

MISSOURI EDUCATOR ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF PROMOTION
STRUCTURES FOR KINDERGARTEN THROUGH SECOND GRADE

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MISSOURI EDUCATOR ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF PROMOTION
STRUCTURES FOR KINDERGARTEN THROUGH SECOND GRADE

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MISSOURI EDUCATOR ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF PROMOTION
STRUCTURES FOR KINDERGARTEN THROUGH SECOND GRADE

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By

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ABSTRACT

Public education is a common thread in the communities of each town and city across America. The local control and civic duty to uphold free and appropriate education rests in the hands of local stakeholders, teachers, administrators, and parents alike. One would be hard pressed to find a local mission statement that did not include the goal of preparing students for an ever-changing world. As the world has continued to change in every aspect imaginable, the time structures of public education have not. In Missouri, students enter kindergarten at the age of five and progress through one grade level each year until completion of twelfth grade when the public education journey is concluded upon graduation. This time-based and fixed mindset has been in place since 1893 and has only been manipulated within the confines of the actual structure itself. This study has been created to explore the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public educators on promotion structures and the effectiveness they have for grades kindergarten through second grade.

A critical component of this study was the creation of a valid and reliable survey instrument. The survey measured the current pulse of Missouri educators with regard to promotion structures and Missouri's youngest students. Construction of the survey, including an extensive pilot, has proven to be a valid and reliable tool to gage the current feelings of Missouri educators with regard to promotion structures and the effectiveness they have for kindergarten through second grade students. This tool can serve as a dependable launching device when embarking on the potential change process for promotion structures. Knowing where educators stand on the issue is a critical formative assessment to help guide and set action steps.

Upon completion of analyzing data gathered from Missouri public educators, it was found that educators support nongraded structures, do not support social promotion, and have feelings both for and against retention. Principals and classroom teachers seem to view social promotion and retention with different degrees of support. This indicates that educators do not have a shared understanding of practice and implications of practice, both in short and long terms.

The researcher recommends keeping current research in the hands of Missouri educators as well as looking for ways to find the pulse of the community regarding promotion structures and the effectiveness they have. It will be imperative to know the attitudes and perceptions of parents before an action plan can be made for moving forward with nongraded learning structures in kindergarten through second grade. Missouri educators and parents currently have two promotion options at the end of each school year. This creates a dire dichotomy for the public education system as both choices have many negative outcomes. It is recommended that Missouri public education move forward in finding ways to incorporate nongraded learning as it was the only structure that showed positive support from Missouri educators as a whole, within each sub group and within each demographic area explored. Given that nongraded learning was the most supported structure and the only structure not being implemented, it would be of great value for Missouri educators and policy makers to move down this path. Finding ways for individualized learning could be key in the success of students.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Public education has been charged with the responsibility of successfully progressing each student enrolled from kindergarten through his/her senior year of high school. Beginning in 1893 this assembly-line structure has existed to produce productive citizens in the United States of America. In the spring of each school year, teachers, administrators, and parents are required to make placement decisions for the following year. The prevalence of only two existing options for all students is burdensome and problematic. The two choices given for each student are for that student to be advanced to the next grade level or to be retained and repeat the same grade level. Educators have created support systems to assist learning in each grade level, including but not limited to: special education, Title I support services, Reading Recovery, after-school programs, tutoring, Response to Intervention structures, and in-class differentiated instruction. The given strategies to assist students on the continuum of K-12 public education exist only within year-long time frames and do not allow for shortened or prolonged time to master grade-level expectations.

Problem Statement

The design of public education in this country has been mostly resolute and unvarying for over a century. Public education systems are not changing in terms of time-based structure to meet the ever-changing needs of learners and the world. The National Education Association in 1893 was appointed to establish a standard curriculum for public education. The Committee of Ten was mainly comprised of educators and was chaired by Charles Eliot, the president of Harvard University. In December of 1893, the

committee's published recommendation organized and charted the standardization of public schools. As the United States moved from a nation of agriculture to a nation of industry, more children were attending school, and ideas of transformation were challenging the public education system. The Committee reported that all public school children would be taught the same curriculum. Schooling would take place over twelve years. The first eight years would be considered elementary, and the last four would be considered high school. In addition, students would complete approximately 180 attendance days per year based on an agrarian calendar and would attend class six hours each day (Ornstein & Levine, 1993; Meyer, 1967).

Educators consistently agree that each child learns within his or her own timeline, and individuals need different resources as well as different amounts of time to successfully learn. Students deserve an environment where learning is the critical goal, no matter the time it takes. Supporting this notion, Reeves (2009) asks, "How logical is it that state funding formulas and hidebound tradition conspire to associate the age of a student with a grade level, rather than recognizing that the relevant question for every student is, 'What do you need to learn?'" (p. 135). Reeves goes on to state that we "know that the least effective response is the simultaneous implementation of many different initiatives. But as bad as 'initiative fatigue' may be at one extreme, the other extreme--analysis paralysis--is no better" (p.107).

Rationale for Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public educators in terms of promotion structures, along with the contributions and detriments of time-based education as assessed through surveying a wide range of

educators throughout the state. Public education has had a similar learning structure for hundreds of years. The modern world has transformed rapidly; however, the public education system has been unable to match those developments. For Missouri students to possess the best educational experiences, the structure of the current system will need to be extensively evaluated and changed. Schwahn and McGarvey (2011) declare, “the forces demanding that education change are many and powerful; and the forces resisting educational transformation are also many and powerful, but the future will win out” (xii). Schwahn and McGarvey (2001) add these thoughts, “our Industrial Age delivery system is an assembly line where time for learning is the constant and the quality of the learning is the variable” (p. 5). No research indicates that people learn in nine-month segments of time. People naturally take different amounts of time to learn concepts and skills and learn best when they are not evaluated nor penalized for the length of time it takes to learn. School improvement efforts should address changing school practices so students can believe their efforts will lead to success rather than failure defined by time limits. Dillon (2013), long time educator and administrator, as well as current educational consultant for Measurement Incorporated, concurs in his blog that public school structure is dated, inhibiting, and even negative. Dillon recognizes that having teachers and students come to school for the same hours every day supports a kind of entrenched dullness. The actual design of the physical space limits the types of learning experiences that students can have as well as how frequently teachers will have opportunities to interact with one another. Jacobs (2010) addresses the topic of design in *Curriculum 21: Essential Education for a Changing World*, where she offers the following conclusion: the form of public schooling should support purpose and not lead it. The very forms into

which schools put curriculum have a great deal to do with the difficulties curriculum planners have in developing contemporary and exciting opportunities for learners. Jacobs notes “we have 1930s schedules, grouping patterns, and spaces; and so, the curriculum follows. Form should follow function. And now more than ever, we have genuinely new forms to work with that do not seem to be breaking into and replacing these restricted structures” (Jacobs, 2010, p. 14).

The researcher-developed survey and subsequent data gathered determined the current attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public educators for finding a starting point in seeking future promotion possibilities. Currently, Missouri students and educators only have two options for placement decisions: retention or promotion. If educators see these options as favorable and worthwhile, the potential for change will be faced with extreme resistance. If, on the other hand, educators indicate they are not satisfied with retention and social promotion, it is possible that new structures could be introduced or investigated. When looking to frameworks and how to meet the needs of educators, Bolman and Deal in *Reframing Organizations* (2008) offer four frames to consider. When examining attitudes and perceptions, Bolman and Deal point out, “people’s skills, attitudes, energy, and commitment are vital resources that can make or break an enterprise” (pp. 121-122). This mindset confirms the value of having a deep understanding of educators’ thinking before moving forward. The researcher hoped to recognize, honor, and uncover the belief systems and use that knowledge to make appropriate recommendations for next practice decisions.

Research Question

What are the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public educators regarding current promotion structures and the effectiveness they have for kindergarten through second grade students?

- a. What are the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public educators regarding nongraded or competency-based structures and the effectiveness they could have for kindergarten through second grade students?
- b. What are the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public educators regarding social promotion and the effectiveness it has for kindergarten through second grade students?
- c. What are the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public school educators regarding retention and the effectiveness it has for kindergarten through second grade students?

Theoretical Framework

Since the Committee of Ten standardized education in 1893, the public debate has continued to surround the philosophies of retention and social promotion. Each year the dire dichotomy of retention and social promotion rears its head when making placement decisions for students who have not yet mastered current grade-level content. The decision of repeating a year to increase time and exposure or moving forward with a familiar- and similar-aged cohort plagues educators and parents alike. Many researchers and educators have studied or questioned the philosophy of time-controlling structures. In *The Constructivist Leader*, Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, Lambert, Gardner, and Szabo (2002) shared the thoughts of educator, principal, and founding director of the

Principals' Center at Harvard University, Roland Barth. One takeaway Barth expressed was “organizing learning by age and grade are static core metaphors: they define and confine us” (p. 241).

A leading figure in studying the effects of retention and social promotion is Jimerson, a professor at the University of California. Jimerson has completed studies, calculated meta-analysis reports, and worked with others to continue the study of retention, specifically, retention in the early grades. Jimerson’s (2001) longitudinal study tracked over twenty-one years of data following identified low achieving students. Jimerson followed those students who were retained as well as those students who were socially promoted. Jimerson’s analysis of data concluded that students who were retained in early elementary grades are not as successful as students who were also low achieving academically but socially promoted.

A second leading figure in studying the decision-making process for retention or social promotion is Light. Light (2006), an over-twenty-five-year veteran in school psychology as well as academic researcher and author, has written several books concerning retention and published a complete tool kit and guide to assist schools as well as parents in choosing the most appropriate path when retention is a possibility. Light’s background in psychology, as well as his comprehensive understanding of retention and social promotion literature, led him to publish *Light’s Retention Scale* (LRS) in 1977. Currently LRS has been updated and republished four times with the most recent edition published in 2006. Light states “the question is not whether school grade retention in general is a positive or negative intervention, but whether will retaining this *particular*

child be helpful or harmful” (2006, p.13). Light’s retention scale has been used throughout the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and England.

Limitations

The data used in this study was generated from an attitudinal survey. Therefore, the researcher is aware of the sensitivity and truthfulness expressed within this process. Responses given will offer a perception on the successfulness of retention, social promotion, and nongraded learning in kindergarten through second grade. Further research will also be necessary to determine feelings of educators outside Missouri.

1. This study was limited by the honesty of each participant.
2. This study was limited by the educational background and understanding of topics presented.

Delimitations

This study was limited to kindergarten through second grade teachers of Missouri public schools as well as principals and superintendents. Missouri public school teachers and administrators were chosen specifically to determine the current attitudes and perceptions of state educators.

1. This study targeted Missouri educators only.
2. This study explored the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri educators including teachers, principals, and superintendents who work with kindergarten, first grade, or second grade students.

Conclusion

Promotion structures based on time are deeply imbedded in the history of public education. The continued tie to time causes life-changing decisions to be made for

students not mastering grade-level expectations or standards. Each year, educators are required to make challenging decisions for students and their families. These decisions result in potentially significant short-term and long-term effects. Since 1893, this country's public school system has progressed all students through identical promotion structures without substantial change. In addition to the lack of change, the attitudes and perceptions of educators are pivotal in implementing and supporting the educational path for all students. This study explored the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public educators with regard to promotion structure effectiveness for kindergarten through second grade students. The survey itself could prove to be the most significant piece of research as it will become a valid and reliable tool for decision making in terms of Missouri educator readiness for potential promotion structure changes. The pilot, extensive data analysis, and repetitions yield a measuring tool for Missouri and other states to gain an accurate understanding of educators and the beliefs they hold true for promotion structure effectiveness in kindergarten through second grade.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Dillon (2013) states that learners with a growth mindset think “no matter how long it takes or how hard it is, I will learn what I want or need to learn” (para. 14). Dillon continues by exposing the fact that students are essentially penalized for taking longer to learn. For example, if a student struggles during the school year, and teachers are worried about a potential backslide, those teachers may refer that student to summer school or even make it a requirement. Another detriment to taking longer to learn is the use of what is referred to as remediation or intervention due to requiring more exposure or time to practice a skill. Setting a predetermined length of time for mastery of content leads to the label of success or failure. Not only can the label of failure be associated to objectives, but it can also become the perception of the learner. In *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (2006), Senge maintains that educators are continually challenged to match the needs of learners to a world that is changing with great speed. To meet this challenge, educators need to become strategic learners by intentionally gaining perspectives and updating approaches.

In *Understanding by Design*, Wiggins and McTighe (2005) reinforce their philosophy that teachers should determine exactly what it is they need students to know and be able to do before those teachers begin the process of writing curriculum. When answering what it is that instructors want students to know and be able to do, it is difficult for educators to balance when content or timing is critical. Missouri public education students currently have nine months to complete grade-level determined curriculum regardless of contributing factors within each student. Some of these factors are: existing

content knowledge, age in relation to months and not only year, family structure, socioeconomic standing, physical and mental health, and topic at hand. Essentially, nine months are given to all students regardless of need or circumstance. Students who master content knowledge months ahead of time are working alongside students who need more than the allotted time. In both cases the timeframe takes ultimate authority without the ability to adjust in small or large increments.

Senge (2006) espouses, "when it comes to organizational change: the organization as a whole cannot recognize impending threats, understand the implications of those threats, or come up with alternatives" (p. 17). Change researchers, Kotter and Rathgeber expand on that idea by suggesting that when changes are acknowledged, those changes are often irrelevant, and do not meet original aspirations. Too much money is spent for too little gain, which leads to pain and frustration. Evidence from schools and other organizations that have experienced successful change provides encouragement for leaders who know meaningful change begins with cultural change (Kotter & Rathgeber, 1995). Change initiatives must not be moderate or occasionally implemented; "only deep implementation had the desired effect on student achievement" (Reeves, 2009, p. 44).

Program structures directly affect curriculum, and these are key: scheduling, student grouping, personnel, and both physical and virtual space (Senge, 2006). Reeves goes on to point out that although the educational field intends for achievement to improve incrementally as implementation improves, current evidence does not withstand this notion. In fact, in surprising research, Reeves concludes that "for many change initiatives, implementation that was moderate or occasional was no better than

implementation that was completely absent. Only deep implementation had the desired effect on student achievement” (2009, p. 44).

How the Brain Works

Jensen, a noted brain researcher, writes in *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (2005), the wide range of developmental maturity in primary classrooms creates extreme difficulty in making a schedule of grade-level mastery targets. Public schools are designed and implemented with the goal of keeping the wide range of students in sync within narrow and identical curricula. Brains working through the process of reading, for instance, take place over many consecutive years. This range can end as late as age seven and even eight years of age. In the case of primary education, five- and six-year-olds are all required to be reading on-level text at the end of the kindergarten year to be considered proficient. All kindergarten nonreaders are considered behind and not on target by the spring of their kindergarten years. The same pattern of identifying those on or off target continues in first and second grades. Students at the ages of seven and eight also have rigorous reading and writing expectations with no age or brain maturation exceptions taken into consideration. Currently it is a dire dichotomy when it comes to making decisions about grade levels for children who appear to be behind in academic content. Brain maturation indicates that the public school time structures demanding everybody on the same page on the same day do not match or support the way the brain develops. As educators continue to focus on accommodating learners, the transition of fixed factors will need to be examined.

Ramey, an expert in the early childhood enrichment field, states in another of Jensen's works, *Enriching the Brain: How to Maximize Every Learner's Potential* (2006), states:

We need to realize that the question of whether the development of high-risk children can be positively changed has been answered with a resounding, 'Yes.' Now it is our job to move to a more refined question concerning the relative influence of different types of programs including practical questions concerning age of onset, intensity and duration of treatment as well as the effects of various specific educational curricula (p. 273).

The world's largest scientific and professional association of psychologists, The American Psychological Association (2014), has considered the process of learning to read as it is tied to public education. The American Psychological Association (APA) is quick to point out that brains all mature in different ways as well as different rates. Maturity and functions of the brain are as individualistic as each child in each classroom. The APA goes on to address the policy of placing all students of similar age in the same classroom as a way to properly group children. The professional association swiftly reminds educators that the understanding of brain maturation is paramount in properly planning for each child and being clear that the process of brain maturation influences learning readiness. Furthermore, the brain does not develop within a scope and sequence on a linear timeframe. Recommendations considering research on brain function and education indicate that educators should "not adopt a one-size-fits all approach as well as not place children in groups based solely on age" (American Psychological Association, 2014, para. 7).

At one time people believed the brain developed into its full form by the age of three. Development after the age of three was considered a matter of refinement. Through years of study, research, and experience, researchers now know the brain is plastic and can be altered with experience and development. Evidence shows that rather than a complete stop in development at the age of five or even twelve, the brain continues to grow and change well into one's twenties (Semrud-Clikeman, 2006). In each stage of development, it is important for teachers to understand the relationship between neurological development and learning. Understanding the concept of brain growth and refinement is particularly important for teachers and parents to understand as children are grouped and move through the educational system. When there is a mismatch between development and educational expectation, as can happen quickly in the primary school setting, it is important to remember each child is growing and maturing at his or her own appropriate rate and sequence. The potential mismatch that can occur may be due to brain maturational differences or can be due to a developmental disability. Short- and long-term decisions concerning the education of students must be made with the knowledge of development and cannot ignore the potential that time is a factor (Semrud-Clikeman, 2006).

The American Psychological Association (APA) does give clear recommendations to public education for consideration. The recommendations include: having an awareness of developmental differences among students, understanding that normal development differs extensively within the same age and the same grade, keeping in mind that children born prematurely may have development that does not correlate to chronological age, and being mindful of childhood health and the effect of illnesses,

including ear infections (2014). The APA also warns public educators to not assume a disability just because of academic delay, to not assume that current delays will continue over time, to not adopt an all-inclusive approach, to not make grouping decisions based on age alone, and to not let physical appearance interfere with developmental assumptions (2014).

Research has found differences in brain structure, activation, and development in children with learning disabilities and mood disorders. Sousa, an international consultant in educational neuroscience, gives an explanation in his book, *How the Brain Learns to Read* (2005). Sousa clarifies the challenge for even those students without special needs:

Speaking is a normal, genetically-hardwired capability; reading is not. No areas of the brain are specialized for reading. In fact, reading is probably the most difficult task we ask the young brain to undertake. There are nearly 40 million adults in the USA alone who are functionally illiterate. Renewed emphasis in recent years on improving the basic cognitive skills of students has increased pressure to start reading instruction sooner than ever before (p. 32).

Evidence-based milestones have been created through developmental observation and monitoring guidelines set by Pediatrics and Child Health of Alberta, Canada. The expected guidelines include the ability to name letters and give corresponding sounds by seven years of age (Dosman, Andrews, & Gould, 2012). Currently in Missouri, students of age five and six, at the latest, are considered on target for this landmark skill.

Midpoint of the kindergarten year, Missouri students should have mastered letter name and sound and begin reading. At this juncture, student age ranges from the last months of age five to the beginning months of age six. In Semrud-Clikeman's (2006) study of brain

function and learning, the case is made for times when reading can be delayed. The ability for children to hear and distinguish one sound from another sound is an indicator that the auditory system is functioning at the level needed to begin the process of pre-reading skills. One key predictor for reading readiness is a child's ability to hear and manipulate rhyme. This ability translates into skills in understanding how sounds differ, and in turn, predicts a child's success with phonics instruction (American Psychological Association, 2014). This critical time is important to detect and act accordingly to best meet student needs. Semrud-Clikeman's (2006) research indicates that missing this timing either way (too early or too late) can cause learning to be delayed, and in turn, create even longer timelines and interventions needed to help a student be successful. Moreover, if reading instruction is not provided, or if the home environment is not enriched with literacy and literacy components, learning will be delayed.

Evaluating the knowledge of how the brain functions and develops is key when working with children in an educational setting. The disconnect between the science of the brain and the structure of public education creates a major hurdle in appropriately addressing the needs of learners. The hard and fast rule that all kindergarten students must be five years of age on or before July 31st to enter kindergarten does not match the fact that brain development is not directly tied to age (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014). To compound the disconnect, the range of ages within one classroom can be as large as eleven months, and the end-of-year content goals are exactly the same for all students, regardless of age. For the education system to appropriately address this issue, it will have to find new time structures to allow for increase or decrease in speed of content.

Entering Public Education

Kindergarten entry is the first official step in the public school system. Although many students attend preschool, preschool is not guaranteed or offered for all children. Typical school entrance is exclusively based on the birthday last celebrated. Officially enrolling a student is the action that starts the clock, suggesting that all students will learn yearly content in no less than one hundred and eighty days per school year and at the end of a thirteen school year journey; therefore, the on track child will graduate from public school. If students' progress is considered off track, it is believed that students have been retained, failed, flunked or labeled remedial. This time-bound promotion structure and mindset creates an urgency to properly start each child on a successful path. Parents and educators must make informed decisions about the specific needs of individual children, and then determine what path will meet those needs.

According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE, 2014) Missouri students have a right to a free and appropriate education beginning at the age of five. When Missouri children are five years old on or before July 31st of the current year, they may enroll within their assigned school districts. Kindergarten, however, is not mandated, and parents have the right to enroll students beginning in first grade or when the child turns six on or before July 31st of the current year. Often times, parents and students struggle with the decision for public school entry when the child is young for his or her class. Naturally, children born in April, May, June, or July of the enrollment year are considered young. The possibility for a student with a July birthday to be eleven months younger than some students in his or her cohort exists within the current enrollment requirements due to age. With increasing accountability

and required reading achievements for kindergarten students, it is proactive for parents and educators to consider the options for young students.

When a student is young for entry, parents have several choices to determine the appropriate path for their child. Students can enter kindergarten; parents can wait another year and enter kindergarten in the older range the following year; parents can enroll in local preschool programs and then enter kindergarten the following year; or in some districts, parents have the choice of entering students into a developmental kindergarten and then sending them to regular or typical kindergarten the following year.

Frey, educational author and associate professor of literacy in San Diego, studied the growing practice of academic redshirting or the delay of kindergarten entry due to age. In her study, *Retention, Social Promotion, and Academic Redshirting: What Do We Know and Need to Know?* (2005), Frey attempted to first find the rate of retention. Due to lack of required record keeping and unclear detail regarding academic entry, it was difficult to properly calculate the rate of retention. Frey completed a review with a nationally representative sample of nearly 10,000 students tracked by the Center for Research on Students Placed At Risk at John Hopkins University from beginning in first grade in 1991 until the completion of the 1993-1994 school year. In this study it was reported that 18.4% of the students were retained within the three and one-half-year timespan. This percentage and the compared hypothesized percentages ranging from eight to forty percent led Dr. Frey to research the effectiveness of retention and social promotion.

Upon review of more than four studies that included over 22,000 students, Frey (2005) concluded that retention results in negative effects both academically and

emotionally. Given the dismal outcomes of retention, a closer look was given to social promotion. Precise data is not kept or required in the United States of America. Frey refers to this strategy as a “hidden problem” (Frey, 2005, p. 340). Research on social promotion is indirect and restricted to the comparison groups of larger studies on retention. The conclusions drawn come with the realization that true control groups or identical comparisons are not possible. While reviewing more than eight researchers citing social promotion studies, Frey reported the following conclusions when social promotion is used. Retained students underperform on standardized tests as compared to low achieving students who were socially promoted. Socially promoted peers gained more in reading and math over their retained comparison group. One study reviewed by Frey concluded no difference between retained and socially promoted comparison groups. A study of 238 elementary students (retained, socially promoted, matched ability, and stratified sample groups) found that retained students academically outperformed socially promoted peers, and no difference was found in self-worth measures (Frey, 2005).

Students and parents only have two choices when it comes to placement decisions for students considered on track or off track. According to Frey (2005), one way parents and educators are attempting to delay the start of this on or off track mindset is to use academic redshirting. Frey reports that parents are using academic redshirting when a child’s birthday occurs late in the year and for reported less mature behavior when compared to other children enrolling in kindergarten. A review of studies cited on voluntary retention shows that it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of delayed entry. When reviewing studies looking at the rate of voluntary retention, parent reasons

for delayed entry, and the access to preschool led to the conclusion that more research is needed. Emerging information included “delayed entry is used primarily with boys and children with summer birthdays, children attending preschool scored higher on kindergarten readiness tests, children from lower income families have less access to preschool” (Frey, 2005, p. 343).

Retention and academic redshirting are very often referred to as giving the gift of time. To truly understand the impact of extended time or delayed entry, more research is needed (Frey 2005). The failure or lack of adequate progress demonstrated by primary-aged students is a concern among parents, educators, and legislators. The continued focus on effective interventions will help shape and form system changes. Time-bound structures will need to be closely examined and properly studied to determine effectiveness of delayed entry. According to Missouri Parent (MO Parent, 2014), Missouri offers full-day kindergarten and is ahead of the nation in providing this full-day service for young students.

Nongraded Education

Heterogeneous groups of students attempting to master similar content are considered nongraded classrooms. Nongraded can also be referenced as ungraded, multiage, combination, continuous progress, open concept, mixed-age, competency-based, and multilevel classrooms. The rationale behind nongraded classrooms can be linked to:

First, the grouping of students with multiple ages allows older students to assist classmates and promotes cooperative learning. Second, teachers in nongraded classrooms are expected to tailor learning experiences to the needs of individual

children. Third, a developmental approach to learning is emphasized and accommodates the fact that children enter school at different stages of readiness (Kelly-Vance, Caster, & Ruane, 2000, para. 4).

Nongraded grouping allows teachers to individualize according to each learner's existing skills and abilities. In 1992 researchers Gutierrez and Slavin (as cited in Kelly-Vance, et al., 2000) found in a best evidence synthesis that nongraded elementary programs resulted in more positive educational outcomes for students. In contrast, Veenman's 1995 (as cited in Kelly-Vance et al., 2000) best evidence synthesis found no difference between the two types of schools. Thus, no conclusive evidence is provided; and therefore, continued research is needed to build the research base in the area of graded versus nongraded educational structures.

Results of a nongraded versus graded study in 2000 favor the nongraded structure or indicate no difference between structures, depending on what is measured. The study concluded that primary level students in the nongraded school outperformed the students in the graded school in reading and math. Results from this study suggest that nongraded schools may have academic benefits for students, especially at the primary level in reading and math (Kelly-Vance, et al., 2000).

Anderson and Pavan (1993) reviewed studies from 1968 to 1990 that investigated the impact of nongraded schools. The completion of this review found the following with regard to standardized test scores: 58% of the studies provided support for the nongraded format, and 33% reported no difference between nongraded and graded schools. Nine percent found that graded schools had a greater positive effect on achievement than nongraded schools (as cited in Kelly-Vance, et al., 2000).

Educational leaders, Schwahn and McGarvey have co-authored the book, *Inevitable: Mass Customized Learning: Learning in the Age of Empowerment*. With combined backgrounds in leadership, effective organizations, teaching in both the United States as well as Canada, and extensive research in future-focused change, Schwahn and McGarvey (2011) have identified ten weight-bearing walls that impede the ability for disrupting time-based promotion structures currently in place for public education learning. Of the ten weight-bearing walls, they suggest grade levels and students assigned to classrooms as being hurdles to individualizing education. Schwahn and McGarvey recognize that the use of grade levels allows for ease of grouping students and the ability to move cohorts of students within a cycle. On the other hand, grade levels do not allow for individuals to progress at their individual “optimum rate of learning” (Schwahn & McGarvey, 2011, p. 136). Another weight-bearing wall, that of assigning students to specific classrooms, allows for the ease of management, control, and accountability tracking. With this ease also comes the burden and inability to bring students with similar learning needs together with a master teacher to study “specific learning outcomes” and then moving on after mastery (Schwahn & McGarvey, 2011, p. 136).

The concept of students having individual needs addressed with specific plans and flexible timelines has growing support from families as well as public educators. New Hampshire is the first state to change their public education policies to promote student progression based on what students have mastered and not the number of hours spent in the classroom or in one grade level. Researcher Freeland wrote *Policy to Practice: How Competency Based Education is Evolving in New Hampshire* (as cited in Schwartz,

2014). Within the research lies the core concept that students need to advance upon mastery. If New Hampshire truly implements this vision, the system will have to embrace flexible pacing. Freeland states that this system must be meaningful to teachers; they need to see and know this will be better for kids. Even when teachers can see the benefit educators and families must remember “our current batch system has been in place for over 100 years, and all the infrastructure was created over time to support it” (as cited in Schwartz, 2014, para. 10). Although New Hampshire has legislative and political support for a no graded or competency-based system, the implementation throughout the state varies widely as districts have local control to make implementation decisions. It is possible for new research to be conducted and analyzed to see outcomes of new structures (as cited in Schwartz, 2014).

Bramante and Colby have published *Off the Clock: Moving Education from Time to Competency* (2012). Within the framework of their ploy is that education must move from time-based promotion to mastery learning without rigid timelines. Bramante and Colby state public education “has difficulty envisioning a system that is substantially different than the model that we have known for our entire lives” (Bramante & Colby, 2012, p. 7). When drilling down to the specifics of remodeling, education systems’ time-based promotion structures and schedules drive schools. The day-to-day schedules, lunch schedules, recess schedules, yearly schedules, and testing schedules all dictate what is done and when it is done. To truly make a change in current structures “we must deconstruct the elements of the framework that obstructs the natural process of teaching and learning” (Bramante & Colby, 2012, p. 19).

History of Retention and Social Promotion

Educational researcher, Caples, studied the history of retention as well as the increase and decline in usage of retention within the United States. Caples authored *Grade Level Retention: A Handbook for Educators* (2005), a book that includes several phases of accountability he believes are tied to retention and promotion within the country. In 1647 a law was passed with regard to elementary education. Any township of fifty families or more would be required to have an elementary school. Students were grouped by geographic location and generally educated in one-room schoolhouses. Near the mid-nineteenth century, elementary schools began organizing students within grade levels according to age. At the time, it was believed this grouping would assist teachers and enable them to focus their efforts (Caples, 2005).

During the time of transition from one-room schoolhouses to grouping students by age, retention was born. The main reason for retaining students was to give students more time to develop academic skills and master curriculum content. Throughout this time in history, students who were retained and continued to struggle were often labeled as retarded, slow, or lazy. Beginning in the 1930s, public opinion began questioning the use of retention as the public believed it was a damaging process, and the student psyche was forever crippled. The public applied great pressure on the educational system to stop retention because they wanted to reduce the stigmatic effects of failure, ease the fiscal burden of school to re-educate, reduce the number of over-age students in schools, and keep retained students from dropping out. With this pressure, social promotion was born and became the new way of deciding to send a student to the next grade level (Caples, 2005).

In 1981, the National Commission on Excellence in Education was born. The Secretary of Education, T. H. Bell, painted a picture of American public schools that were not adequately educating the children of the nation. Bell directed the Commission to create a report containing realistic recommendations for educational improvement in the United States of America. In 1983, born from this recommendation, was the document, *A Nation at Risk*. (as cited in Caples, 2005).

A Nation at Risk stated that all students were “entitled to a fair chance for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit” (as cited in Caples, 2005, p. 18). Students were to be competently guided to assure they would “manage their own lives and serve themselves as well as society” (as cited in Caples, 2005, p. 18). With this statement the entire nation began to establish reforms. In 1989, President George H. W. Bush and the National Governors’ Association established America 2000 (as cited in Caples, 2005). This educational strategy listed six national goals for American schools to reach by the year 2000. America 2000 was amended in 1994 by President Bill Clinton and the United States Congress and came to be named, *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (as cited in Caples, 2005). It is believed that this was the beginning of the development of standards-based educational reform in American schools. The six principles included the following components:

1. All students are capable of learning.
2. Long-lasting improvements are necessary.
3. Improvement is dependent on school-based leadership.
4. Top-down and bottom-up reform is necessary.
5. Comprehensive strategies for implementation will be developed locally.

6. Whole communities must be involved in the reform efforts (as cited in Caples, 2005, p. 20).

No Child Left Behind was sanctioned in 2002 by President George Bush and mandated that each state be held accountable for educating all students (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). This legislation also included the requirement of measuring students' successes against national standards using standardized assessments. Due to No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), many states decided to implement zero tolerance and no exception policies that require students to pass the standardized high-stakes tests in order to be promoted to the next grade or to graduate (Hancock, 2005). In Missouri the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has enacted Senate Bill 319 to address the sanctions of NCLB. The bill states that all Missouri school districts must have a systematic assessment procedure in third grade to determine the reading level of all students. Upon identifying reading levels, any student one year or more below level must be placed on a reading improvement plan that includes, but is not limited to, summer school reading instruction, after-school tutoring, and parent education about the requirements of these interventions. Along with the aforementioned strategies, a fourth grade student reading at a third grade reading level or below will be required to be retained unless he/she qualifies as exempt under allowable reasons set by the state (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014).

Social Promotion

Within the State of the Union Address of 1998, President Clinton spoke of the “end of social promotion and the retention of students who did not meet promotion standards in all schools across America...when we promote a child from grade to grade

who hasn't mastered the work, we don't do that child any favors" (Clinton, 1998).

Beginning in the 1930s, the public opinion of retention was that it damaged the psyche of students; therefore, social promotion protected the confidence as well as mental well-being of the children. School systems then and now are continually finding ways to motivate students to achieve and simultaneously addressing the needs of students who persistently struggle. Social promotion is the act of sending students from one grade level to the next, regardless of academically poor achievement. Social promotion is a strategy that enables children who are having educational difficulty to proceed to the next grade with their same-aged peers. The belief that the social and mental benefits of continuing the systematic process of a K-12 education with a child's predetermined cohort far outweighs the academic difficulties the child will face the continuing year is held by educators and parents alike. Bolman and Deal (2008) note that psychologist Abraham Maslow guides us when looking through the human resource frame while attempting to achieve self-actualization or the ability to realize one's potential. When a student is coping with a sense of failure or is suffering from the effects of broken security or self-esteem, he/she can be delayed in reaching his/her full potential, both academically and personally (as cited in Bolman & Deal, 2008). Social promotion stands to protect this impending barrier to success. According to researcher Caples (2005) four main reasons are given to support social promotion. The use of social promotion reduces the stigmatic effects of failure. Social promotion eases the fiscal burden of school to "reeducate" students. Each year a child is retained creates an extension into the projected thirteen-year system. This extension includes costs from individual cost to teacher cost. Another advantage of social promotion is reducing the number of over-age students in

school. Lastly, Caples supports social promotion to keep potentially retained students from dropping out of school (Caples, 2005).

When reviewing Miami-Dade County Public School's Assessment, Research, and Data Analysis report (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2008) on alternatives to retention, the Florida school district states that social promotion is not a viable alternative to retention. The school district has released the following reasons to refrain from social promotion:

1. Socially promoted students already lack the needed cognitive skills needed to be successful in the next grade-level and therefore would continue to perform at low levels and widen the gap between mastered content and needed content.
2. Students' frustrations increase as they recognize they are not performing like their peers. This frustration can then evolve into behavior problems.
3. Socially promoting students sends the message to students that effort and achievement are not required or important.
4. Socially promoting students creates larger teaching challenges as teachers have to plan and teach with underprepared students while also meeting grade-level standards.
5. Socially promoting students gives a false indicator of success to parents. This can lead to confusion when it comes to understanding student achievement.
6. Socially promoting students does not prepare them for college or the needed and expected skills in the workforce (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2008, p.3).

As student placement decisions are finalized, many times the focus of potential short-term and long-term discomfort in relationships and self-perception of learning is the

push that leads educators to send students to the next grade level. When *A Nation at Risk* was published, lowered standards, weak curriculum, and social promotion of students were criticized because ill-equipped graduates were graduating and entering college or the workforce (as cited in Woodruff, 2009). This common opposition of social promotion and grade retention has been around since the foundation of the graded elementary school (Balitewicz, 1998).

Social promotion is often used to avoid long-term social adjustment and self-esteem drawbacks of retention. Teachers hold tight to the belief that retaining students improves their long-term chances of academic success but fear the negative impact on self-esteem when retention occurs. This fear often outweighs the thought of potential success and leads teachers to push for social promotion. When attempting to make sound judgment calls addressing what to do with underachieving students, educators try to think of long- and short-term advantages as well as detriments (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005).

Educational advocates, Roderick and Nagaoka (2005), reviewed the retention policy in Chicago, Illinois, and studied long-term effects of the policy in the winter of 2005. Their study and conclusions can be found in *Retention Under Chicago's High-Stakes Testing Program: Helpful, Harmful, or Harmless?* Citing different reviews by Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber (1994), Holmes (1989), Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe (1997), and Peterson, DeGracie, & Ayabe (1987), Roderick and Nagaoka drew the following conclusion: "few studies have examined the long-term effects of retention on student achievement and school attitudes, and these studies have generally found that even when there are short-term benefits, those benefits are not sustained over time" (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005, p.310). While all school systems in

the United States are strained with how to motivate and address the needs of struggling students, Chicago public schools took drastic and systemic efforts to end social promotion and placed an intense focus on students' underachievement. To comprehensively approach underperforming students, Chicago enacted promotional requirements based on standardized test scores in third, sixth, and eighth grades. Roderick and Nagaoka followed those students affected by retention in grades three and six from 1997 through 2000. Conclusions stood less than favorably when looking at how retention increased achievement. Students who were retained continued to struggle during the retained year, and this led to a significant increase in special education identification and placement. When reviewing third grade, specifically, retainees showed no greater achievement growth after two years following the retention. When reviewing sixth grade, specifically, retainees exhibited lowered achievement growth. Growth was measured with a growth curve analysis, and comparison groups were constructed using variations across time in the administration of the Chicago policy (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005).

Short-term benefits of retention are not sustained over time. Short-term success is seen and measured in the initial years after a retention, but success is not persistent beyond the first years after a retention, supporting the act of social promotion. It is possible, also, that the perceived short-term success is seen as a retained student's progress is being compared to the progress of a student who is on the standard track in terms of time frame and who is encountering first time exposure to grade-level material. To determine the truth surrounding short-term gains that indicate growth for retained

students, more case studies with control groups would need be explored (Hong & Yu, 2007).

Hong, of the Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, Canada, and Raudenbush, distinguished service professor in the department of sociology at the University of Chicago, published *Evaluating Kindergarten Retention Policy: A Case for Causal Inference for Multilevel Observational Data* (2005). This case study was initiated due to the belief that some kindergarten or primary-focused educators believe kindergarten children need more time to mature or more time to master basic skills before progressing to the next grade. This slows the process by adding additional years. Using studies conducted by Morrison, Griffith, and Alberts (1997), Jackson (1997), and Shepard and Smith (1989), Hong and Raudenbush (2005) studied a nationally representative sample of kindergarten students, in two different types of schools, those with low retention rates and those with high retention rates, and compared the effects of being promoted in each type. Using Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption (SUTVA), the effects were calculated. Results indicated that in both low retention and high retention schools, students would have achieved more during the treatment year had they been promoted and not retained. Not only did retention not produce academic success, it also did not affect the learning of peers not at risk of retention. This evidence supports social promotion over retention in kindergarten (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005).

Mohl and Slifer (2005) believe “that social promotion has three detrimental effects on the education system:

1. Social promotion taxes both the teachers and students.

2. Social promotion monopolizes teacher attention and in turn limits other students' learning opportunities.
3. Social promotion sends the message to students that they can move on to the next level even if they lack the required knowledge or effort" (p. 48).

Mohl and Slifer go on to state that social promotion only distances students from the goals of meeting No Child Left Behind. Social promotion by itself is not good practice. Although students fail, so do the teachers as they have not provided the help needed for students to keep up with peers. For centuries educators embraced the old system of grouping students by age and possibly writing individualized plans for struggling students. The choices should not just be promotion or retention (Mohl & Slifer, 2005).

Currently in Missouri public schools, teachers and administrators have two choices each May when determining placement for the next year--promotion or retention. This notion of other choices outside of promotion or retention are seen as possibilities, but when action plans are drafted, the ideas quickly fade due to an inability to exist and thrive within current system structures. Research indicates that neither social promotion nor grade retention is an effective strategy for improving student growth. The researchers suggest an approach that addresses academic, social and mental health, and specific evidence-based interventions to individualize student needs (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Researchers Silberglett, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton found in long-term cases, students who are socially promoted outperform low-achieving students who were retained (as cited in Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). This potential highlight of a long-term benefit is not seen or felt by the teachers and administrators who implement the retention

or social promotion. Many times it is long after the initial placement decision that long-range benefits can be seen or identified. This delay in understanding the effect of social promotion can impede the decision-making process. Teachers, administrators, and families are forced to make decisions that are nonlinear and do not have guarantees. Furthermore, continuing research indicates that when looking at short-term and long-term effects of retention, it is noted that although a student's academics may increase during the retained year, academics decline quickly during the two and three years following the retained year, also according to Jimerson. He goes on to point out that retained students are more likely to drop out when compared to groups of equally low-achieving but socially-promoted peers (as cited in Renaud, 2010).

Retention

Public education exists within a thirteen-year linear, systematic approach to advancing students in a cohort style based on similar age. This system proves to be easy to manage and track progress. Each year (typically in the spring), teachers and administrators must determine if students are appropriately prepared or skilled enough to undertake the next year's curriculum and expectations. When it is determined that students will not advance to the next grade level, this is called retention. Retention can be voluntary or mandated within most systems. Retention is typically a repeat of the same curriculum in a similar delivery as the current year. Depending on the relationship between the teacher and the student, it is decided if the child will be with the same classroom teacher again or have a different teacher in the same grade level.

Educators and school communities continue to debate about what is best for children who struggle academically, do not make passing grades, or do not master

content standards. Legislative and bureaucratic policies have wavered between retention, holding students back in the same grade, and social promotion, moving students to the next consecutive grade level based upon reasons other than academic mastery.

According to Denton (2001), the practice of retention does not benefit the student in an academic or remedial manner and can potentially cause negative long-term effects, including dropping out. Furthermore, researchers Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) state emotional distress, low self-esteem, poor peer relations, tobacco use, alcohol and other drug abuse, early sexual activity, suicidal intentions, and violent behaviors during adolescence can be long-term side effects of retention. Jimerson (2001) adds a suggestion that requiring a student to repeat a grade is not likely to meet the needs of the many indicators of poor achievement.

Two main explanations exist for retention: the academic achievement of students and the socio-emotional outcomes of students. When students exhibit below level academic achievement or indicate extreme struggle with academic growth, retention becomes a possibility in the eyes of educators. When considering socio-emotional indicators, maturity, age, size, grade level and gender become focus areas where teachers see retention as a potential intervention. Principals and teachers make final decisions each year regarding the retention or promotion of students. This decision can have a deep impact on students' short-term and long-term successes. In a study focused on perceptions of teachers and principals regarding retention, the findings of researchers Range, Holt, Pijanowski, and Young (2012) were that teachers agree significantly more than principals that retention prevents future failure and helps provide more support. Their conclusions found that principals and teachers perceived a benefit to self-concept

when students are retained in the primary grades and specifically, kindergarten. This study goes on to state “beliefs play a vital role in the decision-making process for teachers (as cited in Bonvin , Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008; Witmer, Hoffman & Nottis 2004). Teacher’s beliefs about retention are influenced more by peers rather than by research” (Range, Dougan, & Pijanowski, 2011, p. 3). Two types of knowledge are used in making retention decisions: propositional and practical. Propositional knowledge refers to knowledge that is acquired through formal studies and research, while practical knowledge refers to knowledge that is gained through one’s experiences. Principals serve as instructional leaders for schools and help shape teachers’ beliefs about child development as well as informing those teachers about the consequences of interventions, including retention. The aforementioned studies conclude that teachers make more decisions based on experience and peer thoughts rather than data and research; a disconnect continues to live between applied practice and hard statistical data.

Hattie (2009) has conducted meta-analyses of over 207 studies on retention. Hattie’s analysis concluded students suffered from negative and even reverse effects in achievement with the use of retention. Hattie states retention “is one of the few areas in education where it is difficult to find any studies with a positive effect” (2009, p. 97). Teachers continue to implement retention procedures in the elementary setting even after research is presented on the drawbacks of retention. In a study focused on retention, social promotion, and dropout rates in Mississippi, Woodruff (2009), it was found that dropout rates increase when retention is used as an intervention. Woodruff found educators and parents believe that early grade retention is more effective, yet evidence reveals that retention is ineffective across all grade levels. Woodruff goes on to say the

odds of dropping out for an average student, relative to grade level, were more than 35 times greater than for a student of average age for his/her grade level. When asking students who have dropped out of school, they tend to list reasons that are related to negative perceptions and feeling like educators were insufficient in providing appropriate support to struggling students (Woodruff, 2009).

Regardless of research or understanding long- and short-term hurdles, teachers are quick to jump at retention when they know their students will struggle the following year if promoted to the next grade level. Teachers are compelled to make long-lasting decisions with limited, short-term knowledge of the effects those decisions may have. “Teachers usually measure success from the second year in the same grade compared to a student’s first time in that grade and equate those gains with retention benefiting students academically” (Xia & Glennie, 2005, p.16). The comparison of the same child from the end of one year to the end of the next year in a repeated grade is misleading as it is expected that a child will have larger success the more times content is delivered and exposure increases. Principals’ attitudes about retention are in line with teachers’ attitudes in that they name low academic performance and maturity as reasons to retain students and feel that retention should occur in kindergarten more than other grade levels (Cannon & Lipcomb, 2011; Range, 2009). Principals who are well-versed in retention research continue to pick retention in cases where they have no other choices. Early-grade retention is perhaps justifiable if it can effectively prevent future failures. Past research has described negative relations between grade retention and a student’s academic achievement as well as social development (Jimerson, 2001). Other research asserts that although retained students show short-term gains in achievement, this gain is

many times followed by diminishing academic progress as well as negative attitudes toward school (Range et al., 2012; Burkam, LoGerfo, Ready, & Lee, 2007; Ou & Reynolds, 2010). Teachers and administrators work with students for a range of two to five years in many cases. In these circumstances it appears that retention's short-term success is positive and would lead to more retention possibilities to duplicate this seemingly positive effect. The absence of the long-term effect not being seen or felt by the educators making the decisions can lead to a false positive due to lack of long range understanding.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2010) reported nearly 10% of students in kindergarten through eighth grade have been retained at one time.

Researchers Griffith, Lloyd, Lane, and Tankersley found that retained:

students' reading achievement was worse than a low-performing but promoted peer group during the retention year with deficiencies still prominent when students reached the 10th and 12th grades. Our results suggest that the negative effects of kindergarten retention on retainees' reading and math outcomes at the end of the treatment year gradually fade over the elementary years. In conclusion, no evidence was found that retention in either kindergarten or first grade brings a general advantage to retainees' cognitive learning toward the end of the elementary years (as cited in Range, et al., 2012, p. 2).

Hong and Raudenbush found that "on average, children retained in kindergarten would have achieved more in reading and math learning during that year had they been promoted to first grade instead" (as cited in Haynes, 2007, p.17). This indicates that

academic gains are not the positive result of retention and pushes thinking back to the question, “Then what is?”

When reviewing potential effects of retention, “indicators outside of academic performance are associated with the decision making process. Retained students tend to have behavioral issues in school” (Haynes, 2007, p. 20). Retained students often show signs of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Conduct Disorder. “When reviewing school drop-out rates, retained students show prevalence in statistics. Students who had been retained once in their school career were forty or fifty percent more likely to drop out of school” (Haynes, 2007, p. 19).

When schools attempt to predict drop-out rates, retention influences the potential of whether or not students will pull away from the school setting (Anderson, Whipple, & Jimerson, 2002). To top off the negative statistical data, “retention could cause serious harm to a student’s self-esteem” (Range et al., 2012, p. 2). Anderson et. al., found “sixth graders viewed retention as the most significant negative life event they could experience” (as cited in Range et al., 2012, p. 3)

Researchers Hughes, Kwok, and Myung (2013) of Texas A&M University reported their comparison of 118 ethnically diverse, at-risk first graders who were retained compared to similar first graders who were not retained. Findings discovered that during the repeated first grade year, the retained students felt more mentally competent, and teachers also had positive insights. However, the families of retained students had lowered the expectations of their children during the repeated year and continued those lower expectations the following years. Hughes, Kwok, and Myung reported that the parental influences on children are not limited to one year but continue

for a lifetime. This decrease in expectations can have an enduring negative effect on the child's perceived competence, engagement, and achievement (2013).

Researchers Range, Holt, Pijanowski and Young of the University of Wyoming and the University of Arkansas conducted a study entitled: *The Perception of Primary Grade Teachers and Elementary Principals about the Effectiveness of Grade-Level Retention* in the spring of 2012. Citing research in Bowman-Perrott (2010), Cannon and Lipscomp((2011), Murray, Woodruff, and Vaughn (2010), and Range, Dougan, and Pijanowski (2011), their focused study made the following conclusion: in order to decrease grade retention, the practice that holds the most promise is identifying early the low-performing students and following that identification with intense, formative interventions (Range, et. al., 2012). Range, Holt, Pijanowski, and Young (2012) suggested interventions they gleaned from Clay (2005), Davenport, Selgado, Meisels, and Moore (1998), Jimmerson and Kauffman (2003), Musti-Rao and Carledge (2007), and Vaughn and Linan-Thompson (2004) that include extending the school day with tutoring, summer school, supplemental reading programs taught by trained tutors, flexible scheduling to allow for more reading instruction, smaller class size, and personalized learning plans. For educators to successfully implement these interventions, the current system structure would have to be examined and potentially redesigned. Furthermore, to offer tutoring, summer school, supplemental reading programs and smaller classes, school systems would have to fund and employ appropriately trained staff to achieve proper implementation. Range, Holt, Pijanowski, and Young cited Tomchin and Impara (1992), Range, Dougan, and Pijanowski (2011), Shepard and Smith (1989), and Witmer, Hoffman, and Nottis (2004) when they conducted their own 2012 study and concluded:

“it appears that empirical research has done little to sway the views of primary grade educators who hold positive beliefs about grade retention, because they do not observe students immediately after they are retained nor follow their long-term academic trajectories” (2012, p. 10).

Researcher Stolworthy (2008) found that at least seven steps need to be taken and applied before the decision of retention is made. To begin with teachers need better training, and specifically, training on how to meet individual needs within a class of varied necessities. Another strategy to apply is the systematic implementation of support services. Not only would these supports need to be research based, but an intense focus on early intervention with scripted action steps would be most helpful. While continuing to reduce the need for retention, Stolworthy points out that the use of appropriate and valid assessments must be created and utilized to inform instruction as well as lead it. Another step to increase learning and decrease retention would be lowering the student to teacher ratio. With this approach students would receive more individualized attention. Continuing, Stolworthy points to the steps of setting, monitoring, and increasing expectations of all students. When students show the need for extra assistance, it is proposed that after-school tutoring as well as summer school help be suggested and required. This step increases the amount of time students spend interacting with content and quality instruction. Lastly, Stolworthy supports the step of creating and applying individualized learning plans for all students. This planned, supported, and focused intervention would decrease the risk of failure (Stolworthy, 2008).

Along with exploring the listed interventions first, Light, author of *Light's Retention Scale 2006 Edition* (2006), shares “the question is not whether school grade

retention in general is a positive or negative intervention, but whether retaining this particular child be helpful or harmful” (p. 13). Light’s scale (2006) includes the investigation of twenty factors to take into consideration in order to have a clear individual understanding before making the decision to retain: preschool attendance, current grade placement, student’s age, physical size, gender, previous grade retention, knowledge of English language, immature behavior, emotional disorders, conduct disorder/defiance, experiential background, siblings, parent’s participation, student mobility, school attendance, academic achievement, student attitude, motivation, history of learning disability, and estimate of intelligence. When realizing the choice of retention is not easily decided, the list of considerations help guide and foster a better understanding of the whole child and not just academic performance for the current year. (Stolworthy, 2008).

Retention has sound motivation behind focusing on clear and well-defined expectations. Retention is used as an intervention to assist a struggling student with the hopeful outcome being academic growth coupled with well-adjusted behavior and engagement. Educators are hard pressed to find hard data that the goal of retention is fulfilled. The eye of the beholder as well as the long- and short-term outcomes of retainees must be factors in deciding if this time structure is a viable option for students.

Conclusion

When reviewing the research findings of retention and social promotion, it is evident that negativity and lack of documented success is guaranteed with either path. Missouri educators are faced with only two options when making placement decisions for primary-aged students. The attitudes and beliefs educators hold are influencing the future

of public education students. Jimerson and Renshaw (2012) believe and support that only prevention and early intervention are appropriate ways to address student academic, behavioral, or social and emotional needs. Their experiences and research indicate that neither grade retention nor social promotion will be the key to success (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

When given the case that neither retention nor social promotion will successfully assist struggling students, teachers and administrators are forced to make decisions about how to best exist within public education's currently rigid system. The possibility of nongraded classrooms has the potential to reduce the pressure of pushing students forward or holding students back. In Missouri, schools have no existing nongraded systems; therefore, the attitudes and perceptions of these educators would be a starting point in the investigation of this potential solution. Nongraded systems could allow the freedom of extended time or reduced time in class or the freedom to focus on specific content based on student needs and not time mandates.

A survey has been created to gain the current existing attitudes and perceptions of Missouri educators on the effectiveness of promotion structures as well as attitudes and perceptions of the potential of eliminating current existing promotion structures in the elementary setting.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This quantitative, nonexperimental, descriptive dissertation is a study of promotion structures for students in kindergarten through second grade. The researcher-developed survey focused on teachers', principals', and superintendents' attitudes and perceptions toward promotion structures in grades kindergarten through second grade. The survey was sent to all Missouri public school districts to determine state-wide attitudes and perceptions. Five hundred and sixty-one superintendents, including the ultimate leaders of elementary-only districts, eight hundred primary principals, and all primary classroom teachers were included in this survey. All Missouri public school districts were included in this research, including juvenile detention centers. Each principal surveyed was the leader of at least one grade level in the kindergarten through second grade range. All teachers surveyed were teachers in the kindergarten through second grade range. The study results were disaggregated by:

1. current position in the district,
2. years in education,
3. school configuration,
4. school enrollment,
5. school structure, and
6. school location.

The main goal was to determine the attitudes and perceptions of promotion structures in relation to the listed demographic categories.

Participants

The subjects of this study were teachers and principals of kindergarten, first, and second grade students as well as superintendents of Missouri public schools. Missouri is a state with five hundred and sixty-one school districts including juvenile detention centers. Missouri public schools use a graded promotion structure and are mandated to submit accurate yearly data to account for the number of students being served in each grade. Given this model of the state, nongraded learning is not systemically supported. Survey results indicate that five respondents believe their schools, however, did not group students according to age.

The survey was disseminated to all Missouri superintendents as well as all Missouri elementary principals leading in a school with kindergarten, first grade, or second grade classrooms. The principals were asked to forward the survey to teachers in classrooms serving kindergarten, first grade, or second grade students. Demographic information was collected to assist in separating various groups for analyzing and comparing various sets of data.

The survey, informed email consent, ethics certificate and Research Review Board (RRB) application were sent to the RRB electronically and as a paper copy with the appropriate signatures in August 2014 for approval. Participants gave consent to be involved in the study by completing the online survey. The submitted forms outlined participant confidentiality, the ability to withdraw at any time without penalty, lack of any foreseen harm to respondents, and a brief overview of the study's aim to provide insight into the attitudes and perceptions of promotion structures and the perceived effectiveness with elementary students. The researcher obtained a master email list of

Missouri public school superintendents and administrators from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Administrators were asked to forward the survey to teachers. A window of two weeks was allowed for participants to complete the survey. A follow-up email was sent one week after the initial email as a reminder to those who had yet to complete the survey, as well as a thank you to those who had completed the survey.

Survey Rationale and Construction

The attitudinal survey used in this study was researcher-developed and tested appropriately for validity and reliability. The survey was created utilizing information gained from the literature review regarding promotion structures and was broken into three scales, including nongraded learning, social promotion, and retention systems for primary-aged students. Determining the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri educators on the effectiveness of promotion structures can serve as the basis for continued research and implementation of operational practices.

The first scale, nongraded learning, was derived from the research surrounding the practice of meeting individual needs, regardless of age or yearly progress expectations. Nongraded learning is also known as competency-based learning or customized learning. Nongraded learning is surrounded by the belief that educators must ask, “What do you need to learn, and how are you going to learn it?” Currently when students register for school, the biggest placement question is, “How old are you?” Nongraded learning is entrenched in the conviction that form should support function and not lead it.

The second scale, social promotion, was derived from the research surrounding the practice of sending students to the next grade level, regardless of mastering grade-level expectations or academic stability. Social promotion is generally implemented to protect students from being separated from their age-level peers and to prevent the potential emotional drawbacks of not progressing through the K-12 educational system as the majority of other students do. Social promotion holds a political charge as accountability requires students to meet or exceed state-mandated testing requirements.

The last scale, retention, was derived from the research surrounding the practice of keeping students in the same grade level for a repeated year due to lack of academic progress. This practice has been in place since the beginning of standardized education and has short-term as well as long-term effects for students and their families. The goal of retention is to grant the gift of time as well as not pushing students into situations that they are not academically equipped to handle. Each school district in Missouri has a retention policy as well as procedure to implement.

The additional demographic data collected allowed separation of the various populations and comparison of groups, for example, teachers and administrators. To increase reliability, the survey consisted of questions stated with a positive connotation along with reversed questions to ensure respondents were giving consistent answers as opposed to marking responses without scrutiny.

Survey Development

Survey questions were developed based on the extensive literature review. After the questions were generated from a table of specifications (see Table 1), the survey instrument was entered into the QuestionPro system. The Table of Specifications was

utilized to address face validity, the extent to which the survey questions were subjectively viewed as aligning to their intended scale. The Table of Specifications determined the survey questions that would measure the intended relationship between topic and crafted statements.

Table 1: Table of Specifications

Statement	SP	R	NG
Social promotion is an appropriate solution for K-2 students not meeting current grade level standards.	X		
Academically struggling students benefit from social promotion.	X		
K-2 students benefit from social promotion when they are struggling academically.	X		
It is not advantageous to socially promote students who are behind academically.	X		
Social promotion is appropriate in a K-2 setting.	X		
Promoting students with insufficient learning is acceptable in the K-2 setting.	X		
Social promotion is an effective decision when students show insufficient learning.	X		
Social promotion is an acceptable path for struggling students.	X		
K-2 students benefit from social promotion.	X		
Social promotion is not valuable for K-2 students.	X		
Social promotion should be a standard practice for K-2 students.	X		
Promoting students who do not meet required standards is socially appropriate in a K-2 setting.	X		
Retaining struggling students is academically beneficial in the K-2 setting.		X	
Students in grades K-2 should be retained when they do not show sufficient learning at their current grade levels.		X	
Grade retention is not a valid solution for struggling students in a K-2 setting.		X	
Struggling students do not benefit from grade retention in grades K-2.		X	
Retention is an effective solution for students not meeting expectations in a K-2 setting.		X	
Retention is necessary for students who show insufficient learning in the K-2 setting.		X	
Students working below grade level should be retained in grades K-2.		X	
If students show insufficient learning, retention should be used in grades K-2.		X	
Grade retention is not beneficial for K-2 students.		X	
Grade retention is an appropriate strategy for struggling learners in grades K-2.		X	
It is inappropriate to use retention in grades K-2 for academically struggling students.		X	
A valid solution for struggling students in a K-2 setting is the use of retention.		X	
Competency-Based/Nongraded learning would benefit students in a K-2 setting.			X
Letting students learn on their own timelines is a successful format for grades K-2.			X
Flexible timeframes would be advantageous for students in K-2.			X
Students in grades K-2 would benefit from competency based/nongraded learning.			X
Allowing students to work at their own paces is valuable to K-2 students.			X
Students in K-2 should be allowed to progress based on demonstration of mastery.			X
Competency-Based/Nongraded structures would be advantageous for K-2 students.			X
Advancing students upon mastery regardless of timeframes is best practice for K-2 students.			X
It is not advantageous to use flexible timeframes with students in K-2.			X
It is not valuable to let K-2 students work at their own paces.			X
Student placement should be flexible in the K-2 setting and not based only on age.			X
K-2 student should have flexible timeframes for learning and not be forced to be retained or promoted at the end of each year.			X

Pilot Process

The survey used in this study was researcher-developed and tested appropriately for validity and reliability. Survey questions were created utilizing information gained

from the literature review regarding promotion structures. Upon accurately defining these terms: nongraded learning, social promotion, and retention, several statements were created to garner attitudes and perceptions about each topic. Each statement was thoroughly investigated to analyze the connectivity of the statement to the definition. The researcher and a university professor examined and revised each statement several times to ensure the statements would gather the intended information. The survey was then entered into the QuestionPro system. At this point the survey was ready for the pilot process.

In an effort to increase reliability, the survey consisted of questions stated in both positive and adverse wording to ensure respondents were giving consistent responses as opposed to marking routinely without examination of the ideas presented. Drafts of the survey were submitted numerous times to the researcher's advisor, an expert in statistics, and the survey was revised as needed. The pilot survey was administered to experts in the education field. The results of these pilot surveys were employed to review and improve the survey tool. The pilot process consisted of the following steps:

1. Expert Validity Pilot #1: The expert validity pilot was utilized to address content validity, the alignment of the survey questions, and the scale they were intended to assess. The researcher used the first version of the survey instrument as presented in Appendix A to gather feedback from experts in the field of elementary promotion structures. Those experts were three current elementary principals, two retired elementary principals, and one university instructor with a history of elementary principalship. The survey was sent to each of these experts, and they were asked to comment or respond on the survey's nature, clarity, and

effectiveness. Specifically, the researcher sent out Rovinelli and Hambleton's Index of Item-Objective congruency (1977). A scale of -1, 0, and 1 was referenced to gain the needed information. -1 indicated the question did not ask what was intended, 0 was neutral, and 1 signified the question did ask what was intended. Feedback from the experts was used to further revise and improve the survey instrument. The survey was sent to these six expert administrators on August 10, 2014, and all six had completed the survey as of August 13, 2014. The researcher had conversations electronically or in person with two participants to further analyze responses and refine intended responses on the item-objective congruency survey. Table 2 below represents the Rovinelli and Hambleton's index aggregate results for each question of the survey. A value of 1.00 is the highest possible value, and with each of the respondents indicating a 1, the statement highly matched the intended scale. Ideally, values should be .67 or greater. Statements seven and fourteen had an index value below .67. As a result, the two statements were removed.

Table 2: Index of Item-Objective Congruency

Survey Statement	Index
Social promotion is an appropriate solution for K-2 students not meeting current grade level standards.	1.00
Academically struggling students benefit from social promotion.	1.00
K-2 students benefit from social promotion when they are struggling academically.	1.00
It is not advantageous to socially promote students who are behind academically.	1.00
Social promotion is appropriate in a K-2 setting.	1.00
Promoting students with insufficient learning is acceptable in the K-2 setting.	0.67
Social promotion is an effective decision when students show insufficient learning.	0.50
Social promotion is an acceptable path for struggling students.	1.00
K-2 students benefit from social promotion.	1.00
Social promotion is not valuable for K-2 students.	1.00
Social promotion should be a standard practice for K-2 students.	1.00
Promoting students who do not meet required standards is socially appropriate in a K-2 setting.	0.83
Retaining struggling students is academically beneficial in the K-2 setting.	1.00
Students in grades K-2 should be retained when they do not show sufficient learning at their current grade levels.	0.33
Grade retention is not a valid solution for struggling students in a K-2 setting.	0.83
Struggling students do not benefit from grade retention in grades K-2.	1.00
Retention is an effective solution for students not meeting expectations in a K-2 setting.	0.83
Retention is necessary for students who show insufficient learning in the K-2 setting.	1.00
Students working below grade level should be retained in grades K-2.	1.00
If students show insufficient learning, retention should be used in grades K-2.	1.00
Grade retention is not beneficial for K-2 students.	1.00
Grade retention is an appropriate strategy for struggling learners in grades K-2.	1.00
It is inappropriate to use retention in grades K-2 for academically struggling students.	1.00
A valid solution for struggling students in a K-2 setting is the use of retention.	0.83
Competency-Based/Nongraded learning would benefit students in a K-2 setting.	1.00
Letting students learn on their own timelines is a successful format for grades K-2.	1.00
Flexible timeframes would be advantageous for students in K-2.	1.00
Students in grades K-2 would benefit from competency based/nongraded learning.	1.00
Allowing students to work at their own paces is valuable to K-2 students.	1.00
Students in K-2 should be allowed to progress based on demonstration of mastery.	1.00
Competency Based/Nongraded structures would be advantageous for K-2 students.	1.00
Advancing students upon mastery regardless of timeframes is best practice for K-2 students.	1.00
It is not advantageous to use flexible timeframes with students in K-2.	1.00
It is not valuable to let K-2 students work at their own paces.	1.00
Student placement should be flexible in the K-2 setting and not based only on age.	1.00
K-2 students should have flexible timeframes for learning and not be forced to be retained or promoted at the end of each year.	1.00

2. Validity Pre-Pilot: The researcher observed three colleagues completing the pilot and had conversations regarding the ease of taking the survey, problematic questions, suggested revisions, and other questions aimed at improving the survey. The input was considered and used to revise the survey before submitting the survey to participants for a validity pilot.
3. Validity Pilot: The survey was sent as a pilot to (50+) teachers and administrators and one superintendent. The pilot survey results were then uploaded to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software to perform a factor analysis to determine construct validity. Construct validity is the degree to which the questions distinctly address the three scales. (See Table 3: Validity Pilot Factor Analysis for specific factor analysis data.) Using 0.300 (+ and -) as a baseline, those statements well below or near the .300 mark were examined for future use. Statement number 33 fell below the .300 mark. Upon review the researcher edited the statements and included it in the final survey. Statements 17 and 34 both scored just above the .300 mark. After the researcher reflected and gleaned advice from her supervisor, edits were made, and the two statements remained in the final survey. After the factor analysis, all 34 statements remained for the final survey.

Table 3: Validity Pilot Factor Analysis

Survey Statement	Scale		
	Retention	Social Promotion	Nongraded
Social promotion is an appropriate solution for K-2 students not meeting current grade level standards.	-.199	.867	.192
Academically struggling students benefit from social promotion.	-.127	.912	.128
Retaining struggling students is academically beneficial in the K-2 setting.	.681	-.203	-.249
Non-Graded/Competency-Based learning would benefit students in a K-2 setting.	.090	-.037	.667
Grade retention is not a valid solution for struggling students in a K-2 setting.	.731	-.101	-.305
Social promotion is appropriate in a K-2 setting.	-.175	.930	.170
Letting students learn on their own timelines is a successful format for grades K-2.	-.032	.196	.823
Flexible timeframes would be advantageous for students in K-2.	-.295	.484	.685
Struggling students do not benefit from grade retention in grades K-2.	.816	-.140	.049
Retention is an effective solution for students not meeting expectations in a K-2 setting.	.672	-.246	.160
K-2 students benefit from social promotion when they are struggling academically.	-.282	.913	.149
It is not advantageous to socially promote students who are behind academically.	-.484	.684	.169
Students in grades K-2 would benefit from non-graded/competency- based learning.	-.038	.160	.527
It is not advantageous to use flexible timeframes with students in K-2.	-.530	.026	.728
Retention is necessary for students who show insufficient learning in the K-2 setting.	.746	-.184	-.099
Students working below grade level should be retained in grades K-2.	.653	-.296	.024
Promoting students with insufficient learning is acceptable in the K-2 setting.	-.509	.404	.325
Allowing students to work at their own paces is valuable to K-2 students.	-.395	-.093	.682
If students show insufficient learning, retention should be used in grades K-2.	.812	-.140	-.141
Grade retention is an appropriate strategy for struggling learners in grades K-2.	.910	-.261	-.003
Social promotion is an acceptable path for struggling students.	-.382	.885	.092
Social promotion is not valuable for K-2 students.	-.169	.815	-.179
Students in K-2 should be allowed to progress based on demonstration of mastery regardless of timeframes.	-.061	.015	.679
Non-Graded/Competency-Based structures would be advantageous for K-2 students.	-.292	-.061	.758
Grade retention is an appropriate strategy for struggling learners in grades K-2.	.874	-.300	-.114
K-2 students benefit from social promotion.	-.382	.885	.092
Social promotion should be a standard practice for K-2 students.	-.252	.667	.303
It is inappropriate to use retention in grades K-2 for academically struggling students.	.661	-.435	-.229
A valid solution for struggling students in a K-2 setting is the use of retention.	.785	-.199	-.122
Advancing students upon mastery regardless of timeframes is best practice for K-2 students.	-.200	.289	.706
It is not valuable to let K-2 students work at their own paces.	.122	.230	.771
Student placement should be flexible in the K-2 setting and not based only on age.	-.374	.337	.424
Promoting students who do not meet required standards is socially appropriate in a K-2 setting.	-.301	.149	.118
K-2 students should have flexible timeframes for learning and not be retained or promoted at the end of each year.	-.563	.077	.356

*Principal components factor analysis with variance rotation.

Using the final 23-person pilot and the three final scales, Cronbach's Alpha was determined through SPSS for internal consistency and reliability. The alpha value for the Retention Scale was .938. For the Social Promotion Scale, the alpha value was .954. The alpha value for the Nongraded Scale was .904. The initial testing confirmed that the survey instrument held strong reliability within each scale.

Procedure

After the pilot surveys were completed and necessary revisions were made, the final version of the survey instrument was emailed to superintendents and primary administrators in Missouri public schools. Primary principals then forwarded the survey instrument to their teachers in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. Email addresses of the superintendents and primary principals were obtained through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) information system. The survey was open for approximately seventeen days. The RRB approved informed consent presented in Appendix B was included in the original email. To obtain a higher return rate, superintendents and principals were reminded via email to take the survey, as well as forward the survey to their staff. A factor analysis was performed on the final results from the 34-statement survey to determine validity. Table 4 shows the factor analysis values for the final survey results. Validity was strong with all 34 statements and all statements were included for the final results analysis.

Table 4: Final Survey Factor Analysis

Survey Statements	Scale		
	Retention	Social Promotion	Nongraded
Social promotion is an appropriate solution for K-2 students not meeting current grade level standards.	-.452	.628	.094
Academically struggling students benefit from social promotion.	-.332	.785	.029
Retaining struggling students is academically beneficial in the K-2 setting.	.849	-.205	-.072
Nongraded/Competency-Based learning would benefit students in a K-2 setting.	-.102	.091	.719
Grade retention is not a valid solution for struggling students in a K-2 setting.	.789	-.193	-.174
Social promotion is appropriate in a K-2 setting.	-.236	.841	.072
Letting students learn on their own timelines is a successful format for grades K-2.	.033	.154	.726
Flexible timeframes would be advantageous for students in K-2.	-.013	.200	.748
Struggling students do not benefit from grade retention in grades K-2.	.830	-.311	-.128
Retention is an effective solution for students not meeting expectations in a K-2 setting.	.851	-.303	-.122
K-2 students benefit from social promotion when they are struggling academically.	-.337	.755	-.036
It is not advantageous to socially promote students who are behind academically.	-.318	.743	-.057
Students in grades K-2 would benefit from non-graded/competency-based learning.	-.090	.153	.780
It is not advantageous to use flexible timeframes with students in K-2.	-.086	.254	.712
Retention is necessary for students who show insufficient learning in the K-2 setting.	.718	-.379	-.130
Students working below grade level should be retained in grades K-2.	.716	-.418	-.080
Promoting students with insufficient learning is acceptable in the K-2 setting.	-.146	.588	.118
Allowing students to work at their own paces is valuable to K-2 students.	-.059	.129	.775
If students show insufficient learning, retention should be used in grades K-2.	.815	-.399	-.086
Grade retention is an appropriate strategy for struggling learners in grades K-2.	.859	-.303	-.136
Social promotion is an acceptable path for struggling students.	-.324	.837	.051
Social promotion is not valuable for K-2 students.	-.247	.792	.081
Students in K-2 should be allowed to progress based on demonstration of mastery regardless of timeframes.	-.153	-.196	.611
Nongraded/Competency-Based structures would be advantageous for K-2 students.	-.116	-.020	.741
Grade retention is an appropriate strategy for struggling learners in grades K-2.	.847	-.325	-.163
K-2 students benefit from social promotion.	-.279	.823	-.029
Social promotion should be a standard practice for K-2 students.	-.388	.690	-.047
It is inappropriate to use retention in grades K-2 for academically struggling students.	.705	-.249	-.169
A valid solution for struggling students in a K-2 setting is the use of retention.	.852	-.266	-.049
Advancing students upon mastery regardless of timeframes is best practice for K-2 students.	-.090	-.146	.694
It is not valuable to let K-2 students work at their own pace.	-.091	-.121	.662
Student placement should be flexible in the K-2 setting and not based only on age.	-.029	-.198	.578
Promoting students who do not meet required standards is socially appropriate in a K-2 setting.	-.255	.752	-.027
K-2 students should have flexible timeframes for learning and not be retained or promoted at the end of each year.	-.220	.060	.724

*Principal components factor analysis with variance rotation.

Cronbach's Alpha was determined through SPSS for internal consistency and reliability. The alpha value for the Nongraded Scale was .886. The Social Promotion Scale resulted in a .948 alpha value. The alpha value for the Retention Scale was .970. All three scales had strong values indicating properly functioning results for the purpose of this study.

Employing SPSS, analysis was conducted to determine if a statistically significant relationship exists between the three dependent variables of promotion structures and the six dependent variables of position held, years of experience in education, school configuration, school size (based on student enrollment), type of school (graded or nongraded), and district community type (rural or urban). Categorizing the questions from the survey created the dependent variables of nongraded learning, social promotion, and retention. Combining statements 4, 7, 8, 13, 14, 18, 23, 24, 30, 31, 32, and 34 of the survey created the first dependent variable, nongraded learning. Combining statements 1, 2, 6, 11, 12, 17, 21, 22, 26, 27, and 33 of the survey created the second dependent variable, social promotion. Combining statements 3, 5, 9, 10, 15, 16, 25, 28, and 29 created the third dependent variable, retention. To assess if schools with more than 500 enrolled students were statistically different from schools with less than 500 students enrolled, a *t*-test was conducted for the dependent variables and school size. This *t*-test process was also used for school type (graded or nongraded) and school community type (rural or urban). A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted for the dependent variables and the independent variables of position held, years of experience in education, and school configuration. Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) was

conducted after the ANOVA test in order to determine which demographic groups differed from each other.

Conclusion

After an extensive literature review of promotion structures, including nongraded learning, social promotion, and retention, a survey questionnaire was created, distributed, and analyzed to determine attitudes and perceptions of Missouri primary educators and promotion structures. An all-encompassing pilot process was used to ensure the intended outcome would be met with the given survey. The pilot process included an expert item-objective congruency survey, a pre-pilot procedure, and a pilot procedure. Data collected at each stage was used to edit and revise the survey tool. The resulting researcher-created survey instrument was determined to be reliable and valid using an extensive process, including a factor analysis and Cronbach's Alpha to determine internal consistency and reliability. The survey yielded very strong alpha rates indicating that the survey can be used by educators to provide attitudinal data regarding the perceived effectiveness of promotion structures used in the state of Missouri. Chapter Four will present the data and information that resulted from the researcher-created survey. Data will be given in narrative and table formats. Chapter Five will summarize the paper, discuss the research survey, review the discovered data and findings, and provide recommendations for Missouri public schools.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

Introduction

The final survey results comprised of 207 total respondents (59 classroom teachers, 71 principals, 66 superintendents, seven others, and four respondents who skipped a question) were uploaded to the SPSS software program. Descriptive statistics were utilized to present quantitative data in a simple and manageable way. Inferential statistics were applied to infer what the data is revealing about the thinking of a given population. Data will be presented in this chapter to give insight into the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri primary public educators and promotion structures for students in kindergarten through second grade. The following research questions were addressed in three scales:

- a. What are the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public educators regarding nongraded or competency-based structures and the effectiveness they could have for kindergarten through second grade students?
- b. What are the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public educators regarding social promotion and the effectiveness it has for kindergarten through second grade students?
- c. What are the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public school educators regarding retention and the effectiveness it has for kindergarten through second grade students?

Descriptive Statistics

The means, ranges, and standard deviations for the three scales of this survey instrument are shown below in Table 5. The mean will give the average of responses

according to each of the three scales. The standard deviation shows the relation that set of scores has to the mean of the sample. Larger standard deviations show a more wide variety of answers. Smaller standard deviations indicate a more narrow variety of answers. The range is the given set of lowest and highest possible scores for each scale. In this study the lower the number indicates a more favorable attitude toward the scale. The higher the number indicates a less favorable attitude toward the given scale. The figures for descriptive statistics are based upon eleven questions in the Retention Scale, eleven questions in the Social Promotion Scale and twelve questions in the Nongraded Scale as determined by the factor analysis.

Table 5: Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges for Scales

Scale	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Nongraded	25.49	4.68	12- 48
Social Promotion	31.67	5.63	11-44
Retention	25.08	6.98	11-44

Nongraded Scale

The Nongraded Scale was designed to determine teachers', administrators', and superintendents' attitudes and perceptions toward the implementation of nongraded learning and how it is or is not beneficial for kindergarten, first, and second grade students. The mean for this scale was 25.49, and the standard deviation was 4.68. The range of possible values was 12 to 48. With a mean of 25.49, respondents as a group fell in the favorable side of nongraded promotion structures. The standard deviation of 4.68 indicates the responses given were narrowly distributed.

Social Promotion Scale

The Social Promotion Scale was designed to determine teachers', administrators', and superintendents' attitudes and perceptions toward the implementation of social promotion and how it is or is not beneficial for kindergarten, first, and second grade students. The mean for this scale was 31.67, and the standard deviation was 5.63. The range of possible values was 11 to 44. With a mean of 31.67, respondents as a group were not favorable for social promotion and not in agreement with the statements under the Social Promotion Scale. The standard deviation of 5.63 indicates the responses given were more widely distributed than the Nongraded Scale.

Retention Scale

The Retention Scale was designed to determine teachers', administrators', and superintendents' attitudes and perceptions toward the implementation of retention and how it is or is not beneficial for kindergarten, first, or second grade students. The mean for this scale was 25.08, and the standard deviation was 6.98. The range of possible values was 11 to 44. With a mean of 25.08, respondents were very near middle ground with regard to attitudes and perceptions about the effectiveness of retention in kindergarten through second grade. The standard deviation of 6.98, indicates the responses given were widely distributed, meaning strong feelings landed on both sides of favorable and not favorable. Given the combination of mean and standard deviation, this survey was inconclusive regarding how Missouri educators feel about retention in kindergarten through second grade.

Inferential Statistics

Out of the 34 original questions theorized to be in the three scales, all 34 questions held as valid through the survey process and loaded with high enough values to proceed with the inferential statistical analysis. All questions loaded high enough to warrant their use as reliable and valid survey items. Cronbach's Alpha was used to demonstrate the degree of reliability. The Nongraded Scale loaded as 0.886, the Social Promotion Scale loaded at 0.948, and the Retention Scale loaded at 0.97. The values noted from Cronbach's Alpha indicated a strong measure of internal consistency. This coefficient of reliability ensured the confidence to move forward with inferential analysis of all items on each scale.

Inferential statistics were calculated using all 34 survey items loading to respective scales. Data was then analyzed to determine any statistical differences found between the demographic differences as marked by the survey participants. Each of the six demographic questions were analyzed, including the following:

1. What is your current position?
2. How many years have you been in education?
3. What is your school configuration?
4. How many students are served in your building?
5. Is your school graded or nongraded?
6. Is your school rural or urban?

Data analysis using *t*-tests and ANOVAs that show statistical differences will be reported. A statistical difference confirmed the likelihood that a result or relationship is caused by something other than random chance. When testing for a statistical difference,

the researcher looked for “p-values” representing the probability that random chance could explain the result. When the p-value is 5% or lower, it was considered statistically significant. The research reports p-values at 5 % and lower as well as 10% and lower. Areas without reportable differences have been left out.

When looking at school size within the category of small or large, an independent sample *t*-test, $t(147) = 1.697, p < .1$ showed a significant difference between size of school and perceptions of social promotion. Both small and large schools had negative attitudes and perceptions toward the use of social promotion. The difference came when looking at the degree or intensity of those feelings. Smaller schools with less than 500 students were more favorable toward social promotion than larger schools of over 500 students. This indicated when looking at school size, Missouri educators have notably different attitudes and perceptions toward the use of social promotion in kindergarten through second grade, yet they all agree that the use of social promotion is not a helpful promotion structure.

Another independent sample *t*-test, $t(143) = 2.665, p < .05$ showed a significant difference between size of school and the perceptions of nongraded learning. Larger schools were particularly more favorable toward nongraded learning than smaller schools. It is critical to note that both school sizes had positive or supportive attitudes when it came to nongraded structures, but larger schools were statistically more favorable. This test established the commonality of Missouri educators agreeing with the use of nongraded structures in kindergarten through second grade and revealed that larger school feel stronger about nongraded statements than smaller schools.

When considering the demographic areas of urban and rural schools, a statistical significance was found in the Retention Scale. An independent sample *t*-test, $t(174) = -3.035$, $p < .05$ presented that rural schools were very near the middle ground for being in or not in favor of retention. When looking closely at the rural schools' mean within the Retention Scale, they fell just barely on the side of favorable. Urban schools showed opposition to the Retention Scale and were not favorable when looking at statements with regard to retention practices in kindergarten through second grade.

An area that demonstrated a reportable difference within the scales of social promotion and retention was current position. Positions reported were classroom teacher, principal, superintendent, and other. The following tables report findings from the final survey.

Table 6: ANOVA for Social Promotion and Position Type

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	P value
Between Groups	346.185	3	115.395	3.799*	.011
Within Groups	5223.974	172	30.372		
Total	5570.159	175			

Note. *= $p < .05$.

For the social Promotion Scale, statistically significant differences were found between positions held in education. When Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test was performed, the difference in attitudes and perceptions about social promotion appeared between principals and teachers. Both groups were not favorable to social promotion structures, but classroom teachers had stronger feelings of negativity toward social promotion. This test showed that Missouri's primary principals and

primary teachers do not have favorable attitudes toward social promotion, but they differ significantly in that teachers are more adamant in their attitudes and perceptions.

Table 7: ANOVA for Retention and Position Type

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	P value
Between Groups	547.492	3	182.497	3.902*	.010
Within Groups	8091.061	173	46.769		
Total	8638.554	176			

Note. *= $p < .05$.

For the Retention Scale, statistically significant differences were found between positions held in education. When Tukey's HSD test was performed, the difference in attitudes and perceptions about retention appeared between principals and teachers. Classroom teachers were favorable for the structure of retention. Principals landed almost at the exact middle point for showing no favoritism or negativity. When looking at the exact mean for principals' responses, they landed just barely on the side of positive by .167. This indicated that Missouri primary teachers have positive attitudes and perceptions as to the use of retention in kindergarten through second grade. However, the Missouri principals of kindergarten through second grade students do not have the same reaction to the use of retention. Principals did fall on the positive side, but it is noted that the mean was very close to middle ground, indicating no favoritism or impartialities.

Table 8: Significant Differences Summary

Demographic Statement	Nongraded	Social Promotion	Retention
Current Position	n.s.	Principal Teacher	Teacher Principal
Years of Experience	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
School Configuration	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
School Size	More than 500 Less than 500	Less than 500 More than 500	n.s.
School Type (Graded/Nongraded)	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Urban/Rural	n.s.	n.s.	Rural Urban

Note. First denotation in each box represents the more favorable to that particular scale. n.s. = No significant difference.

When reviewing overall perceptions within the data, it is important to note that all Missouri educators had similar attitudes and perceptions toward nongraded learning. They indicated that the promotion structure of nongraded would be a successful structure for kindergarten through second grade students. Although one statistical difference occurred within the Nongraded Scale, it is noteworthy that the difference was within the degree of support and not a disagreement of support or nonsupport. When reviewing the Social Promotion Scale, it is also important to note that all Missouri educators had similar attitudes and perceptions toward the use of Social Promotion. Negative attitudes existed when considering Social Promotion for students in kindergarten through second grade. It is notable that smaller schools had more positive attitudes toward Social Promotion being implemented within primary education, and principals also had more positive attitudes toward the use of Social Promotion as well, even though both groups did not support it as

a whole. When reviewing the attitudes and perceptions of retention, Missouri educators showed the most differences in opinion with the use of this promotion structure. It is difficult to pinpoint a positive or negative feeling toward this structure as the mean did not indicate strong overall feelings on just one side. The standard deviation showed the researcher that extreme feelings existed on both sides of this issue. When looking at different demographic groups, teachers favored retention and principals landed on middle ground when responding to retention statements. Rural schools also ranked in the middle when responding to the use of retention, but urban schools were clearly not in favor of retention.

Respondents' Comments

The final question of the survey asked for comments from the participants regarding grade-level promotion structures in kindergarten through second grade. The intention of this question was to gather any thoughts or perceptions respondents may have wanted the opportunity to share. A brief qualitative analysis was conducted to determine any themes or areas to warrant further exploration. Qualitative data was used to find categorical data. Approximately 23 percent of the respondents answered the open-ended question. There were a total of 47 written responses in the final results. The comments were related to attitudes and perceptions of retention, social promotion, and nongraded structures used in kindergarten through second grade. Several themes emerged from these responses. The most dominate message that surfaced from respondents' comments was that students are individuals and have individual needs and backgrounds. Eleven of the 47 responses centered on the idea that regardless of feelings toward promotion structures, each child should be seen as a separate case, and plans

should be made accordingly. This idea directly ties to the positive response seen in the survey regarding nongraded learning. Given this focus that each child is an individual and that nongraded learning is a system based on individual timelines, it shows the research in quantitative data and the qualitative data matched. A match between quantitative data and qualitative data gives more drive and weight behind the drive to move forward. A second emerging theme was the attention to interventions at an early age. Six respondents focused on the need for intervention and early childhood education. Responders held the belief that the focus on intervention and early childhood education could eliminate or decrease the need to focus on promotion structures. Given this theme, the researcher believes educators feel that system structures seem unchangeable, but interventions and early childhood education is something that can be manipulated and altered to increase a focus on student success. To add to this notion of educators believing a different focus is needed, the survey revealed six respondents who actually stated that they were irritated by the survey and felt the questions were repetitive and tiresome. The researcher believes the possibility of two reasons existed for this response, the first reason being the misunderstanding of what constitutes a valid and reliable instrument that gathers attitudes and perceptions data. If educators do not understand how to gain reliability and validity, then they would not understand repetitive questions in different forms. The second reason for the negative responses is that this is potentially a 'hot' topic that challenges fixed mindsets of educators. The ability to think educators can change the unchangeable has to exist before moving down that path. This notion was supported by other comments that included feelings of frustration because nongraded

learning is supported but does not seem attainable within the system as education is so strictly tied to grade levels and whether or not students progress through them.

Summary

The responses to the survey questions were analyzed to provide a broad picture of the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri primary teachers, primary principals, and superintendents in regard to promotion structures in kindergarten through second grade. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to give insight into the results from the survey. In addition, six demographic questions were further analyzed to determine where statistical significances occurred. The t-tests, ANOVA values, and Tukey's HSD test results were utilized to illustrate the statistical differences. The results showed there are statistically significant differences between teachers and principals as pertains to retention and social promotion. When looking at the three scales, Missouri educators are in favor of nongraded structures, do not support social promotion structures, and have differences of opinion toward the use of retention in kindergarten through second grade. The final question of the survey invited open comments from the respondents. A total of 47 responses gave useful insights into Missouri educator attitudes and perceptions toward promotion structures in kindergarten through second grade.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri educators and the use of promotion structures for kindergarten through second grade. Students in Missouri public schools can expect to enter a systematic organization that begins in kindergarten and ends thirteen years later with a graduation diploma in hand from the school district. This system is intended to be the normal path for all students regardless of age, maturity, background, exposure, health, and support. Holding fast to a structure that was created in 1893, educators are required to make yearly decisions each spring to promote students to the next grade level or hold them back to repeat a grade level. Public education has changed in many ways and continues to be altered with the hope of improving student success. Reform can be found in curriculum, assessment, hiring, evaluating, early childhood, standards, intervention, enrichment, after-school programs, before-school programs, professional development, accountability, and countless other areas. One area that has not faced change is the policy that each spring a child will be considered for promotion or retention. This study is centered on ascertaining current attitudes and perceptions of promotion structure effectiveness for kindergarten through second grade students in Missouri public schools.

Summary of Methods

This study was conducted in public schools across the state of Missouri. To gather attitudes and perceptions, the researcher concentrated on all superintendents, all primary principals, and any teacher of kindergarten, first, or second grade. The survey,

informed email consent, ethics certificate, and Research Review Board (RRB) application were sent to the RRB in August 2014 for approval.

A critical component of this study was the development of an attitudinal survey. The survey was tested for validity and reliability with the purpose of accessible availability for future researchers. The pilot process started in the spring of 2014 and included an expert pilot that utilized Rovinelli and Hambleton's index of item-objective congruency (1977), a pre-pilot, and a 23-person pilot. At each pilot step, factor analyses were conducted, resulting in multiple revisions to the survey instrument. To illustrate reliability, Cronbach's Alpha value was figured for each scale. The results during the pilot were as follows: Nongraded 0.904, Social Promotion 0.954, and Retention 0.938. These results were considered reliable enough to proceed with the full study. Once the study was complete, Cronbach's Alpha was figured again based upon the final factor analysis. The Alpha values were as follows: Nongraded 0.886, Social Promotion 0.948, and Retention 0.97. These alpha results indicated the survey instrument to be highly reliable.

The researcher obtained a master email list of Missouri public schools superintendents and administrators from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Administrators were then asked to forward the survey to kindergarten, first grade, and second grade teachers. A window of two weeks was allowed for participants to complete the survey. A follow-up email was sent one week after the initial email as a reminder to those who had yet to complete the survey, as well as a thank you to those who had completed it. If subjects declined to participate, or did not take any action by the end of the second week, there was no further communication.

Summary of Findings

This study targeted the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public educators regarding current promotion structures and the effectiveness they have for kindergarten through second grade students. The process of defining promotion structures built the foundation for then producing a researcher-designed attitudinal survey. Using information gleaned from the literature review, definitions were created to create a common understanding of the meaning of each scale. Nongraded was defined as using flexible timeframes to allow students to progress at their own paces and advance upon demonstration of mastery. Social promotion was defined as the practice of promoting students to the next grade level even when they have not learned the material they were taught or have not achieved expected learning standards. Retention was defined as the practice of not permitting a student to advance to the next grade level with his/her classmates due to insufficient learning or mastery in the current grade level. Once each scale was formally designed, statements in both positive language and negative language were created to garner educator feelings toward each structure as it applied to kindergarten through second grade students. Upon review of the final survey results, the researcher was able to draw general conclusions about the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri educators and promotion structures used in primary grades. Missouri educators strongly supported the concept of nongraded structures. When digging deeper, each demographic group exhibited strong support regardless of educators' position, years in service, geographic location, school configuration, or school size. Nongraded learning was seen by survey participants as a valuable structure that would benefit Missouri primary-aged students. When Missouri educators' attitudes toward social promotion

were examined, it was clear that educators did not support the use and implementation of social promotion for primary-aged students. These same perspectives held true for all subgroups when reviewing disaggregated data. It is important to note that even though negative attitudes existed within the Social Promotion Scale, principals and smaller schools had notably more favorable thoughts toward the use of social promotion. The last scale that was analyzed addressed retention. The Retention Scale indicated a more complex response from the group. Knowing the mean of 25.08 indicates approval of retention as a group. However, that mean is very near the middle ground of not favoring or favoring this scale. With this very small margin combined with a standard deviation of 6.99 the data indicated that respondents had a wide range of responses both positively and negatively. The researcher believes that attitudes and perceptions toward retention were inconclusive and finds that educators feel strongly for and against retention.

Research Question One Conclusions

The first research question was as follows: What are the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public educators regarding nongraded or competency-based structures and the effectiveness they could have for kindergarten through second grade students? Nongraded structures were defined as using flexible timeframes to allow students to progress at their own paces and advance upon demonstration of mastery. Results from collected data indicated very positive attitudes and perceptions toward this promotion structure. The mean in the Nongraded Scale landed at 25.49 with a standard deviation of 4.68. The reported numbers denote that Missouri educators strongly agree with the concept of nongraded learning and the use of this promotion structure in kindergarten through second grade. When digging deeper into specific statements, the researcher

found eight of the twelve statements pertaining to nongraded structures scoring 80% or greater within the responses of “agree” or “strongly agree.” This indicated that not only were educators supportive of this concept overall, a strong majority were supportive. The remaining four statements also showed strong support with a range of 63.48% - 79.47% of the respondents marking “agree” or “strongly agree.” Those statements written in reverse language were accounted for and flipped for analyzing data. The statement that indicated the most support was, “It is not valuable to let K-2 students work at their own paces.” This statement had a response of 92.10% stating “disagree” or “strongly disagree,” meaning 92.1% of respondents believed it was valuable to let K-2 students work at their own paces.

Missouri educators who backed the idea of nongraded structures did so with great conviction. Given the results of this attitudinal survey, the researcher concluded that Missouri educators were in agreement that allowing individuals to have personal or individual timeframes for learning would be advantageous for kindergarten through second grade students. These educators expressed that flexibility with timeframes is necessary, and each child should follow his or her own path. This opportunity could lead to more student success without battling the hurdles of retention or social promotion, essentially eliminating those choices and opening the door to new opportunities. One open-ended response stated, “I think students should be allowed to work at their own pace. In a perfect world this is how we should do things. It is difficult under the current format for public education to function this way.” Missouri practitioners are sending the message that our current promotion structures do not meet individual student needs. Educators are supporting the process of nongraded learning, and they understand the

reasoning behind why it would be beneficial. What stops progress or creates a roadblock for this structure is how to implement it within our current public school system.

When examining disaggregated data, the researcher found a significant difference when looking at respondents' replies to nongraded learning and comparing educators from buildings with more than 500 students to educators from buildings with less than 500 students. The responses from educators in buildings with a larger student population held an overall more positive feeling toward nongraded learning than those responses from educators working in buildings with less than 500 students. Both groups support the structure of nongraded learning, but larger schools were more positive in attitudes and perceptions. The researcher believes this could be due to larger schools seeing and feeling the effects of both retention and social promotion as well as having larger support staff to help put an action plan together for nongraded learning.

Research Question Two Conclusions

The second research question asked the following: What are the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public educators regarding social promotion and the effectiveness it has for kindergarten through second grade students? Social promotion was defined as the practice of promoting students to the next grade level even when they have not learned the material they were taught or have not achieved expected learning standards. As a group, Missouri educators indicated they were not in support of social promotion in kindergarten through second grade. With a mean of 31.67 and a standard deviation of 5.63, the researcher concluded that Missouri educators were not in favor of social promotion as an appropriate promotion structure. When reviewing the 11 statements included in the survey devoted to social promotion, Missouri educators

“disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” when it came to supporting social promotion. As a group, the range of percentages that disagreed was 67.71% - 85.11%. This indicated that not only were educators not in favor of social promotion, they were firm in their attitudes and perceptions. The two statements that provided the strongest responses were, “Social promotion should be a standard practice for K-2 students,” with 85.11% disagreeing, and, “Academically struggling students benefit from social promotion,” garnering 83.49% disagreement. The researcher concluded that Missouri educators made the case that social promotion should not be routine nor should it be used as an intervention. Practitioners stated that social promotion or moving in an assembly line should not be the standard practice as well as it should not be an option when students struggle academically. With this conclusion in mind, the information gathered makes a case for promotion structure reform and the need for change through the eyes of primary practitioners.

When investigating disaggregated data, notable differences in attitudes were discovered between position type as well as school size. Principals and teachers agreed that social promotion was not a valuable promotion structure; however, teachers felt stronger about this statement than principals did. The researcher believes two reasons exist for this difference. One reason principals felt more favorable to social promotion is because they most likely have more education and research knowledge that the alternative of retention does not have lasting and promising outcomes. Given this deeper understanding causes them to be more favorable to social promotion when certain conditions exist. The second reason is that teachers do not want to promote children for the next teacher to potentially judge the effectiveness of the prior teacher. This insecurity

and potential for the blame of a student's unpreparedness can cause teachers not to request retention. Furthermore, once a child is retained, a teacher is likely to compare the retained child's progress to that of the other children in class who were not retained. This comparison is dangerous because of the variables included. Nonetheless it does help gain teacher support for retention as not only does the teacher feel better because he/she is not being blamed for lack of preparation, but then that teacher can reinforce the retention decision by stating the child is progressing better than the previous year or just as well as his/her new peers. This combination leads to misguided support and continued use of retention. The other group with notable differences was school size. Again, both large and small schools agreed that social promotion was not the proper path for students, but smaller schools were more favorable than larger schools. The researcher believes this is due to relationships and social status. In smaller schools it is more obvious and transparent when a child is retained. Many times in smaller schools, retained students are easily spotted and readily known by shared teachers, support staff, and other students. This would make smaller schools feel more pressure to send students to the next grade level by socially promoting them and avoiding the social pressure and stigma associated with retention. Not only does this pressure seem more obvious within smaller schools, it bleeds into smaller communities as well. This creates social friction outside the school walls, creating an even larger dilemma for decision making. Larger schools do not face these hurdles due to less likelihood of the same students crossing paths as often, and this translates outside of the school in the same way, giving larger schools a potentially easier path to use retention over social promotion and avoiding some of the pitfalls seen in smaller settings.

Research Question Three Conclusions

The third research question read as follows: What are the attitudes and perceptions of Missouri public school educators regarding retention and the effectiveness it has for kindergarten through second grade students? Retention was defined as the practice of not permitting a student to advance to the next grade level with his/her classmates due to insufficient learning in the current grade level. When determining attitudes as expressed through the Retention Scale, the researcher looked at the 11 statements and the answers presented in this area. Given the mean of 25.08 and the standard deviation of 6.98, a solid conclusion cannot be made with regard to retention. The mean indicated that Missouri educators did have slightly favorable attitudes toward the use of retention. The standard deviation was large and pointed out that answers were scattered, which indicated more intense feelings on both sides of this scale. The percentage range that supported retention was 57.18% - 77.83%. The statement that earned the strongest support was, "Struggling students do not benefit from grade retention in grades K-2." Missouri educators responded by marking "disagree" or "strongly disagree" at 77.83%. In this case it meant that 77.83% believe retention was beneficial. The researcher concluded that although general statements would be difficult to pinpoint with the given data, it is clear that strong emotion and educational pedagogy play a significant role in attitudes and perceptions. More research would need to take place to pinpoint the reasoning behind each emotion.

When disaggregating the data within the Retention Scale, the current position group and the demographic location group had notably different responses. When current positions were analyzed, teachers and primary principals embraced different

support levels where retention was concerned. Teachers were much more supportive of retention, but principals landed almost right on the line between favorable and not favorable. The researcher believes teachers are much more in favor of retention for two reasons, the first being that teachers see retention as successful due to comparing a retained child to a non-retained child who experienced the particular grade level for the first time. The second reason is that teachers only see short-term gains and are not exposed to experience long-term results of retained students. Principals have less favorable views concerning retention due to having more access to retention research as well as an ability to see long-term successes and failures of children. The disconnect between research and practice was easily seen between teacher and principals. Another group who displayed a difference in attitudes and perceptions about retention were the demographic areas of urban and rural schools. Rural schools indicated favoritism toward retention while urban school exhibited negative feelings toward retention. The researcher believes the difference is due to the fact the urban areas tend to face obstacles, that combined with retention, are almost certain to lead to dropout.

Recommendations

Given the wide base of knowledge gathered in the literature review and the analysis of the results of the attitudinal survey, the researcher has the following recommendations for each scale as well as recommendations for the system of promotion structures in general. Future researchers seeking to determine the pulse of attitudes and perceptions within the eyes of public education practitioners could use this survey as reliable and valid tool.

When reflecting on the results of the Nongraded Scale data gathered, the researcher feels strongly that Missouri educators are actively supporting the notion of allowing students to progress on individual timeframes. Educators already understand the value of individualized education and see importance in focusing on case-by-case needs. The difficulty lands in implementation. Adjusting the current Missouri graded system would require community support, policy changes, and new action plans with accountability and extreme flexibility. Given the political and public pressure to improve public education, coupled with seeing intense opposition to other change initiatives like Common Core and Standards-Based Grading, the researcher is mindful of opposition. The recommendation is to use the base line of support from educators and investigate where parents and community members stand on the issue. In conjunction with investigating public feelings, it is recommended to research the attitudes and perceptions of homeschool parents. Many parents pull children from public school so the family can individualize education. If districts and states can gather community support, then the door can open for policy changes.

Looking at the data gathered within the Social Promotion Scale, the researcher is most concerned with the difference in attitudes and perceptions between classroom teachers and principals. These two groups work hand-in-hand toward the same goal of student success. The researcher recommends future studies as to why that difference exists. Missouri does not track and is not required to track how often social promotion is used. The researcher believes this missing component creates a hidden group of students who may or may not be deserving of extra support services. The researcher recommends that principals become more transparent in the decision-making process with teachers.

Sharing research, past experiences, and long-term possibilities is critical in making the most informed decision for students. The researcher also recommends keeping professional development current and focused on a growth mindset.

Retention Scale findings conclude that emotion is high on each side of the issue. Teachers find retention as a valid choice in intervention while principals have more hesitation and less support for the idea. The researcher recommends practitioners attempt to close the gap between research and practice. Retention continues to be a common practice when research does not support it. Keeping educators updated with current research as well as professional development is critical in making the most informed decisions.

In general, the evidence gathered with this survey tool highlights the disconnect between what educators feel is best practice and the policies in place. Missouri schools have two choices when it comes to promotion: retention or promotion. Retention is viewed as negative and not on track while promotion signifies growth and on-track movements. Educators are forced to place students on one of two tracks with no other options.

Conclusions

Currently, Missouri educators are battling a dire dichotomy. The choices of retention and social promotion do not even begin to meet the needs of each child in kindergarten through second grade. Research explored in chapter three indicated many drawbacks to the use of retention and social promotion. In both cases, the potential of negative outcomes force educators to make decisions when they really do not believe in either choice being appropriate. Given the opportunity to express attitudes and

perceptions of a different system, educators were favorable and concluded individualizing education would be best practice for kindergarten, first grade, and second grade students. This study was a focus on system promotion structures and current practitioner attitudes. The responses overwhelmingly supported the notion that Missouri educators want more choices for student promotion structures and back the idea of nongraded learning. Now is the time for policy makers, practitioners and parents to come together and create a new path for Missouri students. The best next step would be to gage the feelings of parents and communities about nongraded structures and what reimagining the standard practice of graded learning would mean for Missouri students.

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APPENDIX A: Survey Instrument Versions

Pilot Survey- August 2014

1. My current position:
 - A. Classroom Teacher
 - B. Special Education/Title Teacher
 - C. Principal
 - D. Superintendent

2. I have been in education for:
 - A. 1-5 years
 - B. 6-10 years
 - C. 11+ years

3. The school configuration that best describes mine is:
 - A. K-2
 - B. K-4
 - C. K-6
 - D. Other
 - E. I'm the superintendent

4. My school has:
 - A. 500 or less students
 - B. 501 or more students

5. My school is:
 - A. a graded school (Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, etc.)
 - B. a nongraded school (Students are not grouped by age.)

6. My school is:
 - A. Rural
 - B. Urban

7. Please mark how you feel for each of the following statements using the Likert Scale given.

Social Promotion: the practice of promoting students to the next grade level even when they have not learned the material they were taught or achieved expected learning standards.

Likert Scale: Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Social promotion is an appropriate solution for K-2 students not meeting current grade level standards.

Academically struggling students benefit from social promotion.

K-2 students benefit from social promotion when they are struggling academically.

It is not advantageous to socially promote students who are behind academically.

Social promotion is appropriate in a K-2 setting.

Promoting students with insufficient learning is acceptable in the K-2 setting.

Social promotion is an effective decision when students show insufficient learning.

Social promotion is an acceptable path for struggling students.

K-2 students benefit from social promotion.

Social promotion is not valuable for K-2 students.

Social promotion should be a standard practice for K-2 students.

Promoting students who do not meet required standards is socially appropriate in a K-2 setting.

Grade-Level Retention: the practice of not permitting a student to advance to the next grade level with her/her classmates due to insufficient learning in the current grade level.

Likert Scale: Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Retaining struggling students is academically beneficial in the K-2 setting.

Students in grades K-2 should be retained when they do not show sufficient learning at their current grade.

Grade retention is not a valid solution for struggling students in a K-2 setting.

Struggling students do not benefit from grade retention in grades K-2.

Retention is an effective solution for students not meeting expectations in a K-2 setting.

Retention is necessary for students who show insufficient learning in the K-2 setting.

Students working below grade level should be retained in grades K-2.

If students show insufficient learning, retention should be used in grades K-2.

Grade retention is not beneficial for K-2 students.

Grade retention is an appropriate strategy for struggling learners in grades K-2.

It is inappropriate to use retention in grades K-2 for academically struggling students.

A valid solution for struggling students in a K-2 setting is the use of retention.

Nongraded Learning: using flexible timeframes to allow students to progress at their own paces and advance upon demonstration of mastery.

Likert Scale: Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Nongraded learning would benefit students in a K-2 setting.

Letting students learn on their own timelines is a successful format for grades K-2.

Flexible timeframes would be advantageous for students in K-2.

Students in grades K-2 would benefit from competency-based/nongraded learning.

Allowing students to work at their own paces is valuable to K-2 students.

Students in K-2 should be allowed to progress based on demonstration of mastery.

Nongraded structures would be advantageous for K-2 students.

Advancing students upon mastery regardless of timeframe is best practice for K-2 students.

It is not advantageous to use flexible timeframes with students in K-2.

It is not valuable to let K-2 students work at their own paces.

Student placement should be flexible in the K-2 setting and not based only on age.
 K-2 students should have flexible timeframes for learning and not be forced to be retained or promoted at the end of each year.

8. Please give any other comments in regard to time-based structures and kindergarten through second grades students:

Final Survey September, 2014

Each Statement (1-34) was given the Likert Scale of

1. Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Disagree
4. Strongly Disagree

#	Statement
1	Social promotion is an appropriate solution for K-2 students not meeting current grade level standards.
2	Academically struggling students benefit from social promotion.
3	Retaining struggling students is academically beneficial in the K-2 setting.
4	Non-Graded/Competency-Based learning would benefit students in a K-2 setting.
5	Grade retention is not a valid solution for struggling students in a K-2 setting.
6	Social promotion is appropriate in a K-2 setting.
7	Letting students learn on their own timelines is a successful format for grades K-2.
8	Flexible timeframes would be advantageous for students in K-2.
9	Struggling students do not benefit from grade retention in grades K-2.
10	Retention is an effective solution for students not meeting expectations in a K-2 setting.
11	K-2 students benefit from social promotion when they are struggling academically.
12	It is not advantageous to socially promote students who are behind academically.
13	Students in grades K-2 would benefit from nongraded/competency-based learning.

14	It is not advantageous to use flexible timeframes with students in K-2.
15	Retention is necessary for students who show insufficient learning in the K-2 setting.
16	Students working below grade level should be retained in grades K-2.
17	Promoting students with insufficient learning is acceptable in the K-2 setting.
18	Allowing students to work at their own paces is valuable to K-2 students.
19	If students show insufficient learning, retention should be used in grades K-2.
20	Grade retention is an appropriate strategy for struggling learners in grades K-2.
21	Social promotion is an acceptable path for struggling students.
22	Social promotion is not valuable for K-2 students.
23	Students in K-2 should be allowed to progress based on demonstration of mastery regardless of timeframes.
24	Non-Graded/Competency-Based structures would be advantageous for K-2 students.
25	Grade retention is an appropriate strategy for struggling learners in grades K-2.
26	K-2 students benefit from social promotion.
27	Social promotion should be a standard practice for K-2 students.
28	It is inappropriate to use retention in grades K-2 for academically struggling students.
29	A valid solution for struggling students in a K-2 setting is the use of retention.
30	Advancing students upon mastery regardless of timeframes is best practice for K-2 students.
31	It is not valuable to let K-2 students work at their own pace.
32	Student grade-level placement should be flexible in the K-2 setting and not based only on age.
33	Socially promoting students who do not meet required standards is appropriate in a K-2 setting.
34	K-2 students should have flexible timeframes for learning and not be retained or promoted at the end of each year.
35	My current position is: Classroom Teacher, Special Education/Title Teacher, Principal, Superintendent, Other.
36	I have been in education for: 1-5 Years, 6-10 Years, 11+ Years
37	The school configuration that best describes mine is: K-2, K-4, K-6, I'm the superintendent, Other
38	My school has: 500 or less students, 501 or more students
39	My school is a: Graded School (Kindergarten, 1 st Grade, 2 nd Grade, etc.), Nongraded (students are not grouped by age)
40	My school is: Rural, Urban
41	Please give any other comments in regard to grade-level promotion structures in kindergarten through second grade: (open ended)

APPENDIX B: Consent Email

MISSOURI EDUCATOR ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF TIME-BASED STRUCTURES FOR KINDERGARTEN THROUGH SECOND GRADE

Informed Consent

Dear Educator,

My name is Tracy Daniels, and I am the Principal at Bolivar Primary School in Bolivar, MO. Currently I am a doctoral student at Southwest Baptist University, and I am conducting a research study to gather information about attitudes and perceptions of teachers, principals, and superintendents of primary-aged students and time-based structure effectiveness. I am surveying all primary-aged building principals, teachers, and superintendents in Missouri. Since you are the principal at your current primary-aged school, I would like to ask for your participation. I am aware of how busy you are and how spring is packed with many events; this survey should take no more than 10 minutes of your time to complete. The survey is completely anonymous.

Your privacy is imperative; your answers will be combined with other participants and reported in aggregate form. Information reported will not indicate individual participants or school districts. There is no penalty should you choose not to participate or answer all of the questions. Your completion and submission of the survey will indicate your consent to participate and permission to use the information that you have provided in my study.

Before you make a final decision about participation, please read the following statements about how your responses will be used and how your rights as a participant will be protected:

- Participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any point without penalty.
- You need not answer all of the questions.
- Your answers will be kept confidential. Results will be presented to others in summary form only, without names or other identifying information.
- Your participation will take approximately 10 minutes. During this time you will answer questions about how you perceive time-based structures for primary students.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the RRB Committee at Southwest Baptist University (326-1659). The committee believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject's privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights.

You may contact me at 417-326-5247 if you have questions or concerns about your participation. If you would like a copy of the results of this study, you may contact me via email at tdaniels@bolivarschools.org. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Tracy Daniels

Bolivar Primary School, Principal

APPENDIX C: Open-Ended Comments

Number	Response
1.	There are times when retention is appropriate, although they are rare. For the most part, we believe in social promotion with additional support in terms of small group and/or individual interventions for struggling students.
2.	I feel like this was a survey on how many ways to ask the same question. Retention is not best practice for K-2, but currently an option as we are not an ungraded primary with the benefits of allowing children to make progress at his/her own pace. Social promotion is not best practice either, however needs to be assessed on a case by case basis due to very unique circumstances.
3.	Interventions must be put in place to meet the needs of these struggling students.
4.	In my opinion, retaining students makes it even more difficult for them to graduate high school. It is very difficult to keep an at-risk student at 19 in high school.
5.	I believe to retain or not is a very individualized decision that should be based on multiple factors. No two students ever present with the same background or history; thus, it is simplistic to say that one believes in retaining a student based upon non-mastery of concepts.
6.	Retention is not an ideal solution to students performing more than a year below grade level, but it can be an effective option. The key to success with retention is how the student, parents and school partner together to make this successful and a positive situation for the student. Flexible student placement based on mastery of skills instead of the 100+ year old traditional school calendar would benefit students and is an mindset about education that must be

	addressed in today's public schools.
7.	I do not believe to promote or not promote is a simple agree or simple disagree response. Too many variables. I do not promoting without skill mastery is the solution. Student academic accountability needs to shift back to students and family support.
8.	Too many questions asking the same information in reverse order. Also, retention and social promotion can be both of benefit and a detriment to a student; it depends on the individual and what outcomes you are seeking.
9.	Our building does not like to retain students, but if we have to we would rather have them retained in grades k-2 than in our upper elementary. I am not a fan of retention and know it can effect students socially . The questions were to exact for me to answer, but because I believe there is not exact exact answer for every child. It depends on the child and family and their situation if it would be beneficial or not.
10.	I believe that retention is (almost) never advantageous for a student. I believe that students will work at their own pace and teachers should focus on mastery of learning.
11.	There were several questions that I didn't agree but I didn't disagree.
12.	I don't think you can base promotion/retention strictly on a pass/not pass system. There are many factors to consider with considering retention. I have personally seen students who have benefitted from the 'gift' of another year of learning at the same grade level.
13.	I started this survey but could not complete it. I believe that retention HAS to go on a case by case basis and can never be LUMPED as a group. Sorry
14.	I think students should be allowed to work at their own pace. In a perfect world that is how we should do things. It is difficult under the current format for public education to function this way. Students that do not have sufficient reading skills and are less than a Primer level in reading should not be promoted out of 1 st grade. 1 st grade is the make or break year for reading as 2 nd graders are expected to have some independent reading skills.
15.	We need to stop sending kids on who can't read.
16.	Social Promotion should be considered an option for struggling students on a case by case basis. Each student's need are different and therefore should be assessed as such.
17.	The questions above were redundant and most were questions that I did not feel comfortable answering due to the nature of the questions. It is not an agree or disagree blanket answer. There are many factors to be considered with retention. Is there an IEP, are they making significant progress, what are the environmental, physical, emotional, social and psychological factors pertaining to the child?
18.	There are a number of factors to consider when it comes to retention or social promotion. I believe after the 2 nd grade retention will have a measurable negative impact on student development.
19.	I feel students should have Early Childhood Education prior to starting Kindergarten. Students who do not make learning gains need to be looked at for learning deficiencies, early on, as opposed to later. Early interventions

	need to take place beginning in Kindergarten to minimize the learning gaps. Schools do not tend to have support in place (small class sizes, extra support-groups w/adults to work more on specific skills, etc.) to catch learning deficits and/or work with small groups to teach those deficit skills. I am also finding that the school is having to do more parenting to educate parents on developmental milestones ad skills for their children.
20.	I think this survey is more about semantics than trying to gain data for a valid outcome.
21.	K-2 is such an important time for building the basis of learning. Skills and material learned in these years are the critical foundations for the rest of a student's schooling. If we choose to socially promote the students who do not have these necessary, basic, foundational skills, we are doing them a disservice. I believe if we socially promote students who have not mastered their current grade level standards, we could be setting them up for failure in the future. We do not want to increase the learning gap, and make them more and more frustrated each year.
22.	Social promotion must have a safety nets in place for students that are behind in competencies as well as developmental issues.
23.	Your study is not taking into account the social skills of a student. It base retention or social promotion solely on academics is counterproductive. I have known and currently know students in high school who were promoted by their parents and even though they are able to do the academic work, they struggle socially and athletically. There is just a lot more than academics that creates a well rounded individual.
24.	I found this survey hard to complete because most of my responses would be different when addressing different students. Any decision we make regarding promotion/retention is based completely on the appropriateness for the individual student.
25.	This survey was difficult as many considerations are taken into account before retaining or promoting. One size does not fit all and I didn't feel I could answer the questions consistently with the four options given. Sometimes, social promotion is best for a particular students if many interventions have been attempted with no luck. It is ideal to send kids on not knowing all standards? No but will a different outcome be produced by retention? This is the question we consider before retaining/promotion. Good luck!
26.	There are students who benefit from retention and those who don't. Each case must be considered individually.
27.	We need a much more developmentally appropriate curriculum that allows children to progress normally rather than by taking tests and being socially promoted any way.
28.	While grade-level promotion or retention is not ALWAYS appropriate for students, it can be successful for individual students. Social promotion. likewise, can be successful for individual students.
29.	I believe it would be great to allow children to move through school at their own pace. Given the structure of most schools being set up on a grade per year retention of social promotion are not effective. What I believe works best is to

	move a student with their same age peers and intervene in the areas they are not meeting expectations. It is the responsibility of the adults to meet the needs of the child, so if they are not meeting expectations they should not be denied the opportunity to progress in the areas they are meeting expectations.
30.	Each student case is different. Retention may be best for one student, while social promotion may be best for another student. All students learn at their own pace. Students should be retaught or enriched as needed.
31.	The focus is on learning. We have so much move in move out, that kids would automatically be retained if we followed this mode. When dealing with kids in poverty, one retention reduces their chance of graduating high school by 70%. We have to take kids where we got them (often from other countries with no education) and move them...you can't just retain kids, that does not make a bit of difference. Your questions just go all over the place and have nothing to do with what is really considered in advancing student or retaining them.
32.	These questions can not have a direct answer when considering each student as an individual. A solution which is right for one student may not be right for another student.
33.	Sometimes might have helped as an option. Based on individual student needs and background can help determine if retention would be helpful.
34.	I feel strongly that the focus should be standards-based instead of the traditional grading system. Our district has moved to standards-based grading K-4 and is currently exploring expanding into the middle grades.
35.	I would like to see intervention strategies needed to be listed as an option.
36.	We utilize standards based grading.
37.	Some of the questions were not easy to answer on this scale. Is retention best practice or valid? I don't believe it is best practice. I also don't believe that promotion a student based on age is best practice either. If students have not mastered the requisite skills in the next grade, they should not go on.
38.	You asked the same questions or version of the questions far too many times! I almost quit and did not finish the survey, but I know you need the responses from us. Poor survey!!
39.	I had trouble answering some of the questions because I believe that retention trumps social promotion, but an ideal structure with be non-graded, competency-based.
40.	Promotion or retention should be based on more than age. Skills should be developmentally appropriate.
41.	I am a supporter of social promotion at the early ages, but there are times when retention is necessary to be certain skill attainment is possible or mastered. Kindergarten is an example when some students may be retained (transitioned).
42.	I believe that there are times when social promotion in a graded situation is the only reasonable option, however, I do believe as long as we have graded schools retention has to play a roll. I like the ungraded concept but know that traditional communities would have a very hard time with it.
43.	I was an elementary principal for 5 years and our elementary where I am the superintendent has a graded configuration, but our reading program is non-

	graded.
44.	How many ways can you ask the same question? Was this study about retention or about respondents patience level? I stopped answering half way through because of the repetition.
45.	While I believe student should be retained if they are not academically ready, to say “regardless of time frame” might be extreme, as I would not retain more than 1 year except in very extreme cases.
46.	It is difficult to answer these questions agree and disagree, etc. because there are so many variables when it comes to making a decision whether to retain a student or not. Students are unique and each situation is unique! You have to look at the whole picture and should not make generalizations. If there are learning disabilities present, it makes not sense to retain. If a student has excessive absences, then retention could possibly give the student a chance to catch up and be successful. Birth dates pay an important role as well. Is the student immature? These are all questions or items that should be considered when deciding to retain or not. Ultimately, we as educators must make the best decision for each individual child.
47.	I believe maturity plays a large factor in retaining a student. I believe that retention, unless it would be ineffective due to age, allows a child to be given another chance to improve on skills already taught. This would also provide information to the teacher(s) in his/her grade level to see if performance is improved and if not would provide 2 years at one particular grade level of data to enlist possible need for testing. I am of the belief that the earlier/younger you retain a student, the more beneficial. I do not believe that once students get into 4 th grade and are not on grade level, especially in reading, that he/she should be moved on with their peers. I believe we, as educators, should uphold the state law that states this as well.