, 1989) and behavior problems (Mantzicopoulos, 1997; Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992). Kindergarten retention's linkages to gender (Mantzicopoulos, Morrison, Hinshaw, & Carte, 1989), and socioeconomic status (Byrd & Wietzman, 1994; Cosden & Zimmer, 1991; Miesels & Liaw, 1993) have also been thoroughly explored in the literature.

While there is an extensive view of the contributions of these individual child-related variables to the numbers of kindergarten children retained, few investigations have focused on the contributions of teacher beliefs and direct measures of classroom practices. As Mantzicopoulos and Neuharth-Pritchett (1998) note, "there is a need to consider nonpromotion and its outcomes from perspectives that go beyond the narrow, child-focused skill-deficit paradigm" (p. 132). Analysis of school-based factors such as teacher beliefs and classroom practice have been advanced as a meaningful contributions to our understandings of retention. In a number of limited studies, researchers have promoted the argument for examining the context

in which children learn as a means to evaluating the efficacy of retention. For example, Reynolds (1992) suggested that contextual factors such as parental involvement significantly predicted grade retention even when the effects of sociodemographic, school readiness, and academic adjustment variables were controlled.

With regard to contextual factors other than parental involvement, the area of teacher beliefs has been examined from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. The literature has pointed to an overriding tendency for teachers to endorse retention even in light of the body of research that indicates that it is not an appropriate practice (Smith & Shepard, 1988; Zill, 1999). Smith and Shepard (1988) note that teachers hold beliefs that retention is appropriate under certain circumstances whether or not they retain children from their classrooms. There is some additional evidence that suggests that "teachers' beliefs have been shown to be constrained by the immediate context of the school structure and the broader context of what information is available to them and what kinds of decisions they can make." (Smith, 1989, p. 150).

Work by Smith & Shepard (1988) concluded that while variation exists in what teachers believe and how teachers act on those beliefs, teachers whose beliefs endorsed a more maturational perspective on children's development were more likely to retain children. Graue's (1993) in-depth study of three classrooms confirmed the Smith and Shepard findings but tied those beliefs to the influence of teachers's instructional practice on resulting child outcomes. Other research has indicated that teachers who endorse a basic skills or didactic orientation to instruction "more readily accept and expect retention for grades K-3 students who fail to master basic skills" (Tomchin & Impara, 1992, p.219). Work by Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett (1998) in their quantitative study on referrals to transitional first grade indicated that when

considering the numbers of children referred for retention, 90% of the children referred were from classrooms with teachers characterized as emphasizing didactic instructional beliefs. This study is somewhat limited in that there are no direct observations of the teacher's classrooms to correlate with their self-reported beliefs. The authors further note "more comprehensive data are needed on the interrelationships of teachers' beliefs, actual instructional practices, and school system practices (p. 132)".

Zepeda (1993) attempted to provide this comprehensive picture on the contribution of classrooms to retention rates of kindergarten children. She found that teachers who reported utilizing more developmentally appropriate activities were less likely to be in schools with high retention rates. In the Zepeda study, teachers were asked to rate their own classroom practices utilizing the Classroom Practices Inventory (CPI) (Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Rescorla, 1990). The limitation to this approach to classifying teachers' beliefs was that the CPI was utilized as a self-report measure instead of an observational tool. No direct observations of the classroom were made. After completing the instrument, teachers chosen for the study were divided in to high and low retaining groups. Teachers in the high group represented teachers in high retaining schools but not necessarily in high-retaining classrooms. The link between an individual classroom and the number of children retained is unclear given that a low-retaining teacher may have been in a high-retaining school, but the individual teacher's data and its association to retention rates were classified on a school level.

These studies present a consistent picture that teachers who endorse more developmentally appropriate beliefs are less likely to retain children. What is missing from all of these studies, however, is the tie between what teachers endorse as their instructional and

philosophical beliefs, actual measures of the teacher's instructional practice in the classroom environment, and the number of kindergarten children that are recommended for retention. This lack of inquiry on such contextual variables is particularly interesting in that the nature of kindergarten has changed dramatically over the last 30 years (Zill, 1999), primarily in the academic nature of the experience. According to Stipek (1991), concerns over student achievement have shifted the focus of early childhood classrooms from more child-centered environments back to traditional or didactic environments. As this phenomenon has taken place, more children are being retained in kindergarten. Social and political pressures currently face school districts across the nation with regard to passing students who do not have the requisite skills to succeed at the next grade level. Yet the cries for an end to social promotion leave teachers with few options for placements other than an extra year in kindergarten (Zill, 1999). Given that the field has been studying kindergarten retention for decades, is there a construct that is missing in our investigations that may clear the clouded picture of how and why kindergarten children are retained? The current study attempts to augment the limited literature on the influence of contextual variables and their relationship to retention rates, by examining teacher beliefs as well as conducting direct observations of the classroom.

Method

Participants

Participants in this investigation were kindergarten teachers in a rural school system in Northeast Georgia. The county is located next to a major university town and serves as a bedroom community between the university town and a major metropolis. The total population estimate for this county in 1998 was 40,344. The estimated African-American population was

13.5 percent. Children of non-European descent represent 19% of the children in grades kindergarten through twelve. Slightly over 8% of the population were children under the age of 5. A total of 13.3 percent of the residents of the county live below the poverty level. There were 34 participants representing seven schools whose overall years of teaching experience ranged from 1 to 32 years (M=11.94, Sd=8.86). Participants were asked to supply information on the number of years that they had been teaching kindergarten and the number of years that they had been teaching in the specific county in which the study took place. In both cases the number of years ranged from 1 to 23 years. With regard to the number of years of kindergarten teaching, the mean was 7.57 years (Sd=7.13). The mean number of years teaching in county in which the study took place was 7.10 years (Sd=6.12). Teachers also provided information on the highest level of education they had attained. Of the 34 teachers, 18 had a bachelor's degree and 16 had obtained a master's degree. All of the teachers were female and all but one coded their ethnicity as Caucasian. One teacher identified herself as African-American. The 34 teachers in this sample represent the entire population of kindergarten teachers in the school system in which the study was conducted.

Classrooms. Each of the seven schools that participated in this study had at least one kindergarten classroom. The State of Georgia provides universal prekindergarten services to all four-year olds in the state, as a result, for many children kindergarten is not their first experience with school. The mean number of children in the 34 kindergarten classrooms was 19.71 (Sd=3.63). Data provided by the teachers indicated that 33 of 34 classrooms were staffed with two adults, a certified teacher and a paraprofessional. One classroom had three adults assigned to it, with a certified teacher and two paraprofessionals.

School policy. Policies regarding retention in this community were designed by the local school board. For kindergarten children, all children were evaluated with a checklist of developmental skills. The areas assessed by this checklist included reading and math readiness, social development/work habits, physical development, as well as other content areas such as art, music, physical education, health/safety, social studies, and science. Children were required to meet the minimum passing requirements for promotion to first grade. Attendance of 160 of the 180 days was also mandatory for promotion. Meeting these two requirements allowed for a teacher to make a recommendation for promotion to the next grade. It should be noted that even though the attendance requirement was a part of school policy, children were routinely promoted to first grade with attendances rates of less than the required minimum (Neuharth-Pritchett & Turner, 1999). In addition, even if children did not meet the two criteria presented in the school board's policy, in consultation with parents, teachers had the final say whether or not children were promoted. That is, if a child was extremely close to the cut-off scores for promotion, teacher judgment was utilized in making the recommendation to retain or promote.

Subsample. Preliminary data analysis indicated that there was a great degree of variability in the observations of the classrooms on the Classroom Practices Inventory (CPI). Therefore, a subsample of teachers was chosen to represent teachers who on the observation measure were coded as having a classroom that exhibited a high level of developmental appropriateness (HLA). A second subsample of teachers who exhibited lower levels of developmental appropriateness (LLA) as measured by the CPI. The teachers' scores were rank-ordered on the CPI Total Appropriateness of Classroom Subscale. The two extreme groups each contained 11 teachers. The middle 12 teachers are excluded from the subsequent analyses.

Of the 22 teachers remaining in the analysis, all of the seven schools in the system were represented. The teachers were evenly split with regard to the highest level of education attained, 11 teachers had bachelor's degree and 11 had master's degrees. All of the teachers in the subsample were female and Caucasian except for one, who identified herself as African-American. The mean number of years of teaching in the subsample ranged from 2 to 32 years (M=11.18, Sd=9.14). The range regarding in the number of years teaching kindergarten was from 1 to 23 years (M=7.52, Sd=7.46). Teachers also reported data on the number of years they had taught in the county. These data ranged from 1 to 23 years (M=6.68, Sd=5.91). The mean number of children in the classrooms was 19.59 (Sd=4.28), with two adults in each classroom.

Statistical comparisons were made on the two subgroups with regard to all of the subscales in the CPI. These data strengthen the argument that the two groups of teachers varied in their instructional practices and that they subgroups are meaningful representations of extreme appropriateness and inappropriateness. Statistically significant differences were found on each subscale of the CPI. A table illustrating the means, standard deviations, and ANOVA results on the CPI is found in Table 1.

Instruments

Classroom Practices Inventory. The Classroom Practices Inventory is a 26-item rating scale that assesses the curricular emphasis and emotional climate of programs for 4- and 5-year old children (Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Rescorla, 1990). The scale is based on the guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp, 1987). The scale is comprised of four subscales and an overall rating of the classroom. The four subscales include: (a) appropriate program focus; (b) inappropriate

program focus; (c) total program focus; (d) emotional climate; and (e) total appropriateness. Data are collected through an observer with the observer recording the appropriateness of the classroom practice on a 5-point Likert scale. Ratings range from 1 (not at all like this classroom) to 5 (very much like this classroom). Alpha reliabilities for the five subscales range from .88 to .96. The scale also has modest predictive validity (Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Rescorla, 1990).

Teacher Retention Beliefs Questionnaire. This scale was designed to capture teachers' explicit beliefs about retention and its perceived consequences (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). The 20-item instrument allows teachers to respond with four choices (agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, and disagree). Tomchin and Impara also utilize a strategy that allows teachers to express their beliefs about the contributions to success in school by assigning 100 points across ten categories such as academic ability, age, and physical size. For the present study, teachers were asked to assign 100 points to five categories.

UCLA Teacher Measures. This teacher rating scale is composed of two factors that are: (a) Teachers' Endorsement of Child-Centered Strategies; and (b) Teachers' Endorsement of Adult-Directed Strategies. Teachers code their responses to a five-point Likert scale that ranges from Very Much Disagree to Very Much Agree. An example item from the Teachers' Endorsement of Child-Centered Strategies is "Children learn best through active exploration." An example of an adult-centered strategy is "Worksheets are a good way to teach basic skills." The alpha reliabilities for the child-centered strategies and adult-centered strategies are .83 and .94, respectively (Milburn & Byler, 1995).

Summary of Procedures

Initial contact to conduct this study was made through the school system. Each school

was visited and the kindergarten teachers met with the researchers to discuss the requirements of the study. Teachers were provided a stipend for their participation. In addition to classroom observations, teachers also completed two rating scales. Teachers' classrooms were observed during the months of April and May of 1998. Information about classroom practices was collected through classroom observations. Trained observers visited each classroom for a three hour time block and recorded instructional features and processes of the classrooms using the Classroom Practices Inventory. Inter-rater reliability was established in a pilot site, a university Child Development Center, prior to formal data collection. Observers were not allowed to collect data at the study site until they had reached 95% agreement on the observation tool with the pilot classrooms. Five percent of the cases were observed with two observers to establish in-field inter-rater reliability. Agreement in these cases ranged from 98% to 100%.

Teachers were informed that the observers were measuring instructional features and processes of their classrooms. There was no interaction among the observers and teachers during the observations. In addition, the observers refrained from interacting with the children in the classes. Teachers completed the rating forms after the observation and independently mailed them to the researchers. Data regarding the number of children recommended for retention in each classroom were obtained at the conclusion of the school year from school records. All data were checked for completion and in the case of some missing items on the teacher rating scales, teachers were contacted by a member of the research team to complete the data sets.

Results

Common Factors Considered in Retention Decisions.

Teachers were asked to assign a total of 100 points to five characteristics of children that

are often weighed when considering retention of kindergarten children. These five characteristics included the child's: (a) academic ability, (b) chronological age, (c) emotional maturity, (d) physical maturity (most often considered physical height and weight), and (e) attendance at school. Of these five characteristics, teachers assigned the most weight to academic ability, followed by emotional maturity, and attendance. No statistically significant differences were found between the teachers who were observed to have a high level of appropriate practice and those teachers who were observed to have low levels of appropriate practice. The ranges, means, and standard deviations for the two groups of teachers are located in Table 2.

Teacher Endorsement of Child-Centered and Adult-Directed Strategies.

No significant differences were found in the two groups of teachers with regard to their self-reported beliefs about child-centered and adult-directed strategies in the classroom. Data from these analyses are reported in Table 3.

Teacher Retention Beliefs Questionnaire.

Teachers completed the 20-item questionnaire by utilizing a four point scale that included response choices of disagree, tend to disagree, tend to agree, and agree. Data were collapsed into two main responses that were labeled agree and disagree. Chi-square analyses were performed and indicated that there were no significant differences among the two groups of teachers on their self-reported beliefs about retention. Means and standard deviations on the individual items of this measure are located in Table 4.

Retention Recommendation Rates.

End of the year class rosters were obtained to calculate the number of students in each classroom that were retained. On average, the school system retains 20 percent of its

kindergarten children each year (Neuharth-Pritchett & Turner, 1999). Retention rates were analyzed with the t-test procedure examining the number of years of experience that the two groups of teachers had. No significant differences were found on retention rates regarding the number of years of experience that teachers had (t=-1.25, p=.22). A statistically significant difference was found between the two groups regarding the number of children in classrooms that were recommended for retention (F=107.04, p=.000). The mean number of children from classrooms where the teacher was observed to practice high levels of developmental appropriateness who were recommended for retention was .73 (Sd=.65). The mean number of children from classrooms where the teacher was observed to practice lower levels of developmental appropriateness was 3.82 (Sd=.75).

Discussion

Teachers ratings of the contributions of common retention factors agree with the work of Tomchin and Impara (1992). In the current study, academic ability was advanced as the greatest contributor to teachers' retention decisions. Teachers whose classrooms were classified as exhibiting a lower level of developmental appropriateness assigned more weight to the characteristics of attendance and emotional maturity to their decisions to retain children. Although there was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups of teachers, these data suggest that teachers who are characterized as more developmentally appropriate are focusing more on internal child characteristics as opposed to external factors such as attendance.

One of the unexpected findings of this study is inconsistency between teachers self-reported beliefs and measures of their actual classroom practice. The results of this study vary from other research that indicates a high degree of congruence between self-reported beliefs and

practices and observations of teachers (Charlesworth et al, 1993). The data suggest that both groups of teachers advocate child-centered and adult-directed practices relatively equally on self-report measures. When comparing the teachers on observations of their classrooms, there was a clear group that practiced more developmentally appropriate strategies and were less likely to retain children. One possible explanation is that the teachers' self-reported beliefs could be aligned with the school's policy. Yet, when confronted with the actual decision to retain children, perhaps more developmentally appropriate teachers relied on their ability to utilize professional judgment to retain or promote children. Teachers in more developmentally appropriate classrooms might have viewed children from a more developmental perspective and rationalized that the child would acquire the skills with some additional assistance from parents or teachers, thus refraining from a retention decisions. Whereas, the teachers in didactic classrooms perceived the school policy as inflexible and thus recommended retention. These data suggest that future research should include a measure of teachers' perceptions of school policy.

While going beyond the reliance of teachers' self-report data in the other studies that examine contextual variables by measuring actual classroom practice, these results provide support for the limited number of studies regarding the impact of developmental appropriateness of teachers' practice on retention and promotion decisions for kindergarten children. Given the current state of rhetoric surrounding the practice of social promotion, school systems across the nation are likely to be faced with more and more children and recommendations for their repeating kindergarten. Future research that employs methodologies that utilize nested models in their analyses may help in illuminating the role that teachers' beliefs and classroom practices play in retention decisions.

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Table 1

Comparisons of teachers' classroom practices on the Classroom Practices Inventory (n=22).

Subscale	M_{HLA}	Sd_{HLA}	M_{LLA}	Sd_{LLA}	F	p
Appropriate Program	3.48	.59	1.97	.22	64.26	.000
Inappropriate Program	2.68	.43	4.21	.61	46.27	.000
Total Program Appropriateness	3.40	.44	1.88	.34	82.96	.000
Emotional Climate	4.48	.23	3.23	.57	46.24	.000
Total Appropriateness of Classroom (Program and Climate)	3.65	.33	2.19	.35	99.74	.000

Table 2
Teacher assignments of the weights they apply to common factors considered in retention decisions (n=22).

Characteristic	Min	Max	M_{HLA}	Sd_{HLA}	M_{LLA}	Sd_{LLA}
Academic Ability	0	100	51.36	28.03	36.36	28.20
Chronological Age	0	50	12.27	9.05	14.64	14.64
Emotional Maturity	0	40	16.82	10.79	18.27	11.52
Physical Maturity	0	30	10.45	9.34	11.00	8.49
Attendance	0	100	9.09	6.25	19.64	27.45

Table 3
Teacher endorsement of child-centered and adult-directed strategies (n=22).

Subscale	M_{HLA}	Sd_{HLA}	M_{LLA}	Sd_{LLA}	F	p
Endorsement of Child-Centered Strategies	3.51	.39	3.64	.37	.62	ns
Endorsement of Adult-Directed Strategies	3.27	.49	3.35	.53	.13	ns

Table 4
Teacher Beliefs About Retention (n=22).

Item		F_{HLA}	%	F_{LLA}	$\%_A$	χ^2
Retention is an effective means for preventing students from facing daily failure in the next higher grade.	Agree	10	90.9	9	81.8	.39
	Disagree	1	9.1	2	18.2	
Retention is necessary for maintaining grade level standards.	Agree	8	72.7	10	90.9	1.22
	Disagree	3	27.3	1	9.1	
Retaining a child in grades K-3 harms the child's self-concept.	Agree	2	18.2	2	18.2	.00
	Disagree	9	81.8	9	81.8	
Retention prevents classrooms from having wide ranges in student achievement.	Agree	3	27.3	4	36.4	.21
	Disagree	8	72.7	7	63.6	
Student who do not apply themselves to their studies should be retained.	Agree	1	9.1	4	36.4	2.33
	Disagree	10	90.9	7	63.6	
Knowing that retention is a possibility does motivate students to work harder.	Agree	4	36.4	8	72.7	2.93
	Disagree	7	63.6	3	27.3	
Retaining a child in grades 4-7 harms the child's self-concept.	Agree	10	90.9	8	72.7	1.22
	Disagree	1	9.1	3	27.3	
Retention is an effective means of providing support in school for a child who does not get support at home.	Agree	6	54.5	6	54.5	.00
	Disagree	5	45.5	5	45.5	
Students who do not make passing grades in 2 of the 3 major subject areas should be retained.	Agree	9	81.8	10	90.9	.39
	Disagree	2	18.2	1	9.1	
Students who make passing grades, but are working below level, should be retained.	Agree	2	18.2	2	18.2	.00
	Disagree	9	81.8	9	81.8	
Retention in grades K-3 is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up.	Agree	9	81.8	11	100	2.20
	Disagree	2	18.2	0	0	
Retention in grades 4-7 is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up.	Agree	2	18.2	3	27.3	.26
	Disagree	9	81.8	8	72.7	

Table 4 continued
Teacher Beliefs About Retention (n=22).

Item		F_{HLA}	%	F_{LLA}	$\%_A$	χ^2
Students receiving services of a learning disabilities teacher should not be retained.	Agree	7	63.6	5	45.5	.73
	Disagree	4	36.4	5	54.5	
If students are to be retained, they should be retained no later than third grade.	Agree	8	72.7	7	63.6	.21
	Disagree	3	27.3	4	36.4	
In grades K-3, overage children cause more behavior problems that other children.	Agree	6	54.5	8	72.7	.79
	Disagree	5	45.5	3	27.3	
In grades 4-7, overage children cause more behavior problems than other children.	Agree	9	81.8	10	90.9	.39
	Disagree	2	18.2	1	9.1	
Retention in grades K-3 permanently labels a child.	Agree	3	27.3	0	0	3.47
	Disagree	8	72.7	11	100	
Retention in grades 4-7 permanently labels a child.	Agree	9	81.8	6	54.5	1.89
	Disagree	2	18.2	5	45.5	
Children who have passing grades but excessive absences should be retained.	Agree	2	18.2	0	0	2.20
	Disagree	9	81.8	11	100	
Children should never be retained.	Agree	2	18.2	0	0	2.20
	Disagree	9	81.8	11	100	

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