Comparison of Academic Progress and Social Development for Retained and Socially Promoted Spanish Speaking Children in an International English-Medium School

Mavis A. Runia

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Comparison of Academic Progress and Social Development for Retained and Socially Promoted Spanish Speaking Children in an International English-Medium School

Abstract
This two-year study was designed to investigate the effects of grade retention on a child's academic progress, English proficiency, and social development. All students (n=17) were native Spanish-speaking children, living in a Spanish speaking country, learning in an English-medium school. Each retained child was matched with a child in a control group and a child in a socially promoted group, based on age, sex, Sanford Achievement Test scores, and final reading, language, and math scores. The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (PHSCS) and the Comprehensive Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary Test (CREVT) were administered in the fall and spring for two consecutive years. Final reading, language, and mathematics scores were collected at the end of each year, and teaching rating scale surveys were collected at the conclusion of each semester. Because of the relatively small sample size, the results were analyzed through the use of bar graphs and the description of basic trends in changes among all three groups of students. The results indicated retention is an ineffectual means for increasing English proficiency and academic progress. Alternative educational practices must be considered.

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Comments
Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education
A Comparison of Academic Progress and Social Development for Retained and Socially Promoted Spanish Speaking Children in an International English-Medium School

Prepared by:

Mavis A. Runia

BA Dordt College, 1994

Action Research Report
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education
Dordt College
Sioux Center, IA
May, 2000
A Comparison of Academic Progress and Social Development for Retained and Socially Promoted Spanish Speaking Children in an International English-Medium School

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Director of Graduate Education

Date: April 15, 2000
Acknowledgments

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A special thank you is extended to the Santiago Christian School administration and faculty for their support of this project. Finally, thanks to the children and their parents who have allowed me to conduct this study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of the Literature</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Figure 1........................................................................................................22
Figure 2........................................................................................................23
Figure 3........................................................................................................24
Figure 4........................................................................................................25
Figure 5........................................................................................................26
Figure 6........................................................................................................27
Figure 7........................................................................................................28
Figure 8........................................................................................................29
Abstract

This two-year study was designed to investigate the effects of grade retention on a child’s academic progress, English proficiency, and social development. All students (n=17) were native Spanish-speaking children, living in a Spanish speaking country, learning in an English-medium school. Each retained child was matched with a child in a control group and a child in a socially promoted group, based on age, sex, Stanford Achievement Test scores, and final reading, language, and math scores. The Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale (PHSCS) and the Comprehensive Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary Test (CREVT) were administered in the fall and spring for two consecutive years. Final reading, language, and mathematics scores were collected at the end of each year, and teacher rating scale surveys were collected at the conclusion of each semester. Because of the relatively small sample size, the results were analyzed through the use of bar graphs and the description of basic trends in changes among all three groups of students. The results indicated retention is an ineffectual means for increasing English proficiency and academic progress. Alternative educational practices must be considered.

Historically, grade-retention, or the process of denying a student promotion to the subsequent grade, became an issue in the 1840’s. It was at this time that students were divided into grades according to their chronological age and ability level. Once grades were established, standards for promotion became an issue (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). Several advantages existed for the teacher once grade levels were instituted. The teacher was able to concentrate his/her talents and training on students with relatively similar chronological age, maturity, and experience levels. However, when a child did not meet the standards expected for that grade level, retention of this student became a viable option (Holmes & Matthews, 1984).

Since the introduction of grades there have been mixed views among educators concerning grade-retention (Towner, 1988). Retention standards among teachers today are very inconsistent, even among schools in the same school district. Some students who were promoted have actually performed lower academically than some who were retained (Niklason, 1987). However, other studies conclude that retained students had significantly lower academic achievement and self-esteem scores than promoted students; consequently, deeming retention as ineffectual and even damaging (Setencich, 1994; Walters, & Borgers, 1995; Fager, & Richen, 1999, Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997).

Many educators believe that allowing a child to repeat a grade will enable the child to improve academically (Paterson, 1996); however, research studies indicate little
improved academic achievement after a year of retention (Peterson, De Gracie & Ayabe, 1987; Shepard & Smith, 1987; Towner, 1988).

Retention issues become more complex when teaching students learning in a second language. Second language learners are dealing with more cognitive and linguistic demands than first language learners; therefore, does retention allow a second language learner more opportunities to learn the expected grade level content?

Children learn languages at various speeds, whether it is their first or their second language. According to Mc Laughlin (1985), there are a variety of factors that account for the rate of childhood language acquisition. Some factors include sociolinguistic and cultural differences as well as individual levels of cognitive and social strategies used in language acquisition.

Preschool children learn a second language in much the same way they learn a first language. They use first language strategies in order to formulate hypotheses about the second language being learned. The results of this reconstruction process are often referred to as inter-language. Variables, such as frequency and salience, seem to direct the language acquisition sequence despite the child’s first language (Wagner-Gough & Hatch’s study as cited in Mc Laughlin, 1985). The school-age child will likely acquire a second language in a different context than a preschool-age child. Language acquisition within the school context is likely to be more decontextualized and abstract, especially in the upper grades (McLaughlin, 1985).

Statement of the Problem

This study is a longitudinal comparison of three groups of Spanish speaking children in an English-medium school. This study compares the final reading, math, and
language scores, English proficiency scores, and self-concept scores of children in a retained group, a socially promoted group, and a control group. A child who has been retained has been denied promotion to the following grade level due to an inability to perform the expected academic or social standards of that particular grade level. A child who has been socially promoted has equal academic difficulties as a child who has been retained, but because of his/her social situation (usually their age) has been promoted to the following grade level. A child in the control group is a child in the same grade level and at the same academic level as the child who has been retained. Matching children based on the following criteria: grades, Stanford Achievement Scores, age, and sex, resulted in equivalent groups of children. This study looked at both academic progress and social development over a two-year period.

This action research project seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Does a child who is retained because of second language difficulties within a second language medium school acquire the necessary vocabulary in order to maintain a 70 percent or better average in the areas of language, reading, and mathematics?

2. Does a child who is retained because of academic difficulties within a second language medium school maintain a 70 percent or better average in the areas of language, reading, and mathematics for at least two years? Year one will begin with the year the child is retained.

3. Does a child who is retained demonstrate social delays or difficulties in subsequent years?
Definition of Terms

For this research project, the following terms will be used as they are defined below:

1. **Academic Progress**: progress based on final reading, math, and language scores

2. **English Proficiency**: progress based on pre and post test data of the Comprehensive Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary Test (CREVT)

3. **Retention**: the act of repeating a grade because of academic difficulties in the area of language and reading

4. **Social Development**: progress based on pre and post tests of the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale and teacher rating scale surveys of student progress

Review of the Literature

Since the 1900's the effectiveness of grade retention has been an educational concern (Niklason, 1987). After Leonard P. Ayres reported the first comprehensive study of student progress in 1909 in his book, *Laggards in our Schools*, hundreds of articles have been written arguing cases for or against retention of students. Within these studies however, there have been inconsistent findings and conclusions (Holmes & Matthews, 1987).

Retention becomes an issue when children are low achievers or socially immature. Teachers are retaining students with the belief that those who repeat a grade will reach the maturational level necessary for a successful year in school. In Matzicopoulos and Morrison's study (1992) of 53 children retained in kindergarten, they concluded the retained children did have increased academic scores the year they repeated kindergarten; however, the children were unable to maintain their academic gain beyond their second year in kindergarten. In Shepard and Smith's study (1987) the 38
children who repeated kindergarten gained one month of academic learning at the end of their second year in kindergarten. An ineffectual amount of progress was achieved by repeating kindergarten.

Longitudinal research studies have been conducted in which researchers have tracked the academic progress of retained children for two or more years. In these studies it has been found that the children who are retained have experienced increased academic gains during the year they repeated a grade; however, this gain typically disappears two or three years after they are retained (Peterson, De Gracie, & Abaye, 1987; Pierson & Connell, 1992; Snyder & West, 1992, Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, Sroufe, 1997).

Niklason (1987) reported that of the 102 students in her study, the 62 students who were promoted despite the recommendation of the teacher, had increased academic reading gains the following year over the 40 retained children. Niklason concluded that, if there are subgroups of children for whom retention may be beneficial, these groups have not been adequately identified.

Social development is also an aspect that is frequently discussed in conjunction with the issue of retention. However; there are various views concerning the effects of retention on social development. In Cuddy, Frame and DeVincentis' study (1987), they matched 47 students with same age and same grade students and concluded after using peer sociometrics, teacher ratings of academic performance, and scores from the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, that promotion may be beneficial in decreasing the amount of peer rejection. In Setenchich's study of 36 students (1994), it was discovered that children who were retained in kindergarten or first grade had long term negative effects on their academic achievement and social progress as measured by the
Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills and the Self-Esteem Inventory School Form. However, in Pierson and Connell’s study (1992) with 203 students they discovered the retained students experienced no significant deficits in social development in relationship to their comparison groups.

Much of the literature concludes that retention is a questionable educational practice; however, thousands of students are still retained each year. Although there is abundant literature addressing the issues of grade-retention among students learning in their native language, there is little literature available addressing the issue of grade-retention with students learning in their second language. McGinn (1992) conducted a research project in Honduras to discover reasons for a high retention rate, but the children included in this study were native Spanish speakers learning in their native language. In this study, an assessment will be made of both the academic progress and social development on Spanish children who are retained in an English-medium school.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants for the study were seventeen Spanish-speaking children between the grades of first and sixth attending a U.S accredited English-medium Christian school. The school is located in the Dominican Republic in a city with a population of approximately 600,000 people. The students are from affluent Dominican families who travel frequently.

Each student’s parent or guardian signed a consent form explaining the purpose of the study and giving permission for his/her child to participate in this study. (See Appendix A)
Materials

The Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale (PHSCS) was administered to attain pre and post test data on the children concerning their social development (Cuddy, 1987). The PHSCS is an eighty item, two choice instrument. The stability after a four-month test-retest of the Piers Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale was .72 (Piers, 1969). The content validity measured between .40 and .85 for both males and females from kindergarten through grade ten (Piers, 1969). A native Dominican Spanish speaker who is also a fluent English speaker translated the PHSCS into Spanish. This test was administered in both English and Spanish to receive a more accurate self-concept score. However, translating the PHSCS into Spanish may have affected the overall reliability and validity.

The Comprehensive Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary Test (CREVT) was administered to attain pre and post test data concerning a child’s English proficiency. Internal consistency reliabilities, stability reliabilities, and interscorer reliabilities for all scores exceed .8 at all ages. Construct validity for the CREVT was demonstrated in four ways: (a) correlating its scores with age, (b) correlating its items with the total score, (c) showing that its scores discriminate between groups of students with or without vocabulary problems, and (d) showing that the subtests are correlated (Wallace & Hammill, 1994). The CREVT is appropriate for children ages 4-0 through 17-11.

Final reading, language, and mathematics scores were collected for each student. Teacher rating scale surveys were administered at the end of each semester to rate a child’s academic and social development in comparison to his/her peers. A teacher-made
rating scale based on a model by Shepard and Smith (1987) was designed. (See Appendix B)

Design and Procedure

At the beginning of the 1995-96 school year the retained students, same-age students (promoted group), and same-grade students (control group) were matched to compare academic progress and social development. The sample size was diminutive, making it difficult to interpret the data and imply statistical meaning. As a result, the students were instead matched to create equivalent groups (Peterson, De Gracie, Ayabe, 1987; Pierson & Connell, 1992; Johnson & Merrell, 1990 Shepard & Smith, 1987). The students were matched on the basis of sex, age, SAT scores, and report card grades (Mantizicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; Peterson, De Gracie & Ayabe, 1987). Groups were compared to assess their academic progress and social development.

All participants completed the PHSCS in the fall. The questions were first asked in English and then translated into Spanish. Both languages were utilized in order to acquire a more accurate evaluation of a student’s self-concept. All participants completed the CREVT in the late fall to obtain a baseline measurement of their English proficiency. Because most children choose to speak in their native language during the summer months, administering this test in the late fall allowed the children an adequate amount of time to sufficiently practice their second language.

During the school year the participant’s final reading, language, and math scores were collected. At the conclusion of each semester, teacher rating scale surveys were completed. Teachers responded to questions concerning the child’s academic progress and social development in comparison to his/her peers.
At the end of each academic year the PHSCS and the CREVT were readministered. This process was repeated again for the 1996-97 school year.

Results

The results were analyzed in order to determine the amount of academic progress and social development between each group of students: retained, socially promoted, and control group. Each participant’s test scores were examined to look for significant progress over a two-year period.

The small sample size in this study creates some difficulty in analyzing the data and implying statistical meaning, therefore the results section will focus on describing patterns and trends.

Figure 1 illustrates the Piers-Harris raw score ratings between the retained, promoted, and control groups of children. There is not an apparent difference in raw scores between the fall of 1995 and the spring of 1996. However, in analyzing the fall/spring 1995/1996 raw scores with the fall/spring 1996/1997 raw scores, there appears to be a noticeable difference among raw scores ranging from 50.2 to 65.3. This could be attributed to the students’ familiarity with the Piers-Harris test and the testing process.

After converting the Piers-Harris raw scores into percentages, the retained group from the fall/spring of 1995/1996 to the fall/spring of 1996/1997 increased 19 percent. The control group also increased 22 percent; however, the promoted group only increased 5 percent. In the fall/spring of 1996/1997 the retained group and the control group ranked at 85 percent. The promoted group ranked at 74 percent. It appears that the self-concept of the retained group is stronger than the self-concept of the promoted group.
Figure 2 illustrates the Piers-Harris Intellectual and School Status Scores. Questions associated with this portion of the test are related to the student’s view of their intellectual ability (i.e. “I am good in my schoolwork, I am smart, I am dumb about most things, I am a good reader, I forget what I learn.”)

In the fall/spring of 1996-1997 the retained intellectual and school status scores were higher than either the promoted or the control groups. This increase could be attributed to the retained groups’ self-concept toward their academic achievement.

Figure 3 illustrates the Piers-Harris Anxiety Scores, which includes questions associated with the student’s nervousness and timidity in school. In comparing the anxiety scores from the fall/spring of 1995/1996 to the anxiety scores from the fall/spring 1996/1997, there appears to be a small increase. The anxiety scores are identical (9.4 and 9.8) between all three groups in both the fall of 1996 and the spring of 1997. This may be attributed to the school’s caring atmosphere and the teachers’ ability to make all children feel comfortable in their classroom.

Figure 4 summarizes the General Vocabulary Standard Scores based on results from the CREVT (Comprehensive Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary Test). The retained general vocabulary standard scores were perpetually lower than the promoted and the control scores of the general vocabulary standard scores. From the fall of 1995 to the spring of 1997 the control group score rose 7.4 points, which constitutes the largest increase between all three groups; however, since the general vocabulary standard scores are close in proximity, there appears to be limited correlation between promotion and English proficiency.
Figure 5 illustrates the General Vocabulary: Age Equivalent scores. Each year the general vocabulary age equivalent scores from all three groups increased, with the retained group attaining the largest amount of increase (26.6 months). The control groups’ age equivalent score in the fall of 1995 was 7.5 months ahead of the retained groups’ age equivalent score, but by the spring of 1997 the control groups’ score was only 5.4 months ahead of the retained groups’ age equivalent score. The promoted groups’ age equivalent score in the fall of 1995 was 7.4 months ahead of the retained groups’ age equivalent score, but by the spring of 1997 the promoted groups’ age equivalent score was only 1.9 months ahead of the retained groups’ age equivalent score.

Figure 6 illustrates the final reading scores for each group of students from the spring of 1996 to the spring of 1997. The promoted group resulted in the largest increase in reading scores from the spring of 1996 to the spring of 1997 with a 4.2 point increase, resulting in the highest reading score by the spring of 1997 (9.0). Between the spring of 1996 to the spring of 1997 the retained group slightly decreased in their reading score (.2); however, the control group increased their reading score (1.5). It is concluded that the reading scores of the promoted group did not suffer because of their grade promotion and ultimately exceeded the final reading score of the retained group.

Figure 7 illustrates the math scores from the spring of 1996 to the spring of 1997. Both the promoted and the control groups increased their math scores from the spring of 1996 to the spring of 1997; however, the retained group slightly decreased their final math score from the spring of 1996 to the spring of 1997. The control group had the highest math score in the spring of 1996 (9.5) with the retained group only slightly lower (8.8). The retained groups’ spring of 1997 math score and the promoted groups’ spring
of 1996 math score are based on the same coursework. In evaluating the math scores from both groups, the retained group had a 2.4 point increase over the promoted group. This increase may be attributed to the retained groups’ ability to better comprehend the spring of 1996 coursework, resulting in better comprehension of the 1997 coursework.

Figure 8 illustrates the language scores from the spring of 1996 to the spring of 1997. The retained group began with the highest language score in the spring of 1996 (9.0); however, the control group ended with the highest language score in the spring of 1997 (9.1). The retained group’s spring of 1997 language score and the promoted group’s spring of 1996 language score are based on the same coursework. The retained group attained a language score of 8.0 for the spring of 1997; however, the promoted group only attained a language score of 6.2 for the spring of 1996. The retained group had a 1.8 point increase over the promoted group (based on the completion of the same coursework). The retained groups’ increase in language scores may be attributed to a better understanding of previous coursework.

Discussion

After evaluating the results from the Piers-Harris Children’s Self Concept Scale, the Comprehensive Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary Test, and the final reading, language, and mathematics scores, it is evident that the retained groups’ self-concept was not lowered by repeating a grade. The retained group scored higher on the Piers-Harris Intellectual and School Status sub-test than the promoted or control groups. In fact, the retained group scored 19 percent higher than the promoted group on the Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale Raw Score. However, the General Vocabulary Standard scores and the General Vocabulary Age Equivalent Scores were very similar between all
three groups of students (75.4 retained, 79.0 promoted, and 83.3 control). Consequently there is little correlation between retention and English proficiency. In evaluating the final reading, language, and mathematics scores the retained group had scores slightly higher in mathematics and language; however, they had slightly lower reading scores. The scores were very close in proximity between all three groups.

After evaluating the amount of academic progress and social development experienced by each group of students, it is evident that retention does not dramatically improve a retained student’s academic performance and social development. Consequently, retention is ineffectual among students learning in their second language. Educators must seek alternative solutions for teaching students with low academic performance.

Implications and Limitations

A limitation with this study is the sample size. There are a limited number of students retained, resulting in a limited number of students to form groups. Since the decision to retain or promote students was not random, but based on final grades, the groups are not equivalent.

Translating the PHSCS into Spanish results in another study limitation. In order to get a more accurate score of a child’s self concept, the PHSCS was translated into Spanish, the child’s native language. This test was administered in both English and Spanish; consequently altering the standardization of this test.

The teacher rating scale survey, which was completed at the end of each semester, is also subjective and limited in scope. This rating scale tool is not criterion referenced.
Despite the limitations mentioned above, the results from this study are very useful to international schools who teach students in their second language. This study will aid educators in making better-informed promotional decisions when teaching students who are learning in their second language.
References


Setencich, J. (1994). *The impact of early grade retention on the academic achievement and self esteem of seventh and eighth grade students.* California State University. (ERIC Documentation Reproduction Service No. ED 393 026.)


Appendixes
Appendix A

Dear Mr./Mrs._

At Santiago Christian School, we want to give your child the best education possible. In order to provide a quality education we need to be able to follow your child’s academic and behavioral progress.

I am presently enrolled in a graduate program in Elementary Education at Dordt College. This program involves observing, monitoring, and accessing curriculum and children as well as learning how to research in education. I will be studying children’s academic and behavioral progress by monitoring their achievement tests, grades, and English proficiency. I will also be watching how the child feels about himself and his progress. Participation will take approximately one hour at the beginning of the school year and one hour at the end of the school year. My finding will help the Santiago Christian School make well-informed decisions regarding school promotional policies in the years to come.

In order to provide quality education at Santiago Christian School, I need to have your permission to monitor your child’s progress over the next two years. Every effort will be made to ensure your children will not feel singled out for this project. Be assured that all information obtained will be kept confidential and any results reported will be anonymous. If you have any questions regarding this project, feel free to speak with me.

Sincerely,

Ms. Mavis Runia
Teacher

Dr. Eugene Berends
Elementary Principal

Signature of parent or legal guardian:
Appendix B

Teacher Rating Scale

Rate ______________________ on the following areas.

(Student’s Name)

Key:
1 = Bottom Group (The child is one of the lowest 5 children in the class.)
2 = Next to Bottom Group (Next to lowest 5 children)
3 = Average child in this class
4 = Next to top groups (Next to top 5 children.)
5 = Top Group (5 top children in this class.)

1. Reading Achievement 1 2 3 4 5
2. Math Achievement 1 2 3 4 5
3. Social Maturity 1 2 3 4 5
4. Learning Self Concept 1 2 3 4 5
5. Appropriate Attention to school work 1 2 3 4 5

Comments:
Figures
Figure 1: Piers-Harris Raw Scores
Figure 2: Piers-Harris Intellectual Scores
Figure 3: Piers-Harris Anxiety Scores
Figure 4: General Vocabulary Standard Score
Figure 5: General Vocabulary: Age Equivalent
Figure 6: Final Reading Scores
Figure 7: Final Math Scores
Figure 8: Final Language Scores
Vita

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