

# Grade Retention

Subjects: Education & Educational Research

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Grade retention is a strategy for the remediation of learning or developmental delays. Students who cannot keep up with their peers or do not meet a predefined level repeat the same grade once again and by doing so have an extra year to get at the level that is needed to successfully manage the next grade. There are considerable doubts as regards the usefulness and effectiveness of retaining grades. Studies conclude that in the short term retaining grades may have a positive effect on academic achievement, but that this gain disappears in the longer term.

Keywords: grade retention ; grade repetition ; holding back a grade

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## 1. Introduction

Grade retention (or holding back a year or repeating a grade) is normally employed as a strategy for the remediation of learning or developmental delays. Students who cannot keep up with their peers or do not meet a predefined level repeat the same grade once again and by doing so have an extra year to get at the level that is needed to successfully manage the next grade. Studies show there to exist huge differences across countries in the percentage of students who are being retained<sup>[1]</sup>. There are considerable doubts as regards the usefulness and effectiveness of retaining grades. Empirical studies conclude that in the short term retaining grades may have a positive effect on academic achievement, but that this gain disappears in the longer term. The average effect size (Cohen's *d*) of repeating grades as reported on the basis of several statistical meta-analyses is -0.16 and thus negative<sup>[2]</sup>. This means that children who have been retained achieve academically somewhat *lower* than children who have not been retained, despite the fact that they have had one year of education extra. At the same time, retaining grades is accompanied by high financial costs (between 5 and 12% of the total expenditure<sup>[3]</sup>) and may have a significant social and emotional impact on the children who lose their classmates and friends and in a new class with younger children have to build new friendships. For these reasons it would be desirable to reduce the number of grade repeaters.

## 2. Numbers

An overview compiled by the OECD (2010)<sup>[4]</sup> points to huge differences between countries regarding repeating grades in primary education. To give some examples: the Netherlands and Portugal have the highest share of repeaters, namely 22.4%. In the Scandinavian countries there are hardly any grade repeaters: in Norway 0%, in Finland 2.4%, in Denmark 3.6% and in Sweden 3.8%. The United Kingdom also has few repeaters, no more than 1.6%. In Belgium this is 18.5%, in Germany 9.2%, in France 17.8%, in the USA 11.2%, and in Japan 0%. The average of the OECD countries is 7.3%. In interpreting such percentages some reservations need to be made (OECD, 2011)<sup>[4]</sup>. For instance, there are relevant differences pertaining to the structure of the education system: at what age do the children start their school career; is there only one moment of entry or is the moment of entry flexible; are there admission criteria; do the children attend preschool services; at what age do they transfer to secondary education; are regular education and special education separate types of schools or integrated?

## 3. Characteristics

Grade retention is associated with various characteristics at different levels<sup>[5][6]</sup>.

At the level of the *student* the following factors are relevant: a weak achievement level; a low level of intelligence or ability; a disadvantaged socio-economic home situation; an immigrant or minority background; having psycho-social problems; being a boy; being the youngest child in the class<sup>[7][8][9][10]</sup>.

At the level of the *class*: the number of students in a class (bigger classes, more repeaters); low instructional quality; an inefficient planning of time<sup>[11][12]</sup>.

At the level of the *school*: few provisions for children with special needs; limited contact with parents; an unfavorable learning climate; an inefficient planning of time<sup>[12]</sup>.

At the level of the *education system*: a system where all students have to master the same curriculum in the same year (the so-called year group system); too little focus on working for results, adaptive education and curricular differentiation<sup>[13]</sup>.

## **4. Regulations**

In most European countries grade retention is seen as a last provision of educational support<sup>[14]</sup>. Regulations mostly are based on the principle that by repeating a grade students have one final opportunity to improve their learning and skills. However, there also are several countries where grade retention is not allowed. In Norway and Iceland, for instance, students of compulsory school age have the right of automatic transfer to a following grade. In the United Kingdom, regarding grade retention nothing is laid down in regulations; however, it is stated that education should be suitable to the child's age, abilities and aptitude. Therefore, in schools children with different achievement levels normally are taught within the own class and are placed out of this group only in exceptional circumstances. In Poland children cannot be retained during the first three grades, in Greece not during the first two grades. In Germany, Austria and Portugal students automatically transfer from grade 1 to grade 2. In some countries there is a limit to the number of times a student can be held back. For instance, in Flanders a student can attend primary education for no more than eight years; in Wallonia a student can be retained only once in grades 1 and 2 and once in grades 3 thru 6. In France and Spain students can be retained only once in primary education.

## **5. Criteria**

In almost all European countries it is specified at central level which criteria need to be applied for deciding whether a student should be held back or not<sup>[14]</sup>. There are some exceptions, however. In the Netherlands, Denmark and the United Kingdom nothing is centrally regulated and it is left to the schools or school boards. The needs of each individual child should be leading. In countries with central regulations, the most common and decisive criterion applied is the academic progress shown by the student during the school year. Other criteria are behavior and absenteeism related to, for instance, illness. In Ireland changing schools may also be a reason for grade retention.

If academic progress is the decisive criterion, two different approaches can be discerned. In the first approach, practiced in countries such as Belgium, France and Spain, an overall assessment of the student's progress is made based on marks. But this is not the only and decisive criterion; other criteria are also taken into account in the final decision. In Wallonia both academic achievement during the school year as well as at the end of the year are taken into account, and in addition attitudes and abilities. In Sweden both academic progress in each of the individual subjects and development in general are taken in consideration. The second approach for deciding on grade retention is applied in more countries. In those countries progress is evaluated in light of a predefined level. This assessment consists of the aggregation of a series of marks which results in an overall, final mark for all subjects or an average mark for each of the subjects.

Often, regulations provide opportunities for students to catch up if they are in danger of having to repeat a year. In some countries these students are given extra work at the end of the school year, in other countries they are given additional lessons and tests, and in still other countries they have a second chance to be assessed. In Finland, students must be given an opportunity to demonstrate that they have achieved an acceptable level by using different methods of assessment which are specifically adapted to their abilities, such as a written test or discussion with the teacher. This implies that for different students different methods can be applied. In countries such as Germany and Luxembourg students may voluntarily opt for repeating the last grade in order to obtain better results and qualify for a higher type of secondary education.

## **5. Decision-making**

Who are involved and carry the end responsibility for the decision to hold a student back varies from country to country<sup>[14]</sup>. In some countries students have one general class teacher who takes the decision. In other countries several teachers are involved in the decision process, both the class teacher and the subjects teachers. Often, the head teacher is involved as well, and in addition sometimes external specialist are consulted, such as an educational psychologist or a school advisory service. In all countries parents are regularly informed by the school about their child's progress and development. In many European countries regulations include a more active role of parents and in some countries the parents may be consulted during the decision making process. There are three options. In a number of countries (e.g.

France) parents may lodge an appeal if they object to the decision. In some countries (e.g. Sweden) parents may request that their child repeats the year, although the child may also progress to the next grade. In other countries (e.g. Wallonia) consent from the parents is required regarding holding the child back a year.

## **6. Arguments**

The share of grade repeaters differs strongly from country to country. Belfi et al. (2011)<sup>[5]</sup> and Goos (2013)<sup>[6]</sup> made an inventory of the reasons for this variation. One reason could be that in most countries the decision is being made on the basis of objective external information, while in countries with many repeaters, such as Flanders and the Netherlands, the decision mostly is based on subjective teacher assessments. When asked why students are being held back most teachers mention low academic achievement, failing school readiness, psychosocial problems, and a low level of intelligence<sup>[15][16][17]</sup>. The arguments pro and contra grade retention can be ordered from the following four perspectives<sup>[5]</sup><sup>[6]</sup>:

- social-economic (pro: better chances in the labor market; contra: higher costs);
- developmental-psychologic (pro: more time; contra: restriction of growth);
- psycho-social (pro: better self-esteem because of success experiences; contra: demotivation because of repetition);
- didactical (pro: homogeneous and easier class; contra: minimal stimulating learning environment).

## **7. Effects**

The results of international empirical research provide more support for arguments against grade retention than arguments for grade retention. The most important finding is that grade retention normally is not an effective method for improving academic achievement of weaker students. In the short run grade retention seems to have a positive effect, but in the long run it has a negative effect: the longer they are in school, grade repeaters achieve less well than comparable former class mates who have progressed in the regular way. This applies to both repeaters in the early years as well as students in higher grades. Effects are even more negative for relative older students, for children from lower socioeconomic milieus, for children with parents who are not interested in education, for boys, for students with behavioral problems, and for students who already have been held back a year<sup>[5][18][6][19][20]</sup>.

## **8. Alternatives**

In the literature several alternatives to grade retention are proposed. Protheroe<sup>[21]</sup> (2007; also see Johnson & Rudolph, 2001<sup>[22]</sup>; Meador, 2018<sup>[23]</sup>) presents the following strategies:

- aligning of instruction with standards;
- systematic assessment to identify problems;
- changes in grouping practices;
- interventions that accelerate learning;
- helping teachers increase their effectiveness;
- extending learning time;
- pre-kindergarten programs.

It should be stressed that these alternatives are mostly ideas and not strategies that are fully supported by empirical research. In addition, findings from one country cannot always be transferred to another country with a different education structure and deviating regulations.

### **Note**

This item is based on: Geert Driessen, Bianca Leest, Lia Mulder, & Twan Verrijt (2014). Zittenblijven in Nederland: Een probleem? *Tijdschrift voor Orthopedagogiek*, 53(7/8), 297-311, and: Geert Driessen, Bianca Leest, Lia Mulder, Tineke Paas, & Twan Verrijt (2014). Blijven zittenblijven? Zittenblijven in het basisonderwijs: leerlingen, scholen, argumenten, alternatieven. Nijmegen: ITS.<sup>[24][25]</sup>

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