Article

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Grade Retention: Is it a Failed Practice?

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Abstract

This research study was conducted to explore the grade retention practices in private schools of Karachi. The study focused on the impact of grade retention and investigated its effectiveness in terms of its merits versus demerits. The context of the study was six private schools of Karachi and scorecards of the failed students from the selected schools, who were in grade six, seven and eight. To achieve the objectives of the study, a mixed method was undertaken to collect the data. The quantitative data were derived from the scorecards of 84 students of two years, summing to a total of 168 scorecards of 84 failed students, who repeated the class in the same school. Paired sample t-test, one sample t-test and two-way MANOVA were applied to analyze the data. The researcher conducted interviews of six teachers and three principals. The interviews were transcribed and decoded, followed by categorization to explore the themes that emerged. The most crucial finding of the research is that retention and social promotion are ineffective solutions for the struggling learners.

Keywords: academic achievement, grade retention, student cognition, student scorecards, teacher attributions

INTRODUCTION

Grade retention practice has been carried out for many years in most of the countries of the world. Grade retention means holding students back due to low grades and preventing them from being promoted with their peers (Jimerson, 2001). It is known as failing a class or flunking a class by the students. Retention indicates that students who have studied for a year in a grade are asked to repeat the same grade in the following year or years as well in certain cases (Wiersma & Jurs, 1990). The term and concept of grade retention emerged in 1860 (Wood, 1960) and the main aim was to improve school performance by allowing underachieving students more time to develop academic skills (Wood, 1960). Tomchin and Impara (1992) opine that three types of decisions allow academicians to allow a student to repeat or progress a class: (a) the result itself; (b) age; and (c) background factors. Retention was generally accepted by teachers, parents and administrators until a certain time. By the 1930s, researchers reported negative effects on grade retention (Anderson, 2005) and it was acknowledged that grade retention was linked to students dropping out of the school.

There are a vast number of published researches on grade retention and most of them focus on elementary grades. Jimerson (2001) extends his definition of grade retention and adds that a student is held back and made to repeat the class on the basis of his / her academic achievements in the final examination, especially in two core subjects, that is, English and Mathematic. It has been observed that despite the bulk of research done, it is still complicated to establish that retaining students is the solution to make them improve their grades. Jackson (1975) looked at 44 such studies and concluded that it is very difficult to determine whether grade repetition was a good move. This notion has been established by Cunha, et al. (2006) and Jimerson, et al., (2002) as well. Jacob and Lefgren (2009) and (Ozek, 2015) have proved in their studies that retention has short run effects on behavior. Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD), which is a quasi-experimental evaluation alternative that measures the bearing of an intervention or treatment has also noted that retention increases the probability of high school dropouts (Jacob & Lefgren, 2009) and has negative short run effects on the behavior (Ozek, 2015).

Problem Statement

Students who are retained in the same class due to low academic performance, do not show better results even after repeating the same class for a year. This exploratory research is intended to add to the existing studies on grade retention based on the literature review. Studies based in this area are sparsely available with reference to Pakistan and up dated studies done at international level are limited. There is a possibility that studies may have taken place, but perhaps not recorded. This article has been extracted from the MPhil thesis on grade retention practices in private schools. Taking into consideration the problem, the following questions and hypothesis emerged.

Research Questions

1. To what extent are grade retention practices effective in enabling students to achieve better scores?

2. What role does gender play in student performance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on grade retention frequently looks into Piaget's as well as Vygotsky's overarching theories of cognitive psychology. The reason that these theories have shown up in researches is that the focus and concern of Piaget and Vygotsky is children's mental development. Blake and Pope (2008) estimate that teachers who can integrate the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky into their teaching strategies, will be in a better position to increase students' achievements. However, for this research on grade retention practices in private schools of Pakistan, simply taking the cognitive theories was not enough. Therefore, in order to gain sufficient insight into the study topic, the researcher found that the theories of cognition further branch out into various other theories regarding academic performance of students. This discovery led the researcher to explore the theoretical underpinnings of student achievements and student perceptions of self and teacher attributing characteristics to students, based on their academic performances. Emotions such as anxiety, depression and self-harm were reported in children who received poor results in examination (Teng, 2016). Many stress points have been discussed in the literature, such as parents putting their children through repeated grade level, hoping that their children would get better grades after another year of retention (Chua, 2017).

After due consideration, the researcher explored and considered the following two theories: attribution theory by Wynn (2010) and achievement theory by Ebel and Frisbie (1986). The developers of both of these theories derived their inspiration from Piaget and therefore; fall under the umbrella of Piaget's theory of cognition.

Piaget's Theory of Cognition

Piaget's (1973) theory of cognitive development is a wide-ranging theory about the temperament and progress of human intelligence (Blake & Pope, 2008). This theory delves deep into the realms of knowledge. Cognition, in Piaget's words is about humans acquiring knowledge to construct meanings in order to apply it in their lives and use it as and when required. Piaget believed that biological changes and mutations along with the surrounding environmental occurrences formulate cognitive development (Hudley, 2008). This cognitive development was considered by Piaget not as an absolute end, but in fact he believed that it was a process, which involved the mental capacity of humans to realign and reorganize according to circumstantial experiences.

Following the footsteps of Piaget, Weiner (1974) as well as Ebel and Frisbie (1986) developed their theories of attribution and achievement respectively. These theories are derived from Piaget's theory of cognition and were identified and selected by the researcher due to its relevance to the study topic. This was due to the fact that the study dealt with students' low academic performance and low achievement of grades in the final year examination and the subsequent decision of the school management and teachers to fail them and ask them to repeat the same class for another year. Hence, the need for the researcher to look into the theories which deal with the issues of student attributes and achievement was pertinent.

Vygotsky's Theory of Cognition

Vygotsky is best known for his immense work with regards to his theory of cognition, which primarily deals with childhood development. His idea was that students develop and shape their thinking with the help of social settings and community they are in. Vygotsky's theory emphasizes that language is the first and foremost route and tool to attaining knowledge (Wertsh & James, 1985). Vygotsky further explains that intelligence in reality, is the capacity of the children or the one with lesser knowledge to be able to learn from the more knowledgeable people, whom he called More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). Vygotsky defines the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), also known as zone of potential development in three levels: (a) students may not be able to learn in spite of giving support; (b) when a student is near to mastering the required skills and assistance of an expert is necessary; and (c) when a student is able to accomplish the task independently. He informs that the way to bridge the knowledge gap is to adjust MKOs according to the students' comprehension level.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory was developed by Weiner (1974), which looks at the academic success and is reliant on developing a positive view of one's level of capability and competence in learning. The theory of attribution involves two subsidiary themes. The first is that of students' self-perceptions and the second of teachers' expectations of their students and as a result the teachers' attributing characteristics according to how much the students lived up to their perceived expectations. Therefore, the researcher selected Weiner's theory as it suited the investigation the researcher had set out to examine because Weiner's attribution theory looked at two factors, which were similar to this research. However, the researcher felt the need to adapt the attribution theory's framework by including the element of principal's perceptions to meet the requirements of the research questions. This adaptation of Weiner's theoretical framework of attribution allowed the researcher to investigate multiple reasons related to students' academic achievement. There is ample research on the teachers' role in retaining a struggling student (Weiner, 2001). The research on teacher attributes describes why it is of vital importance to explore the effectiveness of retention. Hence, cautiousness prevails in determining whether it is or it is not a valid and effective measure to make students improve their performance and achieve high marks (Weiner, 2001; Wang, et al., 1993). It is further noticed in the literature, that the teacher student relationship plays a vital role in helping students academically, especially in the repeated years. The discussion reveals that the teacher deals with retained students with more compassion and therefore, dedicates more time to the students and works hard to facilitate them in the hope that they would be able to catch up and improve their exam scores after the repeated year (Witmer, 2001).

Achievement Theory

Achievement can be defined as students' overall understanding of particular information and development of specific skills within the school setting (Ebel & Frisbie, 1986). Eccles' Expectancy-Value Theory and Model of

Achievement Related Choices is based over 20 years of research and is the most comprehensive theoretical model of achievement to date. According to the theories, achievement involves the cultural, social, and environmental fit of schools for students. At schools, the students' progress into wider social contexts from their homes, which influence their cognitive, behavioral, and socio-emotional development (Engestrom, 1987). Thus, in addition to the school environment, characteristics of a child's family will influence the child's intellectual and interpersonal development. In addition, students who experience academic and social difficulties may become frustrated, resulting in a negative pattern of adaptation towards school (Patton, 2002). When students do tasks that are intrinsically valued, there are important psychological consequences for them, out of which most are quite positive (Dauber, et al., 1993). Cost refers to how the decision to engage in one activity, for example, doing schoolwork limits access to other activities, like calling friends, assessments of how much effort will be taken to accomplish the activity, and its emotional cost (Hattie, 2009). The general pattern is for the students to have optimistic beliefs and values in the early grades, which decline across the school years. It is important to point out that some children doubt their abilities in early years (Dweck, 2008). A review of the literature has shown that grade retention is the strongest predictor of high school drop-out status. Jimerson (2001) indicates that students who were retained in two grades were 90% more likely to drop out of high school. The author suggests schools to emphasis on accountability of schools to check what policies they follow for retaining students. Although there is a large body of literature on the effects of grade retention on academic achievement, research examining the perceptions of parents towards this decision is sparse. The bulk of literature demonstrates that principals, teachers, and parents play a major role in the decision of children being retained and also to some extent, they are the reason behind children being under achieved (Jimerson, et al., 2002).

The researcher selected the above-mentioned theories as they fulfilled the objectives of the study; however, in order to fulfill the purpose and objectives of the research study, both theories were adapted to develop a conceptual framework. This guided the researcher to focus towards the desired direction and thus obtain maximum holistic findings.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework as given in Table 1 was developed by adapting the existing theories in the light of the research purpose and after going through the available literature on the topic. Thus, the conceptual framework guided the research study. For the study, two theories, namely theory of attribution and theory of achievement were explored, selected and finally adapted according to the purpose of the study. The researcher replaced cost as a factor with principal's role as a factor, in the achievement theory as this study inquired the role of principals in making the policy of grade retention.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework
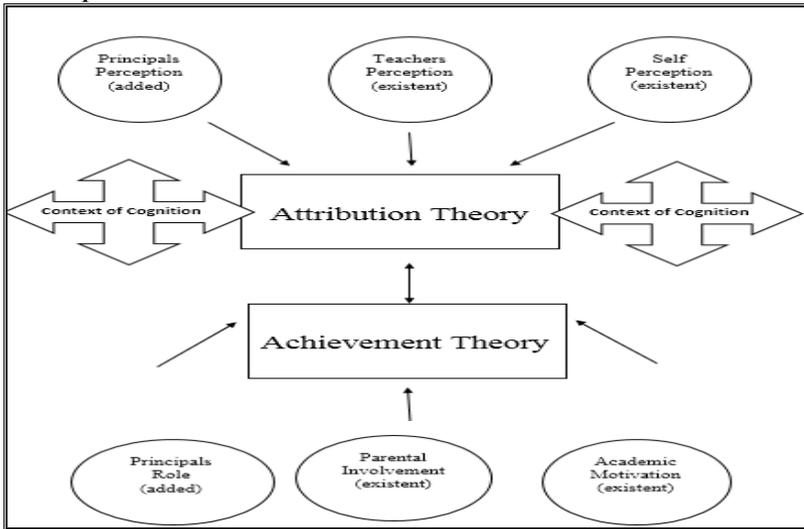
The diagram above demonstrates the scope and extent of the study. It depicts that within the context of cognition, as defined by Piaget, there lies the theories of attribution and achievement. The close connection between the theory of attribution and the theory of achievement is evident by the fact that both theories have teachers and students as integral participants. Moreover, the adaptation of the framework for this particular study, by including principal as another important player, depicts a clear-cut purpose and demonstrates the roadmap followed by the researcher for this study. Therefore, the conceptual framework presented above, laid the boundaries of the research study. Hence, it is indispensable to present the review of literature, not only on the topic of grade retention, but also on the two key theories of attribution by Weiner (1974) and achievement by Ebel and Frisbie (1991), which the researcher had initially selected. It is hoped that through the in-depth review of the related literature, it will enable the readers to comprehend the scope and rationale of the research study undertaken.

Despite the researcher's difficulty in finding the literature on grade retention practices from Pakistan, the study moved forward and different models of methodologies were identified to conduct the study. Therefore, the study proceeded to explore the best methodologies and it was decided that a mixed methodology would be the most appropriate decision because through mixed method of research, the study will fill the gap of work done in the area along with the fact that the findings and results of a mixed method research will, to a large extent, help in providing a holistic and all round view on the topic.

METHODOLOGY

This study focused on sequential explanatory design because it suited the research topic and the objectives. The process of this design is that the quantitative data are collected and analyzed followed by the analysis of qualitative data. This process; therefore, helped the researcher to utilize the qualitative data to facilitate explaining the findings from the data collected. The researcher preferred mixed-method design, for this study because the aim of the study was to explore qualitative data, collected through interviews and also gather data collected from students' scorecards. Both data aided the researcher to interpret findings in depth and holistically.

Sample Size

The sample for this study was purposive and consisted of 84 students who had failed in their final exams, from six private schools located in the different areas of Karachi, which is a cosmopolitan city of Pakistan. As part of the quantitative research, the researcher collected data of boys and girls who were studying in sixth, seventh and eighth grade. The average number of students in each school in the above mentioned classes was 200. Therefore, from six schools the total average number of students was 1200, out of which, the researcher was able to collect data of 84 students who had failed in their final exams. Furthermore, for qualitative research, the researcher conducted interviews of six teachers and three principals, after informing the school management of the current study.

DATA ANALYSIS

In order to test the quantitative data collected through the scorecards of the failed students, paired sample t-test was used.

Quantitative Data

Upon receiving data from the six private schools of Karachi, it was calculated and exposed to quantitative analysis. To examine the two hypotheses formulated for the study, paired sample t-test was used. The paired sample t-test, also known as dependent test, was done for the first hypothesis because the researcher wanted to compare the two scorecards of the same students, which showed their academic achievements in the final exams for English and mathematics subjects of two years in the same class. A student was considered failed when he / she was not able to gain 50 percent marks in the final exam of English and mathematic. The total marks allocated for each subject were 100. Thus, two scorecards of each student were collected.

Qualitative Data

The process of interviews on most occasions went as planned. The interviews with the teachers were scheduled a week before and the time for each interview varied. Three out of six were conducted during recess time, while two were taken on a weekend at a separate gathering; one was taken after the school hours. The interviews with principals were conducted in their offices during school hours.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The interview questions of the teachers and principals were semi-structured and open-ended because exploratory research method involves least structured tools (Creswell, 2003). As qualitative methodologists follow the process of coding and categorizing strategy, the researcher observed the same steps. The categories were labeled to indicate the analysis represented by the combination of the codes. In the end, the researcher explored and reduced the themes to the least number of categories possible.

Quantitative Findings and Analysis

Table 1
Gender – Grade Cross Tabulation

		Grades			
		VI	*VII*	*VIII*	*Total*
Female	Frequency	8	10	9	27
	Percentage	9.5	11.9	10.7	32.1
Male	Frequency	12	18	27	57
	Percentage	14.3	21.4	32.1	67.9
Total	*Frequency*	*20*	*28*	*36*	*84*
	Percentage	*23.8*	*33.3*	*42.8*	*100*

Table 2 describes the frequency and percentages of participating students, based on gender and grades (grade six, grade seven, and grade eight). From this perspective, 84 students were identified as the sample size (n=84), among them 8 female (9.5%) and 12 male (14.3%) were in grade VI, which makes 23.8% of the total sample size. Similarly, 10 female (11.9%) and 18 male (21.4%) students were in grade VII, which makes 33.3% of the total sample size; whereas, 9 female (10.7%) and 27 male (32.1%) were in grade VII, which makes 42.9% of the total sample size. Furthermore, Table 2 also reveals proportion of sample in percentage based on gender and grades.

In this study, two hypotheses were developed to see the impact of grade retention on students' performance in English and Mathematic subjects.

H1: Repetition of same class has a significant impact on students' performance in English subject

H2: Repetition of same class has a significant impact on students' performance in Mathematics subject

Table 2
Paired Sample Test

	N	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig.*
1st Year (performance in English subject)	84	40.58	6.032			
Repeated Year (performance in English subject)	84	48.74	8.975			
Difference		*-8.155*	*8.362*	*-8.93*	*83*	*.000*
1st Year (performance in Mathematics subject)	84	40.37	6.694			
Repeated Year(performance in Mathematics subject)	84	48.79	10.925			
Difference		*-8.417*	*8.759*	*-8.80*	*83*	*.000*

*95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
* Sig. (2-tailed)

Table 2 represents the comparison between the average scores achieved by students in the first and repeated years. From this perspective, it reveals the significant difference between the scores achieved in the two years (difference is also mentioned in terms of mean scores). As a result, it fails to reject the hypotheses that assume the repetition of same class has a significant impact on students' performance in both English and mathematics. This is particularly true because students achieved significantly high scores after repeating a year in the same

class. Paired sample t-test findings show that there is a significant impact of grade retention because the students' performance is improved significantly. These findings are also similar to the findings of the literature that the researcher reviewed. Holmes (1976) and Johnson (2008) reported that the tricky aspect of grade retention is getting one definite answer, as many a times in the researches, the findings show improvement in grades; however, the desired outcome is not completely positive, as this practice creates adverse effects more than the gain.

Table 3
Summary of Hypotheses

No.	Hypotheses	Sig value	Status
H$_1$	Repetition of same class has a significant impact on students' performance in English subject	.000	Failed to reject
H$_2$	Repetition of same class has a significant impact on students' performance in Mathematics subject	.000	Failed to reject

Table 3 provides a summary of all hypotheses used in the present study, along with their sig values and status, either rejected or failed to reject. It is apparent that the hypotheses show the impact of grade retention on students' performance after repeating a grade in English and Mathematic subjects, which have a significant effect. This means that the impact of repeating a grade is significant; however, when we further delve into it in Table 2, it became evident that even with this significant impact on the subjects, the students still did not achieve the passing marks, which is 50 percent. It is concluded that despite grade retention showing improvement in student scores, it is still not able to achieve the purpose, which is to make students perform better and display a remarkable jump in marks. The findings of hypothesis 2 are evident from the result that the hypothesis has failed to reject and suggests that gender does not affect the performance of students and performance does not differ because of grade level or gender.

Qualitative Data Analysis and Discussion

Teacher interviews: Three themes which emerged after coding and categorizing the interviews were: teacher attribution, lack of student motivation and student background.

Teacher attribution: One of the resonant themes which emerged was teachers' attribution of their students. The purpose of the study was to find out whether grade retention practices were an effective measure of improvement in students' academic achievement. Therefore, in the light of the research questions, the researcher carried out exploratory qualitative research by conducting individual interviews of the two integral people: teachers and principals responsible for the decision of retaining or promoting students, after reviewing the final examination results on the two core subjects. The researcher interviewed six teachers and three principals working in the private schools of Karachi for data collection.

Jimerson (2001) shares similar results where teachers heavily put the onus of performance outcomes on the students, whereas in reality teachers providing struggling students the necessary time and resources is the way forward and not only grade retention. For example, one teacher commented:

> *"The student who failed in my class was a very naughty boy. He always hit his friends. I told him many times that he will not pass if…."*

Lack of student motivation: This theme indicated that students are personally responsible for their failure as they are not serious towards their studies due to lack of interest. As one teacher specified:

> *"The students these days don't want to work hard at all…. One of my students said she will get married so why she should bother that much."*

This depicts that there are various factors, which mar the students' motivation to learn and study, such as female students getting married early.

Student background: The third and the last theme of this segment was students' background. Through analysis of the teachers' responses, it was evident that teachers strongly believed that students' background played a major role in defining and shaping their academic endeavors and outcomes. The literature talks about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and usually students who lack intrinsic motivation are the ones who struggle academically during their school years. Factors like girls getting married at an early age are also responsible for students' attention, focus, and eventually motivation to achieve good results, which are diminished. The underlying factor for lack of motivation in students was manifested by the remarks of the teachers, who stated:

> *"Girls cry a lot, they don't come to school because they feel embarrassed."*

A teacher acknowledged that breaking the news to students and their parents regarding the decision of retaining students is a challenge. However, this is not always the case, as one teacher explained:

> *"Initially when we tell parents their child has failed and he will have to repeat the class, then they try to convince us to promote their children this year and InshaAllah next year they will work hard as a team and will send their children for tuitions. But when we tell them that the student will do even worse than this year if he is promoted...then they look at the option of shifting…the school, but you see, not all of them can afford … so that's why they don't leave and continue in this school."*

Therefore, the qualitative analysis of the semi structured interviews of the teacher provided an in depth understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of the themes that emerged, such as; the importance of the power to support a family and the age old need for economic stability. These themes are evident in the literature too that the researcher reviewed for this study.

Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative research findings highlighted that grade retention helps to solve the problem of low academic achievement, but it does for a short time period; therefore, grade retention is not a practice to be considered if long term benefit is desired. It is important to point out that some children doubt their abilities quite early (Dweck & Master, 2008). The participants were vocal and helped the researcher to collect rich qualitative data. The scorecards collected also provided a rich analysis of quantitative research. It was evident from the findings that grade retention can be a quick fix, but not a lasting one. In classrooms, teachers could discuss failure situations and discover what class lessons could be effective in improving students' learning (Carey, 2014). In fact, the findings also revealed that the negative effects of psychological impact are far more important than just getting better academically. At school, students progress into wider social contexts from their homes, which influence their cognitive, behavioral, and socio-emotional development (Patton, 2002). Students who experience academic and social difficulties may become frustrated, resulting in a negative pattern of adaptation towards school (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986). Research reveals that retention and social promotion are ineffective solutions for struggling learners (Roderick, 2005). These findings imply that positive student-teacher classroom interactions fuel teachers' efficacy in teaching (Bredmar, 2013) and it is the strongest

predictor of students' academic success (Hattie, 2009). The grade retention is linked to lower teacher-rated hyperactivity, lower peer-rated and sad-withdrawn behaviors, and higher teacher-rated behavioral commitment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The premise of the proponents of grade retention is based on the notion that students who demonstrate low academic performance require extra time to catch up with their peers; therefore, they hope that if the students repeat and go through the taught concepts again, they would gain better marks and display enhanced academic performance. This belief was proven to be true to some extent, because statistical analysis of the scorecards suggested that there is a significant change in the marks of the students in the repeated year. The students tend to gain marks; nevertheless, they still fall short of the passing cutoff mark; hence, fail again and that is the precise reason why opponents of grade retention argue that if this practice is not producing the desired outcome, then grade retention is not effective. This research also concludes that the intention of retention remains unmet, in most cases, in fact the negative impact on the students' self-perceptions and psychology outweigh the benefits of holding back a student to repeat the same grade in order to improve academically. Hence, the challenges of the norms are met with resistance.

It is suggested that teachers are the key players when it comes to motivation. A struggling student finds it difficult to drive his motivation in the positive direction and thus, does not try hard enough to give hundred percent effort. If the teachers are sensible and have empathy, they should encourage students at every minutest achievement, and perhaps if it is done in the presence of peers, it works as a booster especially to the ones who are in grades six, seven and eight. It is also recommended that the principals should evolve criteria, other than achieving fifty percent marks in the final examination of the two core subjects, which clearly lays out a guideline for teachers to follow, in order to retain a student. This could even be taken further by perhaps contacting the school's regulatory bodies to sit together with all school heads and formulate the criteria with detailed descriptors, so that there is harmony among all the schools for sustainability. Providing multiple pathways in the education system to include curiosity, creativity, and leadership programs is imperious. Simultaneously, parents' and students' emerging concerns should be addressed on priority basis.

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