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The Educational Effects of and the Relationship between Nonpromotion and the Dropout Rate

Sharon Slaughter Summers

University of North Florida

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THE EDUCATIONAL EFFECTS OF
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NONPROMOTION AND THE DROPOUT RATE

by

Sharon Slaughter Summers

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Signature Deleted

Dr. Bruce Gutknecht, Professor

Signature Deleted

Dr. James Mittelstaedt, Division Chairperson
Abstract
The decision not to promote a student is a critical one; it could affect the rest of the student's academic career. It is imperative that such a decision be based on the best available research. This study reviews research that has been done on nonpromotion, dropouts, and the relationship between the two. Results from an examination of 1,024 dropouts' records show that 87.8% of dropouts had experienced nonpromotion one or more times. Recommendations for developing retention criteria and preventing dropouts are listed.
Chapter I
Introduction

Problem Statement

When given the percentage of students who drop out of high school, and given the percentage of students who experience nonpromotion, is there a significant relationship between the dropout rate and nonpromotion?

Rationale

Among the many problems educators face today is that of the school dropout - the student who leaves school before graduation or completion of a program of study. Nationally, 25% of our children fail to complete high school (Harris, Hedman, & Horning, 1983).

Important academic factors that influence the decision to leave school are irregular attendance, serious problems with schoolwork, non-participation in extracurricular activities, disruptive behavior and grade retention. All of the above factors contribute to a low self-esteem and a total dislike of almost every aspect of school. Some theorists argue that nonpromotion affects all the other factors.

According to Holmes and Matthews (1984), cumulative research produces evidence that the potential for negative effects from grade retention consistently outweigh
positive outcomes. Funk (1969) indicated that 70-90% of dropouts failed one or more times in primary grades.

Some research contradicts the effects of nonpromotion on the dropout rate. Clifford (1978) stated that certain levels of failure actually facilitate learning. Ebel (1980) concluded that public education could not gain respect if nonpromotion is not practiced, even at the risk of having students drop out.

The rate of nonpromotion had declined over the last few decades, but is now on the increase. Hubbell's study (cited in Holmes & Matthews, 1984) found that the numbers of children retained in 124 schools surveyed in California had risen steadily over the last five years. Today, the dropout rate continues to be staggering despite numerous preventive programs.

The fact that this writer teaches in a very small rural school and knows each child personally provides a chance to compare the nonpromoted with those who drop out. The dropout rate at the writer's school supports Beck's and Muia's (1981) statement that dropouts usually come from large urban or small rural school districts.

Due to the inconsistencies in evidence and the incomplete analysis of nonpromotion and reasons for
dropouts, it is imperative to identify their link in anticipation of a program to phase out the retention factor of the dropout problem.

**Purpose**

The purpose of the study is to establish the fact that there is a significant relationship between nonpromotion and those who drop out by evaluating existing research and student records from a small rural district in Central Florida.

**Hypothesis**

Briefly stated, the hypothesis is that there is a significant relationship between nonpromotion and the dropout rate.
Chapter II
Review of Related Literature

Among the many problems educators face today is that of the school dropout. Nationally 25% of our children fail to complete high school. Is it because of the debilitating effect of nonpromotion? The rate of retention in elementary schools is now on the increase due to the current emphasis on competency-based education. Is there a relationship between nonpromotion and the dropout rate?

Chapter II of this study will discuss the effects of nonpromotion and why students drop out of school. A comparison of the two topics will follow for the purpose of establishing a significant relationship between nonpromotion and the dropout rate.

Nonpromotion

History. Nonpromotion involves the repetition for one year of a particular grade level in school. The educational worth of nonpromotion as a method of increasing individual progress and maintaining high achievement standards has long been debated (Ames, 1981; Koons, 1977; Taylor, 1978). Historically, nonpromotion has been in use almost since the beginning of compulsory education. Used liberally at first, nonpromotion rates reached as
high as 52%. By the early 1900s seventy percent of the children were overage for their grade (Abidin, Golladay, & Howerton, 1971; Ebel, 1960). Grade retention continued to be a common practice until the 1930s, when it was first challenged by social scientists who feared potential adverse effects of retention on children's social and emotional development. During the next 30 years those sensitive to this position began to support policies of social promotion in order to reduce the numbers of overage, low achievers. Instead of repeating the grade, most students were passed on to the next grade, grouped according to ability, and remediated. For the few students for whom nonpromotion was considered, decisions were made on what was considered best for the children in view of their chronological age, social and emotional maturity, home background and attendance record.

Since the early 60s the value of social promotion has been seriously questioned as a result of the decline in student achievement on standardized tests that is generally noted today (Palardy, 1984). Educators blamed this decline in scholastic achievement on relaxed academic and promotion standards as a means of achieving academic mastery. The public demand for educational accountability can be seen in the creation of minimum competency testing
programs mandated by state legislatures. Basic skills mastery discouraged promotion of children through grades on the basis of social promotion. Few states that have basic skills testing programs require retention solely on the basis of failing to meet competencies (Rose, Medway, Cantrell & Marcus, 1983).

The potential increase in the number of nonpromoted children as a result of failure to meet basic standards has revived arguments for and against retention and it is very likely that retention rates will climb markedly in the near future. McCarson (cited in Rose et al., 1983) stated that 18% of the first graders in Atlanta Public School system were not routinely promoted in the Fall of 1981 as compared to 3 1/2% of the first graders not promoted in the Fall of 1980.

**Research.** Although the rapid growth in nonpromotion stimulated the first investigations, quality research on nonpromotion has been inadequate for making valid inferences about the effects of grade retention. What has been done is generally marked by poor design, inconclusive results, and a generalized failure to look at the long term effects (Ames, 1980; Jackson, 1975; Koons, 1977; Rose et al., 1983).

According to Walker (1984) a summary of the results
from approximately 15 studies on the effects of nonpromotion on school achievement indicates that, on the average, promoted pupils made gains of 8 - 12 months in a year while retained pupils made gains of only about 6 months. In other words, it took two years for the retained student to learn what the promoted student learned in one year. Comparing individual progress, roughly 85% of promoted children as compared to 35% of retained children have been found to achieve at a normal rate.

Rose et al., (1983) examined the progress of nonpromoted students during a repeated grade as compared to progress in the original grade, based on 6,000 cases, and found that 20-35% of the repeaters learned more material in their second year, while as many as 40% of the repeaters actually learned less material.

**Effects.** Research to date is somewhat inconclusive in regard to the effects of retention in general on children's adjustment. Retained students do score lower on adjustment measures than do promoted pupils (Jackson, 1975). Pink (1982) supports the educational axium that negative effects of retention will be fewer and less serious if the retention occurs in the beginning elementary grades. In the higher elementary grades, there is frequent social rejection of older students.
who have been retained. Funk (1969) sees the academic failure beginning in elementary grades as predicting a series of negative behaviors (such as truancy, rebellion, and dropout) and attitudes (such as low affect toward school and self). He argues that the schools' failure to improve academic performance, without failure, handicaps students in coping in a society that equates ability and status with schooling success.

Proponents of retention argue that students who do not understand the material at one grade will find it difficult or impossible to benefit from material at the next level. Retention gives slow or maladjusted students time to come up to grade level and reduces the range of abilities within each grade. Retention is also seen by many educators as an appropriate remedy for students who are immature (Ebel, 1980; Hunter, 1985; Koons, 1977; Scott & Ames, 1969).

Proponents of social promotion believe that simple grade repetition does no more good for academic achievement than promotion to the next grade. Instead of being given remedial help, repeaters are most often recycled through a program that was inappropriate for them the first time and that may be equally inappropriate and of less interest to them a second time (Jackson, 1975).
Furthermore, say critics of grade retention, the stigma of flunking is damaging to the social and personal development of low achieving students; it starts a snowballing cycle of failure that may extend into adult life (Funk, 1969; Godfrey, 1972; Palardy, 1984; Pink, 1982). Phillips (1984), however, criticized the notion that social promotion alone will solve the problem of school failure. Lindvig (1983) theorized that if a child failed daily in his school work throughout a year and then transferred to the next higher grade, where continued daily failure occurred, it was absurd to assume that anything had been done to restore his confidence in himself and his ability to succeed in educational situations.

Although its value as a means of academic motivation has not been proven or disproved, grade retention remains a common practice in the schools (Ames, 1980; Koons, 1977; Rose et al., 1983).

**Dropouts**

**Definition.** A dropout is a student who has been in membership for any regular school term and who withdraws or is dropped for membership for any reason except death or transfer to another school before graduating from secondary school (grade 12).
Dropout Prediction. In 1969, Hicks (cited in Beck & Muia, 1981) described the sequence a dropout typically goes through before deciding to leave school. First, the potential dropout loses interest in schoolwork, which leads to lower grades. Frustrated, the student begins to skip class, thus coming into conflict with school authorities. In rebellion, the pupil exhibits disruptive behavior, for which forced suspension from class or school occurs.

Curtis, Jonathan, and Others (1983) suggest the "typical" dropout as more likely to be male, to live in the South than the North, and to be a slum dweller than a suburbanite. Mahood (1981) indicated that dropouts usually come from large urban or small rural school districts, and that 31% belong to racial minorities. Poole (1978) reported that typical affective characteristics of the dropout include low self-esteem, little desire for self-growth, and limited commitment to accepted social values. The overwhelming majority are from blue-collar or lower white collar homes, and the lower the socioeconomic level of the student's family, the greater the chance of becoming a dropout.

The educational achievements of the dropout's parents are a great deal lower than those of the graduate's parents. Dropping out is most frequent among children
from large families or broken homes. Further, the relationships within dropouts' families have been found to be more tense and less happy than those within graduates' families. Dropouts also report higher levels of parental punitiveness (Kaplan, 1977; Palmo, Buehle, & Osswald, 1980; Stoughton & Grady, 1978).

Most important to the educator are the academic factors that influence the decision to leave school. According to the analysis of Curtis, Jonathan and Others, (1983), and Beck and Muia, (1981) these factors include serious problems with schoolwork, tardiness or irregular attendance, grade retention, nonparticipation in extracurricular activities, and disruptive behavior at school.

In part, the future dropout's poor academic performance could be due to learning disabilities. Widely recognized problems of the dropout include difficulty in math, spelling, and especially reading, in which the dropout is typically two years below grade level, (Poole, 1978). Teachers often compound the problem by having unrealistically high expectations for these pupils. When they are unable to meet their teachers' standards, their poor self-image as failures is enhanced. Potential dropouts are also typically
unable to find much-needed companionship among their teachers. The majority enjoy only an extracurricular aspect of school or enjoy nothing about it at all (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; McLoughlin, 1983; Poole, 1978).

**Dropouts' Reasons for Dropping Out.** Studies by Herron, William & Kemp (1979) revealed that, in the majority of cases, more than one reason for leaving school was the rule rather than the exception. Their survey showed the three most distinct types of dropouts were those students who: (a) wanted to start work or vocational training, (b) could not cope with schoolwork, recurrent labeling as a failure, and a negative picture of themselves in a school setting, (c) thought school boring and irrelevant.

In a comparison of those who dropped out and those who stayed in school a difference was noted in home and school factors. In the home factor, dropouts' perceptions of their parents' job aspirations for them was significant reason for leaving. Parents of dropouts aspired to skilled manual and blue-collar occupations and oftentimes encouraged their children to seek the same type of job.

Concerning school factors, dropouts indicated negative attitudes to school and felt that school had failed to interest them in learning. One out of three
dropouts reported they were "bored and fed up" with school, compared to one out of five of those who stayed in school. Beck's and Muia's (1981) survey showed that low marks and having to repeat a grade were high indicators mentioned by dropouts.

Pink (1982) reported that 29% of the female survey respondents gave pregnancy, marriage, and related child care responsibilities as their reason for leaving school. As stated earlier, most dropout surveys indicated that a combination of reasons led to their dropping out rather than a sole reason.

**Dropouts' Effect on Society.** Students and parents expect an educational system to help young people to gain necessary skills and attitudes to reach goals that are extolled year after year by society. Society subtly promises many things to young people and it is a distressing experience when the reality dawns on students that schooling is not enough to guarantee them a place in society. A quote by Ginzberg (cited in Phillips, 1984) summarizes the picture facing dropouts:

To want to work and be unable to find it is painful at any age, but youth unemployment has particular effects both on individual and society. A lengthy period of frustration and enforced idleness when a
person first enters the labour force can disable him or her psychologically and in terms of experience for later employment — those who encounter serious difficulties in their formative years (from 16 to 24) fail to acquire the experience, training, competence and credentials that would earn them a regular job yielding a reasonable income in their adult years. (p. 27)

As a result of joblessness and the negative feelings about themselves, 76% of dropouts are unproductive in society and oftentimes deviant in behavior (Funk, 1969; Harris et al., 1983). To counteract this problem educators have begun preventative dropout programs and organizations for youth employment. An example of such an organization is 7001 founded in 1969 with a grant from the Thom McAn Shoe Company. It is a national nonprofit corporation that prepares economically disadvantaged youth (mostly school dropouts) for the world of work. 7001 helps youth through a unique job training program consisting of pre-employment training, educational upgrading, motivational activities, and job placement assistance (Sizemore, 1985).

Society must deal with the dropout either in preventative measures or remediative measures. Harris et al. (1983) states that it would be less costly to
prevent dropouts who are already participating in a public school than to provide further programs.

Relationship of Nonpromotion and Dropouts

Society and School Expectations. The educational system in the United States has two principal functions: Students are expected to learn the facts and technical knowledge over the years (i.e., "content" or "data") and they are expected to master, gradually, the roles appropriate to adulthood (Haddad, 1979).

Student achievement is evaluated in terms of facts and technical information learned. Grades are assigned on the basis of achievement in a course and accepted as evidence of the degree to which a student has knowledge of the subject area. Although grades may reflect the teacher's biases and perceptions, the increased use of standardized tests and scoring procedures has resulted in a more objective measure of relative achievement (Kelly & Pink, 1972).

Social roles appropriate to age-grades, and later to adulthood are also incorporated in the educational system. Values, norms, and behaviors conducive to the stability of the classroom are encouraged, and social behaviors and influences are opposed. Emphasis is placed on the values necessary for effective participation
within a middle class community, as well as within the school itself. Independence of thought and behavior is encouraged within the well-defined limits of age and sex roles that teachers consider appropriate for their students.

The relationship between grades and chronological age permits high school graduation at age eighteen—frequently designated as the age for assuming most adult responsibilities. Failure to graduate within the regular period of twelve school years, because of failures, grade repetitions, or dropping out may be regarded as a deviation from the naturally approved procedures for assumption of adulthood (Curtis, 1969; Kelly, 1971; Kelly & Pink, 1972; Pink, 1982; Sewell, Palmo, & Manni, 1981).

**School System and Achievement.** The successful mastery of each grade level and the subsequent promotion to a higher grade represents an increasing acceptance of the adult role. Independence is supported by age roles regarded as appropriate by the educational system. Therefore, it is the role demands of the educational system that grants independence (Harris et al., 1983).

This fact must be considered in the context of the adolescent status system. Students forced to repeat a
grade because they have not learned the required content may be bored because they have already learned the appropriate age role for that grade. Cinal (1982) found forced repetition of grades produced a negative reaction to education and generated hostility toward school, causing no substantial amount of content learning.

In considering the content that must be mastered, it should be noted that current achievement is built upon previous successes in school. Sudden high achievement following a succession of failures is not likely to occur for at least two reasons. First, under our system of education the marginally achieving student is faced each year with an ever increasing gap between expectations and achievements maximizing failure conditions. In such circumstances, the nonschool oriented peer group, often with deviant academic norms, may offer the student social support that can not be gained from school or family.

Second, nonpromotion at any stage of elementary school seems to cause problems in the later years of education. Through nonpromotion, students learn they are unable to accomplish the required academic work and view school as an impossible place for achievement recognition. Since school no longer holds interest for the student,
the dropout will seek accomplishment in areas outside school. Consequently, students who have been "held back" at some time in their academic careers appear more likely to drop out of school (Holmes, 1983).

**Comparison.** The relationship between nonpromotion and dropping out can be seen in a summary of investigations and studies carried out ten to fifteen years ago by Averch (1974), Glasser (1969), Jackson (1975), Leviton (1975), Stroup and Robbins (1972), and Thomas and Knudsen (1965). In these studies approximately 7% of those who had not repeated a grade withdrew from school prior to graduation, but approximately 27% of the students who experienced nonpromotion were dropouts. Roberts' (cited in Thomas et al., 1965) study of one state system found an unbelievable 72% of dropouts had been forced to repeat at least one year.

Pink (1982) found that dropouts were characterized by a sense of failure and cites nonpromotion and frustration in school as a basic cause of withdrawal. These studies suggest that nonpromotion leads to dropouts and those that favor nonpromotion do not show research to disprove Pink's theory. Certainly, the implication is that not being promoted results in stress.

This writer has collected data from a small rural
county in Central Florida as further evidence that there was a definite relationship between nonpromotion and dropouts.

The data collection was based on records for the last ten years and listed the total number of dropouts each year. The dropouts' records were searched to find out if they had or had not experienced nonpromotion. Results of this study appear in Chapter III.

**Summary**

In view of the fact that nonpromotion creates children who are overaged, feel as failures, lose their peer relationships and become bored with school, and the fact that the characteristics of dropouts encompasses the same traits, the research reviewed shows there is a relationship between nonpromotion and dropouts.
Chapter III
Results, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of the research reported in this study was to determine if a relationship exists between dropouts and students that were retained at some earlier time in their academic career. The results of a search of 1,024 dropouts' records, conclusions, and recommendations are discussed in this chapter.

Results

The number of dropouts and nonpromoted students from a small rural school system in Central Florida were obtained from a systematic search of school records over a period beginning with the 1975-76 school year and ending with the 1984-85 school year. The material in this report is not precise, since inaccuracies in records were noted, but should be of value to those who are interested in the correlation between nonpromotion and dropping out.

The information for this study was taken from cumulative records of the past ten years. The first step of this investigation was to establish a list of dropouts. After the student was identified as being a dropout the record was searched to find whether the pupil had or had not experienced nonpromotion and if
so, how many times. The search did not take into consideration any other factors that may have caused the student to withdraw from school, nor did it attempt to prove that nonpromotion was the sole cause of dropping out. Table 1 lists the collected information.

Table 1

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<th>Nonpromotion Experiences of Dropouts</th>
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Between the 1975-76 and the 1984-85 school years 1024 students dropped out. Of the dropouts, 12.2 %
did not experience nonpromotion, 24.5% were retained once, 42.3% were retained twice, while 21% experienced retention three times. The largest number of dropouts occurred after two or more retentions. The records surveyed showed that 87.8% of students who dropped out had experienced nonpromotion one or more times, thus supporting the hypothesis that a definite relationship between nonpromotion and the dropout rate does exist.

Conclusions

The experience of nonpromotion is of significance in relation to the dropout rate. This study showed that nonpromotion almost always appeared on the dropouts' records. It was also noted in research by educators and in the dropouts' own explanations for leaving school.

Nonpromotion cannot be said to cause school withdrawal directly, but the indirect effects of nonpromotion on the students worked to discourage them from continuing their education. The resulting stress created a potential dropout.

Nonpromotion of pupils is implemented with the intention of improving the academic achievement in the basic skills of these pupils, but failure does not inspire students to put forth greater effort. This conclusion should not be interpreted to mean that
promotion is better than nonpromotion but, rather the primary consideration should be whether the students' needs are met wherever they are placed.

Alternatives to nonpromotion and promotion should be adopted by school systems that allow continuous progress, remedial instruction and smaller classes with more individualized instruction.

It is apparent that any attempt to attack the problem of nonpromotion must take place in early grades (i.e., kindergarten or first grade) before the record of continual failure produces a dropout. If for some reason this approach is not practiced, intensive preventative programs for the high risk student should begin in sixth grade.

Even though numerous students who are retained complete schooling successfully, there remains a greater number who drop out. Since nonpromotion has a real effect on the dropout rate, it is a factor that educators need to carefully consider before implementing.

Recommendations

For every student who may possibly benefit from nonpromotion, there are two or more who are not helped or who may actually regress following nonpromotion. Therefore, procedures need to be used for establishing
systematic criteria for retention decisions. Suggested procedures include the following:

1. Critical and individual examination of each case.

2. Improvement of teachers' and principals' knowledge of the effects of retention.

3. Emphasis of study habits and task approach skill, and not achievement test scores.

4. Self-questioning (Will the retention "benefit" the child?).

5. Consideration of the child using the variables of physical disability, physical size, academic potential, psycho-social maturity, neurological maturity, self-concept, level of independence, grade placement, chronological age, previous retention, nature of problem, sex, chronic absenteeism, basic skill competencies, peer pressure and the child's attitude toward retention.

Alternatives to nonpromotion must be considered. Preschool screening programs need to be established to identify early developmental problems. Kindergarten and first grade teachers need to realize the importance of their role in developing positive attitudes toward learning. A policy that discourages nonpromotion beyond kindergarten or first grade should be encouraged. The elementary program must provide for assessment and
remediation within each grade level.

Intensive preventative programs should begin in the sixth grade for potential dropouts. This could be accomplished by treating each student who has experienced nonpromotion as an exceptional child. A program should be established which uses high interest materials to teach basic skills. A multisensory approach should be used in order to meet various learning styles.

On the high school level, flexible programs should be established for the potential dropout. These should consider individual needs and provide specific coursework. Guidance counselors should tailor design such courses of study, as well as provide emotional support. Although basic skills are necessary, a feeling of self-worth needs to be instilled in every student.

Despite all efforts to eliminate dropouts, the excellent programs already established to help dropouts find a place in society should continue and multiply.

Summary

The promotion - nonpromotion controversy has raged for nearly a century and may continue for another hundred years due to stimulation by basic skills legislation and competency testing. However, the bulk of the literature on nonpromotion suggest that the possibility
of noxious consequences is far more likely with nonpromotion than promotion. In view of the fact that the majority of dropouts have experienced retention, it seems inadvisable to retain children until definitive research exists to support nonpromotion.

If unavoidable, it should be done at the kindergarten or first grade level when factors such as peer relations and academic expectations are not yet clear and there is more time to remediate any potentially negative effects. It seems both likely and unfortunate that nonpromotion will continue to exist. Given this situation, it behooves the nonpromotion decision-maker and those who are otherwise involved in the process (e.g., parents) to be aware of the current state of the research with regard to nonpromotion. Of course, it seems possible there will be situations where nonpromotion might be the appropriate alternative, but abuses of nonpromotion will be avoided only through the use of procedures and programs which are systematic, consistent, and which reflect the findings of research.
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District, Texas Office of Research and Evaluation.
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