Response to Intervention Data in Grade Retention Decisions: How is it Used?

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RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION DATA
IN GRADE RETENTION DECISIONS:
HOW IS IT USED?

By

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Abstract

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION DATA

IN GRADE RETENTION DECISIONS:

HOW IS IT USED?

By

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For over 100 years, retention has been an intervention used with students who are not performing at expected levels. Despite the lack of evidence that retention is an effective means of improving academic outcomes, retention continues to be used today. Response to Intervention (RTI) is a strategy to provide support to struggling students in an effort to increase their academic performance, with the caveat that students who do not respond to interventions are candidates for special education evaluation. With RTI, data are generated. The impetus for the creation of the RTI model was its use for identifying students who may have disabilities; the school in this study used these data when it engaged in retention decision making.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of RTI data on teachers’ and principals’ decision making about retention and the impact of RTI data on instructional decision making for students who may be retained. This qualitative case study utilized a survey and interviews K-3 teachers and the student intervention team. These data provided insight into retention decision making and the decision making for instruction for students who may be retained. RTI data were found to have three major
impacts on teachers’ decision making, two impacts on the principal’s decision making, and one impact on instructional decision making.
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Through the process of earning this doctoral degree, Dr. Robert McCord has stood by me, believed in me, and provided endless support. Without him, this project would never have been completed. While being understanding of all of the difficult life circumstances that I have encountered, he continued to help me focus on the completion of this document and my degree, knowing that I would not be happy until it was finished. Thank you, Dr. McCord, for all you have done.

I also need to thank Dr. Shaoan Zhang for his contribution to this study. He went above and beyond the call of duty in supporting me. The countless hours he spent with me working through the details of this project were greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank Dr. James Crawford and Dr. James Hager for their assistance and willingness to help.

When I was a little girl, my grandfather, Raymond Thorsky, promised that he would pay for college books for his first grandchild who attended college because he always regretted that he had to drop out of law school during the Great Depression. Although I have five older cousins and an older sister, I was the first to attend college. True to his word, my grandfather paid for my books through my bachelor’s degree, my master’s degree, and my doctoral degree up to the time of his passing. I know he was exceptionally proud of me as he carried a wallet-sized copy of my master’s diploma in his shirt pocket and often showed it to perfect strangers! He and my late grandmother, Lillian Thorsky, were two of my biggest supporters, and I miss them every day. This dissertation is dedicated to them.
My parents, James and Marlene Peters, supported me in ways too numerous to list. Most important, they always encouraged me to follow my dreams and convinced me that I could do anything I set my mind to. Specific to this project, my parents have babysat for countless hours so I could read, research, and write. They have also listened patiently while I discussed my research and the writing process. They always encouraged me to stay the course and keep working. I could always count on them when I needed help; for that I am grateful.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of compulsory attendance, a number of students exhibited low academic achievement in school. Over time, the United States has responded by developing educational policy to increase accountability for students and teachers. One way accountability has been codified is by state and district educational policy which requires the retention of students who do not meet academic standards. Retention has been researched since the early 1900s for its use with low-achieving students. Although little research has supported retaining students in grade, retention continues as a method used to promote student accountability for learning (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975).

As recently as 2009, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), 9%-11% of students were required to repeat a grade; consequently, it appears that a large number of students are not meeting academic standards for their grade. Researchers have argued that retention as an intervention is not effective, and little evidence exists to support the notion that a second dose of what did not work the first time is the answer (Martinez & Vandergrift, 1991). Just as important as what is being done after a student is retained is the idea that retention can be prevented with interventions.

Background

In the early 2000s, President George W. Bush, as well as many state governors and other policymakers, called for the elimination of social promotion as part of their plan for reforming schools. This was done in an effort to maintain high academic
standards and educational accountability. This focus on academic standards and accountability was prevalent throughout much of the nation. Passed during the presidency of George W. Bush, The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) explicitly recommended retention as an intervention for low-performing students and has resulted in increased numbers of retained students in the past decade (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007). According to Silberglitt, Appleton, Burns, and Jimerson (2006), “The conundrum that remains is that NCLB mandates seem to have facilitated mutually exclusive behaviors, in that evidence-based practices are required in schools, but the adequate yearly progress provision has led to increased student retentions” (p. 268). Indeed, Xia and Glennie (2005a) affirmed that “more and more states and school districts have adopted retention policy[ies] in an effort to enhance educational accountability” (p. 1).

In March of 2010, the United States Department of Education released A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This document contains the framework for a revised federal role in education. Among the priorities indicated for the reauthorization are the following: (a) supporting the use of a new generation of assessments (p. 3), (b) improved professional development (p. 4), (c) the use of evidence-based instructional models and supports (p. 4), (d) identification of effective and highly effective teachers on the basis of student growth and other factors (p. 15), and (e) rigorous and fair accountability for all levels (p. 11). In order to meet the needs of all students, the report suggested that innovation and comprehensive changes may be needed, including rethinking the length of the school day and year to allow students the time they need to succeed and so teachers have time to collaborate (p. 34). Although the report did not mention the promotion or retention of students with
academic difficulties, a clear focus was evident on providing opportunities for and monitoring of student growth over the previous model which required the measurement and reporting of student performance in relation to rigorous academic standards. The report stated, “We will focus less on compliance and more on enabling effective local strategies to flourish” (p. 35).

One such method of measuring student growth is Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI is a process measuring whether a student’s academic performance improves with the provision of well-defined, scientifically-based interventions (Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008). It is defined as “a multi-tiered method of service delivery in which all students are provided an appropriate level of evidence-based instruction based on their academic needs, . . . RTI involves frequent assessment of students’ progress, data-based decision making, and placement of students within a range of instructional supports” (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008, p. 417).

Since the most recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004 (IDEA), RTI has been a permissible way to find students eligible for special education through identification as a student with a learning disability. RTI is also supported by NCLB in the Reading First provisions that call for proven methods of instruction to reduce the incidence of reading difficulties (NCLB, 2001). Since over 80% of students identified as having a learning disability demonstrate a disability in the area of reading (Lyon, 1995; National Association of School Psychologists, 2006), the majority of RTI research has focused on the area of reading. Similarly, the majority of students who are retained in grade demonstrate difficulty in the area of reading. Thus, this study also focused on the area of reading as it relates to data used in retention decision making.
The RTI Process

All states that receive Reading First monies through NCLB, of which Nevada is one, are required to identify a literacy screening tool in grades K-3 (Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008). The data collected through the use of the universal screener are used to determine which students are in need of interventions and those students who are already at an acceptable level—the benchmark students. Students who do not meet the benchmark are monitored more frequently than those who do.

In schools that implement it, the RTI process begins with the universal screening tool which is used to assess the reading and math levels of all students. All students are given the screener, also referred to as Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM), 3 times each year. Students who fall below the benchmark are assessed more often, typically every other week. Between the CBM assessments, students who are below benchmark are provided interventions, and the data collected on the CBMs become the RTI data used for decision making; therefore, CBM data were used in this study.

Although the purpose of RTI data as spelled out in the IDEA (2004) is to identify students with learning disabilities and to determine their eligibility for special education services, the data that result from the RTI process are often used to drive educational decision making (i.e., the need for interventions). Cummings (2006) contended that RTI is more than just a way to identify students with learning disabilities; it is a way to ensure improved academic outcomes for all students, as the RTI service is provided to any students who are in need of interventions, regardless of eligibility for special education. Typically, students made eligible for special education are those classified as “non-responders” to RTI.
Barnes and Harlacher (2008) determined that deciding whether a student has “responded” or “not responded” to an intervention is a complex question. They offered three options for judging responsiveness. The first way they suggested was to establish criteria that the student must meet in order to be considered a “responder.” Another option they suggested was that students who progress at an acceptable rate and reach an established criterion are determined to be “responders.” The final option they proposed was the 3-point decision rule. This requires setting a goal for the student, graphing the data, drawing an “aimline,” and making an instructional decision only after the student has three consecutive data points below the aimline. They suggested that this is the most straightforward and popular way to determine if a student is a “responder” or a “non-responder” (p. 426).

Little research has been conducted regarding how student retention decisions are made, and even fewer have focused on the use of RTI data in retention decision making. Thus, this study aimed to fill a major gap in the literature, specifically in looking at how RTI data factors into retention decision making for elementary students.

**Response to Intervention**

RTI attempts to identify and assist struggling students before they fall behind. RTI systems utilize universal screeners such as CBM along with high-quality instruction for all students. The interventions target students who struggle (Gersten et al., 2008). Interventions are typically divided into three tiers, although some models have two, four, or five tiers (Gersten et al., 2008). Before assigning students to intervention tiers, a screening tool is given to all students at the school. This is typically administered by the classroom teacher in order quickly to assess the students’ overall reading ability (Dunn,
Screening tools are typically administered to students 3 times per year (Deno et al., 2008). Students who fail to meet set cut points are considered to be in need of intervention and are then assigned to an intervention tier.

RTI is a model of intervention, but it is not prescriptive. It is individualized for students involved in the process and does not offer one quantitative formula for measuring any of the following: (a) the time at which it can be determined that a student is in need of intervention, (b) defining what an intervention should entail, (c) clarifying when sufficient progress has been made and the student no longer requires interventions, and (d) what the classification criteria for special education should be (Dunn, 2010). Thus, RTI models vary greatly from one setting to another, even within the same school district. Further, many schools utilize an RTI team to work with teachers to assist with the design of interventions and the interpretation of RTI data to inform decision making. Each school team is therefore able to establish its own formulas for the students in need of interventions.

Tier 1 instruction is generally defined as the instruction provided to all students in a class. In the RTI model, Tier 1 instruction is often categorized as “evidence-based reading instruction” (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2006, p. 6) or “high-quality reading instruction” (Division for Learning Disabilities, 2007, p. 17). At this level, core instruction with no intervention takes place.

Tier 2 instruction is the first- or entry-level of intervention. These supports are in place only for students with a demonstrated need based on screening measures or classroom performance. Students assigned to this tier receive supplemental small-group instruction typically aimed at foundational skills (Gersten et al., 2008).
Tier 3 interventions are provided to students who do not progress with Tier 2 interventions after a reasonable amount of time and require more intensive assistance. At this tier level, instruction may be in a one-on-one setting, and data continue to be collected. If a student fails to make adequate progress after receiving Tier 3 interventions, he or she may be referred for a special education evaluation (Gersten et al., 2008).

The tiers of RTI were designed to be fluid. Students are not assigned to one tier to remain there indefinitely. For example, a student who has made significant gains at Tier 2 may be moved back to Tier 1. Similarly, a student who has not made significant gains at Tier 2 may be moved to Tier 3 interventions. Although not all models of RTI use progress monitoring data, Gersten et al. (2008) suggested that progress monitoring measures are the best way to assess whether students are retaining what has been taught. The use of RTI data can therefore inform decisions about which students need to continue in their current tier placement and which need to move to another. Gersten et al. further proposed that relying only on the screening measures given 3 times per year may over-serve some students while under-serving others. More frequent data collection allows for a more responsive model.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this research is that of competing values. Boyd (as cited in Fowler, 2004) asserted that the competing values framework says that only two or three values can be dominant at any given point in time. In educational policy, according to Fowler, those values may be social values (order and individualism), democratic values (liberty, equality, and fraternity), or economic values (efficiency, economic growth, and quality). Because these values shift over time, they are relevant to
a discussion of the impact of RTI data on current decision-making practices, which is the focus of this study. In looking at the decision-making process in light of the current political climate, the decision-making process can be clarified.

The social values of order and individualism are relevant to a discussion on student retention. In looking at order within a school, the safety and security of students must be considered. When students are retained, they typically become over-age for grade, and some will be larger than their peers. When size and age are combined with the behavior and social problems exhibited by some retained students, the retained students’ impact on the order of the school must be considered. Conversely, individualism examines the needs of the individual over the needs of the group. In the individualism frame, the academic needs of the retained student would be considered more important than the safety and security needs of the group. With the implementation of an RTI model, the order of the school is rearranged to better meet the needs of individual students; however, a social stigma may be attached to being assigned to one of the lower groups or for being singled out for individual interventions.

Democratic values include liberty, equality, and fraternity. Liberty involves freedom, independence, or choice. At its most basic, liberty includes the right to own property which may be perceived as including education. Freedom concerns can include access to knowledge and the provision of a range of educational choices. Retention can be viewed as an effort to increase a student’s access to knowledge which was not gained the first time through a grade; it may also be seen as decreasing the range of educational choices because retained students are typically subjected to another year of the same curriculum. Students participating in an RTI model have greater access to knowledge, as
their individual levels are addressed through interventions. Their freedom may be compromised, however, as students receiving interventions may lose some time from the general education classroom or from the general education curriculum.

The second democratic value, equality, has two applications: (a) social equality and (b) equality of results. Social equality leads to equal opportunity for each student to acquire a good education. Equality of results focuses on the needs of individuals so that each student is provided with the interventions or instruction necessary to achieve at the expected level. For retained students, equality issues in the social aspect include not just academic benefits of education, but the social and behavioral aspects of education as well. Equality of results necessitates that students be provided interventions, which retention is often considered, so that the students may achieve at the expected levels. RTI is a way that interventions can be provided, separate from or in addition to retention. It provides the opportunity for students to maintain placement with their same-age peers and, potentially, achieve the same results as their peers.

The last democratic value, fraternity, examines solidarity or brotherhood. The school is considered a community, as is each classroom within a school. Student retention impacts the student’s interaction within the school and classroom communities. Often at the elementary school level, classes are mixed for special classes such as art, music, or physical education. Entire grade levels may have recess together. A retained student is removed from this brotherhood or grade cohort and placed into a new one with younger peers. Students participating in RTI interventions may be removed from their classroom in order to receive interventions for a short time—perhaps 30-40 minutes, but they spend
the majority of their time in class with their peers. Their placement with their grade
cohort remains intact.

The final category of competing values is economic. Two factors are considered
within the economic value: (a) efficiency and (b) economic growth. Efficiency is
concerned with obtaining the best possible return on an expenditure or on an investment.
Retaining students costs the school system an additional year of education for the student.
The efficiency concern is whether or not the expenditure on that additional year results in
the best possible return in academic gains; research has suggested that it does not. In
contrast, RTI does not require an additional year of schooling, but it does require
additional time and, at times, materials. Further, an increased need for training of staff
members on RTI and intervention programs becomes necessary. In looking at efficiency,
it must be determined if a less costly way is available to increase the academic
performance of students. Students who obtain necessary skills graduate to be highly
skilled members of the workforce, the focus of economic growth. An educated workforce
is necessary to perpetuate economic growth, for without it, production would decrease,
and the economy would suffer.

Boyd (as cited in Fowler, 1984) determined that in policymaking, values are
competing for prominence. A balancing act occurs among competing values when
policies are created. The realm of retention and RTI policies is no different. A balance
among the social, democratic, and economic needs of stakeholders is attempted, though
one or two of these needs typically appears more prominent. Thus, it is important to
examine the competing values inherent in a discussion about RTI and retention—two
policies which are seemingly inherently different, yet they clearly overlap.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to investigate how K-3 teachers use RTI data when making decisions about student retention. The author examined teacher and principal self-report of the role that RTI data took in the decision-making process and explored the issues, concerns, and benefits of RTI data usage. It appeared that retention decision making is an area of research that is lacking, especially when coupled with the consideration of RTI data specifically.

Statement of the Problem

Educators tend to believe that retaining students in grade will lead to improved educational outcomes. The recent push for greater accountability through NCLB (2001) has led to an increased number of students being retained in grade. As a case in point, NCES (2009) reported that the percentage of Kindergarten through eighth-grade students retained in grade remained between 9% and 11% for the years 1996 to 2007. In 2007, approximately 10% of K-8 students had been retained.

Corman (2003) stated that “the failure of children to master the grade-level material and be promoted to the next grade is an important indicator that our educational system does not succeed for a significant fraction of American children” (p. 409). RTI appears to hold promise for underachieving students. It provides the opportunity for students to receive instruction targeted at increasing their learning rate so they can catch up to their peers. In some cases, however, students do not respond to interventions and never catch up to their peers. In this type of case, non-responders, educators may decide to retain the student. A better understanding of how retention decisions are made and the role of RTI data in the decisions would be beneficial to educators and policy makers.
This study examined one elementary school to determine the role of RTI data in retention decision making. As the literature review investigated, the majority of retention research has shown retention as ineffective in remediating the performance of students with low academic levels. In spite of the research, retention is endorsed by many politicians as a way to ensure students are held accountable for their learning. Given this lack of research support for the practice of retention, Hauser (2000) stated, “I doubt that governments currently make important policy decisions about any other social process with so little in the way of sound, basic, descriptive information” (p. 8).

RTI research is still in its infancy when compared to retention research. RTI data provide information about the learning profile of a student, and while the information can lead to eligibility for special education, in some cases, it does not. Students fail to respond to interventions, but they are not necessarily made eligible for special education. This group of students may be the group most likely to be retained, but that assumption remains unclear. This study sought to clarify the role of RTI data in decision making about retention.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine how RTI data are used in decision making about retaining students in grade. While the intent of RTI data is to make determinations about student eligibility for special education, the information has other uses. The school described in this case utilized RTI data in decision making for all students; thus, the relevance of the RTI data and their influence on retention and instructional decisions for students who may be retained became the focus for this study. The specific questions this study sought to answer were as follows:
1. How do RTI data influence teachers’ retention decision making?
2. How do RTI data influence principals’ retention decision making?
3. How do RTI data influence teachers’ decision making about instruction for students who are retention candidates?

**Significance of the Study**

**Limitations**

This study was limited to one school and the teachers of grades K-3 within that school. The findings may therefore not generalize to other schools or grades. The intent of this study was to investigate the use of RTI data during retention decision making, a use of the data not readily observed in other settings. The researcher is a staff member at the school studied which may have provided a limitation to the study because of bias.

**Organization of the Study**

This study was organized into five chapters. The first chapter included an overall introduction, the purpose of the study, the justification for the study, and the research questions. The second chapter, the literature review, included relevant research on RTI, student retention, and decision making. Chapter 3 consisted of the methodology for the study. Chapter 4 contained a discussion of the results of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 included the conclusions, implications, and recommendations that emanated from this study.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Much research has been conducted on the issue of retention. In this chapter is an overview of the research surrounding retention. The exploration began with an examination of the reasons teachers gave for retaining students and the results of studies examining the effects on retained students in relation to the reason given. It continued with an in-depth discussion of research that has been conducted with results supporting and not supporting retention. Finally, options presented in the literature which may assist students with low achievement and prevent them from being retained were presented.

Retention and Social Promotion

Arguments for both sides are compelling as retention/social promotion is a complex problem. Each position has its proponents. Despite the fluctuation in popularity, students have continued to be retained. In making the decision to retain or to promote, teachers consistently offered the same reasons for retaining students.

Five reasons have commonly been given for retaining students (Bocks, 1977; Goodlad, 1954; Norton, 1983). Those reasons were as follows: (a) retention gives students the opportunity to master material that was unlearned the first time through the grade; (b) in the retained year, students often perform better, thus improving their self-esteem; (c) retention helps to create homogeneous groups; (d) the threat of retention motivates students to perform their best; and (e) retention gives students the opportunity to mature, thus ensuring success in learning. Much research has been conducted around
each of these reasons for retention, and little of it has supported the decision to retain students in grade.

Most often cited by teachers was the impression that retention in grade gives students the opportunity to master unlearned material. Many teachers have continued to believe that retention in the early grades is an effective strategy to remediate poor school performance and can lead to greater success in later grades (Roderick, 1995). Schwager, Mitchell, Mitchell, and Hecht (1992) argued that “retention is a convenient but ineffective response to low achievement, shored up by common beliefs that ‘something’ is being done to help the child” (p. 422). Studies consistently showed that recycling students through an additional year of the same curriculum, as is typical of most programs, holds no value for a vast majority of students (Martinez & Vandergrift, 1991; McCollum, Cortez, Maroney, & Montes, 1999). In terms of achievement, Luppescu, Bryk, Deabster, Easton, and Thum (1995) found that based on ITBS scores, students who were retained showed smaller gains than did their promoted peers. Luppescu et al. concluded that retention does not provide students with academic difficulties the opportunity to catch up, as students who are promoted make greater gains than those who are retained. Moreover, the result of retention is that the students fall further and further behind.

Retention, as a response to low achievement, has traditionally given students a larger dose of what failed to work the first time (McCollum et al., 1999). Retaining students places the blame for failure on the students, ignoring the possibility that the educational program, the instructional approach, or the teacher played a major part in the child’s low achievement. For example, Darling-Hammond (1998) identified teacher
preparedness and expertise as the most important factor regarding students’ school performance. In addition, the data collected by Wang and Wang (2007) indicated that schools with fewer credentialed teachers had an increased number of retained students, lending credence to the argument that with proper instruction, students can exhibit increased achievement. In sum, questions remain about whether retained students are unable to learn, choose not to learn, or do not have access to the physical and instructional resources they need in order to be successful (Bowman, 2005).

Teacher beliefs have been shown to be a major factor in decisions regarding whether a student will be retained and may explain inconsistencies in retention practice (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). In general, according to Tomchin and Impara, teachers tended to believe that early retention is more beneficial than later retention. At the Kindergarten level, for instance, Okpala (2007) found that teachers perceived retention as a necessary intervention. Further, Witmer, Hoffman, and Nottis (2004) questioned teachers at the elementary level and found that 77% believed that retention was an effective practice for preventing failure in later grades. In fact, the authors found that 94% disagreed with the statement that “Children should never be retained” (p. 179).

Despite teachers’ belief that retention can benefit students, the research has consistently shown little benefit to students who are retained. Quite the contrary, many studies have shown that retaining students leads to more behavioral problems, increased dropout rates, and social/emotional difficulties for students. Despite a myriad of research studies regarding retention, no studies have completely dismissed the long-term negative effects (Larsen & Akmal, 2007).
In addition to discounting teachers’ reasons for retaining students, research has also indicated other reasons to refrain from retaining students. Indeed, many studies have shown that retaining students in grade is not beneficial; it is, in fact, harmful for students. For over 100 years, the practice of retaining students has been criticized in the research. The cost of retaining students, the link between retention and dropping out of school, and the demographic inequality of retention practices have all been issues highlighted in retention research.

The demographics of retained students have pointed to serious equity issues with significant social implications (Owings & Kaplan, 2007). As a case in point, NCES (2009) reported that for each survey year between 1996 and 2007, a larger percentage of male students than female students was retained. The report also indicated that in 2007, a greater percentage of Black students was retained than either White or Hispanic students, although no measurable difference was noted between 1996 and 2007. NCES also found that the percentage of students retained varied by the level of education attained by the student’s mother. Twenty percent of students whose mother had less than a high school diploma were retained in 2007, while only 3% of students whose mother’s highest level of education was a bachelor’s degree or had some graduate/professional school were retained. Again looking at 2007, 23% of students from poor families had been retained, while 11% of near-poor and 5% of non-poor students had been retained (NCES, 2009).

In addition to demonstrating that students continue to be retained despite research discounting its potential benefits, the NCES (2009) report showed that students’ success or failure in school correlated to other factors, factors beyond their control. For example, Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, and Sroufe (1997) suggested that a parent’s ability to
advocate for his or her child effectively often determined if a student was retained, as one
difference between the retained group and the promoted group was parental involvement.
Parental intelligence quotient (IQ) was also found by Jimerson et al. to be a
discriminatory variable. Birth month was also found to be a predictor for retention: Being
young in grade made it more likely for students to be retained (Luppescu et al., 1995).
Rather than punishing students for low academic performance, it is clear that
interventions are necessary to assist students in these risk groups (poor, near-poor, Black,
low maternal education level) to make academic progress and avoid retention, or if they
are going to be retained, to meet their academic needs.

The research has suggested that many teachers believe that the only alternative to
retention is social promotion. Social promotion is the practice of advancing students to
the next grade despite their not having mastered the material in their current grade
(Denton, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Although less research is available
on social promotion, the available research has shown that social promotion increases
dropout rates, does not lead to improved student achievement, and creates graduates who
do not possess the necessary skills for employment (Denton, 2001; U.S. Department of
Education, 1999). In a discussion about retention, Lazarus and Ortega (2007) stated that
“although social promotion is also insufficient in addressing the problems of
academically underperforming students, grade retention appears to have more deleterious
effects over time” (p. 60).

Luppescu et al. (1989) reported that most students who are retained are held back
due to deficits in reading, written language, or math. While these have been the most
commonly assessed content areas over time, science, social studies, music, art, physical
education, and library sciences are also typically taught or allowed as elective classes for students, but these optional classes are not often considered in retention decisions. Yet, students who exhibit low achievement in one subject may excel in others (McCollum et al., 1999). In these cases, repeating an entire grade deprives students the opportunity to learn new academic material (McCollum et al., 1999).

Although retention is targeted to benefit students, two major studies have shown that students perceive retention in grade to be a stressful event (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2005; Yamamoto & Byrnes, 1987). In both studies, students in first, third, and sixth grade were asked to complete a questionnaire on which they rated life events on a scale to indicate how stressful they would be. In the 2005 study, Anderson et al. found that academic retention fell into the top five most stressful experiences for third- and sixth-grade students. For sixth-grade students, being retained in grade was ranked higher than other life events, including losing a parent and going blind, two events that were ranked higher than retention in the 1987 study conducted by Yamamoto and Byrnes. Students joined the many researchers presented in the next section who are opponents of retention.

**Opponents of Grade Retention**

To reiterate, the majority of research that has been conducted condones the practice of retaining students in grade. In this section are presented summaries of key studies. Two purposes were designated for the presentation. First, the findings had to be clarified by important information regarding the nature of the studies and their flaws; second, the date of the study had to be noted. The analysis demonstrated that the studies presented spanned decades, yet they come to surprisingly similar conclusions.
Goodlad (1954), for example, attempted to design a study that would extend previous studies and used a control group. He selected six elementary schools which had a high retention rate ranging from 12.8% to 28.6% and five elementary schools with a low retention rate ranging from 5.1% to 11.2% (p. 304). From the schools with the high retention rate, he selected a sample of 73 retained first graders. From the schools with the low retention rate, he selected 150 promoted second-grade students whose achievement scores were similar to those of the retained students (p. 304). These schools were neither the most rural nor the most urban in the county and did not represent the highest or lowest socioeconomic status (SES).

Having established a control group, Goodlad (1954) tested his hypotheses and found that retained students did not benefit from the intervention of retention. In fact, the retained students had to deal with more rejection compared to their promoted peers. They also demonstrated deteriorated social and personal adjustment during the academic school year. Promoted peers had fewer issues in peer-group relationships and thrived more than their own class group (p. 324). In summary, he stated, “there are clear indications that nonpromotion is the less defensible educational practice” (p. 325).

Henderson, Goffeney, Butler and Clarkson (1971) examined a sample of 391 students to determine if White male students were retained at a higher rate than Black students in Portland, Oregon. Their sample included only first-grade students who had been born in a specific hospital. In order to be selected for this study, the mothers had to meet economic dependency requirements, as this study was part of the University of Oregon Medical School’s Collaborative Study on Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation, and Other Neurological and Sensory Disorders of Infancy and Childhood. The authors
admitted that the sample population for this study was more representative of the Black population’s economic condition than that of the overall White population. Essentially, the authors stated that in Portland, the SES of Blacks is typically lower than that of Whites and that the study’s results would generalize more easily to the Black population than to the White population.

In their results, Henderson et al. (1971) found that among students who were promoted, White males scored higher than Black males on achievement tests, intelligence tests, and other measures of aptitude (p. 104). Among students retained, White males scored higher than Black males, White females, and Black females on all tests except two—Black males’ reading tests and Black females’ Bender scores. When all students, retained and promoted, were examined, White boys earned somewhat lower reading achievement than either female group; the mean reading score was nearly the same as Black males. In contrast, however, Black males were retained less than one seventh as frequently as the White males. The authors explained a possible reason: White males who performed at a mediocre level were more likely to be retained by schools that served relatively high SES populations. Schools that served lower SES populations were more likely to promote mediocre students.

Abidin, Golladay, and Howerton (1971) studied the short- and long-term effects of retention for students. They compared two groups of students over 6 years. The first group consisted of students who had been retained. The second group of students consisted of promoted students who scored below the 25th percentile on a readiness test, but were not retained. The study examined SES, sex, and race (p. 413). Abidin et al. noted that 90% of parents who did not argue against their child’s being retained were in
the lower SES group (p. 415). The data indicated that students identified as African American were retained more than Caucasians and that only 30% of retained students were female while 70% were male (p. 412).

Abidin et al. (1971) found a decline in academic achievement for students who had been retained, unlike the progress noted for students who were promoted. In spite of this finding, low ability was not cited as one of the reasons for retaining students (p. 414). In 24% of the cases, no reason for retention was given. Of great concern was the decline in the academic achievement of the students who had been retained. The researchers noted that at the outset of the first grade, the ability of the retained group was significantly higher, but by the fourth grade, their mean IQ was 7.7 points below the promoted group. By the sixth grade, the difference had increased to 11.2 IQ points. Based on their results, Abidin et al. concluded that retention is a discriminatory and noxious policy that should be abolished (p. 415).

In an analysis of the literature, Jackson (1975) examined studies dating back to 1911 to determine if students who were doing poor academic work or who manifested emotional or social maladjustment benefited from being retained in grade. He reviewed a total of 44 studies and concluded that most of the research was plagued by design flaws and that the results were not sufficient to support positive results for grade retention over promotion.

Jackson (1975) sorted the studies into three groups according to their design (p. 618). The first design group consisted of studies which compared the outcomes of students who were retained to those of students who were promoted. The second design group compared academic outcomes of students before and after their retention. The third
and final design group was an experimental one. The studies in this group compared groups of randomly assigned retained students’ outcomes to the outcomes of their promoted counterparts, defined as the control group.

Jackson (1975) explained that the first design was flawed because the group of retained students was compared to promoted students (pp. 618-619). The promoted students were not having severe academic difficulties as were the retained group. He noted that this design was biased toward indicating positive results for grade promotion and lacked an experimental design with random assignment to treatment and control groups. Further, the design “falls short of assuring that the comparisons are made among pupils experiencing similar difficulties as relevant to grade retention” (p. 619, emphasis in the original). The second design, comparing students before their retention to after their retention (p. 622), was biased toward indicating positive results for retention because no control for improvement may have had an explanation other than retention. Finally, the third design group (pp. 623-624) utilized an experimental design, but it consisted of only three studies. Jackson noted that the results were not conclusive because they did not have a sample that was representative of the school population, and the studies did not examine the long-term effects of retention. He concluded that it is possible for retention to have some real benefits for students, but promotion appeared to have greater benefits.

A major drawback to Jackson’s (1975) study was that the most recent research that Jackson analyzed that used the experimental design was published in 1941, 34 years before his analysis (p. 627). In spite of this limitation, the importance of Jackson’s article was that it set the stage for future research surrounding the issue of student retention. The
majority of studies that have been conducted since Jackson’s study have utilized his favored experimental design.

As a case in point, Holmes and Matthews (1984) conducted a meta-analysis of 44 studies to determine the effects of retention on elementary and junior high school students. Their analysis indicated that retained students scored .37 standard deviations below their promoted counterparts on the various measures. The authors insisted that the cumulative evidence of the research showed a potential for the negative effects of retention that consistently outweighed positive outcomes. They suggested that proponents of retention needed to show compelling logic to indicate the success of their retention plans in light of the research showing that so many other plans have failed.

Holmes (1989) later conducted another meta-analysis which included the prior 44 studies and 19 additional studies. The findings of his meta-analysis were consistent with Holmes and Matthews’ (1984) previous findings of largely negative effects for retention. Concern continued to be noted that benefits decreased over time and resulted in retained students being no better off than their promoted peers. He repeated that the cumulative research does not support the retention of students. Included in the meta-analysis were studies which had found positive outcomes for retained students; however, Holmes noted that these studies provided intensive remediation for retained students and failed to compare these results to non-promoted students who also received the intensive remediation.

Niklason (1984) examined two school districts serving elementary school students in Utah, an urban district and a suburban district. The urban district served 20,000 students and had a policy which favored retention. The suburban district served over
40,000 students and had a policy which was very restrictive toward retaining students. Niklason sought to answer three questions: (a) What are the actual retention practices in the two districts, (b) How do these children recommended for retention compare to a control group, and (c) What are the effects of retention compared to promotion on these academically similar-functioning children (p. 492)?

In the urban district examined by Niklason (1984), 532 students (4.7%) were recommended for retention, while the suburban district recommended 145 students (.7%) for retention. Niklason determined that first graders were the most likely to be recommended for retention, followed by second graders (p. 493). She also found that: students in the urban district were seven times more likely to be recommended for retention; boys outnumbered girls; Indian, Hispanic, and Black children were overrepresented in both districts; and Asian children were underrepresented in both districts (p. 493). The retained students had a mean IQ that was about one standard deviation below the mean of the control group. The means for the control group were higher in reading, arithmetic, personal adjustment, and social adjustment (p. 494). Finally, she discovered that “retaining students did not serve the intended purpose of increasing the student’s growth academically or in personal or social adjustment” (p. 496).

In her efforts to discover whether certain groups of students benefited from retention, Niklason (1987) re-examined the 102 participants from her 1984 study. She chose three independent variables to address questions about the impact of retention on students: (a) grouped (retained vs. promoted), (b) district (providing remediation vs. providing no remediation), and (c) ability level (high vs. low). The results of Niklason’s
(1987) study indicated that for Kindergarten and first-grade students who were retained, reading and arithmetic scores on the Wide Range Achievement Test declined after the repeated grade. The main effect showed that students recommended for retention but who were promoted made more progress in the following year than retained students (p. 343). She also found that students retained in grades 2-6 did better after retention than students retained in earlier grades. This finding contradicted the common belief that early retention is more beneficial than later retention. In summary, however, she found that “clearly, none of the subgroups selected as likely to benefit from retention showed positive effects” (p. 343).

Johnson, Merrell, and Stover (1990) also analyzed the long-term effects of retention on students retained in Kindergarten and first grade. They examined a group of 57 fourth-grade students who had been retained either in Kindergarten or first grade. The sample consisted of 33 males and 24 females and was divided into three groups: (a) students who were retained (RET), (b) students who were recommended for retention but were not retained (NRET), and (c) students who had neither been retained nor recommended for retention (NORM). Johnson et al. drew their data from students’ standardized achievement test scores. Their analysis demonstrated no significant difference between the scores of the RET and NRET groups. As was expected, a significant difference was found between the NORM group and the RET and NRET groups. The results suggested that retention was not beneficial for the students. Two limitations to this study were the small sample size and the use of only one measure of student achievement.
In their longitudinal study, Hagborg, Masella, Palladino, and Shepardson (1991) examined 38 high school students with a history of retention and compared them to a control group matched by gender. All students participating in this study were White and attended school in a semirural district in New York State. The authors sought to determine if the educator’s goal for retention, becoming academically equivalent to their classmates, had been achieved. The results did not indicate that the goal was achieved. Although the authors admitted that students may have had gains that had “washed out” by high school or that gains had been made and maintained yet were not large enough to permit the students to catch up, they stated that students who had been retained were distinguishable from their classmates. The retained students had lower grades, lower IQ scores, and lower achievement scores than their non-retained classmates. No race other than White was represented in this study, limiting the ability to generalize the results.

Thomas et al. (1992) conducted a study using one rural elementary school. Their sample of 31 students included the entire sample of students who had been retained in Kindergarten or first grade and were in fourth or fifth grade (19 African-American and 12 Caucasian) at the time the study was conducted. The control group of 31 students (20 African-American and 11 Caucasian) had never been retained. The study’s dependent measure was grade point average (GPA). Social and cognitive competence, along with externalizing and internalizing problems, was rated by teachers using teacher rating scales.

In their study, Thomas et al. (1992) found that despite the fact that the population of the school was 68% Caucasian and 32% African American, the retained population was 62% African-American and 38% Caucasian. In addition, the results showed that
while neither group benefited long-term from retention, Caucasian students were more negatively impacted by retention when examining academic and social functioning. The authors noted that their sample, consisting of students from one rural school, may not generalize to other samples. It should be noted that the lack of Hispanic students and students from other racial groups also made these findings less generalizeable.

Mantzicopoulous and Morrison (1992) explored the impact of Kindergarten retention by following a group of retained and promoted students until the end of second grade. The students in this study attended two school districts in Marin County, California. The results indicated that the students had increased scores their second year in Kindergarten, but the improvements were not maintained into the first grade. Mantzicopoulous and Morrison attributed the improved results on the end-of-Kindergarten assessment to the following: (a) use of the same test they had taken the previous year and/or (b) being a year older at the time of the test. The authors attempted to analyze behavioral data for the sample; however, an examination was difficult due to incomplete student data and difficulties finding a matching control group.

Meisels and Liaw (1993) examined data on 16,623 students from the 1988 National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS:88). Their purpose was to examine the effects of retention using a large national sample. Their study included 13,420 students who had never been retained, 2,075 students who were retained in grades K-3, and 1,128 students who were retained in grades 4-8. They found that retention impacted more African-American students (29.9%) than Hispanic (25.2%) or White students (17.2%). They also found that 24% of boys were retained while 15.3% of girls were retained. Additionally, they found that 33.9% of the repeaters came from the lowest SES group
while only 8.6% came from the highest SES. This study by Meisels and Liaw confirmed the results of earlier studies that students who are subjected to retention are most likely to be African-American, male, and poor (p. 71).

In their analysis of the academic impact of retention, Meisels and Liaw (1993) found that retained students have lower grades and test scores than students who had never been retained. They concluded that the results indicated that at the very least, retention does not succeed in its goal of raising the performance of retained students to the same level as students who had not been retained (p. 76). The authors suggested that retention should be used only in rare instances (p. 76).

Luppescu et al. (1995) examined retention data for Chicago public schools. They noted that a policy was introduced in 1987 that encouraged teachers to promote more students than previously. Once the policy was implemented in 1989, a marked decrease in student retention was noted. By 1992, retention rates decreased in all grades by at least one-half of their pre-reform levels. The authors of this study sought to determine if a model could be developed to predict students who would be retained and to establish the effect of retention on student achievement. Although demographic data were not available on the student population, the authors noted that approximately 1 million records were obtained.

Another longitudinal study was conducted by Jimerson et al. (1997). The authors created and examined three groups of students: (a) retained students ($n = 29$), (b) low-achieving but promoted students ($n = 50$), and a control group ($n = 100$). Jimerson et al. sought to examine the characteristics of retained students and contrast them to the
promoted group and to evaluate the long- and short-term effects of retention on academic achievement and social and personal adjustment.

The short-term effects of retention found by Jimerson et al. (1997) indicated that retained students showed significant growth only in math, not in reading or spelling. The short-term changes in math may be accounted for by additional services or by the fact that the tested material had been reviewed twice; thus, the increased math scores may not necessarily reflect an effect of retention. The long-term effects for retained students included significantly lower rankings on an emotional health/self-esteem measure. In comparison, low-achieving but promoted peers displayed gain in emotional adjustment. In summary, Jimerson et al. found that the intervention of retention did not benefit students and was ineffective—and possibly harmful—to their adjustment.

Roderick, Nagaoka, Bacon, and Easton (2000) evaluated the effects of Chicago’s 1997 promotional policy which required students to earn minimum scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) in third, sixth, and eighth grades in order to be promoted. Students who were unable to reach the minimum score were sent to Summer Bridge for remediation and allowed to attempt to pass the test again. Students were either retained based on test scores or promoted despite not having made the cutoff. Using data available, Roderick et al. compared students from 1995, who were not subjected to the policy, to students subjected to the policy in 1997, 1998, and 1999. They found that passing rates for the ITBS improved in all three grades, despite the raising of the minimum score for eighth grade in 1998 and again in 1999.

Despite the rise in passing rates in all grades, no decline was evident in retention rates. Roderick et al. (2000) explained that the reason for this was that fewer students
who did not meet the cutoff were being promoted. It was noted that passing rates in third grade may have improved because retention rates in earlier grades had increased. In comparing 1992 retention rates to 1999 retention rates, Kindergarten retention increased from .5% of students to 1.5%, first grade increased from 3.9% to 6.6%, and second grade increased from 2.6% to 4.1%. Students who were retained under this policy did not fare well. After 2 years in the second grade and 2 times through Summer Bridge, only 43% of retained third graders and 47% of retained sixth graders were able to attain the minimum passing score. One of the most disconcerting findings was that of the eighth-grade students retained in 1997—nearly one third had dropped out by 1999. Additionally, 5% of sixth graders who were double retained had dropped out by 1999. On a positive note, students who had attended Summer Bridge and reached the testing cutoff maintained their gains over the next 2 years.

In 2001, Jimerson published a meta-analysis of grade retention research based on studies conducted between 1990 and 1999. The meta-analysis included 20 studies which met the following selection criteria: (a) the research was presented in a professional publication, (b) results addressed the efficacy of retention, (c) the study included an identifiable comparison group of promoted students, and (d) the research was published between 1990 and 1999 (p. 423). He found that comparison groups ranged from being matched on only one variable to being matched to students who were recommended for retention but were not retained and essentially matched on all variables considered. Of the studies examined, 45% matched on or controlled for academic achievement, 30% matched on or controlled for socioemotional adjustment, 75% matched or controlled for
SES, and 70% matched or controlled for gender. Eleven of the studies reported results for socioemotional comparisons, yet they neither controlled for nor matched on this variable.

Jimerson’s (2001) examination of the 20 studies yielded a total of 175 analyses exploring academic achievement (p. 428). Ninety-one of the analyses revealed statistically significant differences of which 82 favored the comparison group of promoted students relative to the retained students. The mean effect size of the analyses was -.39 standard deviation lower for retained students when compared to the promoted group. The comparison promoted group was higher in all areas: (a) language arts (.36), (b) reading (.54), (c) math (.49), (d) composite scores (.20), and (e) GPA (.18) (p. 429). Jimerson stated that the results of this meta-analysis failed to demonstrate that grade retention provides any greater benefits than does promotion to the next grade.

Silberglitt et al. (2006) conducted a longitudinal study of grade retention on reading performance. They examined 147 students from five districts in rural and “outer-ring” suburban Minnesota (p. 258). The participants were divided into three groups of 49 students each: (a) retained students, (b) a matched group of promoted students, and (c) a randomly selected control group. Each group consisted of 32 males and 17 females. The largest ethnic group was White (91.2%). The sample had no Hispanic students and 2% Black students. The groups were not matched on ethnicity or SES. Notably, 40 (35.1%) of the 147 students were receiving special education services (17 in the retained group, 19 in the matched group, and 4 in the random group). The results of the study indicated that the retained students did not experience any increase in their growth rate as a result of retention. Their rate of learning was not above the rate of the similarly performing but promoted peers (p. 266). The authors concluded, “considering the expense of students
repeating a grade, the lack of positive effects yielded in this study, and the deleterious long-term outcomes reported in related research, it is disconcerting that the practice of retention persists” (p. 268).

**Retention and Dropouts**

In a 1908 study, retention in grade was linked to dropping out of school (Thorndike, as cited in Owings & Kaplan, 2001). Studies conducted since that time have failed to dismiss the correlation between retention in grade and dropping out of school. Retention has been consistently shown to increase the likelihood that students will drop out of high school. Martinez and Vandegrift (1991) commented that “retention is invariably associated with poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, negative attitudes toward school and high dropout rates. In fact, the strongest predictor of dropping out of school is being behind in grade” (p. 1).

Lloyd (1978) extended his prior study which had examined a group of students to determine if a correlation appeared between early school failure and dropping out of high school. In the previous study, Lloyd had used a longitudinal sample to follow students from sixth grade to graduation or dropout. In the current study, Lloyd (1978) examined the available third-grade data for the same population to determine whether secondary school completion could be predicted. The study included 788 males and 774 females. Of these students, 196 males and 143 females had dropped out of school. This study did not offer ethnicity or SES data for the students.

Lloyd (1978) examined a number of variables to determine which, if any, were correlated to dropping out of high school. Based on students’ age, educational level of the parents, number of siblings, marital status of the parents, occupation of the father, grades
in third grade, retention in grade, and test scores, Lloyd found that approximately three out of four students were correctly predicted to graduate or drop out. Of particular concern was that “nonpromotion in the first three grades, as measured by Age (for boys) or Retention (for girls), is a strong indicator of later dropout” (p. 1199).

Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple (2002) conducted a meta-analysis to examine the correlation between retention in grade and dropping out of school. Their literature review was limited to professional publications between the years 1970 and 2000. The original search for references regarding retention and its synonyms produced 837 references which the authors whittled down to 17 when they limited the references to available professional publications which addressed the association between dropout status and grade retention. The earliest paper was from 1972; the most current, from 1999. Jimerson et al.’s overwhelming conclusion was that “although the studies span differing decades, locales, ethnicities, researchers, and designs, the results consistently indicate that grade retention is highly associated with later high school dropout” (p. 452).

Stearns, Moller, Blau, and Potochnick (2007) investigated the relationship between grade retention and dropping out of school. While they confirmed the findings of earlier studies that a correlation exists between retention and dropping out, they sought to explain why retention causes students to drop out. Their results indicated that students who have been retained have lower achievement, more disciplinary problems, and lower self-esteem. In addition, they are more pessimistic about their future, are less engaged with school, and have fewer bonds with teachers (p. 231). Stearns et al. suggested that schools that are interested in reducing their dropout rates may wish to pay particular
attention to retained students to facilitate student engagement and assist in the social arena.

Penna and Tallerico (2005) interviewed students who had been retained and who had dropped out of school to determine their perception of student retention. Of the 24 students who participated in the study, 20 identified grade retention as one of the factors that influenced their decision to drop out. The retainees reported that not much had changed between their first year through a grade and the repeat year. Indeed, teacher and student attitudes toward these students were noted as being negative. They also reported feelings of resentment, disillusionment, and frustration as a result of repeating a grade. Overall, the students felt that they did not fit in at school and believed they never would. They ultimately lost hope and exited (p. 15).

The American Council on Education (ACE, 2006) is responsible for General Education Development (GED) testing. Consequently, ACE conducted a study to examine the demographic, academic, social, and behavioral differences between GED candidates who were or were not retained in grade. Using the date of dropping out of school and year of birth, they assigned candidates to one of three groups: (a) retainee, (b) uncertain of retention status, or (c) not retained. Among the reasons for not completing high school (p. 10), 39.1% of retained candidates identified their reason as being too old for their grade; 4.9% of the nonretainees and 13.7% of the uncertain status group said that. An examination of the testing results revealed that both the nonretainees and the uncertain status group outperformed the retainees on every test (p. 13). Moreover, the passing rate for the retainee group was only 65%; 78% of the nonretainees passed as did 75% of the uncertain status group (p. 18). This was a unique perspective as it looked only
at retained students who attempted the GED test, yet it highlighted that students who have been retained and who were not completely lacking motivation to complete their schooling continued to demonstrate academic difficulties.

**Summary of Opposition to Retention**

A good deal of research condoned the practice of retaining students in grade. The research presented spanned many decades and included students in rural, suburban, and urban districts. Both large and small samples were represented. Despite all of the differences in decade, locale, population, and sample size, all reached the conclusion that retention did not remediate academic difficulties. Although some research offered mixed results, the authors argued against the use of retention as an intervention strategy. In the following section, authors who did not condone retention and those who argued that the benefits are worth continuing the practice are presented.

**Proponents of Retention**

Peterson, DeGracie, and Ayabe (1987) examined the academic impact of retention on first-, second-, and third-grade students in Mesa Public Schools. They examined retained and promoted students in each grade. They confirmed earlier findings that in the first year after retention, students retained in first and second grade scored better on a standardized assessment than promoted students. This positive result was not evident the second year after the retained grade or in years following. In summary, they determined that their conclusion did not show long-term positive effects for retained students, yet it also did not show long-term negative effects. A limitation to this study was that the analysis included only academic factors. The students who were retained were provided with individual plans to assist with remediation, so treatment was not only retention.
Peterson et al. suggested that social promotion with the use of an individual plan for remediation may be more beneficial for students than retention alone.

Pierson and Connell (1992) examined the effects of retention on student self-system processes, school engagement, and academic performance. They examined students from two districts, one serving 900 students in a suburban/rural setting and one serving 11,000 students in a suburban/urban setting. Pierson and Connell compared four groups of students: (a) students who had been retained, (b) a group of students with matched ability (IQ) to the retained group, (c) students who were socially promoted, and (d) students who were neither retained nor socially promoted (random). The sample size for the groups varied: (a) 74 retained students, (b) 69 matched ability group students, (c) 35 socially promoted students, and (d) 60 random students. The majority of the students in each group were from the larger district. The results of their comparisons indicated that students who are recommended for retention and are actually retained perform better academically 2 or more years later than students who perform comparably and are not retained. The researchers noted that retained students perform as well as and try as hard as the matched ability group. Additionally, Pierson and Connell suggested that retention in the early years is not harmful to general self-worth or to the perceived relatedness to peers and benefits students more than social promotion. In summary, the findings supported the use of retention as a potentially effective remediation strategy for students in the early grades who demonstrate academic difficulty. It is important to note that the students in the retained group had been retained only once, and outcomes were assessed only in elementary and middle school grades.
Although showing mixed results, Pomplun (1988) examined students in a semirural area of west central Florida. For 2 years, he examined three groups of students: (a) retained, (b) recommended for retention but not retained, and (c) regular students. His examination included three hypotheses: (a) academic benefits of retention will decrease as grade level increases, (b) self-concept and motivation of retained students will decrease in comparison with the other groups of students, and (c) teacher, student, and parent perceptions of retention as a beneficial alternative will decrease with increasing grade level. The retained students were matched to students who were recommended for retention, yet the two groups were considered to be nonequivalent and to represent different populations due to the decision process not being randomly assigned. The students in this study were in first and second grade (primary, \( n = 66 \)), third and fourth grade (intermediate, \( n = 45 \)), or seventh and eighth grade (secondary, \( n = 30 \)). No explanation for the exclusion of fifth and sixth graders was provided.

Pomplun’s (1988) expected trend of decreasing academic benefits over time was confirmed by test scores in reading, language, and math as well as by parent, teacher, and student attitudes. Primary student self-ratings of self-concept and motivation for retained students increased at the beginning of the retained year, while the regular students’ ratings remained stable. At the intermediate level, students showed increased academic achievement and motivation. For secondary students, no significant achievement gains or decreases in self-concept or motivation appeared. Secondary students, parents, and teachers did, however, rate their retained year in significantly more negative terms than their primary or intermediate counterparts. The author offered that the findings “suggest that retention as an educationally effective alternative decreases in utility as grade level
increases” (p. 286). He further proposed that additional research may be needed to ensure that retention helps achievement. While not advocating retention, Pomplun suggested that retention is not as negative for primary students’ self-concept as previous research had indicated. Pomplun followed this small sample for only 2 years and might have come to a different conclusion had he examined this sample for a longer period of time.

Greene and Winters (2006) examined students retained in Florida under its test-based promotion policy. The students in third grade during the 2002-2003 school year were the first group subjected to this policy. Students were expected to score minimally at the second-lowest of five scoring levels on the reading portion of the state assessment in order to be promoted to fourth grade. Several exemptions were allowed: (a) students with limited English proficiency who had less than 2 years of instruction in English, (b) students with disabilities who were exempted from testing, (c) students who scored above the 51st percentile on another reading test, (d) students with disabilities who received intensive reading remediation, (e) students who demonstrated proficiency through a portfolio, and (f) students who had previously been retained twice (p. 10). Given these exemptions, only 57% of students who tested below the second level were retained. Students who were retained were provided with an academic improvement plan which targeted their specific needs and provided for intervention strategies. Students were also required to attend a summer reading camp where they received literacy instruction.

After retention, Greene and Winters (2006) examined the students’ test scores and found that in both the first and second year after retention, the effects of being retained were statistically significant and positive. The authors cautioned that although they had confidence that academic benefits of test-based retention exist, they are unsure if the
benefits will be maintained, expand, or disappear over time. They did not attempt to
determine if the gains were largely due to the implementation of the academic plan or if
promotion with an academic plan would have been equally or increasingly beneficial for
students. No control group of students was used in this study for comparison; rather,
students’ scores were compared to their scores from previous years. The Greene and
Winters argued that retaining low performing students allows the students to have time to
catch up on their skills so that they have the wherewithal to progress academically (p. 25).

In summary, researchers who were proponents of retention were in short supply.
Although some studies indicated a short-term benefit for retaining students, longitudinal
studies have not confirmed a lasting benefit for students who have been retained. While
research demonstrating no long-term negative effects were noted, limited positive effects
were also noted. No proponent for retention suggested that retention alone would solve
the academic problems that ail low-performing students. Options must be examined
which consider what supports in addition to or instead of retention can be utilized to
ensure positive outcomes for struggling students.

Alternatives to Retention

The cost of retention is high for students, but it is also high for the states and
school districts that have to pay for an additional year of schooling for these students. The
annual cost of retaining students in the United States is around $10 billion (McCollum et
al., 1999; Wang & Wang, 2007). Given that retention does not appear to be an effective
strategy for remediating academic difficulties, it has been suggested that it is a better idea
to use the money typically spent on retention for alternative remedial programs which are
more effective. Rather than waiting for students to fail, it is imperative that failure-prevention approaches be implemented to ensure that all students succeed. According to McCollum et al.,

From a cost benefit analysis perspective, retention is a counterproductive policy to pursue. When one considers the dysfunctional academic and affective effects of retention, it is increasingly difficult to understand the educators’ and public’s steadfast belief that it is the most effective remedy to improve achievement. (p. 12).

McCullum, et al. (1999) argued that retention is often seen as the only alternative to social promotion. Balow and Schwager (1990) contended that neither social promotion nor retention can cure low achievers’ academic problems. These students require effective programmatic interventions including individual learning plans. Martinez and Vandergrift (1991) proposed the implementation of sound educational strategies that alleviate the need to retain students. They argued that the solution to low achievement lies in better academic programs such as the following: (a) full-day Kindergarten, (b) extended day programs, (c) tutoring outside of the regular school day, (d) smaller class sizes, (e) developmentally appropriate practices, (f) enrichment classes, (g) transition centers, and (h) multi-grade classrooms. In agreement, Xia and Glennie (2005b) encouraged the development and adoption of alternative intervention strategies. Their suggestions included the following: (a) individualized student instruction, (b) parental involvement, (c) curriculum development, (d) school restructuring, (e) summer school, and (f) personalized tutoring programs. Xia and Glennie further commented that teachers
are often not offered other alternatives for intervention or remediation for low-achieving students.

Students themselves, in Penna and Tallerico’s study (2005), for example, offered options for retention which could enhance students’ educational experience and afford them the opportunity to catch up. The students made the following suggestions: (a) expanding summer school opportunities, (b) providing for an extended day, (c) allowing students in high school to double up on courses such as taking both 9th- and 10th-grade English during the same year, (d) making Saturday school available, and (e) changing unstructured study halls so that the time is better utilized. Often, in making their suggestions, the students noted that they needed one-on-one attention and participation with other students who were struggling, so their self-concept was not negatively impacted while their academic needs were being adequately addressed (p. 16).

The suggested alternatives to retention are some of the components commonly found in an RTI model. The purpose of the RTI model is to allow academically challenged students to accelerate their rate of learning and catch up to their peers. An examination of RTI research follows which delineated the strengths and concerns evident thus far.

**RTI Research**

RTI research is still in its infancy. RTI grew out of the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004. Schools and school districts were left with little or no guidance from IDEA on how to implement RTI or which model of RTI should be used to benefit students or to make them eligible for special education services. Almost no research is available on uses beyond special education eligibility decisions for this rich data source. In this section, the
researcher attempted to summarize the available research on RTI and relate it to research about retaining students in grade.

In an article published prior to the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 which ended the practice of exempting special education students from standardized testing, McGill-Franzen and Allington (1993) considered the impact of exempting students from the tests. They argued that high-stakes testing in the primary grades increased the pressure to improve test results and in an effort to do so, increased the number of students retained and identified for special education. The result of retention was to increase the time students had to learn the tested material prior to having to take the test, while classification as a special education student made them eligible for exemption from test score reporting. The authors questioned the ethic involved in making the decisions on the basis of test scores without focusing on the unique needs of the students about whom the decisions are made.

McGill-Franzen and Allington (1993) identified the data source as “interview and document data gathered from scores of teachers and administrators in low-achieving schools” (p. 20). They reported that in the districts where they had collected their data, high-stakes test results were not used to improve the quality of schooling for low-achieving students. Teachers and administrators reported using whatever policies existed to help them meet the high-stakes testing requirements. That included referrals for special education where schools in this study typically exempted students from participation, allowed the use of accommodations on the tests, or permitted students to take the tests but had their scores omitted. The authors also noted that student retention was used to delay low-achieving students’ participation in the tests. The state also had a new statewide
high-stakes assessment; thus, the researchers noted an increase in retention in grades K-2 in historically low-achieving schools. McGill-Franzen and Allington argued that the needs of the students were not being ethically addressed through either retention or special education eligibility.

Although the ability to exempt a special education student from standardized assessment is no longer an option, the issue of retention continues to be a current one. This article (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1993) lacked specificity in explaining research design, data collection, and data analysis. Its inclusion here is a reflection of the lack of research regarding retention decision making and, specifically, factors other than classroom performance which could influence the decision.

Beebe-Frankenberger, Bocian, MacMillan, and Gresham (2004) examined 22 schools in three school districts in California. The purpose of their study was to examine the similarities and differences between students who were retained, those identified as “at-risk for retention,” and students eligible for special education services. A control group of normally promoted students was also included in the comparisons. Their findings indicated that over 50% of the special education students had been retained prior to being found eligible for special education, raising the concern that retention was being used as an intervention and may have been the treatment of choice when the teacher believed that the student was either immature or had the ability to catch up if allowed the time to do so.

Beebe-Frankenberger et al. (2004) compared the IQ of retained students to the scores of special education, at-risk students, and promoted students. Their findings showed that the mean IQ score for retained students was in the low average range (mean
IQ = 86.1) and did not differ significantly from the mean IQ of the special education students (mean IQ = 86.7). They noted that 19.4% of retained students had IQ scores which would meet the criteria for mental retardation (i.e., < 70). An additional 12.5% of students scored between 70 and 85 where average is between 85 and 115. The 70-85 range has been identified historically as either “slow learners” or “borderline mentally retarded.”

In addition to not differing significantly on IQ, Beebe-Frankenberger et al. (2004) found no significant difference between retained and special education students on standardized test scores in reading, teacher ratings of academic competence, or problem behavior ratings. The authors raised concerns that teachers may use criteria to recommend retention rather than to make a referral for special education. The students at risk for retention, those who have been retained, and others who fall into the lowest percentiles on standardized assessments may be achieving at their ability level and may continue to face the same dilemma year after year. The authors concluded that research and practice must focus on how to meet the instructional needs of these chronically low-achieving students.

Mahdavi and Beebe-Frankenberger (2009) monitored two elementary schools in Montana as they implemented RTI models. The first school, Bear Elementary, was a small rural school. An RTI steering team was created which originally consisted of the principal, the special education director/school psychologist, two RTI coaches, a fourth-grade teacher, and a special educator. They soon decided to add the school counselor, another general education teacher, and the Title 1 teacher to the team. Before beginning the implementation of RTI, the school replaced its reading curriculum with an evidence-
based core reading curriculum in which teachers were trained. Retired teachers were recruited to assist with administering the universal screener. A goal of at least 80% proficient was set for student performance on the screener. The actual performance of the students was 49% proficient. To address the overall needs of the students, students were provided reading instruction at their instructional level during the 90-minute reading block for grades K-2, while students in grades 3 and 4 received differentiated instruction during this time.

The second elementary school, Coyote Elementary, monitored by Mahdavi and Beebe-Frankenberger (2009), was an even smaller school near an Indian reservation. This school had already been a Reading First school for 4 years and had been implementing research-validated reading intervention practices. When the school started the Reading First initiative, only 39% of the students met or exceeded minimum proficiency standards. By the time the RTI study began, 60% of the students met or exceeded minimum proficiency standards. Their original steering team consisted of the principal, special education director, RTI coaches, a special educator, a reading specialist, one second-grade teacher, and one fourth-grade teacher. They, too, added the school counselor to the team. The school had already implemented the 90-minute reading block at students’ instructional level. Their team goal was to learn a problem-solving method to conduct teams more efficiently.

Mahdavi and Beebe-Frankenberger (2009) found that the RTI systems at the schools were unique to the school. Both schools chose to involve the community, but each did it in its own way. Teachers were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the RTI model at their school. Generally, teachers and team members from the beginning and
throughout the implementation perceived the process as being potentially effective in monitoring student progress and potentially leading to greater academic outcomes. They viewed RTI as useful for screening students and for determining the need for more intensive interventions. Teachers believed that student learning through RTI could be permanently improved. One concern noted by team members was the costliness in terms of time, personnel, and other resources. Developing and teaching small intervention groups was identified as being particularly time- and resource-intensive.

After 2 years of implementation, Mahdavi and Beebe-Frankenberger (2009) examined the percentage of students receiving services at each of the three tiers. Bear Elementary increased the number of students served at Tier 1 from 49% to 76%, almost attaining their goal of 80%. Students receiving Tier 2 services decreased from 33% to 15%, at the high extreme of their 12%-15% goal. Bear Elementary’s students receiving Tier 3 services decreased from 18% to 9%, slightly over the 5%-7% goal.

In contrast Coyote Elementary’s percentages did not change as dramatically. Coyote’s Tier 1 population increased from 60% to 64%, missing their goal of 80%. Tier 2 decreased from 23% to 22%, missing their goal of 12%-15%. Tier 3 decreased from 17% to 14%, missing their goal of 5%-7%. Coyote Elementary School was faced with some hardships which could explain, in part, the limited results. The transiency rate at Coyote is 40%, the school chose to implement RTI in math as well as in reading, and the principal who began the study was replaced with a principal who did not completely buy in to the model.

Fuchs, Compton, Fuchs, Bryant, and Davis (2008) selected 42 first-grade classrooms in 16 schools in urban and suburban Tennessee. In each class, the six poorest
readers from each class were selected for participation in this study. The 252 students were assigned randomly to one of three groups: (a) fall tutoring, (b) spring tutoring, or (c) control. The fall tutoring group consisted of 84 students who participated in small-group tutoring for 9 weeks. The spring tutoring group initially consisted of 84 students; however, 40 of the students were no longer in need of small-group tutoring by the spring semester. The control group consisted of 84 students matched to the non-responders in the spring tutoring group.

In the Fuchs et al. (2008) study, intervention groups were conducted by research assistants 4 times per week for 45 minutes per session outside the classroom. The students’ progress continued to be measured into their second-grade year. The results indicated that students in the intervention groups outperformed the control group on a progress monitoring measure and on several standardized reading tests. The students’ gains were maintained throughout their second-grade year. An examination of the identification of non-responders indicated that the group identified as non-responders varied based on the assessment being used. Fuchs et al. called for an empirically-based consensus about what RTI methods are most useful in order to identify a meaningful and consistent designation of reading disability status across schools, districts, and states (p. 434).

Davis Bianco (2010) described one school’s implementation of a plan to enhance data-driven instruction and fidelity of implementation. The school in New Jersey began implementation of the RTI model with Kindergarten 4 years prior to Davis’ report. Each year the school added one grade level to the RTI model. The issue of RTI fidelity of implementation or treatment integrity was an area of concern; thus, the school set about
using three types of reporting tools to monitor the implementation of interventions: (a) a tracking form, (b) reading coaches, and (c) video clips.

Davis Bianco (2010) identified the purposes of the tracking form as providing specific student data and enhancing teacher fidelity of implementation. The form included spaces to fill in information about the intervention such as intensity, duration, frequency, and student response as well as a section for teachers to write in any deviations from the instructional protocol. The purpose of the reading coaches was to increase fidelity of instruction and to provide assistance to teachers who had students who were not making progress or not making sufficient progress. Coaches provided demonstration lessons, discussed interventions, and coached teachers in mutually agreeable ways. The video clips were taken as teachers implemented specific aspects of data-driven, tiered, research-based instruction. The video clips were shared with other teachers who might also be struggling with a particular intervention.

The findings reported by Davis Bianco (2010) included the following: (a) improved student outcomes in most areas of literacy, (b) declining rates of referral for assessment for special education, (c) decreasing numbers of students eligible for special education services, and (d) positive feedback from teachers regarding this RTI model. Although the author did a sufficient job of providing data for her results, this study lacked information regarding the interventions provided to students. Including the types of interventions, the names of any programs used, and the details about how much intervention was given (intensity, duration, and frequency) would be beneficial to the reader and to anyone considering implementing RTI at his or her school or district.
In their article regarding classifying students as responders or non-responders, Barth et al. (2008) conducted a re-analysis of their previous study’s data. They examined first graders from six schools in a large urban district in Texas. The schools were selected because their designation from the state department of education was “adequate,” demonstrating that classroom reading instruction (Tier 1) was also adequate. All students who received their reading instruction in the general education setting, regardless of identification as special education, were eligible for participation in the study. All students within the school who were identified as at-risk were assigned to one of the following three groups: Tier 1 only or conditions involving Tier 1 and Tier 2. The second group, receiving Tier 1 and 2 instruction, was divided into two types of intervention groups: (a) proactive and (b) responsive. For the purpose of this article, the two groups were combined as the type of intervention which was not relevant. The study was conducted over 2 years with two cohorts of students in an effort to increase the sample size. Typically achieving peers were selected randomly from the same classes as the at-risk students. The sample included 399 students, but after attrition 346 students remained.

The Barth et al. (2008) study sought to identify whether agreement was evident in determining student status as responders and non-responders. They utilized various statistical formulas to determine agreement among methods of identifying students as responders or non-responders. The authors found that agreement was seen only when the same measures were used to generate the criteria for classification. Barth et al. suggested that the most significant determinant of responder status was the use of cut points. Cut points dichotomize a continuous distribution of scores. Because all tests include some error of measurement, instability inevitably occurs. The authors cautioned that stringent
and literal application of cut-point criteria implies that the existence of a real difference in students who perform just above and just below the cut point. They further suggested that RTI continuum placement be guided by the use of cut points that are then confirmed by teacher judgment. Their findings indicated that the students who were identified as non-responders varied depending on how the data were analyzed. This is problematic because a different group of students could potentially be identified as having a disability solely on the basis of data analysis.

**Retention Coupled With Intervention**

Schnurr, Kundert, and Nickerson (2009) determined that limited information is available about how retention decisions are made. Their study targeted identifying the role of the school psychologist in making retention decisions. They surveyed 250 school psychologists who were employed in a school district at the time of the study. The respondents indicated that the school psychologist was included as part of the collaborative decision-making process approximately 20% of the time. Many respondents noted that the decision was made by “Student Support Teams” or “Child Study Teams.” The researchers also sought to determine the criteria that were used to make retention decisions. The primary criteria identified by the respondents were classroom grades (83%) and teacher recommendations (83%). School psychologists who participated in the study indicated that nearly 60% of retained students’ progress was monitored. Most often, progress monitoring occurred for less than 1 year (33%), although 4% did indicate that progress was monitored until the students graduated. Eighteen percent of the psychologists reported that they were unaware if progress was monitored after the retention decision was made. Schnurr et al. noted that in addition to limited information
available about how retention decisions are made, a lack of discussion is also evident about the appropriateness of a student’s general academic program.

Peterson and Hughes (2011) compared the amount of remedial educational services provided to first-grade students who were retained to that of first-grade students who were promoted. They justified their study with the premise that “understanding the services that retained students receive is important because there is considerable evidence that targeted interventions help struggling students improve their academic performance” (p. 157). The study examined three school districts in Texas, a state that required students to pass proficiency exams in grades 5, 8, and 12 in order to be promoted to the next grade. Texas also had statutes in place that required students in grades K-3 to be assessed on their reading proficiency and, if they were not at grade level, required the provision of remedial instruction. These laws made it clear that retention was a tool used to increase student success, but retention was not being done in isolation. The state of Texas acknowledged that students at risk for retention required supports during the pre-retention year and possibly beyond.

With this context as the backdrop, Peterson and Hughes (2011) had teachers complete a survey about each student in their class. On the survey, the teacher was asked to indicate whether the student had received one or more of the following seven available services: (a) reduced class size, (b) one-to-one tutoring by an adult during the school day, (c) tutoring by a peer/older student during the school day, (d) remedial instruction outside of the classroom during the school day, (e) small-group intensive tutoring, (f) remedial instruction before or after school, and/or (g) one-to-one tutoring by an adult before or after school. The results of this study demonstrated that students who were retained
received fewer services in their retained year than their promoted counterparts. Peterson and Hughes determined that the retained students may have been deprived of effective remedial services; their second time through first grade may have been viewed as a “do-over,” and it was assumed that the students would stay on grade level. According to Peterson and Hughes,

This finding raises the concern that instead of looking at why the child failed first grade, the school is simply hoping that the repeat year will permit the child to acquire the academic skills needed to succeed at higher grades. (p. 158)

Abbott et al. (2010) examined the combined effects of retention and a targeted small-group intervention on literacy outcomes. The study matched 15 Kindergarten and first-grade students in seven schools with promoted peers on literacy assessments. The study used a three-tier model of intervention where Tier 3 was special education services. Students not eligible for special education could only access tiers 1 and 2; thus, the intervention level for the students participating in this study was Tier 2. The intervention groups were made up of six or fewer students, were provided in addition to core reading instruction, and used a systematic program with more explicit teaching than was provided in the general education curriculum.

Abbott et al. (2010) determined that “even with good-quality instruction, in order for retained students to accelerate reading progress (as evidenced by slope) beyond the levels of their low-achieving peers they must have increased levels of academic time and literacy instruction” (p. 19). For Kindergarten students attending school for a half day, levels of literacy instruction in the repeated Kindergarten year were insufficient for accelerating their rate of learning. The Kindergarten students were able to match the
outcome of the comparison group; however, Abbott et al. cautioned that the retained students had 2 years to acquire literacy skills while the comparison group made similar gains in 1 year.

First-grade retained students in the study by Abbott et al. (2010) demonstrated a trend of improvement at an accelerated pace compared to the promoted students. The first-grade students who were retained outperformed their promoted peers. Again, the authors cautioned that the retained students had 2 years of core instruction coupled with a small-group intervention before those gains were evident. Based on their findings, they suggested that students at risk for retention should be provided with 2.58 hours per day of core instruction and small-group intervention over the course of their first- and second-grade years. Abbott et al. also said that the decision-making process for retention should include procedures for moving students into appropriate instructional placements including a three-tier RTI-type model. Intervention efforts should be “heroic” and include a mix of general education and small-group intervention (SGI) prior to any discussion of retention. Finally, they stated,

Schools need to keep in mind that putting children back into an environment of inadequate intervention will only leave them behind, with poor educational and employment prospects for the future. All children deserve the best education, which includes appropriate intensity and duration of SGI and general education literacy instruction. (p. 23)

Murray, Woodruff, and Vaughn (2010) examined retention in grade for first-grade students before and after the implementation of an RTI model. The study used six Title 1 schools and examined the reading and social skills of the students. The first year
consisted of the historical control group. Students were assessed in September, January, and May. Neither students nor teachers were provided with any intervention. During the second year of the study, all first-grade teachers participated in year-long professional development. Their students were screened, and students determined to be at risk were tested and assigned to either tutoring by a research team member or regular school-based intervention services. This process was repeated in Year 3.

Murray et al. (2010) found that the number of students retained decreased from the first year to the second and from the second year to the third. In the historical control group, 27 students (5.5%) were retained; in Year 2, 23 students (4.7%) were retained; in Year 3, 14 students (2.9%) were retained. The researchers reported a 47% decrease in student retention during the 2 years RTI was being implemented for first graders.

Another aspect of retention examined by Murray et al. (2010) was the factors considered by principals when making retention decisions. A small sample of six principals was interviewed. Three consistent factors were mentioned: (a) assessment data, (b) parental input, and (c) grades. Although all principals mentioned assessment data, only one mentioned the specific criteria or scores that would indicate that retention was necessary. Only one principal admitted to factoring a student’s behavior or maturity level into the decision.

Two issues were evident in the study by Murray et al. (2010). The first was that the historical control group design of the study is considered to be weak (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). The second was that the students who were determined to be in need of intervention were randomly assigned to either a researcher-led or a regular school-provided intervention group. The purpose of this random assignment was unclear. The
two groups were not compared in the results either with their scores on reading measures or with their retention rates. This study’s inclusion here is due to the lack of other available research pertaining to retention and RTI.

**Summary**

Much research has been conducted on retention over the last 50+ years; articles presented in this chapter dated back to 1954. Despite the 58-year span between that article and this paper, the research presented consistent results. Retaining students in an attempt to increase their academic skills is not an effective practice. In addition, retention has the potential to impact students negatively in their academic gains, social skills, and potential for dropping out of school. The emerging body of research examining the use of interventions for students prior to and following retention has shown some promise for being beneficial for students who have academic difficulties.

RTI research is still in its infancy. The available research demonstrated an inconsistency in implementation and in types and intensity levels of interventions across settings. Of concern to this study, the use of the data generated through the RTI process has not been consistent either. Minimal research is available about applications of RTI data beyond special education decision making. This study attempted to fill that gap by investigating how RTI data were used at an elementary school that included RTI data as part of its retention decision making.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of RTI data in decision making about which students should be retained and the instruction that should be provided for retained students. This study explored what issues and concerns arose from the use of RTI data in making retention decisions.

The first focus of this study was to explore teachers’ and principals’ self-report of the role of RTI data in decision making about student retention. The second focus of this study was to investigate the impact RTI data had on teachers’ instructional decisions for retained students. The data collected in this study were qualitative. Data were collected in the form of interviews with teachers and the principal and through teacher and principal surveys.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how RTI data were used in decision-making about retaining students in grade. While the intent of RTI data is most often to make determinations about student eligibility for special education, it has other uses as well. The school described in this case utilized RTI data in decision making for all students; thus, the relevance of the RTI data and their influence on retention and instructional decisions for retained students became the focus of this study. The specific questions this study sought to answer were:

1. How do RTI data influence teachers’ retention decision making?
2. How do RTI data influence principals’ retention decision making?
3. How do RTI data influence teachers’ decision making about instruction for students who are retention candidates?

**Classification of the Study**

This case study used mixed qualitative methods to answer the research questions. A case study methodology was selected due to the nature of the research questions. Yin (2009) suggested that a case study is appropriate when attempting to answer “how” some social phenomenon works. Yin also deemed that a case study approach is appropriate when studying contemporary as opposed to historical issues. A case study offered the opportunity to observe directly the events being studied and to interview the people involved in the events.

Yin (2009) contended that a unique strength of case study methodology is the ability to deal with the full variety of evidence. In this case study, one school was selected for multiple reasons. First, the author is employed by the school and is aware that RTI data are part of the retention decision-making process. As a result, access to the school and data sources was available. The case study methodology was also selected because the event is contemporary, as evidenced by the lack of literature on the use of RTI data in retention decision making.

**Participants**

One school was selected as a case for this study. Because little research is available on the influence of RTI data on retention decision making, this school was selected as a “unique” case (Yin, 2009). In addition to the researcher’s knowledge of their use of RTI data in retention decision making, being assigned to this site as the Special Education Instructional Facilitator, she had access to the SIT, the teachers, and the
principal. A thorough case study of decision making relies on access to necessary data sources; thus, this elementary school was selected.

The school used an RTI team to inform decision making. The team consisted of general education teachers and special education teachers, the school psychologist, the special education instructional facilitator who is the researcher, and an administrator. The school district required that a general education person act as the chairperson for the RTI team. The team was also required to have a special education teacher, the school psychologist, and an administrator. Some of the staff members were appointed to this team by the principal, and others volunteered to participate.

Of the teachers who agreed to participate, one was a first-grade teacher, three were second-grade teachers, and one was a SIT member without a classroom teaching assignment. This left both Kindergarten and third grades without the representation of a classroom teacher, although the SIT member who is not a classroom teacher works with students in all grades within the school, including Kindergarten and third grade. Concerns specific to these grade levels may therefore not have been reflected in the results.

**The Researcher’s Background**

I have worked in the education field for 15 years, 14 years with the school district in which this case study took place. During my tenure with the school district, I have taught in a resource room for students with disabilities and general education first grade. For 7 years, I worked as a special education facilitator at the middle and elementary school levels. My current role is that of Behavior, Instruction, and Intervention Project Facilitator.
For most of my years in the school district, I have served on the SIT at my site(s) and have served as the chairperson of that team in the past. I am passionate about the role of the team in assisting students through interventions and in identifying students with disabilities. The team has the ability to make several recommendations when considering a student’s case: (a) to be passed to the multidisciplinary team to consider a special education evaluation, (b) to continue interventions, (c) to change the type or intensity of an intervention, (d) to determine that interventions have been successful and are no longer necessary, or (e) to recommend the student for retention in grade. I have always enjoyed serving on this team and believe that it is one of the most important site-based teams on which to serve.

As both a general education and a special education teacher, I have worked with students who have been retained. At one site where I previously worked, a large percentage of students were retained annually. The principal believed that retention was an intervention to assist students in improving their academic achievement. As a first-grade teacher at that site, I had four students in my class of 19 who had been retained. The exposure to an administrator who encouraged the retention of students led me to research retention and specifically retention decision making.

**Setting**

The elementary school selected for this study is one of more than 350 schools located in a large southwestern school district. The demographic data reported here are based on the 2010-2011 school and district accountability report. The elementary school served 716 students in grades K-5. The transiency rate for the school was 15.6%. The student population included 85 students with an IEP (11.9%) and 89 students (12.4%)
determined to be Limited English Proficient (LEP). Of the 716 students, 213 (29.7%) were eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch. The school retained three students at the end of the 10-11 school year—two second graders and one third grader. The Criterion Referenced Testing data showed 43% of students met standards, 28% exceeded standards, 19% approached standards, and 10% met the criteria for the emergent/developing category.

The school in this study used AIMSweb® as a CBM tool. The following assessments from AIMSweb® were available to give to students: (a) reading comprehension, (b) reading fluency, (c) math computation, (d) math reasoning, and (e) written expression measures. The assessments chosen depend upon the grade in which a student is enrolled. After assessments are given, the data are examined by individual teachers to use in making instructional decisions about individual students. They decide which students need interventions and what interventions are needed.

The RTI model implemented at this school included three levels. The first level was the level of instruction for all students. This level consisted of core instruction using a reading series selected by the school. The second level was for students who did not meet benchmark and included an additional 30 minutes per day of targeted instruction aimed at improving the deficient skills identified through the CBM assessments. The third tier of RTI was the most intensive level and involved the most intensive level of instruction. Typically, students who are at risk of being identified for retention or for a referral for special education receive Tier 3 RTI services at this school.

The team met weekly for approximately 30 minutes. During the meetings, students were discussed. Students not previously involved in the RTI process were
introduced to the team, student cases were discussed to determine if adequate progress was being made, and team recommendations were made for retention and/or for referrals for special education evaluations.

**RTI Implementation at the Site**

As discussed in Chapter 1, this school assessed all students 3 times per year using the AIMSweb® benchmark tool. Students who did not meet the benchmark were identified for RTI. Teachers were able to provide input regarding specific students and whether the test results were consistent with classroom performance. The teacher’s input was important because sometimes a student will score higher or lower on the assessments than his or her typical classroom performance; in these cases, teachers can indicate that RTI is warranted or unwarranted for these students. Once students in need of RTI have been identified, they were assigned to RTI groups or to an enrichment group if they did not require interventions.

The AIMSweb® program tracks student data for a student from year to year. All of the schools in this district have an AIMSweb® license for each student. Consequently, if a student transfers from one school to another, his or her data transfer to the new school.

At the site used for the present study, each grade level had a 30-minute assigned block of time for interventions. During the intervention time, all students went to their assigned group. General education and special education teachers conducted RTI groups using a prescribed curriculum. Data continued to be collected for all students, and groupings were altered as needed. Students were allocated this intervention time in addition to the core instruction they received in the general education setting with their
homeroom teacher. This unique model was designed by the administration to meet the needs of this school site. The school district policy indicated that 30 minutes of additional instruction would be required for RTI, but the policy did not dictate how this would be accomplished or scheduled.

This school required ongoing documentation for students who might be retained. The principal had created a checklist of items that needed to be included in a file for a student who might be retained. While RTI data were a component of the checklist, other things were evident, as outlined in Appendix A.

**Data Sources**

While surveys and interviews provided valuable insight into the individuals closely involved with the school’s operation and with the decision making that took place, those interviewed and surveyed exercised the option to respond relative to their own context. This consideration required me to probe to the extent possible to gain clear understanding of their responses. In addition, it was essential that the interviews and surveys be triangulated with direct observation to ensure a complete understanding of the data needed to address the research questions. Even with the most carefully designed qualitative study, participants largely control the exchange of information vital to addressing the foci of the research questions. Accordingly, the two-part design was intended to address that concern.

**Survey**

The purpose of the survey was to examine the dispositions and attitude of the principal and K-3 teachers toward retention. Research questions 1 and 2 focused on the role of RTI data in decision making about retention among the teachers and the principal.
The survey data were gathered in order to assist in explaining student retention decision making through alternate explanations. For example, considerations other than RTI data or decision regarding previously inclinations to retain or not to retain may have influenced retention decisions. The survey therefore enhanced the internal validity of the study by allowing for possible rival explanations to be addressed.

**Interviews**

Yin (2009) defined interviews as “guided conversations” rather than “structured queries” (p. 89). Advantages of using interviews to collect data include having the opportunity to ask open-ended questions and to collect historical information (Creswell, 2003). Additionally, interviews allow for the asking of clarifying questions or questions to gain elaboration on a response. All teachers at the site in grades K-3 were invited to participate in the interviews (Appendix D and Appendix E). The interview data, gathered using an interview protocol (Appendix B and Appendix C) sought to answer directly research questions 1, 2, and 3 by querying teachers and the principal regarding their opinion of the role RTI data took in retention decision making and in decision making for students who had been retained. Interviews allowed the participants to answer open-ended questions and offer their insights into how RTI data influenced their decision-making process when considering a student for retention and when making instructional decisions for students who had been retained.

**Data Collection Procedure**

The first stage of data collection was a survey distributed to the principal and to all teachers in grades K-3 at the site. A letter of introduction to the study and a copy of the survey instrument were placed in the mailboxes of teachers who met the participation
criteria. Each of the surveys distributed to teachers included a unique participant number. The purpose was to ensure that teachers who lost their survey could be issued another and to prevent a teacher from completing multiple surveys. A request that the survey be returned to the researcher within 1 week was also included; thus, teachers were able to complete the survey in the location and at the time of their choosing. Participants were offered the option of returning the survey either by placing it in the researcher’s mailbox or in a box located in her office.

After 1 week, staff members meeting the eligibility criteria who had not responded based on the unique participant number were given an additional copy of the survey with a second request to complete it. One copy of the survey was provided to the principal. When the request for participation yielded no results from SIT team members, the researcher spoke in person with each potential participant and reiterated the purpose of the study and requested his or her participation. After the survey results were obtained, interviews were conducted with SIT team members and the principal.

Interviews are not without disadvantages. Yin (2009) and Creswell (2003) identified the issue of interviewer bias. Creswell also cautioned that not all people are equally articulate or perceptive (p. 186). The issue of articulation concerns was partially resolved by the interviewer’s ability to ask follow-up, clarifying questions. The issue of interviewer bias was not as easily resolved. According to Creswell, the interviewer controls the line of questioning and decides which questions to ask, which areas require clarification or elaboration, and when to (or not to) pursue a line of questioning. With this bias in mind, the interviewer made every effort to adhere to the topic at hand in order to
gather the relevant information without steering the conversation toward any particular view.

The interviews were conducted following a protocol. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain teacher and principal information about the retention of students in the school and how RTI data contributed to the decision making. The participants were queried for their belief about how the RTI data impacted decision making. All of the interviews conducted were focused interviews lasting 30 minutes or less and used a set of scripted questions and follow-up questions, as appropriate (Yin, 2009). All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were provided to the participants so that they could check for clarity and accuracy.

Two sources of data were used for this case study. Survey data and interview data were collected as part of the case study database. Using these sources of data allowed for the analysis of data as described in the results in Chapter 4.

**Challenges to Data Collection**

The interviews were conducted in person and were brief in duration, were driven by an interview protocol, and allowed for the participant to expand freely on his or her responses while the interviewer probed, allowing the interviewee to respond fully to the question. Each interviewee was allowed to choose the setting for the interview, and all preferred either their classroom or their office. Each interview was transcribed by an experienced transcriptionist and reviewed by the researcher for accuracy. Each interviewee was provided the opportunity to review the transcript and make any necessary corrections, additions, or deletions. None of the interviewees made significant changes to the transcripts’ content.
The data collection for this study took place during the last 5 weeks of school and during the first 2 weeks of summer break. The timing was such that it conflicted with standardized testing and end-of-year closing procedures. Not only did many teachers indicate that they were too busy to participate in this study.

**Analysis of the Data**

Phase 1 of data analysis consisted of the tally of the survey responses. Upon the completion of the survey, all results were tallied by question and response. Data were reported in the number of yes and no responses.

Phase 2 of data analysis occurred with the results of the qualitative interview data. The guiding procedure was that outlined in Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) and consisted of six coding steps. The coding process led the researcher through a series of steps from lower levels of understanding to higher levels. The six steps of the procedure were as follows:

1. **Raw Text**—The raw text consisted of the complete transcripts of the interview.

2. **Relevant Text**—The first step following the completion of the transcripts was to divide the text into manageable proportions. This involved the reading of the text with the guiding research question in mind. Text that was directly related to the guiding research questions was kept; the remainder was discarded, thus limiting the amount of text to be worked with.

3. **Repeating Ideas**—With the relevant text isolated, similar words and phrases emerged from the participants’ responses that were used to describe the same
idea. These words and phrases met criteria for a repeating idea and were pulled out of the relevant text.

4. Themes—The repeating ideas were grouped by common ideas. These groups were called themes. The themes were used to organize the repeating ideas.

5. Theoretical Constructs—With the data organized into themes, the researcher was closer to answering the research questions from the interview data. In the same way that repeating ideas were used to create themes, the themes were organized into larger, more abstract ideas called theoretical constructs.

6. Theoretical Narrative—The narrative is the final bridge between the participants’ responses and the research questions. The theoretical narrative was a summary of what had been gleaned from the interview data.

Triangulation of data was described as the protocols used to ensure accuracy (Stake, 1995) and alternative explanations (Tellis, 1997). Tellis said that the need for triangulation arises from the ethical need to confirm the validity of the processes. Three types of validity are of concern when conducting case study research: (a) construct validity, (b) external validity, and (c) internal validity (Yin, 2009).

**Quality of the Research Design**

In evaluating the trustworthiness of a qualitative research design, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility, for instance, was defined as a measure of internal validity which focuses on using the data sources to feed the analysis, formulation, and interpretation used in the study. This study utilized the triangulation of data from interview, survey, and observer-participant sources to the largest extent available.
Transferability is a measure of external validity measuring the ability to apply one set of findings to another context. This required the use of thick description. No attempt was made to generalize the results of this study, as this case was identified as a unique case. Instead, the purpose of this study was to investigate how one school utilized RTI data in decision making about retention.

Dependability is a measure of external validity that acknowledges that the results are subject to change and instability. At the same time, dependability seeks assurance that sufficient stability exists in the information garnered to replicate the study. The chain of events for this study has been clearly described, and a database of interview, survey, and observer-participant data was developed for analysis. Tape recording was utilized for the interviews and the SIT meetings; thus, the accuracy of the transcripts was ensured to increase the dependability of the information gathered.

Confirmability, a measure of internal reliability, tests whether an alternate researcher using the same procedures and conducting the same study would arrive at the same findings and conclusions. Interviews are largely at risk for interviewer bias. The author of this study is an educator who has worked with students who have been retained, a condition that has the potential to lead to interviewer bias. The nature of this study was not exploratory, however, and the researcher had no preconceived ideas about the role RTI data should take in retention decision making. As a result, the selection and interview procedures as well as the description of the triangulation of available data sources met the threshold for adequate documentation required for reliable replication of a study as described by Yin (2009).
Construct validity has been addressed in this study through the use of multiple sources of data and the establishment of a chain of evidence. External validity is evident through the use of explanation building, the establishment of a presumed set of causal links about how the decisions were made. This technique also supported internal validity. Internal validity was addressed additionally by addressing rival explanations such as the possibility that teachers were predisposed to retaining or not retaining students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the methodology employed in this case study to gather and analyze data. An explanation of case study methodology was presented in addition to methods specific to this study. Information regarding the participants and the school in the study as well as the interview protocol and method for data analysis was presented.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In this chapter, the results from this study of the influence RTI data have on retention decision making for teachers and a principal at one school site are presented. Also addressed is the influence that RTI had on instruction decision making for teachers of students who might be retained. This chapter was organized into three major themes: (a) the influence of RTI data on teachers’ retention decision making, (b) the influence of RTI data on principals’ retention decision making, and (c) the influence of RTI data on teachers’ decision making about instruction.

Survey Results

The purpose of the survey (adapted from Tomchin & Impara, 1992) was to gather information about the participants’ perspectives on retention. The 20 items were dichotomous allowing participants to answer either agree or disagree. Four of the five participants answered all 20 questions; the remaining participant answered 19 of the 20. The item not answered on the incomplete survey was Item 18: “Retention in grades 4-7 permanently labels a child.” The classroom teachers participating in the survey teach either first or second grade. It is possible that the participant was a teacher with no experience working with the age group. Table 1 shows the survey results.

The participants answered some items consistently. The participants agreed on Item 13 that “Students receiving the services of a learning disabilities teacher should not be retained.” The participants also agreed with Item 7: “Retaining a student in grades 4-7 harms the child’s self-concept.” They all disagreed with Item 20: “Children should never be retained.”
Some questions regarding criteria for retention were also consistently answered by the participants. The six participants all disagreed with Item 5: “Students who do not apply themselves to their studies should be retained.” They also disagreed with items 9 and 19: “Students who do not make passing grades in 2 of the 3 major subject areas (reading, communications, or math) should be retained” and “Children who have passing grades but excessive absences should be retained.” In terms of the impact of retention, the participants disagreed with items 4 and 12: “Retention prevents classrooms from having wide ranges in student achievement” and “Retention in grades 4-7 is an effective means of giving an immature student a chance to catch up.”

Some disagreement was noted on the remaining questions. The participants did not agree upon the efficacy of retention. Three agreed with Item 1: “Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in the next higher grade.” Five participants disagreed with Item 8: “Retention is an effective means of providing support in schools for the child who does not get support at home.” Three agreed with Item 11: “Retention in grades K-3 is an effective means of giving an immature student a chance to catch up.”

Overall, the responses did not indicate that the participants were either strongly in favor of or strongly opposed to retention. The responses showed that the participants believe that retention is appropriate and beneficial in some cases. Before students can be retained at this school, they must go through the RTI process.
Table 1

Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey item</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in the next higher grade.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Retention is necessary for maintaining grade level standards.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Retaining a child in grades K-3 harms the child’s self-concept.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Retention prevents classrooms from having wide ranges in student achievement.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Students who do not apply themselves to their studies should be retained.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Knowing that retention is a possibility does motivate students to work harder.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Retaining a child in grades 4-7 harms the child’s self-concept.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Retention is an effective means of providing support in schools for the child who does not get support at home.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Students who do not make passing grades in 2 of the 3 major subject areas (reading, communications, or math) should be retained.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Students who make passing grades, but are working below level, should be retained.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Retention in grades K-3 is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to keep up.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Retention in grades 4-7 is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Students receiving services of a learning disabilities teacher should not be retained.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. If students are to be retained, they should be retained no later than third grade.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. In grades K-3, overage children (more than a year older than their classmates) cause more behavior problems than other children.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. In grades 4-7, overage children cause more problems than other children.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Retention in grades K-3 permanently labels a child.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Retention in grades 4-7 permanently labels a child.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Children who have passing grades but excessive absences should be retained.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Children should never be retained.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview Results

The survey gathered data on teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about retention. The interviews inquired about teachers’ and principals’ views on how they used RTI data for decision making for retention and instruction. All names are pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of the participants.

Impacts of RTI Data on Teacher Retention Decision Making

The interview data generated three main impacts on teacher decision making about retention. The first was that RTI data provide the academic basis for the decision to retain or to promote a student in conjunction with other data sources. The second impact was that these data give the justification for retention in a manner that is visual and objective. The third impact was that RTI data assist the teachers in determining if the solution to the academic problem is retention or if a need exists for a special education referral.

RTI data were considered important as the academic component of retention decision making by the participants as indicated by responses to interview questions. For example, Ms. Lee stated, “Well, I think that is really important because I think that it is very thorough and I think that it helps [to make the retention decision clear].” Ms. Miller agreed, “And making sure that we have all of the data exactly right so that when we do go for retention or special ed[ucation] testing and things like that, so that we have exactly what we need to show the proof that this child is not making the progress that he needs to be making.” Ms. Clark described the benefits the RTI data provide:

I think the data helps us to see if the child is making progress, what rate of progress they are making; it kind of helps to set that out a little bit more visually
for you. It provides the data to see with this amount of time and with this intervention is this child making progress? If we put him in the same grade level again, will that rate of progress increase? Can we weigh out those options or will he still need this much intervention to make the progress?

The participants’ responses to the interview questions indicated that they all believed that the decision making was child-centered. The team making the decision looked at the RTI data in light of everything they knew about the child, using multiple data sources. The RTI data were not used in isolation; rather, they were used as the primary measure of academics among nonacademic factors such as English language learning (ELL) status, environmental issues, and social issues. Ms. Lee stated:

Well, I think that is really important [RTI data] because I think that it is very thorough and it helps. In the past, it has been such a quick decision. I’ve witnessed it [retention decision] being a quick decision, let’s just retain a child, it is his birthday, he’s young, he’s immature, and everything else and that was pretty much it. I think that there are other factors that you have to look at. So I think it is important to really look at that data, the time frame, what was done, what interventions were done, to decide if something else needs to be done.

Ms. Lee identified social behavior, grades, and RTI data as being important to her decision making. Ms. Clark’s decision making included the following: (a) social aspects, (b) physical aspects of the child, and (c) family dynamics. Mr. Jones indicated that attendance, grades, documentation, data, academics, and family concerns contributed to his decision making. Although somewhat different in their responses, all of the participants considered RTI data in addition to other factors when making decisions about
whether or not to retain a child. The retention checklist that teachers were required to complete when retention was being considered for a student includes documents or data regarding the following: (a) grade level discussion for the RTI component, (b) family confidential history, (c) academic progress, and (d) behavior progress and attendance history. The checklist also requires that a retention scale be completed; however, none of the participants mentioned that as being a factor in their decision making.

One of the participants stated during the interview that she would explicitly consider the child’s opinion on the decision of retention. Ms. Miller was concerned with the child’s being comfortable with the decision to repeat a grade. Mr. Jones was retained as an elementary student and admitted that that has impacted his decision making. He stated, “I was retained and it affected my whole life negatively.” He considers retention a “huge” decision and believes that “purely academically, it was probably good for myself, but the social part is the part that was horrible.” RTI data therefore helped with the academic consideration for decision making, but other data sources need to be considered as well.

The second impact described by teachers was that RTI data provide the information in a manner that is visual and objective. Ms. Clark stated, “I think the data helps us to see if the child is making progress, what rate of progress they are making. It kind of helps to set that out a little bit more visually for you.” The RTI data justify the decision. As stated by Mr. Jones, “The teachers have to show some documentation, and there are procedures in place which I think makes it so [the parents see] it’s not just us. At the end of the year, some teachers saying ‘I think we should do this.’” Ms. Lee stated, “I think that it is important to really look at that data, the time frame, what was done,
what interventions were done, to decide if something else needs to be done.” Ms. Lee felt
strongly that the data should be presented. She stated:

    I feel that if this is a child who is RTI and he is considered [for] retention, then
this is the child who needed the 30-minute reading group plus 30-minute
intervention. Do that solid hour. And if that truly happens and I think that the
information needs to be documented . . . and have some sort of measurable test to
show that this is what I did with him. These are the interventions. This is the
measurable data and there was no progress. And then sit down and make that
decision.

Although most of the interviewees agreed that the visual data are necessary, some
concern was expressed that only the visual data from RTI was being considered and not
other factors or data that could demonstrate why the student was having academic
difficulties. Ms. Clark expressed her concern about looking only at the visual data. She
commented, “There is a lot more dynamic situation than just here in black and white and
what we should or shouldn’t do.” Ms. Miller expressed her concern that

    I think possibly we all needed more training on collecting the data. And making
sure that we have all of the data exactly right so that when we do go for retention
or special ed[ucation] testing, and things like that, we have the proof that this
child is not making the progress that he needs to be making.

Ms. Smith expressed concern that the principal only wanted to consider the visual data,
not other factors when she said of the administrators, “They want data. Just data, data,
data.”
The third impact that RTI data had on retention decision making was that the data could assist in determining if the student was a retention candidate or if special education testing was more appropriate. On the survey, all of the participants indicated that a student who was receiving the services of a learning disabilities teacher should not be retained. Consistent with their responses on the survey, the interviewees used the RTI data to determine if the student was a candidate for a special education evaluation prior to considering retention. For example, Ms. Lee wanted to examine the data and the types of interventions to determine what else needed to be done. She explained, “If this child possibly has a learning disability and that it [the decision] isn’t just ‘let’s retain the child’ because I don’t think that is probably the answer.” In addition, Ms. Lee wanted teachers to consider before making a retention decision if “retention [is] the solution here, or is it that we didn’t do our job, or is it that this child has a learning disability?” Ms. Miller said that before making a retention decision, the first thing was “one, to make sure the child doesn’t have a disability.” She related a story of one child who had been retained:

I guess in 17 years, I only really thought it [retention] was right for one person. And that was really only because his mom wouldn’t get him tested [for special education]. She didn’t trust the school district to do his testing. I don’t know why. But as we were going through his retention process, she said, “Now can we get him tested for special ed[ucation]?” And I said, “Well, we could have done that at the start of the school year when I knew we had a problem. Now you are going to have to wait until the next school year starts and he will have to get tested while he is in second grade again.” Because she was not okay with retention and now she wanted to get him tested. So I think it is important to do the test [special
education evaluation] first, and if they are not in special ed[ucation], then
definitely look at retention. But I don’t think it [retention] is necessarily the first choice.

Overall, the participants indicated that RTI data were an important factor in their decision making about retention. They discussed three ways in which RTI data impacted their retention decision making: (a) it provided the academic basis for the decision in conjunction with other data sources, (b) it provided the justification for retention in a visual and objective manner, and (c) it helped to clarify whether the solution to the academic difficulties was a special education referral or retention.

**Impacts of RTI Data on Principal Decision Making**

The interview data generated two main impacts of RTI data on principal decision making about retention. The first was that RTI data provided the principal with proof that the interventions were implemented over time and with fidelity. The second impact was that such data assisted the principal in determining if the solution to the academic problem is retention or if there is a need for a special education referral.

Ms. Brown, the principal at this site, had created a checklist (Appendix A) to be completed by teachers for students who may be retained. The checklist is maintained in a folder with all of the documents required on it. She explained the reasoning behind the creation of the folders:

We put together the retention checklist to make sure [retention is appropriate] because I’ve had files that come in from other schools [in the district] that don’t have all of the clear data. They don’t have the RTI file there, they don’t have all of the work that goes in there and all of the work samples in their cum[ulative]
folder to show what it [the intervention] was and all the details that I require. And then I had actually copied that bad one and showed them [the teachers] this is why we’re doing it because it’s actually offensive to think that you’re holding back these kids.

In other words, she wanted to ensure that the right decision was being made for each student and that the data existed to justify the decision. Regarding the principal’s requirement of the checklist items being completed, Ms. Lee explained,

And she wants all of that data and so I guess that it is important for me for being on the RTI, we made sure that any teacher who wanted to retain had properly filled out all that data and had done everything from the beginning of the year until now [May, the end of the school year] when it was due.

Ms. Brown indicated that the use of the checklist and her documentation requirements resulted in her always being in agreement with teachers about whether or not to retain a child:

The checklist includes RTI and meeting with them [the teachers] and making sure that they’re going through the process so there is a lot of documentation prior [to the final decision]. It’s not a quick judgment and there is a lot of conversation between me, the teacher, and the parent prior to making those decisions. So it is not a surprise and it’s not as though we haven’t already looked at interventions we can do in the current year prior to retaining. And I don’t like to have that full last discussion until May because there is a lot of growth they can still have that last month.
Ms. Brown is concerned that the decision be guided by data and documentation so that it is not a quick decision; she reiterated, “I make sure they [the teachers] have all of their [classroom work] samples to go along with it [the RTI data], dated, so that we can see definitively that this is a good decision, that it’s not quick.” Ms. Lee stated that there could potentially be a disagreement if the teacher maybe isn’t as prepared with all of the data that they should be and so they get rejected with that because really it maybe was a last-minute decision at the end of the year and wasn’t followed through. And as I said before I am really concerned that maybe those interventions that should have been in place weren’t there.

The administration and teachers on the RTI team looked closely at the RTI data to ensure that the interventions had been done throughout the year and the decision for retention or special education evaluation was made based on the student-specific data in the folder. Ms. Miller declared, “I’ve never been with someone [a principal] who jumps to retain immediately. It is usually a last resort with my principals, and I feel the same.”

Ms. Brown was also concerned that the interventions had been designed to meet student needs and had been implemented with fidelity. When speaking of a particular student in Kindergarten, she discussed her decision-making process:

Right now in RTI, one little guy had attendance problems, and the attendance was affecting [his progress], although we didn’t think he had a learning disability, and it was kinder, so we pushed him on to first [grade]. He didn’t show growth. Then we retained because Kinder half-day is not going to benefit him. So then we monitored and [provided] more interventions and looked at the data to see that it
wasn’t a plateauing issue. It wasn’t the fact that they had any goals they couldn’t achieve.

Ms. Brown refrained from retaining this student in Kindergarten because she did not feel that another year of attending school for half a day would create the academic gains that he needed to make in order to be at benchmark. She looked at the RTI data and at the RTI goals that had been created for this student. During his first year of first grade, he was monitored, and interventions were attempted. When the interventions did not result in sufficient growth, the interventions were modified. Ms. Brown then looked at the pattern of the data and saw that the student had not had a plateau in his learning. His rate of improvement was not sufficient for success in the following grade. As a result of the principal’s data analysis and observation of the student, the student was retained in first grade.

Ms. Brown considered RTI data helpful in retention decision making because of the following:

We just look at their goals, look at the data, teacher, and parent input. Looking to see specifically where their growth is, if there is growth and overall it really helps just to have more information. And of course monitoring is the big piece if you see any growth or minimal growth and then being able to track it from year to year has been helpful.

Ms. Brown indicated the theme that the RTI data demonstrated where retention may be the solution or where special education evaluation may be needed. She included information about how a student’s status as an ELL would change how she looked at the data and how the decision would be made. The principal was adamant that a student
identified as an ELL or who may have a disability would not be retained. When considering the ELL status of a student, Ms. Brown stated her reasoning: “because full immersion takes 5 years, and I don’t want to retain because of ELL even if they are in the RTI process.” RTI can provide the supports that they need in order to make academic gains; however, the RTI data are not going to override the fact that the student may require additional time to increase his or her English skills.

Students who may have had a learning disability were regarded in much the same way. Ms. Brown emphasized, “If there is a possibility of special ed[ucation], then there is no way I want to retain a child who needs to maintain the RTI process [and be evaluated for special education].” When looking at RTI and retention folders from other schools, Ms. Brown believed it was offensive to think you’re holding back these kids. One, if there is a possibility of a learning disability and you’re retaining them without knowing that they’re going to need to be assessed. And if they have a learning disability, then we need to go that avenue.

She was clear in her opinion that students with disabilities should not be retained and if a possibility exists that a student has a disability that a special education evaluation would be more appropriate than retention to assist those students with acquiring academic skills.

The two themes indicated by the interview with the principal were: (a) that the RTI data served as proof that the interventions were done with fidelity over time and (b) that the data assisted her in determining if the solution to the academic problem was retention or if a need existed for a special education referral. Through her creation of a retention checklist and folder, Ms. Brown had set clear expectations for the staff on how
retention decisions would be made. That included excluding students with disabilities and ELLs from being considered for retention.

**Impacts of RTI Data on Teachers’ Decision Making About Instruction**

The interview data generated one main impact on teachers’ decision making about instruction—that it provides the focus of instruction for students who may be retained. Through the continued collection of data, teachers indicated that they are able to alter their instructional practices to meet the needs of the students.

The teachers at this site consider the RTI data as essential in designing interventions and instruction for students who may be retained. Ms. Miller explained, “What I like about RTI is that we continue to figure out new ways to help the child and try to make them successful.” The RTI data are continuously guiding instruction, according to Ms. Lee; she commented, “I think that it is important to really look at that data, the time frame, what was done, what interventions were done, to decide if something else needs to be done.” The RTI Team discussed, as Ms. Lee stated, “how to do the reading groups, how to do the interventions.”

After the intervention data have begun to be collected, times occur when a student does not make progress. Ms. Lee said that at the RTI team meetings when examining the data, “It is very typical to look at data and see that this child is not progressing and [ask] why this child is not progressing.” A major function of the RTI team is to examine the instruction and interventions that the child has been receiving to answer that question and to figure out what would help the student to progress more. Ms. Miller explained how the RTI influenced her decision making:
I think it really helps us to hone in on different aspects of the child’s shortcomings. And it helps us to decide the RTI process. I think it helps us to get ideas from each other and helps us to help the child as best we can through interventions as well as honing in on this child. We have done all of these interventions, this is the data we are collecting, they are up and down, they are not making progress steadily or they are making progress, depending on the kid. What we are doing is not working; let’s try something new. That is what I like about RTI is that we continue to figure out new ways to help the child and try to make them successful.

Through the RTI process of data collection from AIMSweb® and other assessments, the teachers were able to pinpoint the skills that a student lacks or struggles with. Ms. Smith stated,

It [the RTI data] zeros down on the skills that the child may be lacking. It is going to pinpoint through AIMS[web] that gives us specific information on skills specifically where they are lacking and how I can adapt it in the classroom.

Ms. Miller added that she is pulled in many directions when trying to adjust instruction for students who are struggling:

[I spend time on] lesson plans, grading, creating those lessons, and putting the lessons together so that they are exciting and make kids want to learn. And then on top of that, most of us [teachers] have reading groups, have small math groups for kids that aren’t getting things, and then to go onto those kids that are struggling or those kids that are accelerated.
She alluded to the amount of time that is dedicated to the RTI process for students who do not meet benchmarks.

Ms. Lee discussed the need for the block of instruction time for interventions as well as the need to collect data on the interventions:

I feel that if this child is RTI and he is considered for retention, then this is the child who needed the 30-minute reading group plus 30-minute intervention. Do that solid hour. And if that truly, truly happens and I think that the information and data needs to be documented that from say a CORE phonics test and we needed to work on short vowel sounds, long vowel sounds, etc. and have some sort of measurable test to show that this [is] what I did with him.

Like Ms. Lee, all the participants at this site supported the use of RTI data for guiding instruction for students who may be retained. They did, however, express concern with the amount of time that collecting the data required. Ms. Miller explained, “to try to make time for all of it is a little bit difficult; to find the time to do all of the paperwork.”

This site used a prescribed intervention program during the intervention block. Teachers were able to adapt and modify the program to meet the needs of their students. Many of the participants also indicated that they modified their classroom instruction to meet the needs of the students, including using small group instruction to address areas of deficit identified by the RTI data.

**Conclusion**

The survey results indicated that the participants believe that retention is appropriate in some cases. They agreed that students who are currently receiving special education services should not be retained and that retention in early grades is more
beneficial than retention in later grades. All of the participants disagreed with the statement that students should never be retained. In their interviews, the participants discussed how RTI data influenced their decision making about retention.

During the interviews, teachers often referenced the retention checklist or retention folder. Retention decision making at this site was guided by a checklist of items that were assembled in a folder. The teacher and principal then made the final determination regarding retention based on the RTI data collected in conjunction with classroom work samples and other teacher data that resided in the checklist folder. The participants agreed that this approach allowed for the decision to be student-centered. The RTI data were also used by teachers to plan intervention and classroom lessons that focused on the areas of need demonstrated by a particular student.

The principal and the teacher participants agreed that a child who was eligible for special education services or who was suspected of having a disability was not a retention candidate. This was evident in the consistent response of disagree to Item 13 on the survey and also in the interview discussion. Where the teacher participants focused on the visual and objective component of the RTI data in an effort to adjust their instruction to meet student needs, the principal was more concerned with having proof that the interventions were provided with fidelity. In addition, although all participants were in favor of using RTI data in making retention decisions, some concern was noted regarding the amount of time it took to collect the data.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

In this chapter, the conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 1 was used to guide the discussion of the results. The results were then connected to the literature presented in Chapter 2 to explain how this study fits with existing studies. Finally, recommendations for future research and implications for practice are presented.

Overview of the Problem

Despite decades of research which demonstrated that retention is not effective for increasing student achievement, retention continued to be a common practice in elementary schools. As a case in point, NCES (2009) reported that each year from 1996 to 2007, 9%-11% of students in Kindergarten through eighth grade were retained. This is a significant number of students for whom the U.S. educational system is not working (Corman, 2003).

RTI is one strategy being used to help underachieving students. Through RTI, data are collected to determine the efficacy of interventions and the rate of learning for students. One possible outcome of the RTI process is that a student will be evaluated to determine if a disability is the cause of the learning problem.

At the school examined in this case study, a student who went through the RTI process may have been evaluated for special education; however, the RTI data were also used to determine if retention was an appropriate intervention for the student. No previous studies had been conducted which examined the use of RTI data in retention decision making; thus, this study attempted to fill that gap in the literature. Additionally,
this study investigated the use of RTI data in instructional decision making for students for whom retention was being considered.

Summary of the Research Findings

The teachers interviewed for this study indicated that the RTI data were among the things considered when making decisions about retention. The teachers tended to look at the whole child and not just one specific criterion, although RTI data were the primary academic component of the decision.

The principal established the data collection requirement for retention decisions by her edict that teachers must complete a retention checklist and assemble it with other documents in a folder to represent student progress. As a result, data collection went beyond the RTI data and included student work samples and other documents. The contents of this folder were the basis for student retention decisions. The principal believed that it was necessary to have all of the data in order to make and justify the appropriate decision for an individual student. While the teachers interviewed did not indicate any disagreement with the principal about retention decisions, the principal noted that she always agreed with the teachers when making retention decisions.

The teacher participants indicated three themes for the impact of RTI data on retention decision making: RTI data (a) provided the academic basis for the decision to retain or to promote a student, (b) offered a visual and objective representation of the academic progress, and (c) assisted teachers in determining if retention or a special education evaluation would be appropriate. The principal participant also indicated a theme of retention or special education evaluation as a decision that could be made based
on the RTI data. The teachers and the principal agreed that a student who either was eligible or might be eligible for special education services would not be retained.

An additional theme identified from the principal participant was that the RTI data provided proof that the interventions were implemented over time and with fidelity. The theme identified for the impact of RTI data on instructional decision making was that these data provided the focus of instruction for students who might be retained.

**Theoretical Framework: Competing Values**

As detailed in Chapter 1, the theoretical framework for this study was that of competing values. This section therefore focuses on the social, democratic, and economic evident in the research findings. The conclusion of this section emphasizes the dominant values resulting from the analysis.

Social values, order and individualism, focus on safety and security of students. The interviews did not indicate any concerns about the physical safety of the students being discussed; however, their emotional safety was a subject of discussion. For example, one participant agreed and five disagreed with the survey item that said that students in grades K-3 who have been retained cause more behavior problems. When a different item asked about behavior problems of retained students in grades 4-7, three participants agreed that retained students exhibited more behavior problems.

More concern was expressed about the social impact on the individual student than on the possibility that the retained and over-age student would cause behavior problems. This was evident in the interviewees’ concern about the right decision being made. As a case in point, Mr. Jones expressed concern about the emotional damage that could be caused by a student’s being retained. Participants were concerned about how the
students would be socially and emotionally affected by being held back in the same grade. No concern was explicitly expressed about the physical safety of the students; however, Mr. Jones expressed concern about the size of the child when he queried, “Are they too big?” He also wondered whether the student would take advantage of his or her larger size when he asked, “Is it going to be a bullying situation?”

Also of consideration in the context of social values was the conflict of individualism as opposed to the needs of the group. In this study, the participants did not discuss the needs of the group when making retention decisions. In fact, on the survey, the participants indicated that retaining students did not lead to a more uniform academic level in their classrooms, showing that that is not one of their aims in retention.

The participants specifically discussed the needs of individual students when discussing retention and when discussing instruction for students who may be retained. They were greatly concerned that the needs of individual students would be addressed in their instruction, although not necessarily at the cost of the group. Moreover, this school’s RTI schedule was such that all students went to an RTI or enrichment group. All students who required interventions were able to access them at this time without the possible stigma of being singled out for individual help.

The democratic value of liberty includes freedom, independence, or choice concerns. Retention limits students’ access and freedom with respect to choices as retained students are subjected to another year of the same curriculum. McCollum et al. (1999) explained that students who are low in one subject area may excel in others; thus, repeating an entire grade deprives them of the opportunity to learn new academic material. Students participating in the RTI process of interventions at this school lost
some of their freedom and choice. Where students in the enrichment groups have activities scheduled to enhance their learning and some freedom to make choices about their activities, students in intervention groups must participate in the lessons planned for them by the intervention teacher.

Ms. Miller was specifically concerned with the students’ level of agreement with the retention decision. She stated, “I think it is important to make sure that the child is comfortable with that decision (to repeat a grade).” She said that some students handle retention well, but “some just seem to say ‘whatever,’ and they are the kind of kids who can probably handle retention.” To Ms. Miller, it was important that the student have a choice or at least get to participate in the decision-making process.

The democratic value of equality has two facets: (a) social equality and (b) equality of results. Social equality leads to equal opportunity for each student to acquire a good education. The RTI model implemented at this site exhibited social equality. Students who required interventions were granted access to them, and students who did not require interventions were afforded the opportunity to enrich their learning. Each student had an equal opportunity to participate in the activities that were necessary to increase their learning outcomes. Moreover, students who were involved in the RTI groups were afforded that opportunity to enhance their education and increase learning outcomes.

Social equality was a concern for many of the participants, especially when looking at students who may be retained. The participants expressed concern that the students going through the RTI process had access to instruction within the classroom that addressed their areas of deficit. Ms. Miller explained that in her classroom, she used
small reading groups, one-on-one interventions, small math groups, and lesson planning to address the individual needs of students in her class. She wanted her lessons to be engaging in order to motivate students to participate and to learn. Ms. Miller summed up the decision-making process: “I think that some people forget the personal factor and that these are people. These are children and not just numbers. And we have to remember that they are kids . . . we’re in charge of helping them to be successful.” Mr. Jones agreed that “You have to look at the big picture and whether or not it will be truly significantly effective and affect his or her life, his or her academic achievement.” The focus was on the decision to retain or to promote being based on the potential academic benefit of the individual student. In addition, Ms. Smith felt that sometimes the data did not tell the whole story of a student’s progress.

Equality of results was not directly mentioned by any of the participants, although the concern that the students could catch up or make significant academic gains if they were to be retained was discussed. Mr. Jones was retained in elementary school, and one of his concerns about retaining a child was, “Is the kid so low that he or she will never benefit from it [retention]?” Ms. Lee mirrored that concern: “Is retaining going to really make a difference if they are in the classroom again for another year?” Ms. Clark raised the question, “If we put him in the same grade level again, will that rate of progress increase?” Conversely, Ms. Miller looked at what would happen if a student were not retained: “Would he be successful in the next grade level? Would he be able to keep up with the work?”

The participants were clearly concerned about making the right decision for the individual child and ensuring that the outcome of the decision was the one most likely to
provide academic gains and equality of results. This was consistent with the findings of Meisels and Liaw (1993) that retention does not succeed in its goal of raising the performance of retained students to the same level of students who had not been retained. They suggested that retention should be used only in rare instances.

Besides the retention decision, the teacher and principal participants expressed that retention was not the only decision that could be made to gain equality of results. Students could maintain the RTI process or be evaluated for special education. All participants indicated through their survey responses and the interviews that a student who was eligible for special education or who was suspected of having a disability would not be retained. For those students, equality of results could be obtained through interventions from a special education teacher. Retention was not a consideration because the student required special education services in order to make academic gains rather than going through another year of general education and RTI services.

The third and final democratic value, fraternity, examines solidarity or brotherhood. The intervention groupings at this school disrupted the brotherhood of individual classrooms, but they could potentially lead to new brotherhoods in the intervention groups. The problem with looking at the intervention groups as brotherhoods is that the groups are changed throughout the year in order to respond to student needs; thus, after a brotherhood has been formed, it may be disrupted by changes in the grouping pattern. Of course, the majority of the student’s day continued to be spent in the homeroom with the homeroom teacher, so this interruption of 30 minutes may have been insignificant. Retained students suffer much more disruption through the need to switch brotherhoods.
A retained student is guaranteed to lose the brotherhood of his or her grade level and is invariably placed with younger students. This can lead to social issues as explained by one participant. Ms. Smith expressed concern that “. . . the social interaction. The interaction with kids that I think is lacking in retention [decision making].” Ms. Miller queried,

Is it something that is going to bother them socially? . . . I worry about their social aspects and how their friends are going to treat them or make them feel. You never want them to have that embarrassing moment that their friends tease them or make them feel bad about the fact that they are not moving forward with them.

Ms. Lee and Ms. Clark also noted that the social aspects are of concern when deciding whether or not to retain a child. Mr. Jones indicated that for him, “the social part is the part that is horrible.” He also wondered, “Are they going to be made fun of their whole life?” Ms. Brown, the principal, said that she considered whether retention “could possibly hinder the child and their self-esteem.” Overall, every participant expressed concern about the social impact of retaining a student. Much of the concern revolved around removing the student from his or her brotherhood and possible isolation from his or her former brotherhood.

Finally, the economic value looks at efficiency and economic growth. Mahdavi and Beebe-Frankenberger (2009) noted that RTI was costly in terms of time, personnel, and other resources. They indicated that developing and teaching small intervention groups were identified as being particularly time- and resource-intensive. The implementation of the RTI model at this school was costly in terms of time. Each teacher at each grade level dedicated a 30-minute block of time to interventions. Additionally, the
school site used a program for intervention which had to be purchased for student and teacher use. The RTI model may cost teachers and students time, but it was conducted within the school day, a circumstance known as between the bells instruction time; thus, it did not add to the cost of instruction.

The consideration that the time used for RTI could be spent in another way must be noted, however. Economical growth, in theory, follows good instruction; students who obtain the necessary skills graduate to be highly skilled members of the workforce. These students then contribute to economic growth.

Although the cost of RTI was not directly discussed through any of the survey or interview questions, some implications can be inferred. Based on the participants’ belief that students with disabilities or suspected of having a disability would not be retained, it is possible to consider that the economic impact is a consideration. First, the cost of repeating a grade is such that a student who is retained gets an additional year of schooling in addition to the typical 13 years students receive in grades K-12. The cost of the additional year could possibly be a consideration, but more likely, it is the time of the student that is a larger factor. Students with disabilities receive the instruction of a special education teacher in addition to the general education services that typical students receive. An additional year, with or without special education services, is not believed to result in more significant academic gains than a promoted year with special education services. Thus, the student with a disability would cost more to be retained and would benefit less than if the student were promoted. Students who were not yet eligible for special education would be evaluated for special education and could be retained if it were found that a disability was not present. The dollars and cents cost analysis of 1 year
of retention with the possibility of dropping out of school as opposed to eligibility for special education services requiring education either to the child’s 22nd birthday or to high school graduation is beyond the scope of the present study.

Of all the values discussed, two appeared to be the most dominant: (a) the equality of results and (b) the social value of individualism. Through the analysis of the data, it is evident that the participants are chiefly concerned with achieving the best possible academic outcome for each individual student. The participants gather and evaluate all of the available data to make the best possible decision for each student who is being considered for retention.

**Connection to Prior Research**

Little research has been conducted surrounding the retention decision-making process or the impact of RTI data on retention decision making; thus, limited opportunity was available to connect the current study to existing research. The majority of research presented in Chapter 2 revolved around the efficacy of retention as an academic intervention, the implementation and effects of RTI, and special education students with respect to retention.

At the school used as the case study as well as many others across the nation (NCES, 2009), students have been retained. Schwager et al. (1992) argued that retention is not an effective response to low achievement, but shows that “something” is being done to help the students who are struggling. At this site, retention was indicated only after “something,” namely RTI, had been implemented to try to help the child. All of the teacher participants indicated that RTI data were used to guide instruction, and instruction was tailored to meet the needs of individual students.
RTI has been shown to offer promise to supplement the instruction of students who have been retained. Peterson and Hughes (2011) investigated the services that retained students received. They found that students who had been retained received fewer services than those who had been promoted and argued that a school needs to consider why the child failed in the first place instead of hoping that the repeat year will permit the child to gain the skills needed to succeed at higher grades. Abbott et al. (2010) also contended that being put back into the same grade with inadequate intervention would only leave the academically low students behind.

The site investigated in this study attempted to discover why a child was failing and continued to adapt and modify the interventions to meet student needs. Students who had been retained participated in the CBM benchmark assessments and could continue to participate in the RTI process. The participants indicated that they modified classroom instruction to meet the needs of individual students so that they would not be subjected to another year of the same thing, argued to be ineffective by Martinez and Vandergrift (1991) and McCollum et al. (1999).

Abbott et al. (2010) said that the decision-making process for retention should include procedures for moving students into appropriate instructional placements, including a three-tier RTI-type model. They also indicated that intervention efforts should be “heroic” and include general education and small group interventions prior to considering retention. As a case in point, the teacher participants at the site of the present study continuously examined RTI data to determine if the interventions were effective or if something needed to be changed regardless of whether the student was a candidate for retention, had already been retained, or was only slightly below grade-level expectations.
Further, all students being considered for retention were required to participate in the school’s RTI process which included three tiers. The RTI process at this site allowed students to move between the tiers of instruction in response to the RTI data that were collected on each student. Additionally, the interventions were often provided by someone other than the student’s classroom teacher. These measures tended to ward off the concerns that the student’s low achievement could be due to the educational program, the instructional approach, or the teacher—three concerns noted by McCollum et al. (1999).

Beebe-Frankenberger et al. (2004) found that over 50% of students eligible for special education in their study had been retained. They expressed concern that retention was being used as an intervention and was the treatment of choice when the teacher believed that a student was immature or needed time to catch up. The authors raised the concern that low-performing students were retained instead of being referred to special education and that special education referrals happened when retention failed as an intervention. At the site examined in this study, it was clear that special education eligibility was considered prior to retention. Participants indicated consistently that a student who was suspected of having a disability would not be retained; instead, a special education evaluation would be completed before retention was pursued.

Although most research condemned the practice of retention, the site investigated in this study retained a small number of students. Consistent with promoted research practices, the site used RTI data with the following goals: (a) to guide instruction and interventions, (b) to ensure interventions were provided with fidelity, and (c) to ensure
that special education eligibility was not considered only after retention had failed as an intervention.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

As a result of the findings in this case study, some recommendations for practice were identified for schools or districts looking to include RTI data as part of their decision making about retention and about instruction for students who may be retained. The following recommendations resulted from this study:

1. Set clear expectations for the RTI data that need to be collected. Discuss how these data will interface with other data collected regarding nonacademic factors when making decisions about retention.

2. Provide staff development on the RTI and data collection process. Ensure that all staff members know what their roles are, what specifically is to be done, and how it is to be done to ensure that when the time comes to make decisions, the proper protocol has been followed.

3. Establish procedures to ensure the fidelity of the RTI intervention process. Develop data collection procedures that reflect the intervention process and show the fidelity of implementation.

4. Interventions should be reviewed periodically to determine if they are effective or if they need to be changed. The instructional decisions should be based on the RTI data collected. Professional development may be provided to teachers to assist with data interpretation or to review research-based interventions.
5. Consider special education eligibility prior to retaining a student. Including a special education teacher and/or the school psychologist on the RTI team can be beneficial to assist with making this determination.

6. Principals should make their criteria for retention clear to staff. A system should be created which allows for the documentation of interventions to ensure that they have been done across settings and with fidelity.

Limitations

Limitations of this research on the impacts of the use of RTI data included the following: (a) small sample size of teachers and principals for the interviews and surveys, (b) inability to observe the SIT committee meetings as planned and lack of usable data from the one meeting observed, (c) lack of representation of Kindergarten and first-grade teachers in the sample, and (d) the use of only one school site. The full sample available at the site was 20 teachers and one principal. Of the 20 teachers, only five agreed to participate, further limiting the sample size. Despite every effort made to obtain the participation of each teacher meeting the participation criteria, no representatives from Kindergarten or first grade could be obtained. This could have been due to the timing of the data collection period at the end of the school year when teachers were occupied with standardized testing and school closing procedures. The use of multiple school sites would have increased the pool of potential participants and would have allowed the opportunity to identify similarities and differences between the sites.

Recommendations for Future Research

By answering the research questions outlined in this study, information was provided about the impact of RTI data on teachers’ decision making about retention,
principals’ decision making about retention, and the impact of RTI data on instruction for students who are being considered for retention. This study served to fill the gap in the literature regarding how RTI data were being used beyond eligibility decision making for special education. The findings of this study added to the knowledge in the field and may be useful for schools or districts aiming to utilize RTI data in their retention decision-making process. Implications for future research include the following: (a) study of a larger sample, possibly including several principals and several school sites; (b) study of RTI data to determine data patterns that dictate retention versus special education referrals; and (c) study to determine the academic outcomes of students for whom the retention decision was based in part on RTI data.
Appendix A

Retention Checklist
Retention Checklist

The following are the steps required to begin the retention process. Please write the date on the line provided as you go through this process.

- Hearing and vision screening completed
- Grade level discussion for RTI component
- Send home Family Confidential History
- Complete the Light’s Retention Scale
- Academic progress, behavior progress, and attendance history
- First date of review initiated (by end of December)
- Meeting with parents to discuss status and acquire parent’s first signature on CCF-731
- Academic progress, behavior progress, and attendance history
- Second date of review completed (by end of April)
- Meeting with parents to discuss status and acquire second signature on CCF-731
Appendix B

Teacher Participant Interview Protocol
Teacher Participant Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Cheryl Mayfield

Date: ____________

Start time: ____________

End time: ____________

Recording # ________

1. What criteria are included in your decision making about who will be retained?

2. Which criterion is the most important one in your decision making? Explain why it is the most important criterion.

3. How do RTI data help your retention decision making?

4. What challenged you most in including RTI data as part of retention decision making?

5. How does the school policy influence your retention decision making?

6. Are there any other conditions that influence your decision making?

7. What level of agreement/disagreement exists between teachers and administration when making decisions about retention? How is conflict handled?

8. How would you monitor the use of RTI data in retention decision making in our school?

9. If you were “in charge,” how would you handle conflicts between teachers, administration, and district policy with regard to retention?
Appendix C

Principal Participant Interview Protocol
Principal Participant Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Cheryl Mayfield

Date: ____________

Start time: ____________

End time: ____________

Recording # ________

1. What criteria are included in your decision making about who will be retained? Which criterion is the most important one in your decision making? Explain why it is the most important criterion.

2. How do RTI data help your retention decision making?

3. What challenged you most in including RTI data as part of retention decision making?

4. How does the school (school district) policy influence your retention decision making?

5. Are there any other conditions that influence your decision making?

6. What level of agreement/disagreement exists between teachers and administration when making decisions about retention? How is conflict handled?

7. How would you monitor the use of RTI data in retention decision making in our school?

8. If you were “in charge,” how would you handle conflicts between teachers, administration, and district policy with regard to retention?
Appendix D

First Participation Protocol Invitation
March 1, 2012

Dear Teacher/Principal,

I would like to request your assistance and expertise in the collection of data for a research project. I am currently in the dissertation phase of my doctorate at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, working under the guidance of Dr. Robert McCord (robert.mccord@unlv.edu). The purpose of this study is to examine how RTI data are used in retention decision making.

As part of my data collection, I am conducting personal interviews with teachers and administrators, and I am distributing surveys for teachers and administrators to complete. Additionally, I am observing the decision-making process through observation of Student Intervention Team (SIT) meetings.

You have been identified as a K-3 teacher, member of the SIT team, and/or an administrator involved in the retention decision-making process.

If you would be willing to participate in this study by completing the survey, participating in an interview of no more than 30 minutes in length dealing with RTI decision making and/or allowing me to observe the SIT team meetings in which you participate, please respond by completing the attached consent form. It can be returned to my mailbox in the teachers’ lounge. If you have any questions, my email address is MrsPeters922@aol.com and my phone number is 702-239-6517.

I appreciate your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Mayfield
Doctoral Candidate, University of Nevada-Las Vegas
Special Education Instructional Facilitator
Las Vegas, NV
Appendix E

Second Participation Protocol Invitation
March 8, 2012

Dear Teacher/Principal,

A week ago I requested your participation in my dissertation study focused on the use of RTI data in retention decision making. Your participation was requested as you are a K-3 teacher, member of the SIT team, and/or an administrator involved in the retention decision-making process.

I have not received the signed consent form for your participation in my study. The participation of the teachers and administrators is crucial to the study. If you have any concerns about participation in this research, please contact me via email at MrsPeters922@aol.com or via telephone at 702-239-6517.

I appreciate your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Mayfield
Doctoral Candidate, University of Nevada-Las Vegas
Special Education Instructional Facilitator
Las Vegas, NV
Please answer each item by circling either “agree” or “disagree”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in the next higher grade.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Retention is necessary for maintaining grade level standards.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Retaining a child in grades K-3 harms the child’s self-concept.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Retention prevents classrooms from having wide ranges in student achievement.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Students who do not apply themselves to their studies should be retained.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Knowing that retention is a possibility does motivate students to work harder.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Retaining a child in grades 4-7 harms the child’s self-concept.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Retention is an effective means of providing support in schools for the child who does not get support at home.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Students who do not make passing grades in 2 of the 3 major subject areas (reading, communications, or math) should be retained.</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>Students who make passing grades, but are working below level, should be retained.</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>Retention in grades K-3 is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to keep up.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Retention in grades 4-7 is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up.</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>Students receiving services of a learning disabilities teacher should not be retained.</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>If students are to be retained, they should be retained no later than third grade.</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>In grades K-3, overage children (more than a year older than their classmates) cause more behavior problems than other children.</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>In grades 4-7, overage children cause more problems than other children.</td>
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<td>17.</td>
<td>Retention in grades K-3 permanently labels a child.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Retention in grades 4-7 permanently labels a child.</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td>Children who have passing grades but excessive absences should be retained.</td>
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<td>20.</td>
<td>Children should never be retained.</td>
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References


