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COMMENTARY

Fostering Academic Skills Early On Shows Most Promise for Preventing Grade Retention

AUTHOR

Pega Davoudzadeh | University of California, Davis

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School performance of children in the United States is a topic of great concern. Ever since theNo Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), there has been immense pressure on schools to show improvements in their test scores at earlier grades. Numerous factors can influence a child's academic success, many starting before the child begins formal schooling. However, some children continue to fall behind expected levels of academic performance. One popular, yet controversial, policy implemented to improve children's academic achievement is to retain (hold back) students who appear to be falling behind in order to give them the chance to meet the requirements of their current grade level. Determining the factors that lead to grade retention help identify students who are at risk for grade retention. Established factors that influence grade retention include living in poverty, low maternal education level, being male, being a minority, being younger at kindergarten entry, behavioral problems, having special needs, exposure to household smoking, being an English-Language Learner (ELL) student, and poor academic performance. The subsequent effects of grade retention are hotly debated; however, many studies have shown grade retention to be detrimental to the student.

Determinants of grade retention have been explored in several studies; however, methodological issues and a lack of generalizability plagued many studies. For example, in the grade retention literature, studies rarely examined the timing of grade retention, used large nationally representative samples, controlled for early childhood academic and behavioral characteristics, accounted for the nesting of children within schools, or examined grade retention at the school level, all of which can lead to a false understanding of grade retention and its predictors. Without the use of proper methodologies, studies may obtain an inaccurate and skewed view of predictors of grade retention. Understanding early predictors of grade retention is valuable. Students who are retained in school are more likely to suffer from depression and drop out of school. Further, when a student is retained a year in school, money is spent on the repeated year of schooling.

This study used a multilevel discrete-time survival analysis to investigate the occurrence and timing of grade retention and whether school readiness predictors influenced grade retention at both the child- and school-level above and beyond background and demographic factors using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Cohort. We found that grade retention was most likely to occur by third grade. We also found that early school readiness predictors, particularly academic skills, were significant predictors of grade retention such that the higher the academic skills (i.e. reading, math, and general knowledge skills), the lower the probability of grade retention. Importantly, at the child-level, once school readiness predictors were controlled for, previously established risk factors of grade retention were no longer found to affect grade retention. Previous studies have attributed grade retention to factors such as ethnicity, ELL status, and poverty, but the results of the current study indicated that these factors were not significantly related to grade retention when accounting for school readiness and school-level variability in grade retention. Furthermore, the results of the current study provide a direct target for teachers, schools, and policy makers when assessing whether children are at risk for being held back a grade and where to implement interventions.

The full study is in Pega Davoudzadeh, Melissa L. McTernan, Kevin J. Grimm, "Early school readiness predictors of grade retention from kindergarten through eighth grade: A multilevel discrete-time survival analysis approach," Early Childhood Research Quarterly, Volume 32, 3rd Quarter 2015, Pages 183–192.

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Policy Analysis for California Education

Stanford Graduate School of Education
507 Lasuen Mall | Suite 205
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

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