

Retention of Hispanic/Latino students in first grade: Child, parent, teacher, school, and peer predictors

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Abstract

A sample of 283 Hispanic children with literacy performance at entrance to first grade below the median for their school district was studied as part of a larger research project on the predictors of grade retention in grade 1. Following retention decisions, 51 Hispanic students were retained in first grade. Low literacy skills, being young at entrance to first grade, low ego resilience, low support in the teacher–student relationship, and parents' low sense of responsibility for their children's educational outcomes predicted retention decisions. Hierarchical logistics regression investigated the contribution of six categories of variables (academic competencies; socio-demographic characteristics; social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment; resiliency, school context; and home environment) to retention. Controlling for literacy, only being young for grade and parents' low sense of responsibility for their children's adjustment to school made a direct contribution to retention. Early literacy skills were higher for children enrolled in bilingual classrooms than for children in non-bilingual classrooms. Implications for educational policy are discussed.

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Although Hispanic/Latino (H/L) children have made gains on several key indicators of educational attainment in the past 20 years, significant gaps in academic performance

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between H/L and White (non-H/L) students remain. According to the U. S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics report (2003), H/L students are more likely to be retained in grade than are White students and have the highest percentage of non-school completion of any ethnic group. In 1999, 13% of H/L students in K-12th grade had repeated at least one grade, compared to 9% of White and 18% of Black students.

The finding that H/L children are more likely to be retained in grade than are White children takes on added meaning in light of empirical research that documents an association between grade retention and lower subsequent achievement, including non-completion of school (for reviews see Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001). Grade retention refers to a student repeating a grade after spending an academic year in that grade. The strong association between repeating a grade and dropping out of school before graduation remains after statistical adjustments for pre-retention differences (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Holmes, 1989). Although some studies report positive effects of grade retention on achievement and behavior (Pierson & Connell, 1992), many well designed studies utilizing controls for pre-retention differences document a range of negative effects (Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Pagani, Tremblay, Vitaro, Boulerice, & McDuff, 2001; Reynolds, 1992). Jimerson's (2001) comprehensive meta-analysis concluded that retention has generally negative average effects on both academic and psychosocial functioning. Furthermore, retention in first grade appears to have more negative long-term effects than retention in later grades (Pagani et al., 2001).

To our knowledge, no prospective study utilizing well-matched controls has investigated the effect of grade retention on a large sample of H/L children from multiple informant sources. White students are the majority of students in several studies (Jimerson, 2001), African-American students in others (Alexander et al., 2003; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). When H/L students have been included in studies, their numbers were too few to conduct within-Hispanic group analyses of relationships between retention and child outcomes. Reynolds (1992) found that H/L students fared worse than African-American children following retention in first grade, but with only 10 retained H/L students, these results must be interpreted with caution.

Predictors of grade retention

A number of studies have investigated factors that predict grade retention (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994; Beebe-Frankenberger, Bocian, MacMillan, & Gresham, 2004; Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1985; Dauber, Alexander, & Entwisle, 1993; Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997; Mantzicopoulos, 2003; Meisels & Liaw, 1993). These studies document that low academic achievement is the most consistent predictor of grade retention in the elementary grades. Because achievement is correlated with many other factors that also predict grade retention, it is important to investigate factors that predict grade retention independent of the effect of low achievement. Recent studies on the correlates of grade retention have either compared retained students to similarly low-achieving comparison students (Beebe-Frankenberger et al., 2004; Jimerson et al., 1997) or statistically controlled for achievement or cognitive ability differences between retained and promoted students (Dauber et al., 1993; Mantzicopoulos, 2003; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). Among these studies, the most consistent predictors of being retained in grade are

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