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Grade Retention and Borderline Intelligence: The Social–Emotional Cost

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ABSTRACT: This retrospective study examines the impact of grade retention in a sample of students with borderline intellectual functioning. Data were collected as part of a 7-year study of 142 children ages 6–17 with intelligence test scores between 71 and 85. Thirty-two students in the study were retained in the second or third year of the study. A comparison group matched on gender, grade, and school grades was formed from the larger sample. The groups were indistinguishable in terms of their reported social–emotional and behavioral functioning. The results indicate that following retention there were no significant differences in academic performance between the retained and nonretained groups. However, the retained group was reported to experience significantly more depressive symptoms than the nonretained group. Following grade retention, 26 of the 32 retained students had depression scores above the clinical cut off. One year after grade retention, students in the retained group continued to have high levels of depressive symptoms. These results are discussed in the context of existing grade retention research, and implications for students with borderline intellectual functioning are considered.

The practice of grade retention is on the rise across the United States. Although rates of grade retention declined in the 1980s after a decade of steady increase in the 1970s, the number of students retained in school rose again in the 1990s (Allen, Chen, Willson, & Hughes, 2009; Bali, Anagnostopoulos, & Roberts, 2005; Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2010). Over the past 30 years grade retention has become an increasingly popular method of remediating poor academic performance (Jimerson, 2001). The most recent research results indicate that between 7 and 15% of students are retained annually (Griffith, Lloyd, Lane, & Tankersley, 2010; Hauser, 1999; Jimerson, Pletcher, et al., 2006). These rising rates of grade retention mirror changes in educational policy that have sought to improve educational standards and increase accountability through mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act (Jimerson, Graydon, et al., 2006) and calls for an end to social promotion (Clinton, 1998, 1999; Jimerson, 2001). Schools have been placed under enormous pressure not to allow students to move to the next grade until they have mastered all grade-level requirements (Frey, 2005). In fact, 49 of the 50 states have academic and

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performance standards in place (Frey, 2005), and following President Bill Clinton's 1998 State of the Union Address in which he condemned social promotion, 17 states implemented bans on social promotion (Thomas, 2000).

SHORT- AND LONG-TERM OUTCOMES FOLLOWING GRADE RETENTION

Although both public opinion and policy support grade retention as a solution to social promotion, research shows that grade retention is ineffective and potentially harmful (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Bowman, 2005; Bowman-Perrott, 2010; Edmonds, 2002; Griffith et al., 2010; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Hong & Yu, 2007; Jimerson, 1999; Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Morris, 2001; Niklason, 1987; Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Westbury, 1994; Wu et al., 2010).

Academic Outcomes

Holmes and Matthews (1984) conducted a meta-analysis comprising 44 studies of grade retention published between 1925 and 1981. Their findings suggest that students who were retained performed significantly less well than their promoted peers in the areas of language arts, reading, mathematics, work study skills, social studies, and grade point average. More recently, Jimerson's (2001) meta-analysis of 20 studies published between 1990 and 1999 showed that 80% of the studies reported negative outcomes following retention. Using data from both the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (n = 1,364) and the Child Development Project (n = 585), Gibb (2010) found that students experienced increases in their language and mathematics performance in the year following retention, but performed less well in the second year following retention. Houck (2009) reported similar findings from a 5-year longitudinal study of students who were retained in fifth grade (n = 1,575). Some achievement gains were experienced in the first year following retention; however, the gains were not sustained. By eighth grade retained students had fallen significantly below their grade peers in both reading and mathematics.

In a follow up to the Chicago Longitudinal Study, McCoy and Reynolds (1999) examined achievement in students at 14 years of age. They found that 28% of students had been retained at least once and grade retention for these students was associated with lower mathematics and reading achievement compared to nonretained students. In a prospective longitudinal study, Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) examined high school students who were retained in elementary school (n = 72). Participants were classified into one of four categories: students who were retained, students who were retained in a transitional classroom, students who were recommended for placement in a transitional classroom but who were instead promoted to the next grade, and students who were regularly promoted to the next grade. Overall, they found that grade retention did not lead to gains in academic achievement. However, students who were recommended for transition classrooms, but who were instead promoted, displayed significantly less aggression during adolescence than students who were placed in transition classrooms and those who were retained. In addition, students who were retained displayed significantly more aggression in adolescence than students who were regularly promoted. By high school, students who were recommended for transitional classrooms but who were instead promoted were comparable on all measures of achievement and behavior to the students who were regularly promoted.

Social–Emotional Outcomes

Although remediation of poor academic skills is typically the primary aim of grade retention and, thus, the primary focus in evaluations of retention efficacy, several researchers have found that grade retention can also affect students' social–emotional and behavioral outcomes as well as their perceived academic competence (Gibb, 2010; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Houck, 2009; Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson

et al., 1997; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Jimerson, Ferguson, et al., 2002; Pierson & Connell, 1992; Wu et al., 2010). Jimerson (2001) reports that 16 of the 20 studies in his meta-analysis examined social–emotional adjustment. Seventy-seven effect sizes were computed for social–emotional and behavioral adjustment, and the retained students scored .22 standard deviation units below the nonretained students on these measures. Examining a sample of at-risk students retained in the first grade (n = 350), Gleason, Kwok, and Hughes (2007) found that in the year following retention students who were retained had higher teacher- and peer-rated academic competence and also higher peer-rated acceptance than the at-risk students who were regularly promoted. Similarly, in a 4-year longitudinal study, Wu and colleagues (2010) examined students' social–emotional functioning, behavior, and peer relations (n = 124 retained students, n = 251 promoted students, matched on propensity scores). In both the year following retention and in long-term follow ups, retained students showed positive gains with regards to teacher-reported hyperactivity and behavioral engagement and peer-reported sadness and withdrawal. However, while increases in peer-liking and school belongingness were found in the year following retention, this effect did not persist beyond the repeated year and showed significant decreases in the long term, to levels commensurate with those of the promoted students (Wu et al., 2010). Thus, grade retention may provide students with some short- and long-term benefits, although not all gains are sustained over time.

WHO IS RETAINED

The principal reasons given for grade retention are that the student has not met grade-level requirements, is frequently absent from school, or has poor social–emotional skills (Alexander et al., 2003; Bowman, 2005; Jimerson et al., 1997). Studies examining the characteristics of retained students have shown that maternal intelligence and education, as well as parental attitudes toward school, are highly related to grade retention (Frey, 2005; Hayes, 2005; Jimerson, Ferguson, et al., 2002; Jimerson, Pletcher, et al., 2006), as is low socioeconomic status (Bali et al., 2005; Frey, 2005; Hayes, 2005; Jimerson, Pletcher, et al., 2006; Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy, 2009). These results are consistent with research on the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage; that is, persistent poverty has been associated with negative effects on intelligence, on school achievement, and on social–emotional functioning in children (McLoyd, 1998). There is also a disproportionate incidence of grade retention among ethnic minorities compared to Caucasian students and boys when compared to girls (Frey, 2005; Hayes, 2005; Jimerson, Pletcher, et al., 2006; Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy, 2009). For complete reviews see Bowman (2005), Frey (2005), and Jimerson, Pletcher, et al. (2006).

Given that school attendance is an important factor in high school grading (Bowman, 2005), frequent absenteeism can affect retention decisions. Students who have disabilities are absent more often than their peers, especially if they have social–emotional or behavioral disorders (U.S. Department of Education, 1993, as cited by Bowman, 2005; Wagner et al., 1991). Children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have been reported to miss significantly more days of school, be three times more likely to be retained, and be 2.7 times more likely to drop out of school than children without ADHD (Barbaresi et al., 2007). Barnett, Clarizio, and Payette (1996) found that of the students referred for special education evaluation, 71.6% of those who later received a diagnosis of a learning disability had been retained at least once before they were referred for special education evaluation. According to Hayes (2005), one of the strongest predictors of grade retention is the receipt of services for developmental delay or disability between ages 3 and 5. Although some studies report that students who are retained do not have lower intelligence than their promoted peers (Jimerson et al., 1997), Barnett et al. (1996) found that students with learning disabilities who were retained displayed lower levels of intelligence and weaker academic skills compared with nonretained students, a finding that is in line with more recent investigations as well (Beebe-Frankenberger, Bocian, MacMillan, & Gresham, 2004; Wu et al., 2010)

Students with borderline intelligence (IQ between 71 and 85) are an often understudied population. Following searches of computerized databases (ERIC, Medline, and PsycINFO) using the subject search

terms *borderline mental retardation*, *borderline IQ*, *mild intellectual disability*, *borderline intellectual function*, *at-risk populations*, *academic achievement*, *grade level*, *outcomes*, *treatment outcomes*, *retention*, *school retention*, and *grade retention*, no studies on grade retention were identified that examined retention outcomes for this population in particular, and only one was identified that examined "low IQ" (below 75) among several predictors of grade retention (Blair, 2001). Yet, students with borderline intelligence are more frequently retained than other groups of students (Shaw, 1999).

The purposes of the present study were twofold. First, we examined the effectiveness of grade retention for remediating the academic achievement of students with borderline intellectual functioning through a comparison of students with borderline intellectual functioning who were retained and a matched sample of students who also had borderline intellectual functioning but who were promoted. Second, we sought to examine the social and emotional outcomes following grade retention for students with borderline intellectual functioning, using the same matched comparison groups. Given the extensive research described above showing grade retention to be an ineffective method of remediating poor academic achievement, it was expected that the group of retained students would be comparable to the group of promoted students in terms of their academic performance. As no research examining the social–emotional outcomes of grade retention for students with borderline intellectual functioning has been identified, our aim for the second objective was exploratory. However, given research showing decreased peer acceptance and school belonging in the years following grade retention (Wu et al., 2010) we hypothesized that students with borderline intellectual functioning might experience some negative social and emotional outcomes following retention.

METHOD

Data were collected as part of a 7-year study of 142 students ages 6–17 with intelligence test scores between 71 and 85. All participants were referred by schools or physicians to a hospital-based psychoeducational clinic for school failure, attention problems, or poor performance on school readiness tests and who also received a psychoeducational assessment.

Procedures

No students in the study received follow-up counseling, educational interventions, or medical intervention through the hospital-based clinic. All students were assessed using a protocol designed to assess learning disabilities, which included a test of general cognitive ability. All students in the larger study earned full scale or composite intelligence scores on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-IV, Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Abilities-II, or Reynolds Intellectual Assessment Scales between 71 and 85. All assessments were conducted by licensed school psychologists trained in administration and interpretation of intelligence, academic achievement, and social–emotional assessment. Informed consent from parents and assent from children were collected.

Thirty-two students in the study were retained in the second or third year of the study. Retention decisions were made entirely by the school and parents, with no input from the researchers or the hospital-based clinic (save the results of the psychoeducational assessment). All students who were receiving general education services and were retained for the first time during years 2 or 3 of study were included in the study. Data were collected for the year prior to the grade retention, students' second year in the retained grade, and the year after grade retention. A comparison group was created from the population of children with borderline intellectual ability in the larger study. The comparison group was selected based on matches with school grades, gender, and grade. In this fashion, risk factors prior to the retention, outcomes during the year of retention, and outcomes a year after the grade retention could be compared. Moreover, outcomes could be compared for retained and nonretained students of equal cognitive and academic performance. Demographic information for the retained group and for the matched comparison group is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Demographic Information for Retained and Nonretained Children

	Retained	Nonretained
Ethnic group		
African American	12	11
White	18	18
Hispanic	4	5
Gender		
Male	21	21
Female	11	11
Maternal education		
University	1	0
Some postsecondary	2	2
High school diploma	2	3
Without diploma	28	28

Measures

Academic outcomes were assessed using school grades and the results of individual academic testing using the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement-II (WJTA-II). All school grades were converted using a 100-point scale, where 100 is the highest possible grade given.

Social and emotional outcomes were assessed with the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC). The reliability on the BASC for each scale and form ranges from .72 to .90, making the BASC among the most reliable of the clinical scales of social–emotional functioning. Parent and teacher reports were collected each year for all participants. For children older than 8 years of age, self-report versions of the BASC were collected each year. Data reported are the median T scores for each child at each year.

Table 2. Description of Comparison and Matching Data

	Retained			Nonretained		
	M	*SD*	Range	*M*	*SD*	Range
Grade	5.8	2.2	2–12	6.0	2.0	2–12
Age	11.5	2.6	7–18	11.2	2.3	6–17
Composite intelligence test score						
RIAS ($N = 4$)	80.5	12.4	74–85	80.0	3.4	78–82
WISC-IV ($N = 48$)	78.2	13.9	76–84	76.0	14.1	72–83
WJTCA-II ($N = 12$)	79.6	17.2	71–85	81.0	10.7	73–81
School grades	63.6	7.9	54–76	64.5	6.0	58–73

Note. RIAS, Reynolds Intellectual Assessment Scales; WISC, Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-IV; WJTCA-II, Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Abilities-II.

RESULTS

Academic outcomes, including achievement test scores and grades; social–emotional outcomes; and clinical analysis of the BASC scores will be discussed in this section.

Academic Outcomes

Achievement test scores. All students participated in individual norm-referenced academic achievement testing using WJTA-II. An abbreviated version of the battery was used, which included the subtests of Letter-Word Identification, Calculation, and Writing Samples. All scores were reported as standard scores ($M = 100$, $SD = 15$). Using a mixed between- and within-group ANOVA design (the between groups factor compares retained and not retained groups; the within groups factor compares the preretention, postretention, and 1-year postretention time periods), there were no statistically significant differences between groups, within groups, or interactions ($F(1,189) = 1.12$, *ns*). Grade retention did not have a positive or negative effect on academic skills or on norm-referenced academic achievement test scores.

Grades. All students received end-of-year grades from their teacher(s) in June. For each participant, 3 years of grades were collected: grades for the year in which they were retained (i.e., preretention), the year following retention (i.e., postretention), and for the year following the grade retention (i.e., 1 year postretention). Using a mixed between- and within-group ANOVA design, there were no statistically significant differences between groups, within groups, or interactions ($F(1,189) = 0.94$, *ns*). Grade retention did not have a positive or negative effect on grades assigned by teachers. See Table 3 for academic results.

Social–Emotional Outcomes

The BASC was administered at the same time points as the academic achievement test. All students had teacher and parent reports at all time points. Self-reports were completed by 29 of the 32 participants, and the other participants were below the minimum age for the BASC self-report form. Given the reading levels of most participants, all BASCs were read to participants and responses were oral. There were no statistically significant differences between retained and nonretained groups preretention, postretention, or 1-year postretention time periods at $p \leq .05$ for the variables of Hyperactivity, Aggression, Conduct Problems, Anxiety, Somatization, Atypicality, Withdrawal, Adaptability, Social Skills, or Leadership. There were statistically significant differences between retained and nonretained groups on the variable of Attention Problems in the preretention session ($t(62) = 1.92$, $p = .03$). This result indicates that the nonretained group was identified by teacher, parent, and self-report as having more attention problems than the retained group. However, these differences did not exist in the retention or postretention years (see Tables 3 and 5).

There were significant differences in the Depression subscale of the BASC. There were no significant differences between groups in the preretention year. However, in the postretention year, the retained group was reported by parent, teacher, and self-report to display a significant increase in depressive symptoms as measured by the BASC. Differences in the same direction and magnitude were also identified 1 year later (see Table 4). The authors tested for group differences on a number of social–emotional outcomes (e.g., nine BASC scores at time periods), and even with no correction for experiment-wise error rates, there were no significant differences shown.

There is a common belief that early grade retention has more positive effects and less harmful effects than later grade retention. This belief in the efficacy of early grade retention is reflected in the larger number of students retained in the primary compared to later elementary and high school grades (e.g., Barnett et al., 1996; Griffith et al., 2010; Jimerson, 2001; Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Shepard & Smith, 1990). Therefore, participants were separated into grade groups. Although the sample size in each grade was too small to allow for reliable statistical analysis, Figures 1 and 2 show no apparent trend. The pattern of

Table 3. Grade and Achievement Test Data

	Retained		Nonretained	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement				
Letter-Word Identification				
Preretention	80.2	9.4	78.1	12.1
Postretention	78.4	8.5	78.8	13.4
1 year postretention	78.3	10.0	80.0	12.0
Calculations				
Preretention	84.1	12.2	82.6	8.6
Postretention	81.4	8.9	79.8	9.6
1 year postretention	82.5	9.5	78.2	12.1
Writing Samples				
Preretention	79.5	8.5	83.4	13.8
Postretention	80.5	13.6	81.0	17.2
1 year postretention	76.4	10.1	77.1	11.9
Grades				
English/language arts				
Preretention	66.2	6.5	70.6	11.0
Postretention	68.0	7.5	68.8	10.4
1 year postretention	68.2	9.8	72.2	8.5
Mathematics				
Preretention	66.0	8.7	74.4	11.1
Postretention	70.8	8.9	73.0	10.6
1 year postretention	72.0	9.4	68.2	8.8
Social sciences				
Preretention	68.5	7.6	68.8	11.2
Postretention	66.8	10.2	73.2	9.5
1 year postretention	70.0	8.4	72.2	10.8

Note. No statistically significant differences between groups.

no change in grades, academic achievement, and depressive symptoms is approximately the same for all grades.

Clinical Analysis of the BASC Scores

School decisions are not based on mean performance but on specific individual needs. In a sample with a highly restricted range, the positive effects of grade retention for some individuals may be averaged out or affected by the extreme scores of a few individuals. Therefore, an examination of individual performance on academic skills and social–emotional variables was considered.

Prior to grade retention, only three students in the retained group (n = 32) had BASC scores on the Depression subscale that were in the clinically significant range (i.e., T scores greater than 70) and the nonretained group (n = 32) included four students with clinically significant scores on the Depression subscale. After retention, the retained group showed a large increase in the number of students with

Table 4. BASC Data for Retained and Nonretained Children for Attention Problems and Depression

	Retained		Nonretained	
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
Depression				
Preretention				
Parent report	48.5	15.3	41.7	18.3
Teacher report	49.6	13.2	46.2	10.3
Self-report	46.9	14.6	44.7	14.2
Postretention				
Parent report	72.3	10.7	48.5	12.1
Teacher report	71.7	9.5	46.9	8.9
Self-report	66.0	11.2	52.6	10.0
1 year postretention				
Parent report	68.2	7.7	52.2	12.2
Teacher report	72.8	9.7	50.6	7.4
Self-report	67.8	8.5	47.4	8.2
Attention problems				
Preretention				
Parent report	51.3	8.5	57.1	7.9
Teacher report	50.6	6.5	55.6	10.1
Self-report	48.1	9.6	57.9	11.1
Postretention				
Parent report	57.3	5.9	53.3	10.5
Teacher report	54.4	9.8	55.5	13.2
Self-report	56.4	10.5	56.4	8.6
1 year postretention				
Parent report	51.5	8.7	55.1	8.7
Teacher report	56.3	6.9	52.7	10.2
Self-report	54.3	8.3	53.5	11.2

Note. No statistically significant differences between retained and nonretained groups at $p < .05$ on the variables of Hyperactivity, Aggression, Conduct Problems, Anxiety, Somatization, Atypicality, Withdrawal, Adaptability, Social Skills, or Leadership.

clinically significant T scores on the Depression subscale (i.e., 26 from parent report, 24 from teacher report, and 23 from self-report). However, the nonretained group had no such increase in the number of students with clinically significant scores on the Depression subscale of the BASC. This is evidence that grade retention does not simply affect a few students in a negative way, but the majority of students in the retained group experienced an increase in reported depressive symptoms, to the level of clinical significance as measured by the BASC. One year after the grade retention, students in the retained group continued to have high levels of depressive symptoms, indicating that the depressive symptoms are more chronic than behaviors expected in an adjustment disorder (see Tables 4 and 5). Also note that attention symptoms did not follow the same pattern over time (see Table 6).

Table 5. Number of Participants With Depression T Scores > 70

	Retained (n = 32)	Nonretained (n = 32)
Preretention		
Parent report	3	4
Teacher report	3	4
Self-report	2	4
Postretention		
Parent report	26	5
Teacher report	24	4
Self-report	23	4
1 year postretention		
Parent report	24	4
Teacher report	23	5
Self-report	21	3

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the effects of grade retention for students with borderline intellectual functioning. Although the literature on the effects of grade retention is extensive, no previous studies examined the effects of retention specifically for students with borderline intellectual functioning. Consistent with findings from previous studies showing grade retention to be an ineffective method of remediating academic performance, the results of this investigation suggest that grade retention does not ameliorate the academic performance of students with borderline intellectual functioning. There were no significant differences between the retained and nonretained students in achievement test scores or grades in either the second or third year after retention. In terms of the

Figure 1. Student Grades at Grade of Retention at Preretention, Postretention, and Follow Up

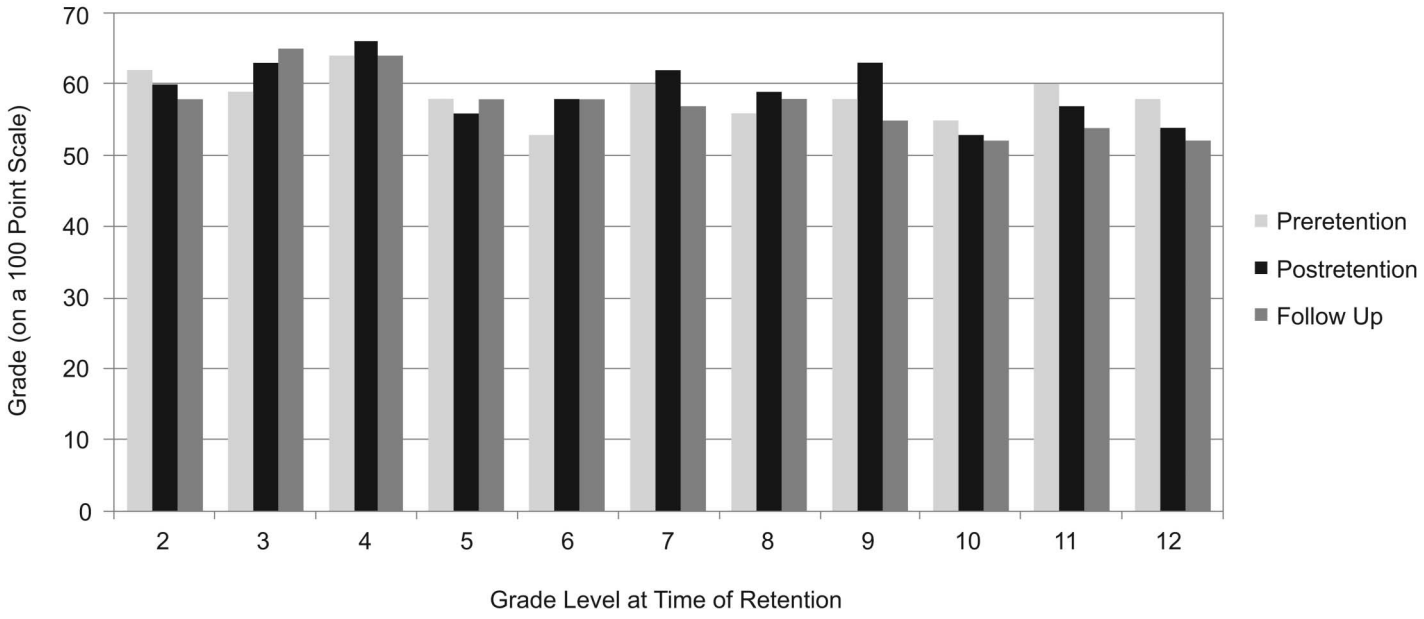
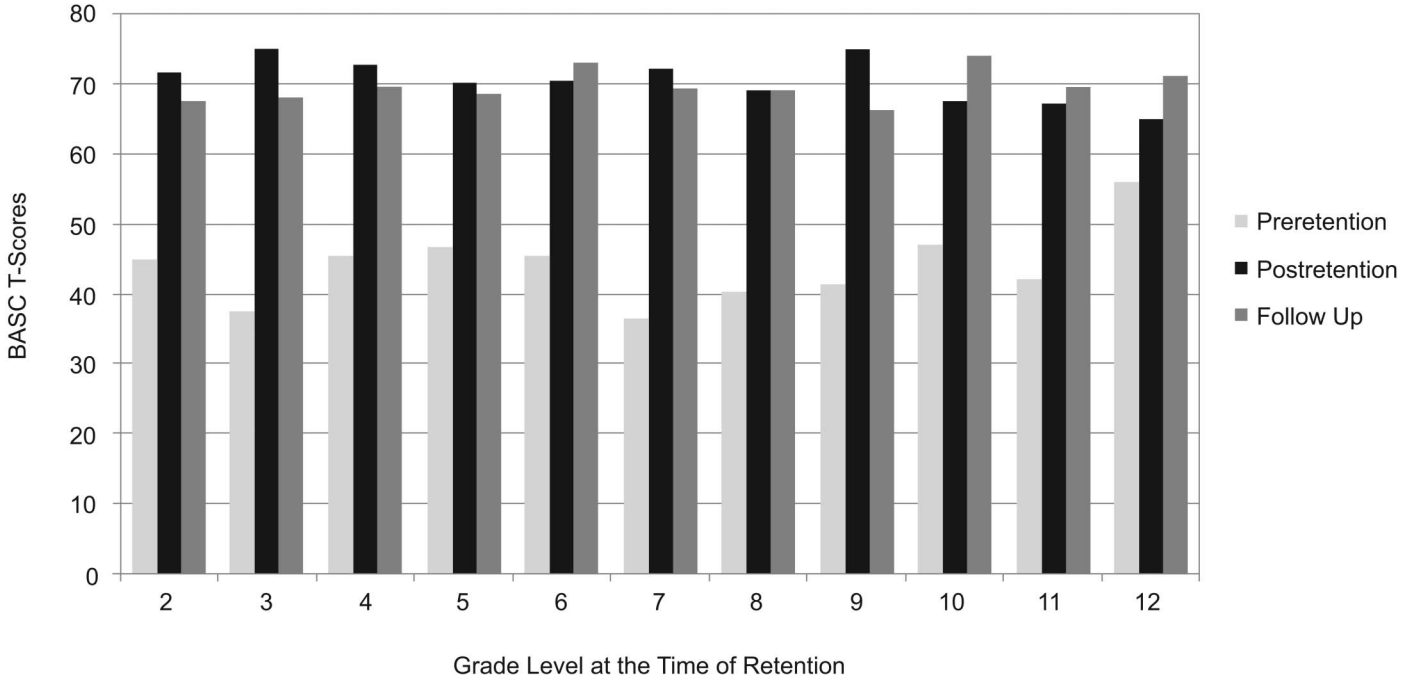


Figure 2. BASC Depression Subscale T Scores as a Function of Grade at Time of Retention



social–emotional effects of grade retention, the results of this study were unexpected. In the first year of the study both groups of students were indistinguishable on all measures of social–emotional functioning, except in their reported attention problems. However, in both the year of retention and the year following retention, retained students showed significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms than did their matched, nonretained peers. These results were not due to a few students with extremely high scores, but rather to a majority of the retained students receiving clinically elevated ratings of depressive symptoms.

These results are more extreme than those of any other study documenting the social–emotional effects of grade retention, suggesting that students with borderline intellectual functioning may be a particularly vulnerable population and may be at increased risk for negative outcomes following retention. The unexpected finding of clinically elevated depression is cause for concern and bolsters calls for increased research involving individuals with borderline intellectual functioning (Shaw, 2010), highlighting the value of studying the unique needs of this population. Little is known about the possible differences in the ways in which students with borderline intellectual functioning may respond to interventions as compared to other groups of struggling students. This investigation provides some insight, however, and suggests that students with borderline intellectual functioning may be at increased risk for negative social–emotional outcomes following retention.

Some researchers have addressed the possibility that grade retention leads to fewer negative effects if it is done early, such as in the primary school grades (e.g., Jimerson et al., 1997). However, the results of this study suggest that early grade retention does not buffer against a negative impact; that is, depressive symptoms increased significantly following grade retention regardless of the grade in which students were retained. There is no evidence that early retention has qualitatively different outcomes than later grade retention. For grades 2–12, no significant improvement in academic skills was found, yet a problematic increase in depressive symptoms was identified.

The cost of grade retention, both to students and to society, is high (Bowman, 2005). Not only do students appear to be at risk of developing severe social and emotional difficulties such as those reported in the current study, but retained students have also been reported to have lowered self-esteem

Table 6. Number of Participants With Attention Problem T Scores > 70

	Retained (n = 32)	Nonretained (n = 32)
Preretention		
Parent report	4	6
Teacher report	5	6
Self-report	2	5
Postretention		
Parent report	9	7
Teacher report	7	4
Self-report	7	3
1 year postretention		
Parent report	8	7
Teacher report	8	4
Self-report	5	3

and poorer self-image (Alexander et al., 2003), to be at increased risk of dropping out of school (e.g., Jimerson, Anderson, et al., 2002), and to experience higher rates of unemployment and criminal activity (Bowman, 2005) than nonretained peers. In terms of the cost to schools, in 2007–2008 the average cost of public education per student in the United States was $10,297 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This is a sharp increase from the estimated yearly costs of $6,000 (in constant dollars) per child in the early 1990s (Thomas, 1992, as cited by Bowman, 2005). As others have repeatedly suggested, the money spent on retaining students could be better spent on hiring additional staff and implementing specialized programs aimed at addressing the academic needs of those students who fail to meet grade-level requirements (e.g., Alexander et al., 2003; Bowman, 2005). Recent studies support the use of small group instruction (Abbott et al., 2010) and response-to-intervention (Murray, Woodruff, & Vaughn, 2010) approaches for remediating student performance and promoting lasting academic skills development. Alternatives to grade retention have the potential to be effective in increasing academic performance, improving the mental health of students, and making schools more cost efficient.

This current study lends support to the copious literature showing that grade retention is ineffective at remediating poor academic performance (e.g., Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001) and suggests that grade retention may actually place students with borderline intellectual functioning at increased risk for developing serious mental health problems.

However, this retrospective study has a significant number of limitations that affect the generalizability of these data. The participants are a sample referred to a hospital-based psychoeducational clinic. Thus, they are not representative of all students retained in grade. The matching procedure was conducted from a retrospective stance, introducing possible bias in selection. Prospective studies with a much larger sample are necessary to determine if these data are robust and generalizable.

CONCLUSIONS

This current study demonstrates the imprudence of the widespread use of grade retention on a particularly vulnerable population. The knowledge that grade retention does not provide an effective and efficient positive academic outcome is well known. Yet, this study provides additional information that grade retention is not only not productive, but is potentially harmful to the short- and long-term mental

health of school children. However, views on the policies of grade retention do not seem to be swayed by the preponderance of data. Advocacy for effective screening; quality instruction at Tiers 1, 2, and 3; and the elimination of grade retention as an intervention are supported by the data in this article and the extant literature on the topic.

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