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A Study of Georgia Elementary Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Concerning Grade Level Retention

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A STUDY OF GEORGIA ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES CONCERNING GRADE LEVEL RETENTION

by

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(Under the Direction of Barbara Mallory)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs and practices of student grade-level retention. Overall, elementary teachers consider grade level retention to be an acceptable school practice to improve a student's academic success and that grade level retention also provides for long-term academic success. Georgia elementary teachers with master's degrees and above, teachers in suburban communities, teachers with more experience, and fourth grade teachers believe more strongly than elementary teachers with bachelor's degrees, teachers in rural and urban areas, and third and fifth grade elementary teachers, that students who do not meet academic standards should be retained. Georgia elementary teachers in suburban communities and teachers' with more school experience felt grade level retention was an acceptable school practice for improving student achievement, even more so than teachers in rural communities and teachers with bachelor's degrees. Teachers with more experience felt grade level retention provided for long term academic success. Georgia elementary teachers also believed grade level retention can cause some students to have emotional issues after being retained. Georgia elementary teachers thought that retaining a student who had met state test score standards could be acceptable based on the student's lack of preparation for the next grade, lack of social maturity, or age. These

same teachers would also consider retaining a student whose scores on state-mandated tests were barely passing. Also, most Georgia elementary teachers were either neutral or disagreed that their views were consistent with the Georgia state-mandated grade level retention policy based on the No Child Left Behind initiative.

INDEX WORDS: Grade Level Retention, Achievement, Low Achievement

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Dedication

With thankfulness to God for my loving family and supportive friends, I dedicate this dissertation first of all to my son, John-Ashley, and my three brothers David, Richard, and Mike. All of these very special men have shown absolute, unconditional confidence in my ability to complete this work and earn my degree. Secondly, I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Evelyn, who encouraged me every time I started to question my abilities or began to waiver from my focus of completing this project. Thanks also to my many friends whose support and encouragement contributed greatly to the successful completion of the project. I appreciated their patience in waiting for me to detach myself from my computer and rejoin the ranks of the human race.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the late 1990s public education entered a wave of school reform. As part of this reform, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), called for strong school accountability. A hallmark of this initiative was to end social promotion, requiring state and local school districts to implement stringent promotion and grade level retention policies. An element of NCLB was based on high stakes testing. Research shows that, for the most part, student achievement, emotional well being, and future success have not been improved by retaining students (Holmes, 1989). Historically, grade level retention of students for academic failure was a common practice, and teachers were relied upon to use their own knowledge and professional judgment to make decisions concerning student grade level retention (Jacobs, et.al. 2004; American Federation of Teachers, 2000 & Kenneady, 2004). Traditionally, within local school/district policy guidelines, teachers had nearly complete autonomy to determine if a student should be retained or promoted (Jacobs, Stone & Roderick, 2004). However, in an era of educational accountability, schools have come under great scrutiny to improve student achievement and implementation of a mandated grade level retention policy has become a bi-product of this reform. In the 2000's, teachers must rely on procedures found within school district policies concerning high stakes testing to determine student grade level retention or promotion.

In the early 1900s, approximately 20 % of students were retained each year. In the 1930s, an interest in child psychology became a focus for educators; grade level retention was used more sparingly, making social promotion a common feature. Grade level retention was linked to negative social and psychological effects, and the policy of social promotion gained momentum. By the 1980s, a backlash against social promotion appeared. This backlash was formalized in a government report *A Nation at Risk (1984).* During the 1990s, the practice of student grade level retention grew dramatically on a national level. Educators valued grade level retention as a remedy for students to achieve future academic success, while at the same time boosting student self-esteem and readiness. Adding to this confusion was the large majority of research which suggested that grade level retention is ineffective, even however, damaging school district policies still continued to offer grade level retention as an option for decisions regarding poor performance of students(Shepard & Smith, 1989, Harvard Education Letter, 1998; Nicklason,1087).

By 2001, school systems across the nation were in a midst of school reform. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, 2001 was enacted by Congress and the hallmark of this reform was strong accountability. As required by NCLB, many states embarked on an ambitious accountability agenda by coupling school-level accountability with high-stakes testing for students. For example, in Georgia, under this new initiative, the lowest performing third and fifth graders would repeat a grade, at least once if they did not meet minimum reading and math test score cut offs established for the Georgia's Criteria Reference Test (Georgia State Department of Education, State Rule 160-4-3-11).

The primary focus of this research was to provide information related to teacher beliefs and practices concerning grade level retention. On one hand , teachers could view mandated grade level polices as something that supported their own work in the classroom helping to motivate students, sending the message that achievement mattered and ensuring that students have the basic skills they need before they advance to the next grade. On the other hand, teachers might believe that high-stakes testing requirements are nothing more than an accountability strategy directed squarely at them: limiting autonomy in the classroom, placing excessive pressure on students and teachers and undermining their professionalism by assuming that teachers own judgment of their student's performance are insufficient. Determining teachers' beliefs and practices concerning grade level retention was critical to understanding how beliefs and practices aligned with current school and district grade level retention policies.

Background of the Study

In the first decade of the 2000's, the shift to a grade level retention policy based on high stakes testing caused a concern among some educators. While most research finds that teachers resent accountability programs that either reward or sanction them for their students' performance (Jacobs, et. al., 2004), due to the newness of the No Child Left Behind sanctions, much less is known about how teachers view a mandated grade level retention policy based on high-stakes testing targeted directly at the student.

American schools did not group students by grade level until 1860. Before then, teachers worked with groups of students of various ages and recorded their progress in a narrative report (Owings & Kaplan, 2001). It became clear that all students did not learn the required curriculum at the same pace, and in an effort to alleviate this problem, a

determination was made by teachers and administrators that students should be placed in a certain grade level according to their age (Maxwell, 1904). Grade reports evolved into a complicated and objective evaluation of student work based on mastery of a quota of content in a particular grade. Regardless of age, students not mastering this quota of content were then retained and had to repeat the same grade (Owings & Kaplan, 2001).

The goal of grade level retention policies was to improve school performance by allowing more time for students to develop adequate academic skills (Reynolds, 1992). By the 1930s, researchers were reporting the negative association of student grade level retention on improving student achievement (Ayers, 1933). In the mid 1930s, attitudes were changing regarding the role of schooling and the psychology of the individual student. This change in attitude prompted a shift toward an approach called "social promotion" in which children were passed to the next grade with their age peers and would receive remedial academic help when necessary. Among the reasons for this policy change was the concern of social scientists that grade level retention might be damaging to children's social and emotional development (Steiner, 1986).

Goodlad (1954) summarized the research that was conducted between 1924 and 1948 relating to grade level retention; his summary suggested that grade level retention did not decrease the variation in student achievement levels, nor did it have a positive difference on a students' educational gain. Otto's (1951) research also suggested that grade level retention had no educational value for children and that academic gain of nonpromoted students was smaller than the gain of their promoted counterparts.

In 1975, Jackson reviewed research studies on grade level retention. The review included thirty studies published between 1911 and 1973. Jackson (1975) sought to

examine whether low-achieving students or those with socioemotional maladjustment benefited from grade level retention or promotion. In a systematic and comprehensive overview of the research evidence, Jackson (1975) concluded that there was no significant evidence to indicate that grade level retention was beneficial to students.

In the mid 20th century, researchers began to investigate the relationship between grade level retention and dropout rates. One study (Berlman, 1949) indicated that students who are retained might be more likely to drop out of school than those who were not retained. This research appeared when the literature was emphasizing the need to keep students in school (Anderson, 1950, Holbeck, 1950, Nancarrow, 1951).

In the 1983, a report, *A Nation At Risk* published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, pointed to the decline in student achievement test scores as evidence that lenient policies such as social promotion had caused a dilution of standards, resulting in students being unable to demonstrate basic skills. Educators perceived social promotion as symbolizing a disregard for achievement which undermined students' motivations to learn (Natale, 1991). Consequently, school districts implemented promotion and grade level retention policies based on mastery of grade level objectives as a strategy to improve students' academic performance or to identify students' adjustment difficulties. This helped satisfy the public outcry for student achievement accountability (Steiner, 1986).

Nearly ten years after Jackson's 1975 review, Holmes and Matthews (1984) conducted two studies. The first was a meta-analysis study using research published from 1929 to 1981. The study was to determine the relationship of achievement and socio-emotional outcomes on retained elementary and junior high school students. The second

meta-analysis used controlled research studies between 1925 and 1989. In both studies, (Holmes & Matthews 1984; Holmes, 1989) the findings suggested that student grade level retention was not effective in improving student achievement and would more likely have a negative relationship on student achievement and social-emotional outcomes.

In the early 1990s, there was another change in the research on grade level retention -- one that proclaimed grade level retention produced negative outcomes on students and their academic achievement (Natale, 1991). By the year 2000, there was a national outcry from parents and business leaders, demanding students failing to meet set educational objectives be retained, thus improving and establishing accountability in education (Olson, 2001). For the public at large, it was counter- intuitive to think that grade level retention was not helping students reach basic skill levels (Natale, 1991).

Relationships of Student Grade Level Retention and Academic Achievement

Throughout the history of education, there has been a perception that even though a student may have emotional difficulty with having to repeat a grade, it can help low achievers gain the skills needed to meet the expected level of skill mastery and avoid failure in future grades (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). Ideally, grade-level grade level retention should provide an opportunity for students to gain skills and experience continued success (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). The rationale behind grade-level grade level retention was to allow additional time for underachieving students to master content and skills (Reynolds, 1992). A large body of research reveals evidence there are almost no lasting academic achievement outcomes gained by grade level retention (Harvard Education Letter, 1991).

Despite the preponderance of data not supporting this practice of grade level retention some teachers believe grade level retention to be an effective academic intervention (Shepard & Smith, 1987). By the end of the repeated year, the students no longer stand out as particularly lost or behind. However, teachers do not have the opportunity to follow a retained student's progress nor can they monitor how that student fares academically in later grades as compared to a similar peer who never repeated a grade. Teachers almost certainly will not know whether the retained student later becomes truant in middle school or drops out of high school (Shepard & Smith.1987).

According to Yamanato (1980), students perceive only two life events as more stressful than being retained in any grade: going blind and losing a parent. The victim of grade level retention vacillates emotionally from fear to anger to extreme sadness. Research has indicated that retained students are worse off both academically and emotionally than their promoted counterparts (Potter, 1996). For most children grade level retention has a negative impact on their social adjustment, behavior, self-competence, and attitudes toward school (Holmes & Matthews, 1985; Miesels & Liaw. 1993). Holmes and Matthews (1985) findings suggest that student grade level retention has not been effective and could have a negative relationship on student achievement and social-emotional outcomes.

Relationships Between Grade Level Retention and Elementary Students' Future Success

Because of low self-esteem and lack of long term academic achievement, many students who are retained continue to experience problems in school (National Association of School Psychologists, 1998). Researchers, on the student dropout rate,

have consistently found that student grade level retention is associated with an increased probability of a student's dropping out and not completing school (Holmes, 1989, Shepard & Smith, 1987; National Association of School Psychologists, 1999). The school chancellor for the New York City school system revised the system's stringent promotional gates policy, citing evidence that drop out rates among retained students were higher than drop out rates among promoted students with comparable reading levels (Owings & Kaplan, 2001).

Opponents of grade level retention often cite the strong association between grade level retention and dropping out as evidence that grade level retention is harmful (Roderick, 1995). A widely quoted finding from the National Association of School Psychologists ([NASP], 2000) stated that one grade level retention increases that risk of dropping out 40% to 50%, and two grad level retentions increase that risk by 90%. Using data from individual school systems, several studies have shown that students who are retained at the elementary level or who are over age for their grade drop out of school at a significantly higher rate (Roderick, 1995).

In elementary school, some groups of students are more likely to be retained than others. Foster (1993), Owings and Magliar (1998), and the National Association of School Psychologists (2000) reported that grade level retention rates for African-American and Hispanic students are twice the rate for white students. Demographic data gathered by these researchers showed that retained students tend to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. It was further determined that approximately 40 % of repeaters came from the lowest socioeconomic quartile, whereas approximately 8.5% came from the highest socioeconomic quartile (NASP, 1999). Nat Kerzner (1982) reported findings of non-

promotion three times greater for children of blue-collar workers than for children of white-collar workers and multi-grade level retention was an even greater possibility. Research by Sakowicz (1996), along with Owings and Magliar (1998), also noted that students living in single-family households or with parents having minimal education were also identified as candidates for grade level retention.

Thompson & Cunningham (2000) have noted that policymakers wish to minimize harming retained students and maximize the chances that the student will be helped; they should call for special assistance to continue during and beyond the year in which the student is retained. In fact, Holmes' (1989) review of grade level retention research identified nine programs that take an alternative approach. He found that the programs with positive results shared several characteristics. Retained students in these studies were identified early and given special help. An individualized and detailed educational plan was prepared for remediation purposes, which places the students in special classes with low student - teacher ratios. Holmes (1989) further noted that when retained students who received extra help were compared to a promoted control group that also received the extra help, the retained students still lagged behind.

Relationships of Elementary Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Prior to No Child Left Behind, district grade level retention policy in the elementary school was based on the number of subjects a student passed or failed. Teachers were given little if any direction on what guidelines to use when determining a student's success or failure in a subject (Jacobs et.al. 2004). Therefore, teachers developed their own criteria or standards for students to meet in order to be promoted to the next grade (Jacobs et.al., 2004). In a national study, Tomchin and Impara (1992)

noted some factors that influenced teachers' decision to retain, including academic performance based on classroom tests and assessments, maturity, ability, gender and age. Sakowicz (1996) & Tomchin and Impara (1992) noted in their research that grade level retention was perceived by most teachers to enhance basic skills, improve self-concept, provide for future successes, and prepare students for the next level of curriculum objectives. Yet, there has been no substantial research on the impact of student grade level retention, based on high stakes testing, and the alignment with teachers' beliefs since the No Child Left Behind initiative in 2002

Grade Level Retention and Accountability

Following in the steps of President Clinton's educational reform initiative, President Bush, in January of 2002, sent his No Child Left Behind (NCLB) plan to Congress calling for comprehensive education reform. The result was the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which embodied four reform principles. One of these principles demanded stronger accountability for states, school districts, and schools. A cornerstone of the NCLB Act requires schools to make adequate yearly progress in order to measure year-to-year student achievement. It also requires states to implement statewide accountability through challenging state standards in reading and mathematics; annual testing for all students in grades 3, 5 and 8; to annually document statewide progress objectives ensuring that all groups of students reach proficiency within 12 years. This recent movement mandating academic standards to ensure accountability has rekindled public debate on the use of grade level retention as a means to remedy academic deficits, resulting in the impression of improving education and establishing accountability (National Association of School Psychologists, 2000).

The NCLB Act requires all states to establish state academic standards and a state testing system that meets federal requirements. In Georgia, House Bill 1187, Georgia Promotions, Placement and Grade law O.C.G.A.20-2-282-285, mandated the elimination of social promotion and required the state board of education to develop a promotion/ l retention policy that would align with the state law. In turn, the Georgia State Board of Education developed Rule 160-4-2-.11, which specifies the requirements for the promotion and the grade level retention of students in grades 3, 5, and 8 based on a student's performance on the Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) in Reading and/or Mathematics. The State Rule also requires each public school district to develop a promotion/retention policy which, as a minimum, is to reflect the guidelines of the State Department of Education (Georgia State Department of Education-Policy Division, 2003).

The State Rule mandates that with the beginning of the 2003-2004 school year, all third grade students would be required to achieve grade level scores on the Georgia CRCT in Reading in order to be promoted to the fourth grade. In the 2004-2005 school year, all fifth grade students have to achieve grade level scores on the Georgia (CRCT) in Reading and Mathematics in order to be promoted to the sixth grade (Georgia Department of Education - Policy Division, 2003).

The state of Georgia complied with the federal guidelines of high-stakes testing accountability for schools coupled with the implementation of a grade level retention policy in the third and fifth grades but there is a little research examining teachers' beliefs about this grade level retention policy. Since the literature was lacking in this area, this study examined the extent to which educators feel the mandated state grade level retention policy is consistent with their own beliefs of grade level retention.

Statement of the Problem

With the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) education reform, a new phenomenon occurred which requires adherence to a federal and state mandated promotion and grade level retention policy. This policy relies heavily on the use of high-stakes testing as a major factor in promotion-grade level retention decisions. This new policy departed from former policies in that test scores--not teachers and other school personnel judgment – were a major determinant in the retention decisions.

Of concern to teachers was the implementation of a grade level retention policy that was based almost solely on high- stakes testing, not taking into account student performance in their classes. Of further concern, to teachers, was the lack of autonomy given to them to make decisions of grade level retention based on their own professional judgment and knowledge of the student. Teachers, as leaders of instruction and learning, were not able to make critical grade level retention decisions if students were unsuccessful in indicating grade level mastery based on state tests scores.

Since NCLB, the extent of teachers' beliefs concerning grade level retention and teacher grade level retention practices were unclear in the literature, considering the provisions of mandated grade level retention policies based on state test scores. The purpose of this study was to determine the beliefs of Georgia elementary teachers regarding grade level retention since the NCLB initiative. The study provides insight into the beliefs and practices that teachers have used in making student grade level retention decisions, their knowledge of grade level retention research, the impact of grade level retention on students, and grade level retention practices by teacher demographics

Research Questions

This researcher examined beliefs and practices that Georgia elementary teachers held regarding grade level retention since the No Child Left Behind initiative. In order to explore this topic, several questions were formulated:

1. What do Georgia elementary teachers believe about grade level retention as a practice?
2. How effective do Georgia elementary teachers perceive grade level retention policy to be on students?
3. To what extent are Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs about grade level retention based on grade level retention research?
4. How do Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs and the No Child Left Behind grade level retention policy compare?
5. To what extent do differences in Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs and practices vary by demographics?

Significance of the Study

A study of elementary teachers' beliefs and practices concerning grade level retention is important for several reasons. First, it is hoped that this research will add to and extend the existing body of knowledge of elementary teachers' beliefs and practices concerning student grade level student grade level retention. Second, to understand the relationships between teachers' and their beliefs and practices and the grade level retention of students can help the organization to develop a culture of best practices that correlates closely to the research literature. Third, policy makers may benefit from

research-based information that provides them the opportunity to design policy concerning students and grade level grade level promotion /retention.

Research Procedures

A descriptive quantitative research design was used in this study. The use of descriptive statistics allowed for summarizing and interpreting the results of the data collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The researcher developed an instrument designed to measure teachers' beliefs of student grade level retention (Appendix A) and to collect information that is of direct interest to the study. A 20-item questionnaire was administered to 350 teachers, with 326 teachers responding. The data from the questionnaire was used to analyze the information collected.

A small sample of teachers that was similar to those used in the actual study were administered this instrument in order to pilot test its characteristics. The data from the pilot was not included in the final study. During the pilot test, the instrument was checked for questions clarity, ambiguity, and other issues, such as time required for completion, directions, and any problems that may be experienced by individuals in responding to the questionnaire.

Definitions of Terms

Central Savannah River Area-Regional Educational Service Agency (CSRA-RESA): A state educational agency provided by the Georgia Department of Education to provide educational and technical assistance to school districts within the demographical area of the Central Savannah River Area.

Grade level retention: Grade level retention is the practice of requiring a student who has been in a given grade level for a full school year to remain at that grade level for a subsequent school year.

Placement: The assignment of a student to a specific grade level based on the determination that such placement will most likely provide the student with instruction and other services needed to succeed and progress to the next level of academic achievement.

Promotion: The assignment of a student to a higher grade level based on the student's achievement of established criteria in the current grade

Social promotion: The passing of a student from grade level to grade level without the student mastering required material as determined by district or state policy

Summary

Since the development of the schools being organized into grade levels, educators have been confronted with the issue of grade level retention. As pressure continues to establish higher standards and accountability in education, federal and state initiatives have been passed into law in the hope of improving public school accountability. The implementation of the No Child Left Behind initiative requires a strict promotion and grade level retention policy be implemented at certain grade levels. Educators have historically made grade level retention decisions based on historic tradition and professional judgment. However, much research identifies retention as harmful for overall student success in K-12 educations..

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

In 1999, President Clinton announced that it was time to end social promotion or the practice of promoting students to the next grade regardless of their academic progress. By 2002, President Bush had signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 calling for school accountability by ending social promotion and in effect requiring schools systems to reinstate grade level retention policies.

The highly visible reforms of public education in the 1980s rejected the child-centered curriculum of the late 1960s and 1970s. Get-tough reformers shared abhorrence for lowered educational standards that led to test score declines and incompetent high school graduates (Shepard & Smith, 1989). *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was the most visible of the reform reports written on the state of education in the United States. This report described the failure of the United States to lead in commerce, industry, science and technology innovation as consequences of inattention to the purposes of schooling. The fear of American students falling behind in math and science scores created a danger keenly felt by the public (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

As a result President Clinton's1999 State of the Union Address, challenged states and school districts to end social promotion and to require students to meet rigorous academic standards at key transition points in their schooling career. Three days after taking office, President George W. Bush announced his plan for the No Child Left Behind Act and signed this plan into law in 2002. The new law articulated how to improve the performance of America's public schools by demanding more accountability

for states, school districts and schools. Schools had to meet state mandated standards through annual testing of students in grades 3-8. The act mandates that all students should be successful in reading by the end of third grade; however, failure to meet this standard has forced students to be retained in-grade (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). Amidst an era in which education reform has been highly influenced by politicians rather than educational researchers, federal and state initiatives have mandated educational reform (Jimerson, Anderson & Whipple 2002; Parker, 2001).

Academic Achievement

Grade level retention has been studied for many years, and the results of most studies consistently show that students do not "catch up" when they are held back (Jackson, 1975; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001; Hemphill, 2004). Educators have used the act of retaining students as a solution for problems of academic failure and social immaturity (Niklason, 1987). Although some students do start out well after being retained, they usually fall behind or are qualified for remedial or special education assistance (Canter & Carey, 1998). In 1975, Jackson summarized available studies and concluded that there was no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade level retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties. Some of the clearest evidence regarding the effects of grade level retention comes from Holmes' (1989) meta-analysis of 63 controlled studies of grade level retention in elementary and junior high school through the mid-1980s. When promoted and retained students were compared 1-3 years later, the retained students' average levels of academic achievement were at least 0.4 standard deviations below those of promoted students. Of the 63 studies reviewed by Holmes

(1989), 54 of the studies yielded negative overall effects from grade level retention, and only nine yielded positive overall cumulative effects. Some of the studies reviewed by Holmes (1989) had better statistical controls than others. Studies in which subjects had matched IQ scores, achievement test scores, socioeconomic status, and the same sex showed larger negative effects of grade level retention on students than studies with weaker designs. Holmes (1989) concluded that, on average, retained students are worse off than their promoted counterparts when both personal adjustment and academic outcomes are concerned. In the nine studies which showed overall positive results, most of the compared results showed that retained students had received extra help through individualized programs and smaller classes, compared to promoted control students who had not been given comparable assistance. Even so, the apparent discrepancies between retained and controlled children disappeared within three years (Mantizicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; Center for Policy Research in Education, 2001).

Individual studies conducted since Holmes' meta-analysis has generally been consistent with Holmes' findings. For instance, Mantizicopoulos and Morrison (1992) compared the academic performance of 53 kindergarten students who were retained to a matched sample of kindergarten students who were promoted. The retained students performed better in the year they repeated, but once they entered first grade, their reading and math achievement was no better than the promoted group (Holmes 1989; Center for Primary Research in Education, 2001).

Shepard and Smith's (1987) research also focused on the effects of kindergarten grade level retention. In a comparison of matched groups of at risk kindergarten students who were retained versus those who were promoted, these researchers (1987) found no

difference in academic achievement. Those students who had been retained were one month ahead on reading scores, but had slightly more negative attitudes towards school: the extra year did not yield the expected boost in academic achievement or self-concept. The retained group was no better off after an additional year in kindergarten, than the promoted group, in terms of social maturity or in their attention to school work. Although some studies have shown modest academic gains for students retained in kindergarten or first grade, the gains of retained students seem to wash out in the second and third grades. In fact, the only major difference between students who had been retained versus like students who were socially promoted was the emotional stigma carried by the retained students for the rest of their lives (Parker, 2001). A number of studies noted that children recommended for grade level retention but promoted anyway did at least as well or better academically as retained children (Shepard & Smith 1989; Pierson & Connell, 1992). A 1994 (Alexander, et.al.) study of Baltimore school children concluded that grade level retention did not increase the chances of academic success. The (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 1994) investigation entailed an extensive longitudinal survey, following 800 students who entered first grade in 1982 and remained in Baltimore public schools for up to eight years. Alexander (et. al., 1994) assessed academic achievement regularly and looked at measures of self-concept, attitudes toward school, and achievement. The researchers concluded that the effects of grade level retention were plainly negative. The final report noted that for as long as student progress could be monitored, retainees fell further and further behind students who had never been retained. The research also suggests that any lasting benefits of grade level retention would be apparent within the time span observed (Alexander et.al., 1994).

Based on the Prospects Database, Karweit (1998) reported a larger scale, but short-term national study of the effects of grade level retention. Through an evaluation of the effects of Title I, Karweit (1998) was able to follow nearly 10,000 students in the first grade cohort of 1991 through their first three years of schooling. Thus, it was possible to compare the academic achievements of students who were retained in the first grade with those of students who had not been retained after both groups had completed the second grade. As is observed in previous grade level retention studies, the retained students gained substantially in the year of grade level retention relative to their poor performance in the preceding year. However, in the spring of 1992, at the end of the second grade, the retained students had fallen back relative to the promoted group of students, though not as far behind at the end of their first year in the first grade. In these respects, the Prospects data are consistent with many previous studies of grade level retention. Unfortunately, as Karweit (1998) noted, it was not possible to sort out the effects of initial selection on test scores in the spring of 1992, or to follow the cohort into higher grades.

In a review of grade level retention research spanning the last 100 years, Jimerson (2001) concluded that the results of research published during the past decade, which examined the efficacy of grade level retention on academic achievement and socioemotional adjustment, are consistent with the converging evidence and conclusions of research from the remainder of the century. The research has failed to demonstrate that grade level retention provided greater benefits to students with academic or social adjustment difficulties than does promotion to the next grade.

Over the years, the effect of grade level retention on academic achievement has been the subject of many research studies. The qualities of these studies are highly variable, and some critics have concluded that the research is so poor that no valid conclusion can be drawn regarding the benefits or harm of grade level retention (Alexander et al, 1994). Nonetheless, those who have completed more thorough reviews of the research, including meta-analyses of the data, have concluded with general certainty; the evidence on the whole does not support the use of student grade level retention (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001).

Researchers Nagaoka and Roderick (2004) conducted a study to determine the effect of grade level retention on student achievement; the study looked at students in the third and sixth grades. The comparison groups were created with closely related academic ability, and thus the comparison would measure only the relationship of grade level retention on student achievement and not other aspects of student progress. These researchers found that there were little or no positive effects from student grade level retention on student academic achievement. Furthermore, when care was taken to extract the most valid and best-designed studies, the evidence even more clearly supported promoting underachieving students over retaining them (Canter & Carey, 1998).

Evidence from controlled and longitudinal studies has shown conclusively that retaining students has little chance of improving achievement. Students who have been retained have no better academic achievement than initially comparable students who have been promoted. Although the comparative studies have shown no immediate academic benefits of grade level retention over promotion, the longitudinal research has shown other risk factors for students when retained (Smith, 2001).

Holmes (1989) also examined the characteristics of students who participated in grade level retention studies, which showed beneficial results. He found that the students who participated in the studies were more able than a traditional population of students; that all students, both retained and promoted, scored average or above average on standardized measures. In addition, Holmes (1989) found most of the positive studies were conducted in suburban settings and contained few, if any, minority students; socioeconomic levels represented lower-middle to upper-middle class. Potential failures were identified early and given intensive intervention in low teacher-student ratio classrooms during the grade level retention year. These positive studies suggested that in order for grade level retention to be successful, additional intervention strategies were required.

Furthermore, without the benefit of controlled experiments that systematically compare the performance of equally achieving students who are retained and not retained, parents and educators may think student grade level retention is successful. If a child does poorly but is promoted, his struggles in the next grade may be interpreted as evidence that he should have been retained (Shepard & Smith, 1987). If a comparison student is held back and does better in the repeated material the following year, this improvement may be interpreted as evidence that grade level retention works. If he does not do better in the succeeding grade, this lack of improvement can be interpreted as evidence that the student would have done even more poorly without the extra help (Center of Policy Research in Education, 2001). Although grade level retention is intended to prevent further school failure, many extensive research studies have shown

that grade level retention does not always give students the advantages necessary to be successful (Kenneady, 2004).

Student Drop Out Rate

Studies examining the association between grade level retention and dropping out of high school have consistently demonstrated that students who are retained are more likely to drop out of school prior to graduation than students who are not retained (Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Roderick, 1995; Shepard & Smith, 1989). Of the kindergarteners who enrolled in school in the United States in the fall of 2002, as many as 50% may expect to be retained in grade at least once before they graduate or drop out of school altogether (Alexander et.al., 1994; Akmal & Larsen, 2004). Public opinion has tended to adopt the intuitive view that grade level retention is a justifiable consequence when an evaluation of student aptitudes has shown that some students seriously lag behind their classmates (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Akmal & Larsen, 2004).

In 1994, Anderson carried out an extensive, large-scale national study of the effect of student grade level retention on high school drop out rates. He analyzed data from the 1988 National Longitudinal Study of Youth for more than 5,500 students whose school attendance was followed annually from the 1978-79 to 1985-86 school years. After extensive statistical controls for sex, race and ethnicity, social background, test scores, adolescent deviance, early transitions to adult status, and several school-related measures, students who were held back to repeat a grade were 70% more likely to drop out of high school than students who were promoted to the next grade. Besides a high drop out rate retained students have shown poor attendance rates, have increased behavior problems, suffer lower self-esteem and view grade level retention as a

punishment and a stigma, not as positive event to help them to improve their academic performance (Kenneady, 2004).

Anderson (1994); Rumberger and Larson (1998) also analyzed high school dropout rates and completion of the General Education Degree (National Educational Longitudinal Study of Youth, 1988). After controlling for social and family background, school characteristics, student engagement and academic achievement (test scores and grades) through the seventh grade, the researchers found that holding a student back before the eighth grade increased the relative odds of dropping out before the twelfth grade by a factor of 2.56. Furthermore, students who were held back before the eighth grade were four times more likely to drop out of school or receive a General Education Diploma than students who were promoted.

Review of the research clearly demonstrated that early grade level retention is one of the most powerful predictors of later school student drop out (Jimerson, et. al., 2002; National Association of School Psychologists, 2000). Jimerson's (2002) research and the National Association of School Psychologists (2000) found the likelihood of dropout to be considerably greater for students who have been retained more than once. Students who have been retained in one grade are 40% - 50% more likely to drop out than promoted students, and students who have been retained in two grades are 90% more likely to drop out.

Hauser's (2000) research noted that not counting kindergarten and the later grades of high school, meant that at least 15 - 20% of students have been held back at some time in their childhood. More notably, minorities and poor children were the most likely to be held back. Black, Hispanic, and white children enter first grade at just about the same

ages, but between entry and adolescence, about 10% of minority children academically fall behind. By ages fifteen to seventeen, 45 - 50% of Black and Hispanic youths are below the expected grade levels for their ages.

Grissom and Shepard (1989) also conducted two large-scale studies, one of which looked at the school records of a large number of African-American males in Austin, Texas. The researchers found that those with below-average achievement have a 45% chance of dropping out of school, while those with identical achievement scores who had repeated a year had a 75% chance. In the second study, Grissom and Shepard (1989) focused on a large affluent suburban school district with a low overall dropout rate; and found that the same statistical pattern held true. Grissom and Sheppard concluded that students who repeated a grade were 20 - 30% more likely to drop out of school than their peers with equally poor achievement who were not retained. Whenever high school dropouts and graduates are compared, it is the case that a substantially larger proportion of the dropouts have repeated a grade. However, this observation has had little influence on school promotion policies (Grissom & Shepard, 1989).

Grissom and Shepard (1989) analyzed whether it was the grade level retention decision itself or poor student achievement which increased the risk of students dropping out. When student background, sex, and achievement were controlled, there remained a significant effect of student grade level retention on dropping out. The magnitude of the effect varied from one school system to the next; although causal-modeling techniques can never produce unequivocal conclusions from correlation data, the consistency of findings across many analyses supported the conclusion that grade level retention adds to the risk of dropping out. Even the most advantaged groups, those who were least likely to

leave school, experienced a significant increase in dropout rate when they were a year too old for their grade level (Grissom & Shepard, 1989). Shepard's (1989) completed analysis determined that grade level retention accelerated school dropout. The researchers reported that the negative effect of student grade level retention on the school dropout rate was even stronger and more consistent than the effect on academic achievement.

Parents and educators have logically related grade level retention as a symptom of poor achievement. Teachers do not understand that student grade level retention, not achievement, is the real cause of students dropping out of school (Grissom & Shepard, 1989). For example, Grissom and Shepard (1989) reported that grade level retention accelerated school dropout based on data for several localities, including the 1979 to 1989 freshman classes from the Chicago Public Schools. In a more recent analysis of data from Chicago Public Schools, Temple, Reynolds, and Miedel (1998) noted a relationship that grade level retention during K – 8th grades increased dropout by 12 percentage points after controlling for social background, program participation, school moves, and special education placement.

Teacher Implementation of District Policies

Of all the major issues in education, grade level retention represents the clearest example of non-communication between research and practice. No one would argue that schools should allow students to move through the grades without learning, yet there is widespread disagreement over what to do about the problem. In 1996, Sakowicz (1996) determined that some grade level retention policies appeared to operate primarily as signals shaping faculty attitudes and beliefs about the proper basis for action rather than directly controlling their decision making. Moreover, the signals provided by any given

policy depended upon the general cultural belief systems that characterize and influence broader organizational patterns within school systems. Because school staffs hold different beliefs and norms about the most appropriate ways of dealing with various behavior and achievement problems, they have construed identical policy provisions in quite different ways. As a result, it was impossible to predict, with any degree of confidence, what effect any particular action would have (Sakowicz, 1996).

The American Federation of Teachers (2000) surveyed 85 of the 820 largest school districts concerning their promotion policies. The 85 districts were located in 32 states and varied in size from more than a million students to just fewer than 10,000. All 85 districts responded to the survey. Seven of the districts had no formal written policy, and decisions about promotion and grade level retention were left to the discretion of individual schools in the districts. The remaining 78 districts had developed formally written school board policies which ranged from three paragraph statements to 30 page documents. In reviewing the policies it was noted that about 1/3 of them referred to curriculum guidelines; the language was often vague and not useful for ensuring that teachers and administrators had a commonly agreed upon expectation about satisfactory performance. Other evidence that was used for decisions regarding grade level retention included teacher-assigned grades, standardized test scores, social and emotional development, attendance and teacher recommendations. The significance of these factors varied depending on the grade level. Another problem concerned who made the decision to retain the student; parents, teachers, counselors and sometimes school based committees were involved in making the grade level retention decisions. However, in the

majority of policies, the principal was given the autonomy to make the final decision (American Federation of Teachers, 2000; Kenneady, 2004).

Most of the school districts did not have an agreed-upon standard of performance that supported a uniform grading policy. Grades meant different things to different schools and to different teachers, and as a result, grades were an uncertain guide to promotion/ retention decisions. The U.S. Department of Education (1999) did a study of eighth-grade students, which indicted that more than 31% of them received mostly “A” s and another 38% received mostly ” B” s. However, when those grades were compared with student performance on an external math and English exam, it was clear that an “A” in a school with high concentrations of lower socio-economic students did not represent the same high level of performance as an “A” in schools where only a few students came from low socio-economic families.

The American Federation of Teachers (2000) also found that a student’s emotional and social development played a greater role in decisions made at the elementary level than at the upper grade level. At the elementary level, 46% of the policies indicated that grade level retention may have been based in part on developmental or readiness factors. The policies listed social and emotional maturity, physical factors, and age as important criteria to consider in making decisions about the grade level retention or promotion of students.

Attendance was a factor taken into account in decision making at all school levels. Some of the policies indicated the number of days or the percentage of the school year that students must be in attendance (American Federation of Teachers, 2000). Some of the policies that were reviewed explicitly indicated that teachers’ recommendations,

based on observations, student performance on teacher developed test, homework, and other academic indicators, could be used as evidence for making a decision on promoting or retaining a student. This sanction given to teachers only applied at the elementary level (American Federation of Teachers, 2000).

Standardized testing also plays a substantial role in determining promotion and grade level retention decisions for students. States have implemented the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act, using standardized or criterion referenced tests to determine promotion and grade level retention criteria for students at certain grade levels (American Federation of Teachers, 2000). School districts using promotion gateways have known that while such policies can pay off for the majority of students, several cautions should be heeded (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). Findings regarding early grade level retention have indicated that promotional gateways should not be introduced in early grades. Rather, student progress should be closely tracked from the earliest grades, with swift re-mediation provided to students who are lagging (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). The decision to promote a student should not be based on the results of a single test. Standards developed by several professional societies condemned the use of a single administration of a single assessment to make high stakes decisions. Therefore, provisions should be made for students to take accountability tests more than once if necessary and for local educators to use additional evidence in making promotion decisions (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000).

Since No Child Left Behind, in Georgia, when a student does not perform at grade level on the Criterion Referenced Competency Test, he or she is given the opportunity to be retested with appropriate section(s) of the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test(s).

Furthermore, a parent or guardian or teacher may appeal the decision to retain the student; next the school principal or designee shall establish a placement committee to consider the appeal. The placement committee shall review the overall academic achievement of the student in light of the performance. The decision to promote must be the unanimous decision of the placement committee (Georgia State Department of Education Policy Division, 2003).

Most school systems' policies are so vague that the brunt of the decision-making falls on the individual teacher (Tanner & Galis, 1997). The teacher considers the child's abilities, social and emotional development, physical size, and home situation as important elements of decision making. The teacher who decides to retain does so with the best interest of the child in mind (Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

After conducting a longitudinal study of 800 Baltimore children, Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber (1994) contended that grade level retention appeared to be a reasonably effective practice. They argued that spending two years in a grade does not bring retained students up to acceptable levels of performance, but most youngsters who are held back do much better the second time through a grade, and for several years afterward continue to show academic improvement.

Student grade level retention has continued to flourish despite the amount of research that emphasizes the negative effects of student grade level retention (Holmes, 1989; Niklason, 1987; Shepard & Smith, 1987, 1989). Many researchers have agreed that grade level retention has not been found to be beneficial. Shepard and Smith (1987) explained that this discrepancy existed because grade level retention appeared to be effective. The majority of retained students make some progress the second half of the

year in grade. However, just as much or more progress would have been made without grade level retention.

Some teachers expressed concern that grade level retention was mandated by policy and by the curriculum, and that such mandates were to blame for student failures, constraining a teacher's flexibility to make appropriate decisions related to content, pedagogy, and student achievement (Sakowicz, 1996; Kenneady, 2004). Tomchin and Impara (1992) noted that teachers do adhere to curriculum and policy standards, feeling that adherence to the standards are a means by which they are judged. Teachers believed that their reputations rested on the kinds of students they sent on to the next grade.

Well meaning leaders throughout the country have pushed a huge national experiment of eliminating social promotion, which only promotes student grade level retention. The evidence that implementation of a strict promotion / retention policy would increase student achievement is not in line with research. In fact, there has been little credible, large-scale research of its success as an educational policy (Hauser, 2000).

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) has been a major reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was it was enacted in 1965. It redefines the federal role in K-12 education to help improve the academic achievements of American students. Part of the major provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) have required assessments in each state that measure what children know and learn in reading and math in grades 3-8. Student progress and achievement will measured according to tests that will be given to every child, every year. Students also have to meet or exceed the state level performance standards on the CRCT in reading and mathematics in first and second grade to be promoted, plus be recommended for promotion by the

classroom teacher. One school district required 70% mastery on the language arts and math essential skills as identified on the county report card. In the five school districts, students had to meet or exceed state performance standards and meet required academic standards set by the county (Georgia Department of Education – Policy division, 2003).

Teacher's Knowledge of Grade Level Retention

Researchers such as Holmes & Matthews (1984), Holmes (1989), and Shepard and Smith (1987, 1989) have condemned the practice of grade level retention for several decades. Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) have noted that that there is no topic in public education that suffers from a greater divide between the views of researchers and the views of practitioners and the public. The existing research overwhelmingly points to negative effects of grade level retention. Yet the practice of grade level retention has continued to be used by school districts throughout the country as a means of intervention for improving student achievement (Meisels & Liaw, 1993).

Jimerson's (2001) findings from a 21-year longitudinal study which began in 1971 provided evidence supporting the position that teachers continued to retain students at grade level despite cumulative research evidence that showed the potential for negative effects consistently outweighed any positive outcomes. Almost two decades ago, in controlled studies, Shepard and Smith (1987) concluded that students who repeat a grade are consistently worse off in academic achievement and personal adjustment than similar students who were promoted. Although past studies have apparently demonstrated the ineffectiveness of grade level retention, this practice continues to demonstrate incredible resilience, as evidenced by the fact that teachers still question whether or not to retain a student (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). Research suggests that although teachers play a key

role in the grade level retention decision making process, they are often unaware of the conclusions of grade level retention research (Tanner & Combs, 1993; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Teachers' perspectives regarding the efficacy of grade level retention are generally limited, as they are usually only aware of student outcomes in the immediate years following grade level retention decisions (Tanner & Combs, 1993; Jimerson et. al., 2002).

One rationale for grade level retention is the supposition that achievement levels of students are enhanced through the repetition of only partially learned material; therefore, grade level retention ensures greater mastery of subject matter and provides the opportunity for the student to learn more of the basic skills (Tanner & Galis, 1997). In a study conducted by Tanner and Combs (1993) teachers in the sample agreed that grade level retention was effective in helping students improve their academic performance. This finding contradicts the literature that has determined grade level retention for improved academics offered little, if any, advantage to students (Smith & Shepard, 1989).

Despite the research that has been formulated (Smith & Shepard 1989; Roderick 1995; Holmes & Mathews, 1984) discouraging the use of student grade level retention, the favorable attitudes of many teachers, administrators, and parents toward grade level retention may be partially understood by examining the source of their information. Most educators consider how the children in their schools do the following year and possibly the year after, but do not examine the outcomes of retained students through high school (Byrnes, 1989). If a retained student displayed improvement the year following grade level retention, this provided further single anecdotal evidence that helps support the

educator's decision to retain, especially in the absence of comparisons with a matched group of students (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

In addition to teachers, other educational professionals involved in the decision-making process, such as administrators, counselors, and school psychologists, also should be apprised of the research on grade level retention that has emerged during the past decade. In particular, research during the past decade has suggested the popular belief that it is better to retain a child in kindergarten or first grade rather than upper grades is unfounded (Jimerson, 2001). Research has also suggested that elementary grade level retention may result in temporary achievement gains, but often these effects taper off and the students eventually fall behind or show no gains relative to their socially promoted peers (Jimerson et. al., 2002).

There is limited information on national statistics toward the number of students retained (Beiger & Gillis, 1985). Yet, Ostrowski (1987) revealed that 1/3 of National Educational Association members surveyed reported that they had retained students. Teachers are involved in day-to-day interactions with students, and as a result, hold a key position in the grade level retention decision. They are perhaps the most important professionals in the decision to retain or promote (Tanner & Combs, 1993; Alexander et. al., 1994; Entwisle & Dauber, 1994). Tanner and Combs (1993) conducted a study in which they randomly selected a national sample of 880 first through fifth grade teachers. The focus of the research was to determine teachers' perceptions and understandings regarding grade level retention. The overall finding showed that there exists an unwritten policy among teachers that grade level retention of students is beneficial. One finding revealed that teachers advocated grade level retention to improve academic performance;

another confirmed that teachers believed in the practice of grade level retention to facilitate student growth and maturity and to increase a student's success in learning. However, it has also been reported that teachers do not believe that grade level retention is a motivating incentive for student achievement (Tanner & Combs, 1993). Furthermore, teachers appear to be divided about the effect of grade level retention on student's self-concept, and whether grade level retention for the purpose of an extra year for growth and maturity is justified (Tanner & Combs, 1993). In a survey of views on grade repetition, teachers and principals described common characteristics of retained children as under motivated, developmentally and emotionally immature, and consider these reasons as appropriate rationale for grade level retention (Jimerson, et. al., 2002).

A number of researchers that have conducted and examined studies over at least a 60-year period have found that there is little gained by students being retained in a grade (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Shepard & Smith, 1989). Widespread concern about grade level retention, and agreement among scholars regarding negative outcomes, causes one to expect that the practice of grade level retention would be discontinued. Yet there is a confusing contradiction, because many of the same studies that espouse the lack of support for grade level retention have also indicated that the practice is rather common (Natale, 1991). In trying to determine the disparity between the findings of the research and the practice in schools, studies by Shepard & Smith (1989) and Manly (1988) reported that teachers' attitudes toward grade level retention were dependent on practical knowledge rather than on what research stated about grade level retention Manly's (1988) study further confirmed the belief that teachers' knowledge of grade level retention was related to education research on the topic. The teachers stated

only the good effects grade level retention had on the student during the grade level retention year.

Teachers' Beliefs

Teachers can spend up to seven hours a day with a student and their opinions on a student's academic abilities can have a major influence when determining whether to retain or promote a student (McCollum et. al., 1998). The majority of published studies and decades of research indicate that there is usually little to be gained, and much harm that maybe done through retaining students in grade. Yet many educators continue to use grade level retention as a way to improve student achievement and claim that it produces positive results (Xia & Glennie, 2005).

A reoccurring theme from a current review of the literature on this topic is that teachers believe grade level retention is a viable option for students who do not meet academic standards. Teachers agreed that grade level retention was an effective practice in maintaining standards at each grade level (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Often teachers choose grade level retention over promotion because they do not want to be questioned by a colleague over the student's lack of preparation for the next grade level (House, 1991).

Pouliot (1999) conducted a study in which he surveyed teachers' belief system concerning grade level retention of students for academic achievement. An analysis of the questionnaire data indicated that teachers believe grade level retention is an acceptable school practice and an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in the next higher grades. The study stated that most of the teachers believed that grade level retention did not harm students' self-concept. The results of the study

found that teachers' beliefs were rooted in the culture of the school curriculum and students must reach the stated goals of instruction. Teachers often view grade level retention as a means of reducing the range of abilities and achievement levels in classrooms. Teachers also believe that a more homogeneous grouping of students within grade allows a better use of educational resources and helps to achieve higher educational outcomes (Xia & Gilennie, 2005).

Tomchin & Impara (1992) used a multi -method approach to examine teachers' beliefs about grade level retention. Questionnaire responses indicted that teachers believe grade level retention is an acceptable school practice that prevents students from facing daily failure and to work harder. Teachers also felt students should be retained on factors such as maturity and ability. House (1991) reported in one study of a large urban district 65% of teachers believed a child should be retained if he or she did not master basic skills. Di Maria, 1999) found that 70% of teachers felt students should be retained if they had not mastered grade level skills. Patterson (1996) also found that teachers believed grade level retention was beneficial to the student. However, most all teachers agreed that grade level retention was not harmful in grades K-3 but they disagreed about the impact on students in 4-7. Teachers of grade 4-7 were less likely to retain students and less likely to agree on what characteristics warrant grade level retention (Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

School Grade Level Retention Policies

The past few years have seen an increase in the degree to which students as well as teachers and administrators, are held accountable for the achievement of high academic goals. For students, this increased accountability has primarily taken the form of performance on state and district level assessments and in a growing number of states,

promotion to the next grade level on the basis of the results of these assessments and other indicators (Information Clearinghouse, 1999).

States' polices regarding student promotion and grade level retention vary significantly in the combination of their criteria for grade level retention such as: state/district assessment scores, classroom performance, which grades are specified for grade level retention based on high stakes testing, which subjects are singled out to determine grade level retention. States' policies also vary at which level of authority rests the decisions for grade level retention. It can vary from the state legislation, the state board of education, the local school board, the individual student's teacher, or a combination of the above (Information Clearinghouse, 1999). Policies can generally be examined in the categories of students' scores on a state and/or district assessment, determined both by state board and local school board requirements (Hedht, et.al., 1992).

Arizona law requires a district to create student/promotion grade level retention polices which include consideration of students' district assessment scores, but other criteria are also to be used. California law allows grade level retention based on state assessment results as well as students' classroom performance. Colorado law requires grade level retention based on reading scores only while Illinois bases grade level retention on reading mathematics at designated grade levels (Information Clearinghouse, 1999). Georgia law bases grade level retention of a 3rd grader on achieving grade level in reading and grade level retention of a 5th grader on achieving grade level in reading and mathematics on the states Criterion-Referenced Competency Test. (Georgia Department of Education, 2004). Georgia has established a placement committee to make decisions concerning a student who does not meet expectations on the Criterion Referenced

Competency Test. This committee shall be comprised of the principal or designee, the student's parent or guardian and the teachers(s) in the content area(s) in which the student did not achieve grade level on the Criterion Referenced Competency (Georgia Department of Education, 2004).

Some school districts have not only implemented mandated grade level retention policies but have added to their grade level retention polices by providing extra help earlier. Schools districts are implementing full-day kindergartens and preschools, new literacy programs, expanded summer school and guidelines for closer student supervision (National Research and Development Centers, 1999). In Chicago Public Schools teachers will be required to write and follow a personalized learning plan for each retained student. Previously retained 4th- and 7th-graders will be required to attend summer school, and the district's 320 school-based reading specialists will work with classroom teachers on strategies to help retained students (Hedht, et.al., 1992). A study conducted by the National Research and Development Center (1999), examined strategies that school districts have adopted to deal with young children who may not be ready for school. These strategies typically include delayed entrance to school for a year or providing special services, such as a transitional first grade or developmental kindergarten.

Demographics of Retained Students

Research by the National Association of School Psychologists (1998) noted that some groups of children are more likely to be retained than others. Those at the highest risk of grade level retention are male, African American and/or Hispanic, have a late birthday, are developmentally delayed, have attention problems, live in poverty, come

from a single parent household, have parents with low educational attainment, or have changed schools frequently. Retained students generally have lower achievement particularly in reading and language arts relative to the average student in a classroom; however, there are typically peers who are equally low-achieving but promoted (Jimerson & Kaufman 2003). Thus it is important to consider other characteristics of retained students, because evidence indicates that low achievement alone is not a distinguishing characteristic between retained and promoted students (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003).

It has been found that parental IQ scores do play a role in the probability of a child being retained in that children who have been retained are more likely to have parents with lower IQ scores than a matched group of promoted children. In addition, parental involvement in school and parent's attitudes toward their child's education plays significant roles in determining whether a student will be retained or not. Research has indicated that parents who are more involved and advocate for their child are less likely to have their child repeat a grade (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003).

Nationally, no statistics are kept on grade level retention, but reasonable estimates based on census data suggest that as many as 1/3 of all students have been retained at least once by the time they reach high school (Thomas et. al., 1992). For males and minorities, grade level retention is even more common. In high schools nationwide, the grade level retention rate for males is about ten percentage points higher than for females (National Association of School Psychologists, 1998; Thompson & Magliaro, 1998). In the earlier grades, grade level retention rates are similar among whites, African Americans and Hispanics, but by high school the rate is about fifteen percentage points higher for African Americans and Hispanics than for whites (Thomson & Cunningham,

2000; Thomas, 2000). For African-American males, repeating a grade is the single strongest predictor of leaving school before graduation (Whipple, 2002 & Akmal & Larsen, 2004). Students with a history of behavioral or disruptive problems, and students with a pattern of absenteeism that has caused them to fall below grade level, are at high risk of being retained and eventually dropping out of school (Di Maria, 1999). Students with limited English language skills and limited resources for them to achieve will also be at risk for grade level retention and may eventually drop out of school (Di Maria, 1999; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003).

Students with low socioeconomic status are also at high risk for grade level retention. Many of these students could be victims of low birth weight and poor nutrition, and may have parents who are unwilling or unable to intercede for them (Robertson, 1997). Many of these students attend public schools that lack the resources to provide them with the special attention they need for success (Renchler, 1993; DeBrayshe et al, 1993).

Through research, the practice of retaining academically delayed students has been shown to be ineffective in meeting their needs. Children who are the most delayed are more likely to be harmed by grade level retention. Particularly at the first grade level, large percentages of retained children are either subsequently retained again or are placed in special education (National Association of School Psychologist, 1998). However, despite the evidence, published estimates indicate that the rate of grade level retention has increased by approximately 40% over the last twenty years, with as many as 15% of all American students are held back each year, and 30 - 50% percent held back at least once before ninth grade. The highest grade level retention rates are found among poor, minority,

inner city youth (National Association of School Psychologists, 1998). At least 15% of pupils retained are between the ages of six to eight and ages fifteen to seventeen (National Research Council, 1999). Grade level retention rates are much higher for males and members of minority groups than for females or the white majority. Overall, grade level retention rates have grown substantially over the past two decades (Hauser, 2000).

Socially differentiated patterns of grade level retention have also developed. While females progress through school most rapidly African-American males are most often held back in a grade. By ages 15 to 17, about 30% of white females, and approximately 50% of African-American males are at least one grade level below their peers. Rates of grade level retention at those ages have remained high even though school dropout has declined (Hauser, et. al, 2000). Hauser (2000) outlined what is known about rates, trends, and differentials in grade level retention in the United States. Sound data are scarce, but current grade level retention rates are much higher than is generally believed. Grade level retention rates are highly variable across states. These rates are unusually high in the District of Columbia, where students are largely African American. In states such as South Carolina and Georgia, which also include relatively large minority populations, grade level retention rates are also unusually high in the early primary grades and high school years (Hauser, 2000).

Grade level retention has become pervasive in American schools. No national data are available to tell us the cumulative risk of grade level retention across grades 1 to 12, but some states provide enough data to make such estimates (National Research Council, 1999). For example, Texas has regularly reported the percentages of students who are retained at each grade level, and the rates are reported separately by race and sex.

Grade level retention rates have been high since 1990, well before the new initiatives to end social promotion. For example, if all Texas students were subject to the failure rates of 1996-97, 17% would fail at least once between the first and eighth grades, and 32% would fail at least once between the ninth grade and high school completion (Texas Education Agency, 1998); among African-American students, the corresponding rates are 20% and 42%, and among Hispanic students 21% and 44% (Hauser, 2000).

There are also strong relationships between race, socioeconomic status (SES), and the use of tests for promotion and grade level retention on mainly low socioeconomic students. For such students, dropping out of school early between the eighth and tenth grades was

6 – 8% more likely than for students from schools that were similar except for the high stakes test (Edley & Wald, 2002).

Perhaps the adoption of high-stakes test policies for individuals serves the larger social purpose of ensuring that promotion from one grade to the next reflects acquisition of certain knowledge and skills. Such tests may also motivate less able students and teachers to work harder or to focus their attention on the knowledge domains that test developers' value most highly (Shepard and Smith, 1989). But if grade level retention in grade is not beneficial for students, as the research suggests, it is cause for concern that economically deprived students and minority students are disproportionately subject to any negative consequences caused by grade level retention (National Association of School Psychologists, 1998; Thomas, 2000).

However, an independent evaluation of Chicago's policies conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that the students who had failed at the

third, sixth and eighth grade levels continued to achieve very poorly on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, even after summer school and grade level retention. The evaluation also showed that students who failed the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, but were nevertheless promoted, performed better than those who failed it but were retained (Roderick, et. al. 1999). Such results once again illustrate that grade level retention typically has no lasting educational benefit.

Alternatives to Student Grade Level Retention

With pressure increasing on states to hold students accountable for performance and to end social promotion educators feel they have few choices. The results of both student grade level retention and social promotion policies are unacceptable. Student grade level retention has created high dropout rates, especially for poor and minority students, and social promotion has allowed inadequate knowledge and skills for students. Neither result closes the learning gap for low-achieving students, nor is an appropriate response to the academic needs of students who have not mastered required coursework (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

There is widespread agreement among the public that schools need to set higher standards for what students should know and be able to do to be promoted. The first step in taking responsibility for ending social promotion requires states and districts to develop clear and challenging standards for all students. There must be realistic objectives for students to meet performance standards at key grades (U. S. Department of Education, 1999). Thompson and Cunningham's (2000) findings indicate that promotion gateways should not be introduced in early grades. Student progress should be closely tracked from the earliest grades, with swift remediation provided to students who have

fallen behind. Intervention strategies appear to be particularly crucial from kindergarten through grade two (Shepard & Smith, 1998; Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). Some of the intensive strategies being used at this level include preschool expansion, giving children who are seriously behind their age-level peer's opportunities to accelerate their instruction, and putting children in smaller classes with expert teachers (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). Such strategies are being implemented in school districts across the county. However, data on their effectiveness are not yet available (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Moreover, educators and leaders must take advantage of research-based practices to enhance student achievement; these include flexible student grouping, keeping teachers and students together for more than one year, cooperative learning, tutoring, and reducing class size. Schools must also strengthen learning opportunities for students with limited English proficiency, migrant students, and students with disabilities by providing them with appropriate educational services and accommodating their unique needs (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Programs that extend learning time, such as summer school, after-school programs and year-round schooling, can help prepare students academically and developmentally to move to the next grade (U. S. Department of Education, 1999). Intervention should focus on only those high-priority skills and concepts required for promotion and move on just as soon as data has indicated mastery (Parker, 2001). To help overcome the negative effect of grade level retention, retained elementary students could be placed in combination or ungraded classes with promoted classmates allowing them to remain with their classmates while making up the prior year's standards,

allowing students to be promoted at any point in the year without changing classrooms once the requirements for promotion have been met (Parker, 2001). Mandatory summer school is a central feature of the efforts to end social promotion in Chicago, New Haven, Boston, and Washington D.C. (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). For students who still have difficulty meeting standards despite prevention and early intervention efforts, repeating a grade with the same instruction over again has been found to be ineffective (Shepard & Smith, 1989). These students need alternatives that help them develop the skills they need to achieve, but intervention services usually diminish in the upper grades, just as these students face tough challenges and peer pressure that can seriously affect their academic lives (Hauser, 2000).

Establishing effective high school transition and dropout prevention programs can help. For example, the Long Beach, California Unified School District assigns eighth graders who fail two or more classes to the Long Beach Preparatory Academy, a year-long alternative program that has smaller classes than regular ninth-grade classes. Counselors work closely with students and their families. In the program's first year of operation, almost 90% of participants earned promotion from the ninth grade (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

The promotion and grade level retention policy for Georgia provides for some remedial assistance. A plan for accelerated, differentiated or additional instruction must be developed for each student who does not achieve grade level performance in grades 3, 5, or 8, on the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (s). After the placement committee has met, a plan of continuous assessment during the subsequent school year will be developed in order to monitor the progress of the student. Each principal or designee

shall establish a student support team for each student in grades 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7 who does not achieve grade level on reading and/or mathematics sections of the Criterion Referenced Competency Test or does not meet other local requirements. The student support team shall determine if a child shall be retained or promoted based on a review of the overall academic achievement of the students as well as the student's Criterion-Referenced Competency Test performance. The team will also develop an accelerated, differentiated, or an additional instruction plan for each student who does not achieve grade level on the reading and/or mathematics sections of the Criterion Referenced Competency Test and develop a plan of continuous assessment during the subsequent school year in order to monitor the progress of the student.

Neither promoting students when they are not prepared nor simply retaining them in the same grade is the right response to low student achievement, and ending social promotions by holding more students back is the wrong choice. Students who are required to repeat a year are more likely than other students to eventually drop out, and few catch up academically with their peers. The right approach is to ensure that more students are prepared to meet challenging academic standards in the first place (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Kenneady's (2004) research noted specific strategies as effective alternatives to in-grade grade level retention. Teachers need to be provided professional development to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to teach a wider range of students to meet standards. School structures could be redesigned to support more intensive learning, and students need to be provided the support and services when they are needed.

Tanner & Combs (1993) emphasized that research findings must be effectively and clearly communicated to teachers and education policy makers in order to make informed decisions. Similarly, Tomchin and Impara (1992) believe that is essential for schools to implement staff development in which teachers examine their own beliefs about grade level retention and are presented with research about the short and long-term effects of grade level retention while being trained in appropriate classroom intervention strategies. The policy options available to educators and state and local leaders are not limited to social promotion or grade level retention. There are options for educators and state and local leaders, which prove to be promising strategies to prevent academic failure and interventions when students need extra assistance in order to meet higher standards (Roderick, 1995; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). No long-term outcomes from methodologically sound studies have been presented to support grade level retention as an intervention. It would seem that the cumulative evidence emerging during the past thirty years would discourage the use of grade level retention among education professionals (Roderick, 1995).

In summary, extensive research indicates that retaining students in the same grade has not fostered student academic achievement. Studies have shown that grade level retention negatively impacts students' behavior, attitude, and attendance, and has created a marked increase of drop out rates (Canter& Carey, 1998; Anderson, Whipple & Jimmerson, 2002). The research has noted that the highest grade level retention rates are found among poor, minority, inner-city youth and students from single-parent households. Statistics also indicate that males are retained more often than are females, and African-American and Hispanics have been retained more than white students (Edley

& Wald, 2002). Some studies have shown some gains in student achievement the first year after grade level retention. Unfortunately, the gains are small and have diminished within three years.

The reason for grade level retention varies with teachers and with each district's promotion policies. In recent years, promotion policies have been related to a state's testing requirements for promotion. Another underlying reason for grade level retention has been the perception of mediocrity in public education. Grade level retention has been a strategy that projects the aura of cracking down on students who are not achieving academically (Kenneady, 2004).It would seem logical for school systems to require research demonstrating the effectiveness of grade level retention as an intervention, which facilitates subsequent academic success. However, despite the findings, many educators and policy makers consider grade level retention a good way to motivate students and to offer those who do not meet appropriate standards another opportunity to learn the material (Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004). Decades of research on student grade level retention has found that repeating a grade generally does not improve students' performance, and in the long run, increases their chances of dropping out of school, yet the popularity of such policies has continued to grow among politicians (Catalysts, 2004). Much of the research has provided alternatives for student achievement without retaining students (Nagaoka et. al., 2004). School systems should develop other options to grade level retention by focusing heavily on research-based interventions (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000).

Chapter 3

Methods

Introduction

In the past, teacher beliefs and professional judgments played a large role in decisions about individual students. More recently, in the context of high-stakes testing, states and school districts have begun formalizing and tightening requirements for promotion, using the data from high stakes testing to make decisions concerning student promotion. The result of this policy shift has been to limit teacher discretion to make decisions concerning students who are struggling academically. The available literature lacks information regarding the relationship between Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs about grade level retention and the state mandated promotion/grade level retention policy implemented through the No Child Left Behind [NCLB] initiative. Thus, the purpose of this study was to provide a description of Georgia elementary teacher's beliefs and practices about student grade level retention in relation to the NCLB promotion/grade level retention mandate.

Research Questions

This study examined the beliefs and practices that Georgia elementary teachers held regarding grade level retention since the No Child Left Behind initiative. In order to explore this topic, several questions were formulated.

1. What do Georgia elementary teachers believe about grade level retention as a practice?
2. How effective do Georgia elementary teachers perceive grade level retention policy to be on students?

3. To what extent are Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs about grade level retention based on grade level retention research?

4. How do Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs and the No Child Left Behind grade level retention policy compare?

5. To what extent do differences in Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs and practices vary by demographics?

Population and Sample of the Study

In order to gather data on Georgia teachers' beliefs about grade level retention a representative sample of teachers was chosen. Participants were selected from elementary schools in the Central Savannah River Area-Regional Educational Service Agency. Selected counties in this regional area represent urban, suburban, and rural populations and provide representation of the different population demographics and geographical areas required to conduct this research. Second through fifth grade teachers were selected for this study based on the impact of high stakes testing on students in these grade levels since No Child Left Behind. A survey was prepared to gather data from approximately 100 subjects for each major subgroup and twenty to fifty subjects in each minor subgroup (Macmillan & Schumacher, 2001). Table 1 show the number of participants in each grade levels 2 though 5 and by the urban, suburban, and rural location of teachers that participated in the study.

Table 1: Urban, Suburban and Rural Teachers from Grades 2, 3, 4, 5

Geographical Location	2nd*	3rd*	4th*	5th*
Urban	35	22	19	42
Suburban	22	26	25	23
Rural	35	44	44	42

Table 2 shows the percent of teaching experience for Georgia elementary teachers and the population sample. The teachers' experience ranges from zero, a first year beginning teacher, to 30 or more years of teaching. The number of Georgia teachers with 0-4 years of teaching experience was 5.1% greater than teachers in the population sample. Also, in the 30 years or more experience group there was a 2.9 % percent difference with Georgia teachers having more years of experience than the population sample. The other experience groups were similar in the percent of Georgia teachers and the population sample experience level.

Table 2:

Teaching Experience of Georgia Elementary Teachers and Population Sample

Experience Group	Georgia Teachers Percent	Sample Population Percent
0-4 years	23.8	18.7
5-9 years	23.3	24.9
10-14 years	17.4	16.3
15-19 years	12.1	11.0
20-24 years	9.7	11.3
25-29 years	8.2	7.3
30 years or more	7.7	4.8

Table 3 shows frequency and percent of the grade level distribution for Georgia elementary teachers and the sample populations. Georgia elementary teachers and the population sample were proportionally aligned. The largest percentage difference was noted in the 2nd grade with Georgia elementary teachers having 1.6 % more teachers in that grade level.

Table 3

Grade Levels of Georgia Elementary Teachers and Population Sample

Grade Level	Georgia Teachers		Sample Population	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Grade 2	6,437	27.4	84	25.8
Grade 3	6,452	27.4	87	26.7
Grade 4	5,497	23.4	69	21.2
Grade 5	5,124	21.8	70	21.5

Table 4 notes the percent of Georgia Elementary teachers and the sample population level in terms of earned degrees. There is an 11.0% greater difference in the number of Georgia teachers with bachelors degrees compared to teachers in the sample population. The sample population has 13.2% more teachers with and masters degrees and above than Georgia teachers. Therefore, the sample population degree level does not proportionally reflect the degree level of Georgia elementary teachers.

Table 4

Degree Level of Georgia Elementary Teachers and Population Sample

Degree Level	Georgia Teachers	Sample Population
	Percent	Percent
Bachelors	43.4	30.4
Masters and Above	56.1	69.3

Instrument

This quantitative study is designed to determine whether the promotion-grade level retention policies established in Georgia as a result of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are viewed as being supportive or limiting by Georgia's teachers. A search of the literature did not yield a survey to meet the needs of this study. Thus a survey was developed and designed to measure teachers' beliefs, concepts of grade level retention, teachers' grade level retention practices, and grade level retention policy (See Appendix B). Teachers' grade level, highest degree earned and years of teaching experience were requested in order to explore relationships between teacher characteristics and grade level retention beliefs. The population for this study was Georgia elementary teachers and the survey approach allowed the researcher to generalize from a selected sample to this population (Creswell, 1994). The data that are gathered were used to describe characteristics of the selected sample and inferences can be made about some characteristics, attitudes, or behaviors of the population (Creswell, 1994).

The researcher used a survey instrument, for this study, based on three primary reasons: versatility, efficiency and generalizibility (Cresswell, 1994). The versatility of the survey allows for almost any problem or question to be investigated. Using a survey is an efficient approach to gather data on many variables without substantial increases in time or cost (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Surveys provide for generalizability across the population, in which subgroups or different contexts can be compared. A small sample can be selected from a larger population in ways that permit generalizations to the population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

The researcher used existing literature for guidance in developing survey items that focused on the goals of the study. In formulating the survey, the researcher consulted Dr. Smith, an Augusta Sate University professor, who specializes in quantitative research and survey design to assure that items on the questionnaire were clear, concise, and unbiased. The items were based on a review of current literature regarding grade level retention and policies governing the practice. Also, to establish validity, other professionals in the department of education reviewed the survey. Suggested corrections were made. The survey was then piloted using a sample of thirty teachers similar to those used in the actual study. During the pilot study, participants were asked to note any issues with clarity, ambiguity in sentences, time for completion, directions, and any other problems experienced while responding to the survey (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The survey was then revised to rectify any issues cited by the pilot participants.

Reliability was controlled by adding restatement questions to the survey. Questions 10 and 13 are restatement questions for teacher concepts, questions 3 and 4 plus questions 9 and 11 are restatement questions for teacher beliefs. Questions 7 and 14 are restatement questions for teacher policies and questions 1 and 2 are restatement questions for teacher practices. Cohen's kappa was used to analyze the reliability of the two correlated restatement questions in the survey. The survey contains 22 items. The last two questions provided information on student demographics that can be used for extended research in the future.

The survey instrument (Appendix *B)* is linked to each of the research questions through item analysis (See Figure 1). Survey items 1 and 2 are all statements of grade level retention as a concept and measured teachers' concepts concerning student grade

level retention. Items 3, 4, 7, 8, 12, 14 are all belief statements about grade level retention and compared the degree of teachers' beliefs of grade level retention to NCLB. In addition to a scale for items 3 and 4, the researcher also added an open-ended response component (items 3a and 4a). The open-ended response component allowed the researcher to gather data about reasons for teachers' beliefs. These reasons were tabulated for a numerical analysis to explain teacher beliefs about retention for reasons other than test scores. Items 9, 10, 11 and 13 are statements related to teachers' beliefs of grade level retention policy and the effect on students and items 5 and 6 are related to teachers' beliefs as it relates to grade level retention research. Questions 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 are designed to gather information on teachers' demographics. The mean of each of these items provided a numerical index score of distribution.

Table 5: Chart of Item Analysis

Variables	**Research Question**	**Survey Question**
Concepts	What do Georgia elementary teachers believe about grade level retention as a concept?	#1, #2, #3, #4,
Beliefs	How do Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs and the NCLB retention policy compare?	#7, #8, #12, #14
Practice	To what extent are Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs about grade level retention based on research?	#5, #6
Demographics	To what extent do differences in Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs and practices vary by demographics?	#15, #16, #17, #18, #19, #20
Policies	How effective do Georgia elementary teachers perceive grade level retention policy to be on students?	#9, #10, #11, #13

Table5: documentation of survey items linked to each of the research questions through item analysis

Procedure

A five point Likert scale was used for each of the questions. The benefits of using a Likert Scale are the ability to easily standardize, and data gathered from closed-ended questions lend themselves to statistical analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Responses from the survey were scored by tabulating the numerical values from number 5 representing strongly disagree to number 1 strongly agree. Item 3 and 4 and also had a subsection asking for teachers responses if they agreed with the item. Response items were organized by categories of answers. In the second part of the survey, a checklist format was used to gather data on teacher demographics. The data collected determined if demographics of this group make a significant difference in teachers' grade level retention beliefs, even though student demographics were not needed to complete this study. The information may be useful for further research on social injustice.

Teachers in elementary schools in the Central Savannah River Area-Regional Educational Service Agency (CSRA-RESA) area were selected for this study. The Georgia Public Education Directory 2008 –2009 was used to identify schools and principals in the designated region. Quantitative data was collected through the use of a survey. The survey contains 24 items. Items 1-14 of used the Likert Scale format of strongly agree to strongly disagree. Six questions asked for factual information such as degree level, years of experience, classification of the school, grade level and geographical location. Two questions were open ended, asking for belief responses from the teachers. The last two questions provided information on student demographics that can be used for extended research in the future.

A cover letter (Appendix A) was developed to explain the purpose of this study to participants. The cover letter emphasized the importance of the teacher's need to respond truthfully and the assurance that their responses would be confidential. The cover letter and the questionnaire were distributed and collected at a designated faculty meeting by the researcher. The cover letter explained the purpose of the study and gave directions for completion. The cover letter was designed to prevent biased attitudes and comments from being elicited from the survey participants. The school principals that elected not to have the survey distributed during a school faculty meeting received a packet with surveys to be disturbed and collected by the principal. Principals returned the completed surveys in a self addressed stamped manila envelope provided by the researcher. Confidentiality of the data gathered was maintained by making certain that the data cannot be linked to individual participants in the study. This researcher provided participates with the opportunity to receive the results of the study.

Analysis

The researcher used descriptive statistics to summarize the response to each item. Descriptive statistics allows for the data to be summarized, characterized, or described (McMillan, J. A. & Schumacher, 2001). Thus a descriptive mode of inquiry was used to describe teacher's beliefs about grade level retention as a concept (question 1; survey items 1 and 2), perception of the effectiveness of grade level retention policy on students (question 2; survey items 9, 10, 11, and 13), to what extent teachers beliefs on grade level retention are based on research (question 3; survey items 5 and 6), and how teachers' beliefs compare to NCLB imitative that required grade level retention based on state mandated testing (question 4; survey items 3, 4, 7 , 8, 12, and14). For each of

these, in order to examine the relationship between item responses and grade level and location, responses for each item was analyzed using a 4/ (grade) by 3/ (location) ANOVA design (research question 1). Family-wise error rate was adjusted to account for the number of analyses being conducted by using a conservative alpha =.01 for all series of t- test and correlations. For ANOVA results that were significant, the researcher applied post hoc tests using the Bonferroni procedure. Gathered data was statistically reported using the mean, median and standard deviation. Pearson product-moment correlations examined the relationships between teachers' beliefs and grade level retention policy (research questions 2, 3, 4). The ANOVA and t-test were used to explore the relationship between demographic characteristics (e.g. experience, degree level) and teacher beliefs to determine if the beliefs and practices differ among the various demographic groups (research question 5). The statistical analysis of each item was interpreted and the final results reported.

Summary

As discussed, this study focused on Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs of grade level retention policy and grade level retention concepts. It also focused on the commonalities or differences in elementary teachers' perceptions of student grade level retention. The method of discovery in this research project was quantitative. The demographic information was collected through the use of the proposed survey at each elementary school involved in this study, and results of the questionnaire were quantitatively analyzed, and the findings were reported. The analysis of the quantitative data which was generated during this research project yielded common themes and

patterns and significant dimensions reflecting the teachers beliefs of grade level retention, grade level retention policy and grade level retention concepts.

Chapter 4

Findings of the Study

Introduction

The primary focus of this research was to provide insight into the relationship of promotion-grade level retention policies established in Georgia since the No Child Left Behind initiative and teachers' beliefs and practices of student grade level retention. Findings of the study were presented in response to the five research questions as posed in Chapter 1. The first question asked: What do Georgia elementary teachers' believe about grade level retention as a practice? The second question: How effective do Georgia elementary teachers perceive grade level retention policy to be on students? The third question examines to what extent are Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs about grade level retention based on grade level retention research. Question four compares Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs and the No Child Left Behind grade level retention policy. Question five asks, to what extent do difference in Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs and practices vary by demographics?

Return Rate

The context of the study involved the Central Savannah Regional Service Area in Georgia. Teachers from 21 schools participated in the study, which represented 5 different county's policies and procedures regarding grade level retention. Questionnaires were distributed to teachers in elementary schools, 5 urban, 9 suburban schools, and 7 rural schools. Teachers who teach in Grade levels 2 through 5 were included in the study because of the direct impact of NCLB grade level retention policy on student testing in grades 2-5, which requires students to pass CRCT tests for promotion. The research

activities covered a three-month period beginning in the first part of September, 2008, to the middle of December, 2008. The researcher requested permission, either by personal contact or letter, from the administrators of each school to administer the questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed during. There were 366 questionnaires distributed and 326 were returned. Of the 326 teachers that participated in the survey, 60% held masters' degree and above, 57.4% worked in Title 1 schools and 44.5 % taught in a rural setting. The return rate of the questionnaires was generally equivalent among the grade levels with a slightly higher percent of return in 2nd and 3rd grades. Teaching experience averaged 18 years with a median of 11 years. Of the 326 participants, 147 came from urban schools, 87 from suburban schools and 96 from rural schools. For the purposes of this study, urban, suburban and rural school districts were defined in line with the parameters set by Augusta State University, which were Richmond County (suburban), Columbia County (urban), and Burke, Warren, and McDuffie Counties (rural). These guidelines were set to meet the placement requirements of lab and apprenticeship students teaching in each of the above defined schools.

Summary Results

The researcher presented the summary results in order of the research questions. The first four questions used descriptive analysis.

Research Question One

Survey items 1, 2, 3, and 4 addressed the first research question which asked for Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs about grade level retention as a practice. See Table 6 for summary statistics. In item 1, it was noted that, in general, 77% of the teacher's

surveyed agreed or strongly agreed in general students who do not meet academic expectation should be retained.

However, responses to item 2 of the survey revealed that 61.6% of the teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would consider retaining a student for reasons not related to academic performance which is based on curriculum content objectives. In item 3, 58.3% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that some students should be retained, even if they meet standards, and in item 4, 70.8% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that some students should be promoted even if they fail to meet state standards. From the open-ended responses in items 3a and 4a, the researcher identified that age and student maturity were reported 203 times as reasons teachers would consider grade level retention or promotion, despite student performance on state tests.

In summary, in response to research question one, the researcher found that teachers believe in the practice of retaining students who do not meet academic standards, and most would not consider retaining student for reasons not related to academic performance. Teachers reported academic performance as a major factor in grade level promotion-retention decisions, and failing or passing state tests did not account for a holistic view of academic performance.

Based on other successful academic information, teachers would consider promoting some students who failed to meet the state test score standards. Over half of the teachers also believed that there are certain reasons, such as student social maturity and age, to consider in the decision to retain students who meet state test score standards.

Table 6
Number and Percentage* of Responses to Question 1 Survey Items 1, 2, 3, 4

Item Content	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. In general, I believe that students who do not meet academic expectations should be retained.	92(28.2)	159(48.8)	37(11.3)	25(7.7)	8(2.5)
2. In general, I would consider retaining a student for reasons not related to academic performance.	7(2.1)	63(19.3)	52(16.0)	111(34.0)	90(27.6)
3. I believe that there are some students that should be retained ever though they meet minimum state test score standards.	25(7.7)	165(50.6)	55(16.9)	59(18.1)	20(6.1)
4. I believe that there are some students that should be promoted even though they do not meet minimum state test score standards.	35(10.7)	196(60.1)	34(10.4)	44(13.5)	13(4.0)

*Percentage in parenthesis

Research Question Two

Survey items 9, 10, 11, and 13 addressed research question 2 which identifies Georgia elementary teachers' perception of the effectiveness of a grade level retention policy to be on students. Summary statistics are shown in Table 7. On item nine, 47.5% of the teachers were neutral in their beliefs that retained students experience long-term success in their academic careers. Yet, item eleven responses revealed that 43.6% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that retained students have an increased chance of long term academic success. For item ten, 43% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed in their beliefs that grade level retention creates emotional issues for student and 32.5% of the teachers were neutral in their beliefs. In item thirteen 33.4% of the teachers were neutral in their beliefs and 50% of the teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that students do not face emotional issues after being retained which aligns with item 10

The results for research question 2 revealed that a majority of the teacher's surveyed were neutral or agreed in their beliefs that retained students continue to have successful academic experiences after being retained. Almost half of the teachers believed that grade level retention creates emotional issues for students.

Table 7

Number and Percentage* of Responses to Question 2 Survey Items 9, 10, 11, 13

Item Content	SA	A	N	D	S D
9. Retained students experience long term success in their academic careers.	7(2.1)	65(19.9)	155(47.5)	70(21.5)	22(6.7)
10. Grade level retention creates emotional issues for students.	23(7.1)	117(35.9)	106(32.5)	52(16.0)	5(1.5)
11. Retained students have an increased chance of long term academic success.	9(2.8)	133(40.8)	95(29.1)	54(16.6)	12(3.7)
13. Students do not face emotional issues after being retained.	2(.6)	30(9.2)	109(33.4)	137(42.0)	26(8.0)

*Percentage in parenthesis

Research Question Three

Survey items 5 and 6 addressed research question 3 which reveals to what extent Georgia elementary teachers beliefs about grade level retention are based on research. Summary statistics are shown in Table 8. Responses to item five revealed that 49.7% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that educational findings have influenced their beliefs regarding student grade level retention but 39.3% were neutral on this question. For item six, 58.6% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that

educational research had informed their decision making regarding student grade level retention and 32.5% of the teachers were neutral

The results for research question 3 on the survey revealed that over half of the teachers surveyed believed that educational research had influenced their beliefs or informed their decision making regarding student grade level retention. One third of the teachers surveyed were neutral in their beliefs that the educational research had an influence or informed their decision making regarding student grade level retention.

Table 8

Number and Percentage* of Responses to Question 3 Survey Items 5, 6

Item Content	SA	A	N	D	SD
5. Educational research findings have influenced my beliefs regarding student grade level retention.	30(9.2)	132(40.5)	128(39.3)	28(8.6)	6(1.8)
6. Educational research has informed my decision making regarding student grade level retention.	30(9.2)	161(49.4)	106(32.5)	24(7.4)	3(.9)

*Percentage in parenthesis

Research Question Four

Survey items 7, 8, 12, 14 address research question 4 which asked to what extent do Georgia elementary teachers beliefs and the state mandated grade level retention policy compare. Survey statistics are shown in Table 9. For item seven, 30.7% of the teachers were neutral and 43% of the teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that state mandated grade level retention policy is consistent with their views of grade level retention. For item eight, 47.5% of the teachers were neutral and 32.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed in their beliefs that grade level retention of a student should be at the discretion of the teacher. For item twelve, 36.8% of the teachers were neutral and 34.3%

agreed that grade level retention has shown to be an acceptable school practice for improving student achievement. For item fourteen, 58.2% of the teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that grade level retention of students should be based only on state performance related test standards.

The results for research question 4 of the study revealed that teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with a state mandated grade level retention policy being consistent with their beliefs. The survey also revealed that Georgia teachers are either neutral or agreed that grade level retention is an acceptable school practice to improve academic success of students. Nearly half of the teachers were neutral in their beliefs that the decision for retaining a student should rely on the discretion of the teacher and not district or state test performance related standards. Over half of the teacher's disagreed or strongly disagreed that grade level retention of a student should be based on state test performance related standards.

Table 9

Numbers and Percentage* of Responses to Question 4 Survey Items 7, 8, 12, 14

Item Content	SA	A	N	D	SD
7. The state mandated grade Level promotion policy is consistent with my own views.	2(.6)	76(23.3)	100(30.7)	119(36.6)	21(6.4)
8. Grade level retention of a student should be at the discretion of the teacher.	7 (2.1)	65(19.9)	155(47.5)	70(21.5)	22(6.7)
12. Grade level retention has been shown to be an acceptable school practice for improving student achievement.	7(2.1)	105(32.2)	120(36.8)	61(18.7)	9(2.8)
14. Grade level retention of a student should be based only on school/district/ state performance related standards.	11(34)	52(16.0)	48(14.7)	140(42.9)	50(15.3)

*Percentage in parenthesis

Research Question Five

Research question 5 examines the extent to which differences in Georgia elementary teacher beliefs and practices vary by identified demographics. These demographics were collected in survey items 15, 16, 17, 1 8, 19, and 20.

Experience. Survey item 15 deals with teacher experience. A Pearson's Correlation (2-tailed) statistical analysis was used to determine the relationship between teacher experience and the opinions expressed in survey items 1-14. The results of the correlation analysis revealed that experience was significantly related to the opinions expressed in items 1 and 12. Item 1 and "experience" had a correlation of .153 ($p<.01$) which indicates that teachers with more experience, in general, believed that students

who do not meet academic expectations should be retained. Item 12 and "experience" had a correlation of .179 ($p<.01$) which indicates that teachers with more experience believe stronger than less experienced teachers that grade level retention has been shown to be an acceptable school practice for improving long term academic success for student.

Degree level. Survey item 16 examined the degree level of the teachers. A t-test was conducted comparing teachers with a bachelor's degree with those with masters degrees or above on each of the statement of belief items. Degree levels were categorized by teachers who had earned a bachelors degree and teachers who had earned a masters degree or above. Three questions showed a significant difference between these groups.

For item 1, ($t= - 2.757$, [df = 319], $p=.006$) teachers with a bachelor's degree had a mean of 1.84 and teachers with a master's degree and above had a mean of 2.16. In general, teachers with masters' degree and above felt stronger, more so than teachers with a bachelor's degree, that students who do not meet academic expectations should be retained. For item 4, ($t =3.006$, [df = 320], $p=.003$) teacher with a bachelor's degree had a mean of 2.64 and teachers with masters' degree and above had a mean of 2.28. Teachers with a bachelor's degree felt stronger, more so than teachers with a master's degree and above, that there are some students that should be promoted even though they do not meet minimum state test score standards. For item 10, ($t =2.00$[df = 304], $p=.010$) teachers with a bachelor's degree had a mean of 2.95 and teachers with a master's degree and above had a mean of 2.62. Teachers with a bachelor's degree felt stronger, more so than teachers with a master's degree and higher, that grade level retention creates emotional issues for students.

School classification. Item 17 examined school classification. A t-test was done comparing Non-Title 1 schools with Title 1 schools on each of the opinion items. There was no significant level of difference noted.

School settings. Item 18 in the survey relates to school setting which was described as urban, suburban or rural. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine if significant differences existed between these three groups for each opinion item. Two items showed statistically significant differences on this variable.

For item 1, (F= 4.318, [df = 290, df = 292], p=.014) urban teachers had a mean of 2.11, suburban teachers had a mean of 2.23 and rural teachers had a mean of 1.88. Post hoc tests revealed that suburban teachers differed significantly from rural teachers on this item (p=.012). Suburban teachers had a stronger belief, more so than urban and rural teachers, that in general, students who do not meet academic expectation should be retained. For 12, (F= 5.677[df = 282, df = 284], p=.004) urban teachers had a mean of 3.02, suburban teachers had a mean of 3.05 and rural teachers having a mean of 2.71. Post hoc tests revealed that suburban teachers differed significantly from rural teachers on this item (p=.004). Suburban teachers felt stronger, more so than urban and rural, that grade level retention has been shown to be an acceptable school practice for improving student achievement.

Grade level. Item 19 in the survey relates to the grade levels used in this study. For this study, grade levels 2, 3, 4 and 5 were included. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine if significant differences existed between these four groups for each opinion item.

For item 1, (F= 3.625, [df = 3, df = 3], p=.013) second grade teachers had a mean of 1.87 third grade teachers had a mean of 2.06, fourth grade teachers had a mean of 2.51 and 5th grade teachers had a mean of 2.13. Fourth grade teachers, more so than 2nd, 3rd, or 5th grade teachers, felt stronger about retaining students who did not meet academic expectations.

Family experience. Item 20 in the survey relates to personal and/or family grade level retention. For each survey item, a t-test was done to determine if the opinions expressed differed between those respondents who had and had not had a member of their family retained. There was no significant level of difference noted.

The results for research question 5 of the study revealed the extent to which differences in teachers' beliefs and practices concerning grade level retention vary by demographics. Teachers with master's degrees and above, teachers in suburban communities, teachers with more experience, and fourth grade teachers feel that students who do not meet academic standards should be retained. Teachers in the suburban communities and teachers' with more school experience felt grade level retention was an acceptable school practice for improving student achievement. Teachers with more experience felt grade level retention provided for long term academic success. Teachers with a bachelor's degree felt that grade level retention creates emotional issues for students.

Summary of Findings

The results presented above clearly note Georgia elementary school teachers beliefs and practices about grade level retention. Overall, elementary teachers consider grade level retention to be an acceptable school practice to improve a student's academic

success and that grade level retention also provides for long-term academic success. More specifically, elementary teachers with master's degrees and above, teachers in suburban communities, teachers with more experience, and fourth grade teachers believe more strongly than elementary teachers with bachelor's degrees, teachers in rural and urban areas, and third and fifth grade elementary teachers, that students who do not meet academic standards should be retained. Teachers in suburban communities and teachers' with more school experience felt grade level retention was an acceptable school practice for improving student achievement, even more so than teachers in rural communities and teachers with bachelor's degrees. Teachers with more experience felt grade level retention provided for long term academic success. Elementary teachers also believed grade level retention can cause some students to have emotional issues after being retained, especially teachers holding bachelor's degrees.

Georgia elementary teachers would consider retaining a student for reasons unrelated to academic performance. Teachers thought that retaining a student who had met state test score standards could be acceptable based on the student's lack of preparation for the next grade, lack of social maturity, or age. They would also consider retaining a student whose scores on state-mandated tests were barely passing.

Elementary teachers also believe that there are some students who should not be retained, even though they did not meet minimum state test score standards. Teachers felt students could be promoted, despite not meeting state test score standards. Those same teachers felt there are some students who are not good at taking standardized tests, and that teachers' knowledge of the student should sometimes override state test standards. A student's ability should not be based on one piece of documentation. Teachers in this

study felt educational research had influenced their decision making, beliefs, and practices concerning grade level retention. Yet, past research does not support or align with teachers beliefs in the study. Also, most elementary teachers were either neutral or disagreed that their views were consistent with the Georgia state-mandated grade level retention policy based on the No Child Left Behind initiative. The study noted teachers felt strongly that other factors should be considered when retaining a student other than the state test score standards.

Chapter 5

Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

Summary

As stated in Chapter 1, the primary focus of this study was to provide information related to whether the promotion-grade level retention policies established in Georgia since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative are viewed by teachers as being in line with their beliefs and practices on student grade level retention. With the NCLB education reform, teachers' beliefs and practices concerning grade level retention were unclear in the literature, especially in relation to a state and district mandated grade level retention policy which relies heavily on the use of high-stakes testing. The study also provided insight into teachers' beliefs and practices concerning student grade level retention, their knowledge of grade level retention research, and grade level retention beliefs based on selected teacher demographics.

The researcher utilized a quantitative research design to conduct the study. The study targeted teachers in grades 2 through 5 because of the direct impact of NCLB on grade level retention policies in these grade levels. There were 366 questionnaires distributed in 19 schools located in the Central Savannah Region Area. Of the 326 returned surveys, 147 were from urban schools, 87 were from suburban schools and 96 were from rural, and grade levels had equal distribution. Teacher demographics for level of experience, degree, and school context were also surveyed. Participants responded to a 22 question researcher-developed questionnaire. The first 14 items used a five-point Likert scale, with open-ended responses in items 3a and 4a to account for reasons for beliefs. Descriptive statistics was used to calculate the frequencies, means and

percentages of each item on the survey. Teacher demographic data was collected on survey items 15-20 and were statistically analyzed using a T-test , One-way ANOVA or Pearson's correlation analysis. Data for items 21 and 22 were compiled for future study. Survey information data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Base 16.0).

Analysis of Research Findings

The overarching question for the research was as follows: What do Georgia elementary teachers believe regarding grade level retention since the No Child Left Behind initiative? In addition the study explored the following sub questions:

1. What do Georgia elementary teachers believe about grade level retention as a practice?
2. How effective do Georgia elementary teachers perceive grade level retention policy to be on students?
3. To what extent are Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs about grade level retention based on grade level retention research?
4. How do Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs and the No Child Left Behind grade level retention policy compare?
5. To what extent do differences in Georgia elementary teachers' beliefs and practices vary by demographics?

The results of the questionnaire noted that in general, teachers did not believe the state and district mandated grade level retention policy is consistent with their own views. Teachers generally believed in grade level retention as an acceptable practice to improve student potential for future success in school. Yet, they also believed grade level retention

may cause emotional issues for retained students. Teachers also believed students who do not meet academic expectations should be retained. However, teachers also would consider retaining some students meeting state test scores standards and would consider promoting some students even if they did not meet state test score standards. Further data noted that teachers believed educational research findings had influenced their beliefs regarding student grade level retention.

Teachers with more teaching experience, 4th grade teachers and teachers' with master's degrees and higher felt in general, that students who do not meet academic expectation should be retained. Teachers with more experience and suburban communities believed that grade level retention is an acceptable school practice for improving student achievement. Teacher with experience also believed that retained students have an increased chance of long term academic success. Teachers with bachelor's degrees believed that grade level retention created emotional issues for students

Among the urban, suburban, and rural school districts surveyed, the data collected showed very little statistical difference in the teachers' belief systems. Suburban teachers felt grade level retention was an acceptable school practice for improving student achievement and, in general, believed that students who do not meet academic expectations should be retained.

In summary, major findings of the study were as follows:

- Georgia elementary teachers believe that grade level retention is an acceptable means of improving student achievement and support grade

level retention as an acceptable school practice, but they recognize that grade level retention may create emotional issues for students.

- In general, teachers' beliefs support local school and district grade level retention policies when the policy is not based solely on high stakes testing. However, teachers generally do not support the impact of the NCLB initiative, which caused school districts to align their grade level retention policy based on high stakes testing.
- Further, teachers believe that there are reasons such as maturity, age, and academic proficiency that could cause a student to be promoted even if they did not meet test score standards or to be retained even if they did meet test score standards.
- Although teachers acknowledged awareness of grade level retention research, the research had not been instrumental in influencing best practices regarding promotion/grade level retention.
- Teachers with more experience, teachers' with a master's degree or better, 4th grade teachers, and teachers in urban schools, demonstrated more conviction to grade level retention as an acceptable school practice than teachers with less experience, teacher's with bachelor's degrees, teachers in 2nd, 3rd, and 5th grades, and teachers in rural or suburban schools.

Discussion of Research Findings

In this study, the researcher found that elementary teachers believe that grade level retention is an acceptable practice, with academic performance as the major

influence on the decision to promote or retain a child. Teachers believe strongly that they should base their knowledge of the "whole child" in grade level promotion/retention decisions, not just state test scores. Teachers would consider other factors when retaining or passing a student, such as academic readiness for the next grade, social maturity, and age. This belief system converges with findings in the literature that teachers believed in the practice of grade level retention to facilitate growth and maturity to increase a student's success in learning (Combs & Tanner, 1993). The belief and practice of teachers in this study aligns with the literature (Holmes & Matthews. 1984).

Furthermore, teachers in this study believed that retaining a student provides them the opportunity to have future academic success. Research notes that students were usually academically successful in the repeated grade (Robertson, 1997). Therefore, teachers assumed that students continued to have academic success in the rest of their academic careers (Jacobs, et. al. 2000). However, research has strongly pointed out that retaining a student has negative effects on the student's long-term future academic career (Jacob, et.al. 2004). Students who were retained showed less academic achievement than those students who were at the same academic achievement level, but were promoted (Holmes, 1989). Retained students typically continued to experience academic problems in school and developed low self-esteem (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). The literature also stated that teachers believe retained students have continued to have academic success (Robertson, 1997). These findings suggest that teachers see grade level retention as an intervention for academic readiness for the next grade level. However, research has not been influential in providing insight into implications of grade level retention. Experienced teachers and those holding degrees beyond the bachelor's level believe more

strongly in retention as an acceptable practice. Teachers in the study also believed that grade level retention does cause emotional issues for students, which is consistent with findings in the literature Research has shown that there are emotional issues tied to student grade level retention (Yamanto, 1980; National Association of School Psychologists, 2000). After being retained, students face difficulties such as anger, fear, depression and sadness (Yamanto, 1980). Students who have been retained state that it was one of the most stressful events in their life (National Association of School Psychologist, 1998). In this study, teachers contend that even though students may face emotional issues, grade level retention does provide for a student's continued academic success and is an acceptable school practice.

A number of researchers who have conducted and examined studies over the past 60 years found that there is little academic achievement gained in the repeated grade (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Mathews, 1984; Shepard & Smith 1989). The literature states that teachers' beliefs toward grade level retention were dependent on practical knowledge rather than on what research stated about grade level retention (Shepard & Smith, 1989; Holmes, 1989). Teachers in this study believed that the research literature had influenced their decision making. Yet, their practices of student grade level retention did not align with the literature. The literature notes that teachers ignore the research on grade level retention due to a school culture where grade level retention is an acceptable school practice (Sakowicz, 1996).

Teachers' also believe students should not be retained based solely on a required state test score standard. However, teachers were supportive of local, district, and state promotion/retention policies, but not if policies are narrowly aligned to state test scores..

Prior research notes teachers believe that grade level retention should not be based on the results of a single test and teacher should use additional evidence in making a grade level retention decision (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). Teachers in this study viewed academic performance more broadly than performance on a single state end of grade test. They also believe evidence of academic readiness, social maturity, and age should be used in grade level promotion/retention decisions.

The study addressed some issues related to teacher beliefs that have not been found in previous studies. This study collected teacher demographic data such as the following: teacher experience, degrees, school classification, family members or themselves ever being retained and geographical location. The study also addressed teachers' beliefs by grade level. The data was collected to determine if teacher demographics made a difference in teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward grade level retention.

Gathered data from this research noted that teachers with more experience, 4th grade teachers, teachers in suburban areas, and teachers with master's degrees and higher believed students who do not meet academic expectations should be retained more strongly than teachers in other elementary grade levels, teachers in rural and urban areas, and teachers who hold bachelor's degrees Also, teachers with more experience believed more strongly that retained students experience long-term success in their academic career and that grade level retention is an acceptable school practice. The researcher's experience is that teachers with higher degrees and more experience have been in the school system longer and have typically accepted a school culture which regards grade level retention as being an acceptable school practice for students not meeting academic

expectations. Research does not confirm grade level retention as best practice, and yet according to this research highly credentialed teachers continue to believe in the practice.

Teachers with bachelor's degrees believed more strongly that students do face emotional issues after being retained. The researcher's experience is that teacher with bachelor's degrees usually have fewer years in the school system and have a different view of grade level retention. Many teachers with bachelor's degrees are just starting their teachings careers and they are more knowledgeable and idealistic about how research does inform practice. Again, as a former principal, the researcher has observed how school culture may shape beliefs of those who come into the school as novice teachers. Furthermore, Pouliot (1994) also found that teachers at all grade levels believed that grade level retention was an acceptable school practice and most teachers did not believe that students faced emotional harm from being retained. Although teachers in this study feel that students may experience emotional harm, they accept grade level retention as a practice.

With respect to teachers' grade levels, fourth-grade teachers believed more strongly that retaining students who did not meet academic expectations was an acceptable practice. Yet, past research notes that teachers in kindergarten and first grade hold a very strong belief that grade level retention of a student should occur in these two grade levels (Jimerson, 2001) thus, allowing time for students to develop in maturity, physical growth and academics (Smith & Shepard, 1989). Based on this researcher's experiences, teachers in fourth grade are at a very pivotal position in regards to state standards. In Georgia, the state mandates that all third grade students would be required to achieve grade level scores on the Georgia CRCT in reading in order to be promoted to the fourth grade and that all

fifth grade students have to achieve grade level scores on the Georgia (CRCT) in reading and mathematics in order to be promoted to the sixth grade (Georgia Department of Education - Policy Division, 2003). To account for fourth grade teachers' beliefs concerning grade level retention, it would seem that they may be influenced by student's academic readiness for grade 5, recognizing the high stakes of testing in the fifth grade year. Fourth grade teachers may be under more scrutiny to prepare students for the fifth grade, and they see grade level retention as an acceptable intervention.

Conclusions

This researcher has concluded that:

- Elementary teachers' views of grade level retention do not align with grade level retention policy that calls for grade level retention of students solely based on student performance on state tests, a provision generated from the No Child Left Behind initiative.
- Elementary teachers' beliefs are strong influences on practice, even stronger than grade level retention research.
- Elementary teachers believe grade level retention is an acceptable school practice for improving student achievement, even if the practice may result in emotional issues for children.
- Elementary teachers' believe that some students should be retained, even if they meet state test score standards, based on individual student characteristics, such as academic readiness, social maturity, and age.
- Elementary teachers' believe some students should be promoted, based on other academic success, even if they fail to meet the state test score standards.

- Experienced, elementary teachers with a master's degree or better may be influential in how schools view grade level retention as a practice.

Implications

Implications of this study relate to policy and school level practice, as well as researchers in the field. Policy makers may need to examine school district policies to define academic performance. Teachers in the field strongly support academic performance as a major factor in grade level promotion/retention decisions, but they strongly believe that academic performance is defined more broadly than state test scores. In reviewing the research, policy makers may benefit by deciding if grade level retention should be an intervention for students who are not meeting academic performance expectations. Teachers believe in the practice, even though long-term benefits are minimal at best.

Targeted professional learning as a best practice may also be helpful, especially for fourth grade teachers who carry a tremendous responsibility for fifth grade readiness of students. Research findings must be effectively, efficiently and clearly communicated to teachers and policy makers in general, to inform practice. Providing teachers and policy makers with the findings from the study, as well as many other studies, would have the potential for reflection on necessary change in policy and practice to facilitate positive outcomes for students.

The findings of this study, along with previous research studies, provide information to elementary school principals as well. Sensitivity to teachers' beliefs is essential in developing school culture. If principals desire to lead change about grade level retention, they must begin by understanding teachers' belief systems. Teacher

preparation programs and principal preparation programs in universities may address the gap in theory, research findings, and school practice. Any initiative or intervention that is harmful to students' emotional well-being must be thoroughly considered as an acceptable school practice. If grade level retention is an acceptable practice, schools have the responsibility to have measures in place to help students with their emotional distress. Armed with sound educational research, policymakers, staff developers, principals, and teachers could make decisions that would provide for student academic achievement, as well as early intervention to prevent the practice of grade level retention.

This study is significant to the researcher because it provides empirical evidence of the beliefs of teachers concerning grade level retention. This empirical evidence allows the researcher the opportunity to use the platform as a professor in teacher education to inform future teachers of grade level retention research and the effects of grade level retention on student success. The researcher may influence the interventions that future teachers will use to alleviate the need for grade level retention. However, the researcher also knows that the change begins with the belief system that informs behaviors, She is committed to developing teacher dispositions that may value any intervention in terms of academic and emotional benefits to children.

Recommendations

As a result of this study, the researcher offers the following consideration for future research:

1. This study should be replicated to further gain information to determine whether the mandated grade level promotion/ retention policy established since NCLB is viewed by teachers as being in line with their beliefs on student grade level retention.

2 This study should be replicated in order to further gain information related to teachers' beliefs by teacher demographics to inform professional learning.

3. This study should be replicated in the middle and high school to determine if these teachers' views of grade level retention are in line with the promotion grade level retention policy implemented since the NCLB initiative.

4. Further research could be conducted to determine reasons for the gap that exists between research and teachers' grade level retention beliefs.

5. Further research could be conducted to determine how student demographics influence teachers' beliefs about retention.

6. Last, it may reveal a need for additional study, as grade level retention is a major factor of educational practice.

Dissemination

The researcher plans to disseminate this information to the students in teacher education classes at Augusta State University. As future practitioners, they need to be knowledgeable of grade level retention research and the impact it has on student achievement. Also planned are presentations at state and regional conferences for the Professional Development Schools (PDS). The PDS alliance, of universities and local school districts, provides students with lab and apprentice experiences and provides a venue for university professors, teachers and students to gain knowledge of grade level retention research. An article generated from this research will be sent to the Academy for Educational Studies and to the Association for Childhood Education International for publication. Each organization deals with critical questions in the educational field. .

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

2102 Magnolia Parkway

Grovetown, Georgia 30813

August 13, 2008

Dear Georgia Teacher:

My name is Jeanie Hill and I am currently in the process of completing the requirements for a Doctorate in Educational Administration from Georgia Southern University. My research study, titled A Belief Study of Georgia Elementary Teachers Since the Implementation of No Child Left Behind, is being completed under the direction of Dr. Barbara Mallory.

I would greatly appreciate your help in completing the enclosed questionnaire that should **take only five minutes or less to complete**. If you do not wish to participate, please return the questionnaire with a notation at the top. Completion and return of the questionnaire will indicate permission to use the information you provide. Please be assured that your responses will be kept completely confidential. The results of this research may be published, but the names of the participating teachers and their respective school systems will not be used. Obviously, the greater the response rate, the more valuable the findings will be for this research study. If you would like a copy of the results at the conclusion of the study, you may contact me by phone or email.

If you have any questions about this research project, please call me at (706)-792-2346 (work) or (706)-860-0682 (home). My email address is ahill@aug.edu. Any questions or concerns that you may have about your rights as a research participant in this study should be directed to the Research Institutional Board Coordinator at the Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at (912) 681-5465.

I thank you, in advance, for your time and consideration in completing the enclosed questionnaire.

Sincerely,

Jeanie Hill

Appendix B

A STUDY OF GEORGIA ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' BELIEFS SINCE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

This questionnaire is designed to yield information from Georgia elementary teachers' concerning beliefs regarding grade level retention. Your response will be kept totally confidential and you will not be identified in any way in the final report. Thank you for your participation.

Please complete the following:

Part I: Teacher Beliefs:

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements by circling one response.1= Strongly Agree 2 = Agree 3 = Neutral 4 = Disagree 5 = Strongly Disagree

STATEMENTS	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. In general, I believe that students who ***do not*** meet academic expectation should be retained.	1	2	3	4	5
2. In general, I would consider retaining a student for reasons ***not*** related to academic performance.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I believe that there are ***some*** students that should be ***retained*** even though ***they meet minimum state test score standards.***	1	2	3	4	5
3a. If you strongly agree or agree with this statement, briefly give a reason(s) that some students should be retained despite their test scores: _____ _____ _____ _____					
4. I believe that there are ***some*** students that should be ***promoted*** even though they ***do not*** *meet minimum state test score standards*.	1	2	3	4	5
4a. If you strongly agree or agree with this statement, briefly give a reason(s) that some students should be promoted despite their test scores: _____ _____ _____ _____					
5. Educational research findings have influenced my *beliefs* regarding student grade level retention.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Educational research has informed my decision making regarding student grade level retention.	1	2	3	4	5
7. The state mandated grade level retention/promotion policy is consistent with my own views.	1	2	3	4	5

STATEMENTS	SA	A	N	D	SD
8. Grade level retention of a student should be at the discretion of the teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Retained students experience long term success in their academic careers.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Grade level retention creates emotional issues for students.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Retained students have an increased chance of long term academic success.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Grade level retention has been shown to be an acceptable school practice for improving student achievement.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Students do not face emotional issues after being retained.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Grade level retention of a student should be based ***only*** on school/district/state performance related standards.	1	2	3	4	5

Part II: Teacher Demographic Variables:
Please fill in the blank or circle the correct answer.

15. Years of teaching experience: _____ 16. Degree Level: _____

17. School Classification: Title I Non-Title I

18. My school is considered: Urban Suburban Rural

19. Grade level you teach: _____

20. Have you or any member of your family ever been retained? Yes No

Part III. Demographics of Retained Students:
Please indicate your answer by filling in the blank.

21. During the past academic year how many students did you have in your class?_____

How many were male? _____

How many were Black? _____ Hispanic? _____ white?_____

How many were second/language barriers? _____

22. During the past academic year, how many students in your class were retained? _____

How many were male? _____ female? _____

How many were Black? _____ Hispanic? _____ white? _____

How many were second/language barriers? _____