ABSTRACT

JAILALL, JULIE. Examining the perceived effects of kindergarten retention on students’ school performance: How students fare three years later in the third grade. (Under the direction of Dr. Paul Bitting).

This is a qualitative case study that investigates the practice of kindergarten retention by examining the performance of third grade students who were retained in their kindergarten year for failing to master prescribed grade-level standards. The sample of this study was composed of five third-grade students who had been retained in kindergarten and whose performance in school was still below the third-grade level. Data for this study was collected from four sources: (a) interviews with the five third-grade students, their teachers and their parents, (b) surveys from the parents of the five third-grade students and their teachers, (c) surveys from nine kindergarten teachers and the principal of the selected school, and (d) descriptions of the five third-grade students’ neighborhoods, their school, and their classrooms. Case narratives for each of the five third-grade students were developed using the four data sources. This study showed that there were seven factors responsible for kindergarten students’ low performance in school: low teacher expectations; subjective teacher observations of student performance; deficient and partial assessments; unfair grouping practices of students; unrealistic curriculum pacing; ineffective and inconsistent interventions; students’ poor school-readiness skills. This study also finds that third-grade students continued low school performance could be influenced by factors such as: students’ home-structure and after-school routines; parent support for school; students’ lack of motivation to perform school tasks; types of interventions implemented at school to assist struggling students; parent
work schedule; neighborhoods recreational resources; high-stakes testing. This study makes five recommendations for future research and policy development: (a) identify students with at-risk behaviors early in the school year, (b) design and implement interventions that address students’ specific needs, (c) keep parents informed, (d) access other support systems in the school, and (e) continue with intense, sustained interventions in all grades for at-risk students or until the students can work independently on or above grade level.
Examining the Perceived Effects of Kindergarten Retention on Students’ School Performance: How Students Fare Three Years Later in the Third Grade

By

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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2006

Approved By:

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____________________________________________________________________
Richard L. Haley, Ph.D.                                          Clyde E. Sorenson, Ph.D.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to: (1) My late parents--my father, Manna Ramadhin and my mother, Dhanpalia Ramadhin--for giving me the desire and hope to pursue education. (My father's instruction to us, his children, that "immoral conduct, cruelty and uncivilized behavior were all due to a lack of literate-ness and cultural identity" has never ceased to inspire me); (2) My husband, Dr. Jerry Jailall, for solidly standing with me throughout my pursuit of five degrees over the past twenty five years; (3) My three sons, Robert, Ron and Steve, for making me so proud and so happy; (4) All the at-risk students who were able to rise above the negative stereotype of low achievers and break the cycle of poor school performance.
BIOGRAPHY

Julie Khemrajie Jailall is a principal of a public elementary school in Clayton, North Carolina. She is married to Dr. Jerry M. Jailall, State Coordinator for Comprehensive School Reform with North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), and together they have three sons, Robert, Ron, and Steve. Jailall entered the field of education when she became an assistant teacher at age eighteen in a classroom for 5-year-olds at an elementary school in Guyana, South America. On completion of a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a minor in Creative Arts, and a postgraduate Diploma in Education (Dip. Ed.) at the University of Guyana, South America, Jailall taught English for five years at Cummings Lodge Secondary School, Guyana. Jailall later migrated to the Bahamas where she taught English and Religious Knowledge for two years in a predominantly Black public high school of approximately 2,500 students in Freeport, Grand Bahama.

When Jailall came to the United States of America in 1989, she simultaneously pursued a Master of Arts degree in Education Leadership and Supervision at East Carolina University (ECU), and taught students with Specific Learning Disabilities at a middle school in eastern North Carolina. In 1994, upon completion of a Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) in English
at ECU, Jailall accepted a position as a part time English instructor at Beaufort Community College, North Carolina.

When Jailall’s husband was promoted to the position of education consultant with NCDPI, the family moved closer to the capital city of Raleigh, NC. In that same year, Jailall also worked for NCDPI as a consultant for students with Specific Learning Disabilities. Following her NCDPI service, Jailall later choose to be involved more directly with schools by accepting an assistant principalship with Johnston County Schools in central North Carolina. As a school leader, Jailall worked for three schools--two elementary schools and one middle school. After two years, Jailall was promoted to the position of principal of an elementary school--a position she held for over six years.

Jailall received the Flame for Learning Award as a finalist for the Teacher of the Year in 1997 for Johnston County Schools. Among other awards Jailall received, were the Clayton Leadership Award in 2005 from the Clayton Rotary Club, and the Exemplary Women Leader’s Award in 2004 from the Clayton Woman’s Club. Her publications include short stories and poems published by Bear in Mind Publisher, Georgia.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe unfathomable gratitude to my family--my dearest husband, Dr. Jerry Jailall, and my wonderful three sons, Robert, Ron and Steve--for their enduring patience and never-ending support for me for the entire duration of my studies. With their constant encouragement, patience and assistance, I was able to complete this project.

I am also deeply indebted to the chairman of my committee, Dr. Paul Bitting, for his continuous guidance and encouragement throughout my doctoral program. I am greatly appreciative for his patience and the faith he had in me, and his constant reminder that “we’ll get through this.” My sincere thanks to the members of my committee, Dr. Kenneth Brinson, for his optimistic outlook and understanding always, Dr. Clyde Sorenson, for his willing support and helpful critique of the dissertation document to ensure I have a better product and to Dr. Richard Haley, for his willing support at the most critical stage of the dissertation process.

I would also like to thank my colleague, Robin Herridge, Principal of Selma Elementary School for being a good friend on whom I could depend at all
times. My thanks are also extended to two superintendents of Johnston County Schools, Dr. James Causby and Dr. Anthony Parker, for the opportunity they gave me to embark on this project and the support they showed me to its completion.

To all my friends and colleagues at Cooper Elementary School, especially assistant principal, Nancy Parker, who supported me and wished me well all along the way, my thanks and gratitude to all of you.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of the practice of retaining kindergarten students who failed to master grade level standards. To make such a determination, this study examines the perceived impact of the practice of kindergarten retention on students’ long-term school performance three years later when these students have reached the third grade. Through a case study analysis of five students who were retained in kindergarten, this study discusses the effectiveness of kindergarten retention as it is practiced in one school. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations stated at the end of chapter five of this document will guide schools in making better and more informed decisions on the retention and the promotion of kindergarten students.

Retention and Kindergarten

Retaining a student means keeping the student in the same grade for another year so the student can master grade-level material or curriculum standards, which the student failed to master in the preceding year. Retention in kindergarten is seen as giving more time to children who are regarded as immature kindergartners so that these children can grow, develop and learn school-readiness skills, or children who are not ready for the rigors of first grade
because of deficient pre-reading or language development skills (Shepard & Smith, 1988). Examples of some of the pre-reading skills or language development skills a kindergarten student in a North Carolina classroom is expected to master by the end of the school year are as follows: to respond to oral directions; to have dialogues and conversations; to show a steady increase in speaking vocabulary; to write letters and words for a variety of purposes; to understand that reading and writing are ways to obtain information and knowledge; to generate and communicate thoughts and ideas; and to solve problems (North Carolina Standard Course of Study [NCSCOS], 2005). If these language-development skills are assessed to be below the school’s expected levels of performance at the end of the kindergarten year, the student is categorized as one needing more time to master the skills and, consequently, is held back in the grade, hence the retention of a kindergarten student.

Retention of students is not a recommended practice by some education researchers for the reason that students who have been retained generally do not improve their performance significantly (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2003; Viadero, 2002; Brooks, 2002; Shepard & Smith, 1988). Of interest to this study, if retained kindergartners continue to perform below the school’s expectations even after the students have completed three grade levels and have reached the third grade, then the practice of retaining kindergarten students as an intervention for the improvement of academic
performance should be examined for its long-term worth, thus making the subject of kindergarten retention justifiable for study and research.

An effective method of investigating the value of retention as a school practice is to examine its impact on students’ future performance in school--how have the retained kindergartners demonstrated, academically, that retention has helped them as they advance in the first three grade levels of school (NASP, 2003). In his analysis of multiple studies on retention, Holmes (1989) found that after three grades there was no difference between children who were retained and children who were not, even though the retained children were one year older. The residual effects of any significant educational experience, such as grade retention, take a minimum of three consecutive years to diminish, a position substantiated by findings from a study by William Sanders (2001) on the “impact of teacher effectiveness on students’ performance.”

Using Sanders’ (2001) findings of “diminishing” residual effects on students’ future performance, and Holmes' (1989) assertion of “no difference after three years” findings, kindergartners who have been retained should outgrow the short-term positive or negative impact of their retention experience by the time they reach the third grade (Thompson, 1999). This makes third grade a good milestone to conduct a study on the long-term perceived effects of any significant kindergarten experience such as kindergarten retention. Additionally, third grade is significant to this study because schools in North Carolina require third grade
students to be able to independently take a two-hour standardized test in reading and math, the results of which could determine whether the students would be promoted to the fourth grade. Third grade, therefore, becomes the first benchmark year for school accountability in all public schools in the state of North Carolina (The ABCs Accountability Model, 2005).

In order for this research to make a valid case for or against kindergarten retention, the researcher focused on the performance of third graders students who have been retained in kindergarten to find out whether the additional year in school was helpful in keeping the students on grade level beyond the kindergarten year. In addition to examining third grade students’ performance data, this study also looked at how the students, their parents and their teachers perceive the practice of retaining kindergarten students who continue to have low performance in school.

Statement of the Problem

The subject of how retention impacts students’ school performance became important to the researcher when a team of third-grade teachers went to their elementary-school principal to discuss the possibility of retaining seven students they had placed on the list for at-risk, below-grade-level students. Four of the seven (57%) third-grade students listed had already been retained in kindergarten.
The researcher questioned what could be the factors that were preventing the four students from succeeding, even when they were already given an additional year of schooling. Would another year in the same grade bring the student up to grade level, academically? Why did retention in kindergarten not solve the students’ problems so that they could perform on grade level in the long term? Are there other persistent problems in the students’ lives that are preventing them from reaching grade level? These questions convinced the researcher that there was need for more information if she were to rank the practice of retention of students as an acceptable or unacceptable school practice.

Therefore, this study is a result of the researcher’s quest to investigate why retention appeared not to be an effective intervention for some kindergarten students, and what needs to be done to help students maintain grade-level performance before a decision is made to retain them, or after their retention.

This study becomes even more meaningful in light of the fact that retention as an education practice is on the rise especially in kindergarten due to the pressure on schools to be more accountable—a direct result of federal and state legislations for better school accountability (Kindergarten Readiness Issues Group, 2004). Evidence of this increased pressure stems from the North Carolina Accountability, Basic Skills, and Local Control (ABC) legislation implemented in 1994 and the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2001 which have forced school systems to establish new definitions for students’ success and failure. As
a result, all students must now master curriculum standards in reading and math to be promoted to the next grade. A more direct impact of the legislation is the North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) test, which is first given at the third grade level to determine students’ successes and failures. The problem arises, however, as to what to do with students who fail to measure up to the new expectations and standards set by state and federal education policies. Is holding students back in their grades for failing to meet standards the answer to the problem of students’ failure? It is this debate over whether the practice of holding back or retaining students is more beneficial to students not mastering grade-level standards, versus promoting students despite their lag in mastering the standards, that led to this study’s questions and the investigation that follows.

Research Questions

The key question that this study asks is: How has retention as an education practice designed to improve students’ low performance in kindergarten made a significant difference to students’ school performance three years later in the third grade?
It is not enough for educators to say that retention only works for some students and not for all students, and then continue with the practice anyway. When an entire year has been added to some students’ schooling with few results, educators should be moved to search for causes and solutions to solve the problems of those “failing” retained students.

Sub-questions

(a) Was the performance of the third graders who were retained in kindergarten impacted by factors external to the school?

This question allowed the researcher to explore parents’ perceptions and misperceptions about their child’s school success, and investigate what role, if any parents play in reinforcing their children’s poor school performance. In examining factors outside of the school, the researcher acknowledged the reality that there might be other variables affecting the students’ performance, other than the practice of retention itself.

(b) What factors compelled the school to make the decision to retain students in kindergarten? This question guided the researcher to look at precipitating factors and predictors of retention perceived by the kindergarten teachers in the students’ first year of school. The question directed the researcher to also look at how teachers and schools operate and make decisions for retention in the current standards-based education framework, and to what extent those decisions affect teachers’ performance and students’ learning outcomes. While
teacher training, experience, knowledge, and skills play a big part in helping students succeed, teachers’ care for students and understanding of the students’ [culture] in designing interventions are just as important to the students’ success (Conley, 1993). This study focused on the teacher as one of the key factors affecting decisions for students’ retention.

Description of the Study

This study is a qualitative, descriptive, multiple case study design that sought to uncover the perceived effects of students’ continued low performance in school after they were given the additional benefit of extra time in school--an entire school year--to improve. Interviews with students, their parents, teachers, and surveys received from the students’ parents and teachers, and their principal were the data sources of this study. Figures that show demographic trends and types, variation and frequency of responses from participants were included in the discussion of this study (Patton, 2002). The process of cross-case analysis for this study began with documenting all data sources for each individual case, and then examining the data of all the cases for common patterns and themes. When the data clarify the findings, common themes and patterns discovered were charted and placed in figures followed by a narrative discussion in the Discussion and Findings section of chapter five of this study.

The study was structured in three phases, with Phase A comprising three stages.
Phase A

Stage 1. Nine elementary schools in a single school district participated in the initial survey of this study. (The school district is given a pseudonym of Grand County Schools for the purpose of protecting the rights and confidentiality of the subjects involved in this study). The elementary schools were surveyed to gauge whether they housed third-grade students who had been retained in kindergarten (see Appendix A for the School Survey). When the charted data collected from the surveys were analyzed (see Figure 1) almost all the schools in the selected school district were found to house retained kindergartners who were currently in the third grade. However, because the purpose of this study was to explore the problems associated with students who had been retained in kindergarten and who were still performing below the school’s expected levels in third grade, it was inconsequential to this study whether the cases were drawn from one school or several schools. To this end, the researcher selected the school (referred to as Workhard Elementary School) that yielded the highest number of cases that fit the sample of this study.

The responses from the nine schools have been analyzed and charted and shown in Figure 1. Figure 1 shows Workhard Elementary had the highest number of students who fit the criteria of this study’s sample. Overall, thirty one of the forty three students (70%) retained in kindergarten continued to have low school performance three years later in the third grade (see Figure 1).
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<th>No. of 3rd Grade Students Retained in K Still Low Achievers</th>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>31 (70%)</td>
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Figure 1: Number of students in nine schools who were retained in kindergarten, and number considered as low achievers in 3rd grade.

Stage 2. Responses from specific questions about students’ academic performance in a teacher survey were used as “an intense criterion” (Patton, 2002) to further screen or delineate the specific subjects for this study. The teacher survey presented a more detailed picture of the students’ performance outcomes because the teachers knew the students’ test performance grades, discipline report and report card grades (see Appendix B for the Teacher Survey). From the results of the teachers’ surveys, the retained students who
appeared to have the greatest academic problems were selected to be the cases described in this study.

**Stage 3.** The students with the greatest academic problems who were willing to participate in the study comprised the sample of this study. These students, along with their parents, were interviewed in an open-ended, unstructured interview format (Patton, 2002).

**Phase B**

One parent of each of the five students in Stage 3 was surveyed to gauge the parent’s understanding and perception of school success, hence the child’s success. The parent responses were examined to determine to what extent external factors in the form of parents’ perceptions and support were influential in the students’ performance in school (see Appendix C for the Parent Survey).

**Phase C**

The students’ current teachers in third grade were interviewed and surveyed to find out their perspectives and attitudes about how these retained kindergarten students had progressed through school thus far. Kindergarten teachers, not necessarily the students’ teachers, completed surveys to share their perceptions and opinions about students’ successes and failures in kindergarten. Their responses also were used to determine to what extent teachers’ opinions and perceptions led to decisions to retain students in kindergarten (see Appendix D for the Kindergarten Teacher Survey). The principal of the school also completed
a Principal Survey (see Appendix E for the Principal Survey) thereby providing
data on how the school as a whole addressed the issue of students’ low
performance both in kindergarten and in the third grade.

Limitations of the Study

The significance of this study does not lie in the diversity or variation of the
occurrence of retention in a large number of cases (Patton, 2002), but in the
richness of the information and data collected in a few specific cases—the
detailed description of each case, the analysis of themes found in the data of
each case, and the interpretations and assertions about the cases (Stake, 1995).
Within Workhard Elementary School, there were several cases of retained
students nested in a rich field of data and information. This study examines data
from each of the selected cases, the significance of which rests not in how
widespread the problem is, but in the complexity of peeling away the layers
searching for themes and categories to arrive at decisive assertions on the
seriousness of the impact of retention of a few cases (Patton, 2002). Therefore,
this study does not attempt to focus on quantity of cases; rather, it focuses on the
depth and richness of the information derived from five cases.

A list of the limitations is as follows: (a) The study was restricted to one
school site; (b) only those students who were considered to be below grade level
in math and reading were selected as subjects or cases; (c) data collection tools
were restricted to surveys, interviews and questionnaires; (d) data sources were
teachers currently in kindergarten, teachers currently in third grade, students who were retained in kindergarten and were now in third grade, the principal of the school and the parent(s) of the selected students.

Generalization

The claim that this study makes on the subject of retention rests completely on the research and findings that substantiate the perception that retention as an education practice to help students improve is not a viable educational option. The data collected, and the findings put forward in this study, help to shed more light on and raise questions about the subject of retention, and serve to guide schools in making more informed decisions on the practice of retention. The findings uncovered in these five cases can only be further validated if there appears to be a pattern of similar symptoms described in similar studies. In this study, the practice of retaining students, common in most schools, was brought under scrutiny to check for its effectiveness as an education practice for school improvement.

Therefore, it is expected that the findings of this study would help to highlight the contradictions and the pitfalls of this common school occurrence of retaining students, and be beneficial to all schools considering making the decision to retain students. This study is useful and generalizable to the extent of how widespread and ineffective the practice of retention of students is in schools.
Definition of Terms

Operationalized terms that are exclusive to education contexts, which are used in this study, need to be defined. Below are definitions of terms as they are used in this study.

Kindergarten standards

These are competency goals and objectives for all subjects as prescribed in the document, North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS, 2005), that are taught systematically throughout the school year in kindergarten.

Grade-level benchmarks

Grade-level benchmarks are curriculum standards that must be mastered by the students in a particular grade before the student can be promoted to the next grade (NC Guide for the Early Years, 1997).

Below grade-level

When students are taught curriculum content designed for the grade preceding the current grade, those students are said to be functioning at below grade-level and are taught below grade-level material.

Differentiated instruction

Differentiated instruction is instruction premised on the belief that students’ needs are different, that learning tasks should be tailored for the individual child, that all students do not require the same activities at the same pace, and should
not be measured with the same evaluation criteria (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2002).

**Assistance Team**

The Assistance Team in a school is composed of selected teachers in the school who come together to make decisions on what actions need to be taken if a student is experiencing academic or behavioral difficulties in the classroom. Typically, the team makes recommendations for specific interventions to be implemented before the student is recommended for a psychological evaluation or retention.

**Social promotion**

This is the practice of promoting students to the next grade regardless of their academic progress (Kelly, 1999). Social promotion is “generally understood to be the practice of allowing students who have failed to meet performance standards and academic requirements to pass on to the next grade with their peers instead of completing or satisfying the requirements” (Riley, 1999, p. 5). Promoting students in this way is called social promotion because it is often carried out in the presumed interest of a student’s social and psychological well-being without regard to achievement.

**Kindergarten social-skills adjustment**

A kindergartner who has adjusted well socially to school would demonstrate
skills such as sitting quietly, listening, raising his or her hand for the teacher’s attention, lining up in a straight line, learning to share (whether it’s crayons or a teacher’s attention), adapting to regular routines, being independent and responsible and being a friend to others in the classroom (The guide for the early years, 1997).

Intervention

An action or set of actions undertaken in order to prevent something undesirable from happening, or to mitigate, change or solve a student’s educational problem.

The Researcher’s Background

The researcher has twenty-three years of experience in education. The researcher began her formal teaching experience as a public school kindergarten teacher (Preparatory A and Preparatory B) in Guyana, South America. After completing her studies for a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and a postgraduate Diploma in Education degree at the University of Guyana, the researcher taught English as a subject in a secondary school for five years.

The researcher later migrated to the Bahamas where again she taught high-school English, this time in a predominantly Black public high school. Her experience as a teacher in the Bahamas prepared her for teaching later in the United States of America. Students in the Bahamas exhibited many of the same behavior patterns and cultural mores as the students she later had in her
classrooms in the United States. Also, many of the texts and tests used in the Bahamas were also used in the USA such as the California Achievement Test (CAT) and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) preparation in high school.

After several years in the Bahamas, the researcher moved to the United States of America to teach English to tenth graders at a high school in Brunswick County, North Carolina. During that time, she also supervised an after-school day-care facility, and taught adults in a high school Extended Day program.

Following the researcher’s Brunswick County experience, her family moved to Beaufort County, North Carolina so that she and her husband could pursue graduate degrees in School Leadership and Curriculum Supervision at East Carolina University (ECU). During her years at ECU, she also took classes in Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) to be certified as a special education teacher for grades K-12. For seven years, the researcher taught reading and writing to middle school students with SLD.

Upon completion of a degree in school administration and supervision, the researcher began studies for a sixth-year degree in English. Her interests were in teaching students who were learning English as a second language and in writing fiction for children and young adults. During this time, the researcher was hired on a part-time basis to teach English to freshman adult students in the vocational program at Beaufort Community College.
The researcher’s first administration experience began as an assistant principal at two elementary schools in Johnston County in 1997. Some of her assignments as an assistant principal included evaluating teacher performance in the classroom, developing criteria for textbook selection and assisting with curriculum issues in kindergarten through fifth grades (such as lesson design, performance data analysis and developing assessment tools). She also assisted with student discipline and management of student classroom behavior in kindergarten through fifth grades.

After two years as an assistant principal at the elementary level, the researcher took a new assignment as a consultant for children with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, where she worked for one year with school systems across the state on SLD issues.

The researcher’s next assignment brought her back into the schools as a school administrator but this time as a middle-school assistant principal in a school district in central North Carolina. After one year as a middle-school assistant principal, she then accepted a position as a principal of an elementary school in central North Carolina—a position she held for over six years.

Because the researcher’s experience as an educator spanned over twenty three years in several different areas of education, in several counties in North Carolina, and three countries, she was expected to have the necessary
qualifications and skills as an education researcher—all of which, presumably, gave her some authority to give her professional opinion on matters of education. When the researcher became the principal of the elementary school, she had a deep desire to take the school to a new level in student achievement. Subsequently, identifying problems such as why students were failing to reach benchmarks in their first year of school, and investigating the retention issue for possible solutions, were met with much support and collaboration from the school community. The *Harris Interactive Survey*, conducted in the school district in 2001-2002 to gauge customer satisfaction, showed that the parents and staff of the elementary school rated the principal’s performance “very high” (8.9 of a possible 10 points) for effectiveness, the highest rating they have given to any principal since the school and the district began gauging school and personnel performance through surveys (*Harris Interactive Survey, 2001*).

*Chapter Endnote*

This research began on the premise that, (a) something was amiss in the design, structure and function of the school’s kindergarten and third grade programs that were affecting the way the students achieved, and, (b) despite the fact that some schools offered an expansive and comprehensive curriculum, some kindergarten students were not able to master skills within the given time of a whole school year; subsequently, they were held back in their grade. Given the researcher’s background in education and this study’s purpose and description, it
was expected that with in-depth, multi-layered data collection, the intricacies of the many retention questions and issues raised in this study will be explored, and some answers will be provided.
Overview of Retention

During the 19th and early 20th centuries--the era of the one-room schoolhouse in the United States--retention was a non-issue because schools were not organized by grade-levels. In these schools, students mastered their lessons and advanced at their own individual pace (Groom, 2002). There was no comparison, no peer groups and no need for promotion or retention, just upward movement (Labaree, 1984). The advent of graded textbooks, along with the spread of public education led to the grouping of students, and grade levels replaced the one-room schoolhouse (Snyder and West, 1992). After students were required to learn as a class, grade-level standards were designed, and they needed to be mastered before the student could proceed to the next grade. Those who mastered the standards were promoted and those who did not were retained (Groom, 2002). As far back as the early twentieth century, Leonard Ayres, in his book Laggards in our Schools (1909), posited that retention, even when it was first practiced was harmful to students’ psychological well-being. Groom’s position on the harmful effects of retaining students was substantiated by more recent research that maintained that retention is harmful to students both on the short-term and the long-term (National Association of School Psychologists
Some of these harmful effects are manifested in behaviors such as students dropping out of school, low academic performance, dislike for school, student alienation from their classmates for being older, low self-esteem and self-confidence and living with the negative effects of the stigma of grade retention (Shepard and Smith, 1987; Patterson, 2005). Based on the negative effects of retention, it appeared that the most likely alternative from the early days to as recently as the late 1980s was to socially promote the students despite their deficit in mastering the grade-level standards. Until the early 1990s, the practice of socially promoting students was common in most schools. But, the practice of social promotion was not regarded as a laudable replacement for retention, because the practice was sending the wrong message to students— that they could be promoted to the next grade despite their failure to master curriculum standards (Rliey, 1989).

When President Bill Clinton (1991) called for schools to bring an end to the practice of social promotion, it was after many critics had already surmised that the American education system was in need of repair. In their report on high-stakes testing, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD] (2005) reported that for four decades schools were condemned for failing to help a vast majority of students to master standards that would allow them to be successful after high school (ASCD, 2005). When the Nation at Risk report was published in 1983, the document viewed public schools as failing to meet the
needs of the majority of students and failing to produce a work force that will meet the needs of the economy. The National School Board Association [NSBA] (NSBA, 1989), published a report that stated that nearly half of all seventeen-year-olds did not know how to perform basic math problems that involved fractions or decimals. These “mediocre students” (National Commission on Excellence, 1983) were passing through school on a “social promotion” agenda. President Clinton’s call for an end to social promotion led to legislations that forced many states to increase testing and assessment of students’ performance for improved school accountability. The 1994 ABC legislation in North Carolina and the 2001 Federal NCLB were all legal measures taken to increase accountability of student achievement in public schools. School districts were tasked with increasing the number of academic standards and make students and schools more accountable for academic achievement and growth.

With this emphasis and pressure on meeting standards, ending social promotion and becoming more accountable, grade retention in schools has become a bigger issue in America’s schools. A recent report by Kindergarten Issues Readiness Group (2003) on grade retention states that:

With increased accountability pressure, early childhood leaders are concerned with grade retention in the early elementary school.

Often the choice seems to be between retaining children who are not succeeding or passing them on to the next grade with their peers. (p. 3).
The choice between retaining students and passing them to the next grade is not as uncomplicated as it sounds. Each choice comes with its own district and state penalties for schools and students not showing performance growth and excellence. For instance, in most North Carolina school districts, a third-grade student who failed to meet grade-level standards by failing the EOG test after the third retesting attempt is recommended for retention. This recommendation is usually made solely on policy mandates (based on high-stake tests) without attention given to the individual characteristics and circumstance of each student. Even if all the indicators for success are present in the student’s case, such as age appropriateness, parental support of the school and the student’s good performance in subjects other than reading and math (NASP, 2003), the question of promoting the student is still not considered by some districts’ policy because such an action would be “socially promoting” the student. The only alternative for such a student is usually grade retention. “Students [in grade three] who fail to meet any of the following two promotion standards (end-of-grade tests or classroom assessments and grades) shall be retained” (Cabarrus County Schools, 2004).

The era of accountability has forced schools to look for the most effective teaching strategies or programs for helping struggling students (Hodgkinson, 2003). If neither grade retention nor social promotion is acceptable, the question becomes, what then? The answers to this question direct one to think of how
schools can provide an education for all students in a way to keep them (the schools) from getting in a place where they are not faced with the two choices--retention or social promotion. This study addresses the concerns, (a) why retention as an education practice in kindergarten had little effect on the schooling of students three years later, and (b) what are the alternatives to grade retention and social promotion.

*Retention as a Stigma, not a Liberating Force*

The basis of grade retention rests on the tenets of critical theory. This study views retention as “holding back”—a method of restricting a student from receiving a full and fair schooling, which often times leads to the student struggling to break free from the stigma of retention and achieve full school success (Groom, 2002). To question retention as an education practice can be described in the language of critical theory as an act of “unmasking sources of oppression, promoting understanding of causes and consequences of oppression [retention] and encouraging human and individual participation in liberation [full school success]” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 134). Critical theory makes the point that one must not be satisfied if the condition [of retained students] does not improve or change for the better, [and questioning grade retention] is concerned with eliminating a form of oppression and social inequalities [retention] and seeking to resolve the victims’ problems (Groom, 2002). Max Horkheimer (1932), the architect of critical theory, was concerned
about the problems of the working class in a stratified society. Paulo Freire’s
*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) addressed concerns shared by marginalized
students. Both Horkheimer and Freire advocated activism on the part of those
who were disenfranchised [retained students], but research indicates that most
students who repeat a grade will not be liberated from poor academic
achievement or from the stigma of retention (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber,
1994; Groom, 2002).

In their study of 14 controlled studies, Shepard & Smith (1987) found that
“retention does nothing to boost subsequent academic achievement, and
regardless of what it is called, the extra year creates social stigma … grade
retention means students failing a grade, and failing a grade is not a viable option
for improved academic growth (Shepard & Smith, 1987, p. 34). Smith and
Shepard’s study is supported by a report from the National Center for Education
Statistics [NCES] (2000), which states “that children who had been required to
spend two years in kindergarten performed significantly worse than their first-
and second-grade classmates on all counts” (p. 4). Mantzicopoulos’s (1997) also
found that:

Students failed to maintain their academic gains beyond their second year in
kindergarten … either because the teachers gave inflated scores in the
second year, they were tested with the same material, or they (students)
were more familiar with the class expectation … and claims that retained
students continued to have sub-average performance way into second grade. (p. 196).

Mantzicopoulos’s study confirms the findings by another study done by the NC Kindergarten Readiness Issues Group (2004), which contends:

Students who were retained in school were more likely to drop out of school compared to similar low-performing students who were not retained. Students who are retained tend to continue in their low academic performance, dislike school, and be older than their classmates. Together, these factors alienate students and lead to school dropout. (p. 4).

The persistence of low performance by retained students continues to be the central focus of educators and researchers alike in search of what works for struggling students. While it may be true that there are short-term improvements after the retention year, this study is concerned with what happens in the long term to students who have been retained. Why are some students unable to maintain their success after the boost of an additional year?

**Possible Causes for School Failure**

When one examines all the possible reasons for a student’s failure at school, hence his or her retention, there are many. The research clearly points out that factors such as lack of sufficient instructional time to master curriculum goals, grouping practices, lack of time for individual support and instruction, poor
parenting, and teacher-biased perceptions are some of these reasons (Losey, 1986; de Cos, 1997; Warjanka, 1982; O'Brian, 1991). When the factors are school-related, it is expected that schools in their own interest for continuous improvement and effectiveness should be bold and honest enough to search for solutions.

The Grouping of Students as a School Factor for Reinforcing Retention

The grouping of students for their various classes falls under “school factors” that can potentially affect students’ performance because student performance is affected by certain grouping practices and group dynamics (National Association for Early Childhood Specialists [NAECS], 2000). In their position paper, NAECS states that:

Children identified as at-risk placed in homogeneous programs often encounter lower peer role models for success and confidence … heterogeneous groupings are more likely than homogenous ones to encourage growth among children who are developing more slowly. (p. 6).

Believers in heterogeneous grouping practices of students believe that schools generally should operate on the philosophy that children should not be separated due to their low school performance (The Good North Carolina Elementary School, 1996; West, Meek & Hurst, 2000; Literacy First Process, 2005). Whether low functioning or high functioning, students of the same age
should all be placed in the same classroom, and instruction should reflect and respond to the reality that children learn and develop differently (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005).

When students are grouped together by abilities in a homogeneous classroom, such as all retained students in one class, the teacher factor in the form of teacher beliefs and expectations is even more pronounced (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2003; Oakes & Lipton, 1992). The teacher’s expectations for students who are considered low achievers, such as those who have been retained, generally affect the teacher’s behavior in how he or she plans and delivers instruction for those students, thereby reinforcing poor performance (Ferguson, 1998).

*The Teacher as a School-Factor for Reinforcing Retention*

How teachers plan, teach, interpret, implement the curriculum, and assess the students’ performance on the curriculum standards are factors that have been examined as school factors in this study because teachers come to the classroom with different teaching styles, a wide range of experiences, varying numbers of years of teaching experience and different philosophies about student learning, all of which in some form or another may impact student performance. According to Bates (1979):
Teacher sensitivity to individual differences in child development and curriculum considerations greatly impacts their decisions for retention or promotion of their students. (p. 78).

This teacher impact could be both positive and negative, and is often seen in how teachers perceive their students, especially in assessments that are subjected to teacher judgment. Most schools operate on the belief that “screening and assessment should not substitute for an observant, competent, caring teacher and a responsive curriculum” (NAECS, 2000, p. 4). Samuel Meisels (1997) in Assessing Readiness found that teachers’ observation was a significant factor among all the factors used to group kindergarten students. Meisels (1997) found that teacher-judgment plays a significant role in kindergarten assessment. He illustrated the value of teachers’ perception of students’ success when he noted that teachers gave the following characteristics as essential for beginning kindergartners:

A child should be physically healthy, rested, and well nourished. He or she should be able to communicate needs, wants and thoughts verbally, and be enthusiastic and curious in approaching new activities. (p. 19).

According to Stacy (2001), the teacher-factor plays a significant role when it comes to the retention of students. Analysis of school-based factors such as teacher beliefs and classroom practices have been advanced as meaningful
contributions to the understanding of retentions (Stacy, 2001). He confirmed that teachers’ inability to successfully reach the students [their misunderstanding of the student’s cultural mores] from the outset will influence both teacher and student behaviors. Despite the commonalities among classrooms in their structure and design, teachers could still espouse their own individual theories of learning based on their own perceptions of their students and create an environment that matches their own philosophy of student learning and child development, which oftentimes may not benefit students they perceive as different or “failing.” Spodek & Sancho (1993) pointed out that “there is no rule to stop a practice if it does not violate [acceptable beliefs about teaching and learning] and meets the curriculum standards” (p. 10).

Of interest to this study, teachers appear to be the ones who are the strongest supporters of the practice of retention, and they are the ones who essentially are responsible for the decision to retain. In a Shepard & Smith study (1987) teachers have a more positive view of retention, believing that “within some normal range of environments, children become more prepared for school according to an evolutionary, psychological unfolding of abilities” (p. 136). Teachers’ positive position on retaining students is supported in a report by Magliaro & Owings (1999), which stated that teachers talk about children who had been retained as:
… assuming more leadership, being more comfortable with routine, being more cooperative, having greater self-confidence becoming more a part of a social group, and achieving more academic success. (p. 1).

Shepard & Smith (1990) insist that children view retention as punishment and experience emotions such as fear, anger and sadness when not promoted despite the teachers’ positive beliefs.

*The Two Sides of the Retention Debate*

Clearly, the issue is not to necessarily keep a student with their own age peers in the same grade (social promotion); rather, it is to look at what adjustments (interventions) schools (and teachers) need to make in order to make education more responsive to young children (NAECS, 2000).

Despite the belief of several researchers that grade retention leads to more harmful effects on students’ long-term performance, the argument is intense regarding the positive effects of retention.

Proponents of retention argue that retention could be regarded either as a progressive effort (not failure) to help students succeed or as a strategy that schools use to group students homogeneously by their abilities in order to separate the low from the high for more efficient teaching (Stacy, 2001; Steinberg, 1990). Still others think, repeating a school year for reasons of immaturity is a gift of time for the child, preventing school failure (Kahn, 2004). In
their findings from a study on retention and social promotion, Green & Winters (2005) said that:

While students who were subject to the retention program outperformed those who were not ... our second analysis shows that low-performing students who were retained significantly outperformed those who were promoted. (p. 5).

Whereas proponents to retention argue that the early years are more appropriate for retention, those who oppose see few benefits. Opponents to retention contend that gains by retained students shown on norm-referenced tests are short-lived and decrease over time (Mantzicopoulos, 1992; Shephard & Smith, 1990).

Holmes (1989), in his studies on retention, found that after three grades, there were no differences between children who were retained and those who were not, even though the retained students were one year older. He posited that “children retained at the end of kindergarten performed lower than a random sample of their promoted peers on a number of measures” (p. 119). However, the sudden gains did not last. Holmes’ (1989), position is substantiated by findings from a report by Patterson (2005) that confirms that retention does not improve achievement among kindergartners in reading and mathematics, nor does it facilitate instruction by making classrooms more ability-based. In fact, opponents to retention claim that the prognosis for early high school drop-out is
indicated by whether those high school students were retained in the early elementary grades--most likely in kindergarten (US Department of Education, 2003; NASP, 2003).

In their opposition to retention as a progressive school practice, NACES (2000) stated as one of its basic principles of early childhood education that retention is rejected as a viable option for the academic success of young children (NAECS Position Paper, 2000). The discussion on whether to retain or promote kindergarten students because of their school performance also addresses the topic of what should constitute the kindergarten curriculum and experience.

The Kindergarten Experience

Kindergartners coming to school can either be thrust into a rigorous standard-based, academic environment or one in which they explore and grow through play and exploration. In Adria Steinberg’s (1990) study, Kindergarten: Producing Early Failure? she posited:

Kindergarten has become a skill-based, academically oriented program … yet many experts believe that the kindergarten experience should be intellectually stimulating rather than academically demanding. (p. 10).

Steinberg’s (1990) report is backed by a more recent study done by Viadero (2002), which suggests that doubling the amount of playtime in kindergarten
increases academic learning in later grades. Steinberg’s and Viadero’s positions on the kindergarten experience is of great interest to this study when one considers the report “Ready for School Goal Team” (2000) that says kindergartners must reach certain academic benchmarks at the end of the year in order to be promoted, a position that is a direct result of the NC ABC legislation for the accountability of schools.

The goal of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study [NCSCOS] (2005) for kindergartners is to promote a consistent, appropriate and effective system of early education. The standards are organized in five domains of development that include, (a) Approaches to Learning, (b) Emotional and Social Development, (c) Health and Physical Development, (d) Language Development and (e) Communication and Cognitive Development. Whereas the standards appear to deemphasize academic rigor and encourage intellectual development, kindergarten teachers are generally aware of the pressures first grade teachers put on them to focus on more academic goals (Viadero, 2002). In a North Carolina classroom, kindergarten teachers feel the pressure to focus on teaching academics such as phonemic skills, handwriting, alphabet letters, math processes, shapes and colors, and reading. Kindergarten teachers also know that they are required to teach these skills because these are requirements in the kindergarten English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum of the NCSCOS:
During the kindergarten year, students need to experience the enjoyment of reading while they learn the foundational strategies and skills that will enable them to read independently. Students learn enabling skills of phonemic awareness, letter names, sound-letter correspondences, decoding skills, high frequency vocabulary, and comprehension skills and the as they listen and respond to a variety of texts. (p. 21).

The NCSCOS-ELA curriculum for kindergarten outlines five goals and twenty-four objectives to be taught in the kindergarten year. The objectives emphasize a high level of academic rigidity: (a) The learner will demonstrate decoding and word recognition strategies. (b) The learner will begin to read. (c) The learner will use new words in own speech and writing. (d) The learner will use a variety of sentence patterns in writing (NCSCOS-ELA, Kindergarten, 2005). Time for “play” is usually restricted in a strict academic environment in the kindergarten classroom.

This emphasis on reaching grade level standards for academic excellence, have led to more kindergartners “failing” kindergarten. With increased accountability pressures on meeting rigorous curriculum standards, grade retention in kindergarten has increased (Kindergarten Readiness Issues Group Report, 2004). Included in the pressure for kindergarten students to master high academic standards, is the high cost of reteaching retained kindergarten students for the second time in the same grade.
Retention is Also Costly

To as the question “why do schools continue to retain students when retention has failed to sustain the growth of some students?” is valid when one considers, not only the effects on a child’s overall well being, but also the cost to schools for educating a child for an additional year. The report by the Kindergarten Readiness Issues Group (2004) states that 22,343 children were retained in the 2001- 2002 school year and it costs the state an additional $170 million in expenditures to re-educate all the retained students in one year. In the elementary grades, the percentage of grade retention has more than doubled since 1992. Retention in schools increased from 2.2% in 1992 to 5.5% in 2002. This means that the cost for educating our lowest levels of students continues to rise with little change in their academic growth.

With the increased cost of re-educating retained students coupled with the penalties they must suffer for not meeting high standards, schools are becoming proactive in finding ways to help students succeed. The emphasis on kindergartners mastering academic standards in order to be promoted to first grade is forcing schools to look at what needs to be done before the child comes to kindergarten.

Perhaps, Delayed Kindergarten Entry?

An Illinois kindergarten study reports that preschool programs have had a positive influence on students’ kindergarten readiness skills and that performance
levels have been sustained in the early elementary grades when interventions are appropriately applied in classes for at-risk or retained students (Illinois Pre-kindergarten Program for Children At Risk of Academic Failure, 1994). The study claims that there are many variables that may affect students’ success in school, and grade retention could be one of many support systems that schools can apply to solve the problem of low achievement. The Illinois study is proposing delayed kindergarten entry to public schools for those students who are not yet ready for the rigors of school. But, this position is admitting that there is a common “starting line” and slow students need an extra year to get to it. Critical theorists would argue this would not be “fair education” because this process penalizes some students for not being ready for the starting line, and delayed kindergarten is retention in an underhanded way. To refute such an argument, a common starting line means that there is a common finishing line which is high school graduation, and older retained students are the most likely to drop out of high school and not reach the finishing line (Hodgkinson, 2003). The long-term effects of delayed kindergarten appear to be just as harmful as being retained in kindergarten.

Proactive Measures to Eliminate or Reduce Retention in Kindergarten

There are two kinds of successes that could be attributed to retention—short term and long term. Short-term success is likely, and usually occurs in the student’s second year in kindergarten. However, to validate the practice of kindergarten retention, one needs to look at the long-term results of retention:
Long-term school success is in how the students establish and successfully apply a hierarchy of skills and knowledge that they have acquired since kindergarten and all along the way as they advance through school. Maintaining continued success long after the retention year requires schools and families to establish student support mechanisms that will continue to bolster student performance. The research shows that intervening early with a variety of intervention methods has proven to help students to be successful in school regardless of difference in abilities. (Anderson, 1992, p. 7).

A proposal of five recommendations by five state education departments working collaboratively on a report, *Retention in the Early Grades* include the following: (a) Promote low achievers and provide additional instructional support, (b) expand parent involvement in school, (c) implement multi-age classrooms, (d) review and redesign curriculum, and (e) develop a summer enrichment program. (Hoover-Dempsey & Walker, 2002).

These alternatives for improved performance are replicated by the National Association of School Psychologists position paper (NASP, 2003). NASP criticizes schools for retaining students, especially if the decision to retain is based on standardized tests results. Their position encourages much to be done before the student reaches the point where retention is the only option. Their core recommendations are as follows:
(a) Encourage early identification and intervention of academic, behavioral and/or emotional difficulties to avoid the inappropriate use of retention. (b) Encourage the use of interventions other than retention for students in academic difficulty. (c) Promote and publicize research comparing retention to alternative intervention practices at kindergarten and first grade level with children determined to be at-risk for school failure. (d) Encourage school psychologists to assist in the decision-making process about retention of individual students by examining the interventions that are put in place to help retained students, checking to see if they are designed to fix the problem and help the student experience continued success in school. (p. 36).

Along with the interventions implemented at the school, factors external to school can also have a positive impact on student achievement. Henderson (2002) observed that families whose children are doing well in school exhibit the following six characteristics:

(1) Establish daily family routines, (2) monitor out-of-school activities, (3) model the value of self-discipline and hard work, (4) express high but realistic expectations, (5) encourage children’s development and progress in school, (6) encourage reading, writing and discussions among family members. (p. 35).
A child's success rate increases when schools work together with families to support learning. In fact, the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that the student's family is able to create a home environment that encourages learning, expresses high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children's achievement and future careers, and become involved in their child's education at school and in the community (Henderson, 2002). Family support for the school, coupled with student-centered academic interventions at school, proves to be among the best model for alternatives to retention. If the answer to the question what will increase the success of low performing students, rests in the types of interventions implemented both at school and outside of school, then attention must be given to suggestions for more and effective interventions. This study examines some of the early interventions teachers apply in their classrooms that improved students’ performance and that could potentially reduce the need to retain their low performing students.

Chapter Endnote

The decision to retain a struggling student sometimes appears to be the best professional choice for some teachers and educators, but research has shown that such a decision could be more harmful than helpful for some students if all the factors affecting student failure are not considered and addressed.
In light of the extent to which the research rejects retention as a viable option for sustained academic growth, this study searches for causes and remedies that will lead to schools successfully implementing interventions for students’ holistic improvement.

The process of delineating the problems of academic failure early and addressing them directly is a more progressive outlook for dealing with low-performing students versus the process of retaining them. And, it is not that schools and teachers are not aware what the problems are or don’t know how to find them; it is how the problems of low performance are identified and addressed (or not addressed) that makes the subject of retention so significant.

The literature suggests that teacher expectations and teacher judgment along with proper parenting are key factors that sometimes lead to student failure or success, hence decisions to promote or retain students. In light of that assumption, this study has identified the teacher and parent factors as two major data sources for this study. The process of gathering the data and presenting the discussion and findings will be done in chapters three, four and five of this study.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

This study examines the perceived effects of kindergarten retention on students’ academic outcomes as the students advance to the third grade. A case study design is used because the case study is viewed as “an ideal design for understanding and interpreting observations of educational phenomena” (Merriam, 1988, p. 21). Given that the researcher begins this study on the premise that something is amiss in the design, structure and operation of the kindergarten classroom that are preventing students’ continued school success, the case study approach allows the researcher to disconfirm beliefs that retention supports academic growth with “negative” cases--those retained kindergarten students who are still not making adequate progress in the third grade. This study then confirms existing beliefs about retention, and posits new ones as they unfold in the investigation.

The study focused on third grade students who had been retained in kindergarten and who were not experiencing school success. In effect, this study presumed that there might have been potential problems that existed in the manner in which decisions were made to retain students in kindergarten and the manner in which retained students were educated as they advanced to the third grade. Each case that is reviewed, uncovered conceptual categories that either
illustrated or challenged the assumptions held prior to the data gathering that retention was helpful. Subsequently, this study challenges the effectiveness of those retention decisions based on the resulting impact they had on students’ school performance, then recommends alternative strategies schools can implement to reduce or eliminate grade retention in kindergarten. To strengthen the case against kindergarten retention, students in third grade at Workhard Elementary School who had been retained in kindergarten and who were showing signs of low school performance were selected as the subjects of this study.

The study began inductively with third-grade students at their current place or grade in school, making this a case study layered or nested in a field of data sources (Patton, 2002). Data was collected from two levels—at the third-grade level, and at the kindergarten level—through questionnaires, student interviews, teacher interviews, parent interviews, a principal survey and students’ assessment data. Field notes and memos that were kept by the researcher during the interviews and throughout the data collection process were also used as data sources for this study. These data sources were all aligned in a matrix and carefully cross-checked in search of common themes, new patterns or trends or paradoxes.

Through questionnaires, parents were surveyed for their input on their expectations of a good education for their child and how their expectations were
aligned with the teacher’s and the school’s expectations (see Appendix C for Parent Survey). Patton’s (2002) proposed three-step method of data collection was followed in gathering the data for this study: (1) Assembling the raw case data. This was the process of gathering as much information as possible on each case. (2) Constructing a case record. Bringing all the pieces together for each case, and laying them out in a multidimensional matrix. (3) Writing a final case study narrative, either in a chronological or thematic order (Patton, 2002). This study used a thematic approach to tell the stories of the individual cases. After the narratives had been assembled, the researcher began the process of cross-case analysis by coding and categorizing the convergence and divergence of themes and patterns:

Once patterns, themes and/or categories had been established through inductive analysis, the final, confirmatory stage of the qualitative analysis was deductive in testing and affirming the appropriateness and authenticity of the inductive content. (Patton, 2002, p. 454).

In other words, through careful cross-checking and dissection of all the details in the layers of information collected on each case, the researcher was able to confirm findings with existing research and posit new theories derived from the case analyses.

The cases for this study have been selected purposefully for meeting the following two criteria: (1) for being third graders and (2) for being retained in
kindergarten. From this sample, an intense criterion was then applied by asking the question “How many of the third grade students who repeated kindergarten are still low achievers?” (see Appendix A for the School Survey). The intense criterion created a smaller group of subjects immediately identifiable for their unique, extreme condition of being low performing retained kindergartners in the third grade. This smaller group of students made up the sample of this study.

The sample consisted of all the students who had been retained in kindergarten at Workhard Elementary School. There were ten students at Workhard Elementary who fell into this category, and from among the ten students, eight met the intense criterion of being below grade level in math and reading. Five of the eight students agreed to participate in the study; therefore this study conducted research on five cases.

Sample Selection Process

Selecting the five cases for this study required that the researcher take the following steps:

Step 1: The researcher first obtained permission from the school district superintendent’s office before beginning the study. This helped to validate the study, and at the same time encouraged participation from the other schools.

Step 2: The researcher used a questionnaire to screen all the appropriate school sites in the school district to gauge the extent to which schools were retaining students in kindergarten. This screening showed that some schools in
the district were retaining students at a higher rate than other schools (see Figure 1).

**Step 3:** The researcher selected the school with the highest number of retained kindergartners currently in third grade. Having selected the site, the researcher then obtained permission from the principal of the school to visit the school and make contact with the teaching staff, students and parents.

**Step 4:** The researcher sent an introductory letter with an attached form that requested further contact information from each of the parents of the retained third graders, the kindergarten teachers at the school, the teachers of each of the students who had been retained in kindergarten and who were now in third grade, and the school’s principal. The parent contact information requested from the parents included their telephone numbers (cell, home and work), name of parent(s) or guardian(s) and the home address. Included in the teacher packet was a survey for the teachers, and in the principal packet, a principal survey (see Appendixes B, D and E for the Teacher and Principal surveys).

**Step 5:** Upon receipt of the completed contact information forms from the parents and the teachers, the researcher began the process of scheduling interview sessions with both the parents, the students and the teachers who had expressed that they were willing to participate in the study (see Appendix F for the Letter to Parent).
**Step 6:** Before the interviews began with the parents, students and teachers, the researcher explained the purpose of the project and invited each participant to sign a participation agreement form. The interviews with students and parents were held within a specific time period with one following the other respectively. The researcher developed a tracking process to make sure that all data sources—teacher interviews and surveys, student interviews, parent interviews, surveys, and the principal survey—were all carefully aligned with the individual cases as each case unfolded.

**Step 7:** After collecting and assembling all the data from all participants, the researcher began the process of constructing case records of each case by tallying, cross-checking, aligning, examining field notes, creating data figures, and noting and categorizing patterns and themes.

**Site Selection**

Nine elementary schools in the Grand County School district were sent a questionnaire to determine where most of the student retentions in kindergarten were taking place in this school district. The three survey questions asked were, (a) How many students in third grade had repeated their kindergarten year? (b) How many of the students who repeated the kindergarten year would you describe as low achievers? (c) In making the decision for kindergarten retention: (i) Do you rely on externally prescribed criteria? (ii) Do you rely on your own school’s developed criteria? or (iii) Do you rely on both your school developed
criteria and those developed by the district or state? (see Appendix A for the School survey).

All but one of the schools showed that they retained kindergartners. Workhard Elementary was purposefully selected as the site from which the cases were drawn since it had the largest number of retained kindergarten students (see Figure 1).

*Workhard Elementary School*

The process of selecting Workhard Elementary School was done in a purposeful manner (Patton, 2002; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). After meeting the criteria of a public elementary school, Workhard Elementary School needed only to house students who had been retained in kindergarten who were still low achievers at the beginning of third grade. Each of the nine schools was gauged to determine the location of the cases, not to show how well one school did versus the other schools since this study is not about comparison of schools. It turned out that eight of the schools practiced some level of retention in kindergarten, which proved that the practice of retaining students was prevalent enough that generalities were not uncommon.

Workhard Elementary School was a newly constructed building located in the center of a small North Carolina town. Before its renovation two years prior to this research, it was the oldest school building in the county. The school housed grades preschool to grade four and had a population of about eight hundred and
fifty students, ninety percent (90%) of whom came from lower-income families. Sixty percent (60%) of the students were African Americans, twenty percent (20%) were Caucasian, fifteen percent (15) were Hispanic and five percent (5%) were multi racial. The school was viewed as a “tough place to work” by one teacher although she said she liked the challenge. The school’s office hours were from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. A big “We Welcome Our Parents” sign hung over the office door, and to the right of the office was a small table that held a book for visitors and parents to sign. Large cushioned chairs and carpeted floors marked the office and the lobby.

The researcher and the principal of Workhard Elementary met in the principal’s office prior to the interviews to discuss how interviews with the students and teachers would be done without violating their privacy and rights. They made the decision to include the parents in the interview session as the trusted second person and for all interviews to be done at either the school during the day in a room that was familiar to the students or a neutral place such as a public library in the local community. Three of the students’ parents in this study requested the school’s guidance counselor’s conference room as the place for their interviews and two chose the local public library.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with five students, their parents and their teachers. The interview process with the students was initiated with (a) a letter
from the principal of Workhard Elementary School inviting parents to participate
in the interview, and (b) an introductory letter from the researcher along with a
blank contact information form sent to the parents of all the students in the third-
grade who had been retained in kindergarten (see Appendix F for the Letter to
the Parent). In the end, there were three documents that were sent home with
the ten students. Figure 2 shows students who returned their completed contact
forms and who were selected for the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Of the Cases</th>
<th>No. of Retained Students</th>
<th>Students Who Met the Criteria</th>
<th>Students Who Participated in Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Larry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Perry</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Dover</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Avery</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Bane</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2: Actual number of students that were contacted, and the number of
cases that actually participated.*

Figure 2 shows that ten students were identified; eight returned their
information for contact, and five actually participated in the study. Of the eight
students who met the sample criteria, only five could be reached for interviews.
One of the three parents who did not participate had a disconnected telephone, failed to respond to notes sent home by the student or a letter in the mail, another refused to participate because she said that, “I am too embarrassed to talk with a stranger about my child’s retention…my daughter is doing fine and I don’t think we would like to re live the memory of that experience.” (This parent’s response is an example of the negative stigma and emotional trauma associated with retaining a child that some families may experience). The third parent did not show up for the interview even after a third contact by telephone. The teacher confirmed that it was almost impossible to get the third parent to come to school or respond to almost any communication that was school related.

The interviews with the students and parents were conducted at the school and at the public library at a time that was convenient for each participant. An audio tape recorder was turned on and placed in the center of the table to record the interviews. The interview with each participant took about 30 minutes to complete.

The teachers of the five third-grade students who participated in the study were also interviewed and asked to complete a survey. A letter from the researcher along with a form for contact information and the survey was sent to the teachers by mail. The teachers returned the completed surveys and contact information to the researcher by mail. The researcher then contacted the teachers either by telephone or e-mail to schedule the interviews.
The interview questions were unstructured and open-ended in design (Patton, 2002). The questions served as lead questions to direct the participants to feel free to share information or their experiences in a non-structured way. During the interview, the researcher constantly noted the subjects’ mood changes, their word choices, body language, animated-ness, and tone of voice, and kept these as field notes to be used in the case development.

The interview questions were designed to answer the research questions on which this study is premised. The main research question was: “How has retention as an education practice designed to improve students’ low performance in kindergarten made a significant difference to students’ school performance three years later in the third grade?” The sub-questions were, (a) “was the performance of the third graders who were retained in kindergarten impacted by factors external to the school?” and (b) “what factors compelled the school to make the decision to retain students in kindergarten?” This study’s research questions provided the rationales for the questions in the interviews with the subjects.

*Rationale for Student Interview Questions*

1. To establish that the retained student knew that he or she was or was not successful in school. 2. To determine whether the students remembered his kindergarten retention and how that memory still affected him or her. 3. To determine the level at which the retained student was having normal school
interactions with his or her younger peers in third grade. (4) To determine what school and outside factors were influencing the retained student’s current academic performance.

Rationale for Parent Interview Questions

(1) To determine that the parent was in full agreement with the decision made in kindergarten to retain his or her child. (2) To determine that the parent was satisfied with the progress his or her child had made in school since retention in kindergarten. (3) To determine how the parent felt about retaining students. (4) To determine if the parent was still satisfied that the school had done the right thing by retaining his or her child in kindergarten and if the parent was still satisfied with what was being done to help his or her child.

Rationale for Teacher Interview Questions

(1) To determine how the current teacher was measuring the growth and performance of the retained student. (2) To determine whether the teacher thought kindergarten retention or the retention of students on the whole helped students in any way. (3) To determine whether despite all the interventions the teacher was putting in place, the student’s performance had not changed significantly since kindergarten.

The responses to the questions in the interviews were then assembled in a matrix and compared with the responses in the surveys from the same sources.
This proved to be a valuable step in constructing case records before the final development of the case narratives (Patton, 2002).

**Surveys**

The teacher surveys and the principal survey were mailed to the principal and teachers, respectively along with a self-addressed stamped envelope so they could return the surveys to the researcher at no cost to them.

The parents completed their surveys in the same room in which the researcher was interviewing the student. Four third-grade teachers and nine kindergarten teachers completed the surveys. The purpose of the surveys was to conduct cross-checking of the information received in the interviews with information in the surveys. Because the surveys were completed anonymously, using pseudonyms, it was hoped that the subjects would be more at ease and willing to share their thoughts and feelings on the subject of retention without undue pressure from the researcher’s presence.

**Pseudonyms**

The participants showed more willingness to participate after they were informed that their real names, the school’s name or the town’s name would be replaced by pseudonyms. The researcher created a tracking matrix to keep track of the real subjects and their individual pseudonyms throughout the data collection process. As was stated earlier, Grand County Schools, Workhard
Elementary School and the names of the cases and their teachers are all pseudonyms.

Analysis

The results from the surveys and interviews with the students, teachers, parents and the principal were compared and cross-checked systematically in search of common themes and patterns as the stories of each of the cases were developed. This process is described by Patton (2002) “as bringing order, structure and meaning to a collection of unorganized information” (p. 297) A primary basis for the analysis was to examine what were the perceived predictors that were used by kindergarten teachers to make decisions for retention, and to show how the school altered their curriculum design, and instructional practices to match the needs of retained students in the third grade. The researcher conducted surveys and interviews with the third-grade teachers of the retained students to examine the effectiveness of their teaching practices on the students in their current grade. The analysis also examined the home-school relationships (through parent interviews and surveys), and how those could be factors for success or failure of the five cases.

Coding and categorizing in search of patterns, themes, and trends were ongoing throughout the data collection process. Information received from the teachers, such as the student’s test results and discipline report was compared with the researcher’s notes taken in the interviews with the student and parent.
Even though categorizing in case studies is largely an intuitive process, in this study it was also systematic and informed by the study’s purpose, the researcher’s orientation and knowledge, and the constructs made explicit by the participants of the study (Merriam, 1988).

The researcher kept a journal for reflections and reminders during the interviewing process to ensure accuracy of information such as times and dates of the meetings, names of subjects carefully matched with pseudonyms and other details not recorded in the actual interviews or surveys.

**Validity**

The assumption of qualitative research is that it is “holistic, ever-changing and multidimensional” (Merriam, 1988). For case studies, Stake (1995) offers two procedures for validity confirmation—triangulation of information (searching for the convergence of information) and member checking.

Member checking of this study was done in various ways. After the interviews were completed, the participants were allowed to listen to and comment on portions of the taped interviews (Merriam, 1988, Creswell, 1998). Four members of a research department in higher education were asked to provide feedback after the proposal for the research was presented. One kindergarten teacher and one third-grade teacher of another school in the district were asked to preview the draft report before the final report was written.
Members in the school community, such as the school principal and other teachers, continually read and critiqued the manuscripts for content correctness.

Wolcott’s (1990) eight points of validation were also applied to reinforce validity of this study: (1) “Talk little, listen a lot.” This strategy not only encouraged the participants, but it helped the researcher to be more responsive and attentive and to ask the right questions for clarification, especially when the researcher dealt with children and adults who were chatty. (2) “Record accurately.” Whether this was done objectively as in audio recording or subjectively as in personal journals and notes, accuracy of information was taken seriously to validate the study. (3) “Let readers ‘see’ for themselves.” Wolcott (1990) emphasized triangulation, especially when there were several answers to the same question. In this study, care was taken to show the reader how each piece of the data sources from the teachers’, parents’ and students’ perceptions, the research questions, and the themes from the cases helped to create the final case through tallying the number of similar responses, matching common constructs, and categorizing the frequency of divergent information. (4) “Report fully.” In trying to understand or interpret the subjects’ statements that may have had cultural bias in the interviews with teachers, parents and students, the researcher was careful to report all accounts of the subjects in the interests of the readers of this report, the subjects and research in general. (5) “Be candid.” Wolcott thought it was healthy to bring back to the table the feelings and thoughts
of the researcher in a conscious manner. This was done throughout this study in the form of reflective memos, field notes and journal records, which were later used for cross-checking the data for common themes after transcribing the interviews, examining the survey results and re-visiting the research questions. (6) “Seek feedback.” Feedback from colleagues, committee members and interested others was critical to the researcher to ensure that the research was being conducted in a manner consistent with protocols of a qualitative case study design. (7) “Try to achieve balance.” Revisiting the notes and drafts constantly for disciplined subjectivity helped to establish balance, fairness and completeness of this study. This practice was necessary in this study for the simple fact that the data collection and gathering of notes from multiple sources expanded over a period of three months. (8) “Write accurately.” Technical accuracy, coherence and internal consistency should be the criteria for accuracy according to Wolcott (1990). This called for the researcher’s competence in writing so as to present the report in a manner that was both readable and informative. The goal of this study was to make it available in a reader-friendly format to other educators, parents and other participants with the hope that it would be useful in adding to the data on retention studies.

Wolcott’s (1990) eight points offer the researcher a clear formula for validating the data collection process of this study. The researcher followed the eight points to ensure that the validity of the research was reinforced.
Ethical Issues

To stem any challenges relating to ethical issues in this study, the researcher followed strict codes of professional behavior at all times. *The Educators Codes of Ethics*, developed by the North Carolina School Board Association, was adhered to in all its facets such as respecting the rights of the students, the parents and colleagues at all times, ensuring their safety and security and safeguarding their confidentiality and privacy. The researcher sought endorsement from the Internal Review Board (IRB), which is the governing committee that previews all research done in the name of the college with which the researcher was affiliated.

The researcher received written permission from the school district’s superintendent to conduct this study at Workhard Elementary School. To further avoid any risk factors and to strengthen validity, the following list of items was adhered to: (a) Acquire parental permission from all the parents of the students who were directly and indirectly involved in this study. Parents were informed of the purpose of this study and their written permissions were acquired for interviewing their children. (b) The data was collected and stored in a safe and secure place in the researcher’s office or at the researcher’s home. Except for the person who was hired to give technical support, the transcriptor and the editor and the school personnel who read the draft manuscript to help strengthen validation, no other individuals had access to the manuscript or any other
document related to this research. (c) The teachers and other subjects who participated in this study were given the choice of opting out at any stage without any negative repercussions or reprisals. (d) Because the researcher had no intention of publishing the final report for financial gain, all the adult participants were informed of all the uses of the document after it was completed. The researcher fully disclosed the purpose and use of the research with the participants. (e) The researcher took great care to ensure that the audit trail of all the stages of the research could be easily followed by anyone who was interested in the study. And, according to Merriam (1988), “just as an auditor authenticates the accounts of a business, independent judges should be able to authenticate the findings of the study by following the trail of the researcher” (p.164).

Chapter Endnote

The researcher’s ultimate goal was to discover new themes and trends through the five cases, and to be able to find answers to the questions raised in this research. To ensure that this was done in a manner accepted by the other researchers, members of the education community and those interested in the topic of this research, the researcher followed and recorded the steps described in the preceding chapter of this study. The researcher hoped that this study would shed light on the kindergarten retention issues, which would ultimately
lead to new practices and policy development on promotion and retention of kindergarten students.
CHAPTER FOUR

Data Collection

Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher took a focused scope (Patton, 2002) of examining several specific data sources that together tell the stories of the five students. The data sources included student interviews, parent interviews and surveys, teacher interviews and surveys, and the principal survey. One of the steps in the process of triangulation required that the researcher frequently assess the newly found patterns and trends uncovered in the cases against the findings in the literature and against the questions raised in this study. The development of the narrative of each case was dependant on how efficiently and effectively all the information gathered were analyzed and reassembled to build the case records (Patton, 2002). In the end, the process of cross-checking new findings as the cases emerged with other similar research findings resulted in positing new or revised theories and confirming old beliefs on the topic of retention.

Gathering the Data

The question that steered the data gathering process is “How has retention as an education practice designed to improve students’ low performance in kindergarten made significant difference to students’ overall school performance
three years later in the third grade?” Through five case studies of third-grade students who were retained in kindergarten, this study searched for answers to resolve the question asked. The five students were: Harry, case number one; Tony, case number two; Jane, case number three; Dolly, case number four; and Daisy, case number five. The students’ third-grade teachers agreed to participate in this study, and Figure 3 illustrates how the students were matched with their teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students (Cases)</th>
<th>Students’ Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case No. 1 Harry</td>
<td>Ms. Avery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case No. 2 Tony</td>
<td>Ms. Perry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case No. 3 Jane</td>
<td>Ms. Dover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case No. 4 Dolly</td>
<td>Ms. Larry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case No. 5 Daisy</td>
<td>Ms. Larry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3:* How the cases were matched with their teachers.

*Cases*

This study derived its data from five cases made up of both male and female students. None of the current kindergarten teachers at the school had taught any of the selected students. The teachers said the students had moved out of the kindergarten grade prior to them being hired as kindergarten teachers, and, therefore, they could not provide much data on the subjects themselves.
However, the students’ current third-grade teachers all participated in the study, and provided all needed information on the students’ third grade performance.

Case Number One--Harry

Meeting Harry

Harry, a 10-year-old, third-grade male student of Hispanic origin spoke both English and Spanish fairly fluently and was a student at Workhard Elementary School in Grand County Schools district. He was a student in Ms. Avery’s classroom. In the initial school survey completed by the third-grade teachers at Workhard Elementary School, Harry’s teacher identified Harry as a student who “was retained in kindergarten, and who was performing below the third-grade level in reading and only slightly above the third-grade level in math.”

Before the researcher contacted Harry’s parents, they had already been informed in a previous letter from his school’s principal that they would be asked to participate in an interview for a research study on “kindergarten retention.” Subsequently, when the researcher called Harry’s home to set a time and place for the interview with Harry’s parent(s) and Harry, his mother, who answered the telephone, was not surprised. Because Harry’s mother spoke limited English, she gave the telephone to her son, Harry, who spoke with the researcher and translated for his mother at the same time. Harry told the researcher that his mother would love to come for the interview on any afternoon when school was
dismissed. Harry explained that his mother would have a few children with her whom she was babysitting, and as a result, she needed to be finished with the interview by 5 p.m. in time to take the children home. When the researcher suggested that the upcoming “teacher’s workday” (a day when students do not come to school) was a good day for the interview, Harry translated that his mother would love to have the interview on that day. However, it was Harry who decided that he preferred to have the interview at the school in the school’s guidance counselor’s conference room.

Harry’s preference for this particular room was no surprise to his teacher, Ms. Avery. Ms. Avery stated that all her students with behavioral problems went to see the counselor on a regular basis for counseling, and the students liked going because the counselor would reward them with candy for “good conduct in her office.” Ms. Avery also reported that Harry was one of the first students to return the researcher’s contact information form with the details needed for the researcher to contact his family.

Harry came to the interview fifteen minutes early with his mother, his younger sister and a neighbor’s five-year-old son, whom his mother was babysitting. All of the members of Harry’s party were smiling and friendly and appeared somewhat pleased to see the researcher. Even though it was a cold January day with the temperature less that 60 °F, Harry and his party walked the distance from their home to the school. Harry’s mother told the researcher (with Harry translating)
that they lived “close by … about two miles away,” and that she “… couldn’t drive; that’s why we walked to the school. We thought this was important, so we did not mind walking.”

Harry was casually and neatly dressed in a clean, gray, tee shirt; denim jeans; a thick, black jacket; and a pair of old, white tennis shoes. His hair was short and styled with a noticeable amount of some type of hair treatment, which caused Harry’s hair to look wet and straight. Before he went into the school building, Harry stopped to look at his reflection in the glass doors and gave his hair a slight pat. The researcher noted that Harry was about five feet tall with a medium build. He displayed a demeanor that his teacher described as “quiet.” One of the first things that Harry stated to the researcher was that he would have to translate for his mother in her interview because she could not speak English.

Harry appeared to be somewhat apprehensive of the interview at first, especially because, as he said later, he was not sure what the interview was going to be like. After several minutes of light chatting on topics, such as, “walking to school on a cold January day …” and “it’s a workday for teachers and no school for students …” Harry guided the researcher to the school’s guidance counselor’s conference room--a place, he said, he had been to before. On his way to the conference room, the school’s secretary greeted Harry and asked Harry to introduce his mother to her, as they had never met. Harry
translated in Spanish what the secretary requested and his mother smiled and reached out to shake the secretary’s hand.

Harry’s and his mother’s prompt arrival to the interview (despite the hardship of having to walk the distance of two miles to the location where the interview took place) was noted by the researcher as “student’s and parent’s perseverance to attend school-related issues.” The student’s seriousness to attend a school-related event at the school as shown by Harry and his mother was also reported by Harry’s teacher who stated that “Harry’s parents were very supportive of the school and her class, shown in their willingness to send items for class projects even though the parent did not physically come to the school to volunteer.” Harry himself shared with the researcher that he loved school and that the worst part of his day was “going home in the evenings after school was dismissed.”

Parents’ positive attitude and support for their children’s school and teachers are noted by Byrnes (1989) as important ingredients for retained students’ school success. Other factors that Byrnes (1989) cited as critical conditions for retained students’ school success were student’s acceptance of their retention as necessary for their success, and the student’s motivation to work hard to succeed despite being retained. If Harry’s success was measured by the level of his parent’s support for the school and his love for school, Harry should have been described as a “successful student on grade level” by his teacher. However, on the contrary, his reading assessment results showed that
he was still performing below grade level (shown in the 30th percentile in reading) on a recent standardized test he had taken, and only slightly above grade level in math. Further, a report from Harry’s teacher indicated that as a third grader, he was “still below grade level in reading and had low average performance in math.” For the purposes of this study, one could also ask, if there were sustained parent involvement throughout the kindergarten year, would the students in this study have been retained?

*Harry’s Neighborhood*

Harry’s home was located in the neighborhood close to his school. His home was an old, one-story, brick, ranch-style design in a neighborhood close to the school. From the principal survey, the researcher learned that the section of town in which Harry lived was the poorest in the small town, where most of the families were laborers and worked at minimum wage jobs. Eighty percent of Workhard Elementary School students, according to the principal, were on the federal Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) program (a high percentage of families qualifying for the FRL program, indicates a high level of children of low-income families who attend the school). A description of the neighborhood is important to this case study because it has been deduced that “poor reading achievement of children from poor families is due to the quality of the neighborhoods in which they live and the quality of the schools they attend (National Research Council, 1989).
Harry’s house was surrounded by a chain link fence, as were most of the houses on the street. There was an older model car parked at the side of the house on the grass, which was worn, and strewn with children’s toys such as a tricycle, a soccer ball, a plastic baseball bat and a pink toy bucket. There were no trees except for old shrubberies that lined the chain link fence. Harry said that they had been renting the house for the past five years. Harry shook his head from side to side in the negative, and frowned when asked if he liked the house in which he lived. His sister said they planned to move to a bigger house as soon as their father found a better job.

At the time Harry and his party came to the interview, the neighborhood was quiet with few cars or people visible. After the interviews were completed, the researcher offered to take Harry and his party home in her vehicle, and they all willingly agreed. Harry’s sister said her mother was happy that she did not have to walk all the way back to the house. Almost all the houses in the neighborhood in which Harry lived, and where the school was situated, appeared to be over fifty years old, with many in need of repairs or painting. Some of the houses were so close together that there was little yard space left for lawns or play area for children. Harry said that he and his cousin would usually play soccer in the street when it was quiet.
Harry’s Home Life

According to Harry, he lived with his mother, father, an older sister and a younger sister in the two-bedroom house. His mother did not work outside the home; she stayed at home and assisted two of her working friends by babysitting their young children. On the day of the interview, Harry’s mother was baby-sitting her friend’s kindergartner son. Harry’s younger sister was in the second grade. Because the researcher was friendly and tried to reach out to everyone who came with Harry to the interview, Harry’s sister took the opportunity to share as much as she could with the researcher each time the researcher asked a question. The researcher found out from the initial conversation with the family that Harry’s older sister was in the 11th grade and attended the local high school. Harry said that sometimes his older sister would help his younger sister and him with homework if they would ask her. Harry shook his head and said, “No other person in my family helps me with homework.”

Harry’s father worked as a construction worker during the day and has never been known (according to Harry’s mother) to help Harry or his siblings with their homework due to his long work schedule. She said she herself was unable to assist the children with their schoolwork due to her inability to speak English well. Harry said that sometimes his father would come home very late in the evenings at approximately 9 p.m., especially if he had to travel far out of town for work. According to the research:
Disadvantaged children tend to be behind in reading skills, come from families with lower levels of education and expectations for their academic achievement and are more likely to have, fewer financial resources, more demands on their time, and fewer personal resources to help them succeed. (Coleman, 2001, p. 10).

Harry’s family had been living in the same house for the past five years since they came from Mexico to the United States. He said his family would all go to the local Wal-Mart store to shop for groceries on Saturday afternoons when his father received his weekly pay check, and then sometimes, as a treat, go to a fast food restaurant close to their home. Even though Harry’s mother spoke little English, she appeared to understand the conversation taking place between Harry and the researcher in the way she shook her head, nodded or smiled when Harry responded a certain way to a question. According to both Harry and his mother, Harry’s after-school life allowed very little time for recreation. As soon as Harry got home from school, the chores began, sometimes until he went to bed for the night. He washed the dishes, swept the floors, helped with cooking, and washed clothes. Harry’s mother admitted that Harry helped out a lot around the house, but she made sure all the children had something to eat when they arrived home from school. Harry remarked that he liked soccer and would play with his cousin and friends whenever they could find the time. In his study, Coleman (2001) found that in neighborhoods with few wholesome activities
available to children, children tend not to be concerned with academic-type learning activities when school is out, and the academic gains schools achieved with them tend to erode easily.

The Interview With Harry

The interview with Harry and his mother took place in the school’s guidance counselor’s conference room. The main items in the room were a huge conference table and rolling cushioned chairs, which the children liked and rolled around in before the interviews began. Harry chose this room because he said it was comfortable, quiet and familiar to him. There were pictures of children’s artwork on the walls, a bookcase with children’s books in a far corner and a smaller table in another corner with a small basket on top containing markers and crayons. The secretary of the school had commented earlier that the students saw coming to this room as a special privilege as they all liked the school’s guidance counselor. Harry explained that he had been in the room several times before for meetings with the school counselor. He said that any time his teachers sent students to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU)—a room set aside for students who were sent out of the regular classroom for behavior problems—the school’s counselor would bring them to this room to “talk.” He pointed to a white board on which they were allowed to draw or write if they were “good.”

Before the interview started, all the members of Harry’s party were talkative and appeared comfortable. However, the researcher soon realized that Harry
was not comfortable talking about his experience at school with so many of his close family members present, especially his younger sister. His younger sister teased Harry several times for having been chosen as the one for the interview with the researcher. Harry sat next to his mother, who was flanked on the other side by Harry’s sister. Harry did not appear to mind that his mother was present. The researcher then asked Harry if he would like his sister and the little boy his mother was babysitting to leave the room, and he said “yes.” The two children were then taken to the lobby where the school’s secretary, who knew them, said she would gladly keep an eye on them. The researcher and the secretary provided the two younger children with coloring books, word-searches and children’s reading material while they waited.

School Structures for Harry’s Academic Progress

Harry became very serious when the researcher asked him questions about school. He thought he was doing well in school, but hesitated before he shared the types of grades he was getting. “I would get some As and Bs on my report card, but mostly Cs and a few Fs. I am not too sure that I am doing well …sometimes I would get low grades.” In a later interview with Harry’s teacher, Ms. Avery, she reported to the researcher that “Harry is a concern of mine academically as are all the other lower functioning students in my class.” Ms Avery showed the researcher Harry’s reading and math scores, which showed he was performing below grade level in reading, and barely above grade level in
math. The researcher examined Harry’s other work samples in math and reading and confirmed by Ms. Avery, they indicated that Harry’s problems included spelling grade-level vocabulary words, writing a third-grade narrative essay with clear coherency, understanding steps in a math word-problem and accurately completing basic math computational problems. Ms. Avery expressed that because Harry was bilingual and he had to shift language-use constantly, his problems with writing and reading were intensified.

Harry showed no excitement when talking about his grades or his report card. In fact, he was observed to become sad when he talked about getting low grades in school. When asked about his favorite subjects in class, he replied, “I don’t like math and reading, but if I had to pick one of the two subjects, I would pick math. The worst thing for me is mental math. You have to do a lot of problems quickly before a timer goes off.” When asked to explain why reading was not his favorite subject, he said, “Reading, is hard also. I prefer reading books when I go to the school library … but I don’t have a book that I am reading right now.” Other things that Harry listed as his favorites in class were when his teacher put them in small groups of two or three students to work together on class projects. “I like working with my friends on stuff … it’s easy that way,” he said.

Harry’s teacher described strategies she had been using since the school year started to assist Harry in performing better in her class. Ms. Avery stated
that she created centers in her classroom where students could go after they were finished with their individual tasks at their desks. According to Harry’s teacher, “They could work in pairs on different group tasks at the puzzle center, reading center, computer center or art center.” She pointed out that Harry’s favorite center was the computer center. Other interventions that Ms. Avery listed as being used in her classroom for her retained students were “leveled questions, reading groups, daily skill sheets in math, oral discussion on topics being read and take-home contracts where parents can help them with their reading.”

Ms. Avery expressed concerns that Harry’s academic progress in math and reading was not promising enough to where she felt convinced that he would pass the up-coming End of Grade Test. “If he failed that test, he could be recommended for retention again.”

The students’ desks in Ms. Avery’s classroom were organized in rows in front of a whiteboard and an overhead projector. Ms. Avery pointed out that she was able to move easily among the desks to assist students such as Harry who tended to struggle to complete tasks on time. Students’ work samples for writing and science were posted on two bulletin boards in the classroom. The researcher noted that Harry’s work was not among the ones on display. In her survey, Ms. Avery shared that Harry was encouraged to play only “reading” games when he went to the computer center because his reading ability was weak. She also
wrote that Harry’s motivation to work on the computer had assisted in helping
him stay focused on longer reading tasks and forced him to strive for success.
Harry’s mother echoed a similar report on her son’s love for the computer; she
said that “he loves the computer at school and would love to have one at home.”

Harry’s Kindergarten Retention

When the researcher asked Harry if he remembered anything about the time
he was retained in kindergarten, he shook his head and replied, “No, I don’t
remember anything.” Harry’s mother interrupted and said something in Spanish
to Harry. Harry turned to the researcher and said, “My mom said she
remembered when I was retained.” At this comment, the researcher turned to
Harry’s mother and asked her to share everything she remembered. There was a
long pause before Harry’s mother said anything. Then, she began weeping
silently. Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair and looked away, and he himself
became quiet when he saw his mother’s eyes welled up with tears. Harry’s
mother began speaking again after several minutes. On the question of Harry’s
retention, his mother agreed that it could not have been helped. She said they
had just moved from Mexico and were getting used to the country when the
teacher gave a test.

“After he failed the test that he took in kindergarten, I agreed to retain him.”
she said. Tears welled up in her eyes again when she was asked to describe
how she felt when the school told her that her son was going to be retained.
Harry continued to shake his head from side to side and repeated that he could not remember much, although his mother said that she had discussed his retention with him after she came home. After this discussion, it was difficult to get either Harry or his mother to say much more.

In her survey, Harry’s mother wrote that the main reason why she supported Harry’s retention in kindergarten was because they had just migrated to the United States from Mexico and Harry failed the reading test. She expressed that she personally did not support her son’s retention but the school gave her no other option that she thought was fair. They told her that “he would do worse if he should go to first grade.” Also, according to the mother, the school encouraged her to agree to retaining Harry. According to mother, the teachers told her “Harry would be put in a class with few children and the teacher would give him one-on-one instruction in reading so that he could catch up with what he missed in kindergarten. By the end of the year, Harry would be ready for first grade.”

Harry’s mother wrote that she was disappointed that Harry did not have the same kindergarten teacher (as she had requested) in his second year in kindergarten.

Another reason Harry’s mother gave for her son’s failure in kindergarten was because “he could not speak English; just a little bit.” She did not deny that she was somewhat pleased with her son’s progress in the second year in kindergarten because “the teacher did some different things to help him, even though he did not have the same teacher.”
Harry’s mother also stated that she was pleased with her son’s progress academically in third grade. She admitted that if Harry had not been retained, he would have been doing worse than he was in the third grade. On the subject of his retention, Harry’s teacher, Ms. Avery, said if she had not checked her records, she would not have known that Harry was a retained student “given his physical size. He is no bigger than the other kids.” However, she still could not explain why “Harry was still struggling with reading since he was a ‘normal’ boy’,” she said.

Upon reflecting on the question of retaining students, Harry’s mother expressed that she supported retaining students because if they were not retained, they would do worse in the next grade. This position was not different from Ms. Avery’s who expressed that retention was necessary “as an intervention when students are struggling in the early developmental years, and, therefore, should be corrected as quickly as possible.”

**Harry Failed the Kindergarten “Test”**

In the survey, the principal explained that Workhard Elementary School “usually conducts a summative assessment of kindergarten students close to the end of the school year. The assessment takes about an hour and it is usually in the form of a checklist that the teacher uses to rate the student’s performance on several skills in writing, reading and math. The purpose of the assessment is to determine how much the student has mastered the kindergarten curriculum--
number concepts; concepts of print, such as writing one’s name; identifying letters and sounds; recognizing colors and shapes in a pattern; and generally, how the student is ready both academically and socially for first grade.” The principal stated that “a student is considered for retention if that student is performing only minimally at the kindergarten level.” The principal clarified that the decision to retain was usually based on more than “the summative assessment--it’s on what the teacher has seen all year and the data she collected, her notes from her observations, work samples, etc.” In their surveys, the kindergarten teachers identified various social skills that were assessed at the end of the school year. These included students sitting at a table and working independently for at least fifteen minutes, sharing items with other classmates, making friends and following directions such as walking quietly in a line behind another student as the class is taken to another location in the school. Harry’s teacher shared that Harry had no major social skills adjustment problems in her class. She said, “If anything, he may have low self-esteem issues as he tends to follow his friends--sometimes in unacceptable behaviors.”

*Harry’s Adjustment With his Peers in the Third Grade*

When asked if he had ever been in any trouble at school, Harry said, “yes.” Harry became more animated as he recounted to the researcher a fighting incident in which he was involved “… it wasn’t my fault. I got in trouble after I pushed this boy off me. He was bugging me all the time in class and then on the
playground the teacher didn’t see when he pushed me, and when I tried to tell her, she didn’t believe me. She saw when I pushed him. She sent both of us to the ICU. We had to spend a whole day in ICU. I hate going to ICU … I don’t want to ever go back to ICU." Other than that one incident, Harry said that he was a good student in his class. He talked about the number of times he was rewarded for good behavior by his teacher on Fridays. He explained that students were given the opportunity to buy presents in class with tickets they had earned all week for being good, and he said that he had been good all the time. Harry appeared to be proud of the fact that he was a good student.

Several times in the interview, Harry repeated that the worst part of the day was when school was dismissed and he had to go home. "I would rather stay at school. Some things that I enjoy about school are art, lunch and PE. I really only go to art because of my art teacher … she is nice. I can’t draw, but she is still nice to me."

Ms. Avery, on the other hand, described Harry as “playful, easily distracted by others’ silly behaviors and could not stay focused on reading tasks for long periods of time. He gets off-task very easily because his friends distract him. Instead of putting his classwork first, Harry would prefer to stop what he was doing to laugh out loud at silly jokes or silly behaviors that other students in the class might be displaying.” She talked about how Harry was generally a follower and that most of his behavioral problems were because he made decisions to
please friends, some of whom were not very well behaved. Harry himself talked of the many friends he had at school. If his teacher gave him permission, he said he would sit next to his best friend, Hugo. Ms. Avery admitted, however, that Harry did act a little more mature in how he treats others than the rest of the students in her class, and she added, “I guess that’s because he is older.” Ms. Avery noted she had to call on Harry on an average of three times per class session to stay focused on his work. “If he gets to be disruptive, I’d have to write his name on the board as a ‘warning’.” He would rarely regress beyond a “warning,” and if he did, she would send a note home to his parent, she stated.

*Harry’s After-School Life*

Harry took a school bus to go home, after he went to the after-school homework club. (The school provides a homework club after school for students who might need help with homework. The homework club is a classroom where students go to get help from a teacher who supervises the students. After the club ends, all students are taken home on a school bus unless their parents pick them up). Harry said he tried to go to the homework club every day, but if he did not go he would do his homework at home. He remarked that because his parents could not help him with homework, he would ask his older sister for help sometimes. If there were something that he did not know or understand for homework, he just would do his best and risk the chance of getting it “wrong.”
Harry spoke of his chores at home as a necessary part of his home life. He admitted, “I do whatever my mother asks me to do.” He said that he did not have his own room; instead he slept on his own bed in the hallway, while his sisters shared one of the two bedrooms. He claimed that the children’s bedtime was usually at ten o’clock, but they would stay up later if they were watching something “good” on TV.

**Emerging Themes From Harry**

To assess the significance of Harry’s case, the researcher looked for themes that provided insights to the main question on which this study is premised: “How has retention as an education practice designed to improve students’ low performance in kindergarten made a significant difference to students’ overall school performance three years later in the third grade?” and the sub-questions, (a) “What factors external to the school affected the success or failure of the retained students?” and (b) “Was retention in kindergarten necessary, considering the students’ continued low performance in the third grade?”

**List of Themes**

- Retention in kindergarten was an unpleasant memory for student and parent.
- Retention was predetermined by the school before the parent was informed.
The school was not empathetic to the parent’s and student’s emotional reaction.

The student still relied on interventions in third grade to maintain minimal success in reading.

Parents were supportive but were not able to help student’s with academic work.

Structure and routine were evident in the student’s home life.

Case Number Two--Tony

Meeting Tony

Tony was a nine-year-old, third-grade male student of Caucasian origin who came from a single-parent family. He was the oldest of five children. Tony stood about five feet tall, with brown, straight hair and blue eyes. When Tony came to the interview, he chatted easily with the researcher and members of the school’s office staff, who all appeared to know Tony very well. His hair was cut short, and he was dressed neatly in blue, denim jeans and a white, long-sleeve tee shirt with a picture of a musical star printed on the front. He wore a brown, beaded necklace and a digital watch. His mother and younger sister came with him to the interview. The researcher noted that they each talked with one another frequently, and Tony’s sister was constantly correcting Tony if he said something that she thought was not true.
Tony’s Neighborhood

Tony’s family lived approximately three miles from the school, in a neighborhood described by the school’s principal, as “the projects.” The “projects” were small, one-to three-bedroom apartments rented by the town at a low cost to lower-income families. Tony’s mother described the apartment as “old, but conveniently located close to the school and close to my job, so that I don’t have to drive too far.” After the interview, the researcher drove through the neighborhood to get a detailed picture of the “projects.” The apartments were actually about ten duplexes clustered together in a space as large as a football field. The houses were flat, one-story homes with two sections, each with its own entrance and back door and designed for a family of three or four. It was around 5 p.m. on a mild January afternoon, and several children and adults were observed to be out and about in their yards and on the street. One main street ran through the neighborhood, so several vehicles were going up and down the street. Few shrubs and trees were seen, and the grass, even though brown due to winter, was cut short. All the houses looked alike--dark brown, brick walls and black shingled roofs--except for an occasional air-condition unit hanging out of a window or a chair in the front entrance area. Most of the yard spaces surrounding the houses were used for clotheslines and, on some of them, clothes were seen hanging for drying.
Tony’s *Home-Life*

Due to Tony’s mother’s work schedule—2 p.m. to 10 p.m. at a local food processing company—Tony and his brothers and sisters stayed with a babysitter from the time they came home from school to the time mom got off work at night. Tony told the researcher that his baby sister and two-year-old brother were always getting on his “nerves.” He specifically mentioned that he hated when his baby sister cried and bothered him when he played his video games. He talked of a place in his home where he had his own little space in the living room for his Play Station and video games, and another place where he keeps his “stuff.” According to Tony’s mother, their two-bedroom, one-and-half bath apartment “was not too bad. The space is limited, but I try to make sure they (the children) have room to play and do their homework.”

“I leave my stuff underneath the table so I won’t lose things…” interrupted Tony’s sister. Tony told of the times he helped his mother with taking out the trash, sweeping the floors and sometimes taking care of his baby sister. After school was dismissed, Tony and his siblings would ride the school bus to the babysitter (who lived in the same neighborhood as Tony’s family) and stayed there until his mother picked them up. Sometimes, they were picked up after 10 p.m. after all the other children had gone home. There were two older teenagers in Tony’s family, but neither was discussed or brought up in the interview by either Tony or his mother. Tony said his babysitter helped him with his homework.
whenever he did not go to the homework club at school. He never referred to his
father or any other relatives. (During Tony’s interview with the researcher, Tony’s
mother sat at a small table to complete the parent questionnaire and Tony sat at
the bigger table on the other side of the large room talking with the researcher.
Tony’s sister found a book she liked and was scanning or reading).

Tony’s mother was thirty-three years old. She wore a dress to the interview
and looked neat in appearance. She spoke clearly and projected an image of a
caring mother. She spoke of her children lovingly and said she invested a lot of
her time in their education. She repeated several times how hard it was for a
single mother to raise five children all by herself. She claimed that she tried to
give them all that she didn’t have as a child. Tony’s mother claimed that because
she worked mostly on the second shift at her job, it was hard for her to be there
for her children when they came home from school. She agreed that there were
times she could not “sign their homework because I couldn’t. It was too late and
the children were either in bed or too tired to show me. Tony, sometimes, would
leave the homework on the kitchen table before he went to bed, so I would see it
and sign it when I get home.” (The school required that parents signed their
children’s homework each night to indicate that the parent had seen the
homework or had checked the homework for correctness). Henderson (1994)
stated that children from never-married households were more likely to be
retained, received lower grades, obtained lower scores on standardized tests,
and were more often absent and tardy than children of divorced parents or two-parent households. Mothers who never married were also the least likely parents to monitor their children's schoolwork and to supervise them at home.

Tony’s Mother’s Perspective of Tony’s School Problems

Tony’s mother was eager to share her feelings about the subject of retention and wanted to get started soon after the introductions at the interview. The researcher conducted the interview in the school’s guidance counselor’s conference room, as she did in the first interview with Harry.

According to Tony’s mother, Tony was taking medication for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD—a condition that prevents children from attending for long periods of time to tasks typically in a classroom setting, and a diagnosis for those children who sometimes need medication to help them stay “calm”). Because of the diagnosis, Tony was receiving three hours of daily special education in a resource room at school. (The resource room was a support program for students with difficulties attending or completing tasks in the regular classroom). Other support that Tony received at school were to have his resource teacher work with him in the classroom on tasks that were difficult and after-school tutoring in the homework club.

Tony’s Perspective of his Performance in Third Grade

Tony appeared eager to talk to the researcher in the interview, but not about school. He later said that he did not like school because of his grades. He
changed the subject several times in the interview from school to what he was
going to do with his friends or do at home. Tony showed keen interest in the
researcher’s small tape recorder at first. He said he liked video games and
played his Play Station (a video game player) a lot when he was at home. He
said that he and his friends exchanged video games, and his mother would buy
him games for his birthday or for Christmas.

When asked how he was doing in third grade, Tony replied that he thought he
was doing “pretty well,” except for a few Fs that he sometimes received on his
report card. He told the researcher about the times his name was put on a chart,
and if he had a behavior problem he had to “pull a card.” (“Pulling a card” was a
behavior management system kept by the teacher where a student was asked to
take a card from his folder if he was violating a class rule. There were five cards
for five types of rule violations. Each card would tell the student what the
consequence was for the violation. The consequence on the last card was a “call
to the student’s parent”). He admitted that he had to pull cards a lot, especially
the last card when the teacher called his parent. He listed a few of the reasons
for pulling cards: “getting out of my seat, talking out, not paying attention,
forgetting to do my work, yelling across the room and talking back to the
teacher.” Tony’s mother said most of his behavior problems were because he
was ADHD, and that she was not surprised. “Tony gets frustrated if he does not
get his way, and then he acts out,” said his mother. Ms. Perry, his teacher,
explained that Tony had severe discipline problems at school. For example, as a prank, he had pulled the fire alarm just the week before when he was asked to “sit silently” at lunch. Ms. Perry thought that Tony needed stricter consequences at home from his parent for his behavior problems at school. “Tony’s mother is always blaming someone else for Tony’s problems and he gets away with whatever he does. We are doing all we can to help him,” said the teacher.

Ms. Perry expressed that Tony had both academic and behavioral problems. She identified Tony’s key problem “as not liking to read, not even for pleasure.” She “despised the tantrums” Tony tended to display if he did not get his way. She also listed poor comprehension, poor decoding of words, class work rarely being finished work within a specified allotted time, and sometimes, not having his homework done.

The teacher also stated that Tony changed school several times in the past three years, sometimes in the middle of the year, but Tony would always “wind up coming back” to Workhard Elementary School. She stated that she did not think kindergarten retention was a good thing because students who have been retained continued to do poorly anyway. Tony said he took medication to calm him down because “I’m was usually ‘hyper’.” Tony agreed that he liked Fridays because he got to play on the computer as a reward in his resource class. He said he liked his resource teacher a lot because “she was fun and she made things easy” for him. Ms. Perry explained that the resource teacher was teaching
Tony at “his current level of performance which is at a second-grade level, and that makes it easy for Tony. I have to teach him on grade level so that he passes the up-coming EOGs, and it’s hard for him.”

Tony spoke of his many friends at school. Tony named a few students in school who were “smarter” than he because they knew their “times” tables so well. Tony said his friend, who also went to the babysitter, knew his “times” tables but that he did not. He recounted a challenging moment when he could not say his ABCs backwards but all his classmates could.

On the whole, Tony seemed like a likeable student with an outgoing personality. When he said that he was smart, his little sister who heard him rolled her eyes and looked doubtfully at him. Tony stopped a few times to convince her that he was really telling the researcher the truth. During the interview, Tony did not display the “hyperactive” behavior for which he was taking medication. When that was brought to his mother’s attention, she could not give a clear explanation. “Sometimes he is active and sometimes he is not,” she said.

Tony’s Retention in Kindergarten

Tony admitted that he hated talking about being held back in kindergarten because the other students were generally mean to him. They would laugh and call him “dumb.” Tony’s mother said she remembered the day the teacher told her that Tony was going to be retained. The teacher had called her for a parent-teacher conference to discuss “ways to help Tony.” Tony’s mother did not deny
that Tony was having some problems in reading, but she was not expecting to
hear that Tony would be retained. “When I got there the teacher told me that
Tony’s reading level was too low for first grade. I knew he was having problems
with his ABCs, but I did not know they would retain him in kindergarten,” she
said. Tony’s mother remembered that Tony’s problems in kindergarten were
mainly academic, especially his handwriting; it was not his behavior. “They
retained him for his behavior problems, which I disagreed with them because I
knew his problems were more his handwriting and reading,” said Tony’s mother.
She remembered that he continued to have problems in schoolwork all through
his second year in kindergarten, and because of that, the school put him in a
separate class for children with academic problems (the school’s Transition
Kindergarten First [TK1] class).

In the survey Tony’s mother filled out for this study, some of Tony’s issues
she remembered were that “he was immature, he was writing his letters
backwards and he could not read.” While she wrote that she felt good about
agreeing with the decision for Tony’s retention, she still felt a little disappointed in
the school. “Had I known earlier, I might have been able to help him some more,”
she reflected. Tony’s mother admitted that she herself was retained and
eventually dropped out of high school, so she knew how it felt when a child was
held back. She indicated in the interview that she also had a daughter who was
also retained in first grade. In the interview, Tony’s mother sighed when she
reflected on her son’s retention. “I felt sad, but realized that that was the only thing that would have helped Tony. I was afraid of what would have happened eventually to him in first grade. He would have continued to fail and fall behind,” she said.

In the survey, Tony’s mother expressed that she supported retaining students because she thought it would be good for the student to fix their problems first before going on to the next grade. She wrote that at the time the teacher told her that her son was going to be retained, she was disappointed, but thought at the time it was what he needed. She discussed the retention with Tony and then called the school. She wrote that before he was on medication in kindergarten his problems were mainly behavior, but as he got older his problems were more reading and academics. That was when he was given a battery of tests by the school psychologist, after his first-grade teacher suspected that Tony might have a “learning disability”--a psychological processing disorder that interferes with a child’s ability to read, write, spell or perform mathematical calculations. According to Tony’s third grade teacher, Ms. Perry, “Tony was not diagnosed with a learning disability; instead the tests showed that Tony’s problems were inattention and hyperactivity that were affecting his ability to focus on school tasks.” Tony’s physician put him on a medication to reduce his hyperactivity after the school found that his problems were mainly inattention. Ms. Perry insisted that the medication only helped him to stay calm; it was Tony’s
responsibility to do the work and get good grades. To some degree, Ms. Perry thought that Tony could do better if he would show more responsibility towards his school-work.

After his retention in kindergarten, Tony had a different kindergarten teacher and his mother was very pleased with his progress. She attributed most of his success in the third grade to his retention in kindergarten, even though she thought that retaining students was not a “good thing.”

Tony’s Third-Grade Teacher’s Perspective of his School Progress

Tony’s third-grade teacher, Ms. Perry, was in her late fifties. She said she became a teacher later in life, after she had been in the corporate world for many years. She said she wanted to be a teacher so she would have the same holidays as her children. She admitted that teaching demanded more of her time than a corporate lawyer’s secretary (which she was before she became a teacher), but she enjoyed teaching more than being a secretary.

Ms. Perry was very critical of Tony’s parent. She told the researcher that according to Tony his “mother stayed out all night sometimes and left them unattended. She sleeps all day and goes out all night.” She told of the many times Tony did not have his homework signed. She said Tony’s mother “loves her children, but she is also irresponsible in that she hardly comes for parent-teacher conferences to discuss the progress of her children.” According to Ms. Perry, the only time the school would see Tony’s mother would be when she was
coming to the school to vent her emotions if Tony was suspended from school for a behavior problem.

Ms. Perry explained that Tony was not on grade-level in any subject. She shared tracking data of his academic growth, which showed that Tony was performing between the 40th and the 9th percentile in reading and math respectively on all the standardized tests that were given to third grade students. She was very concerned that Tony was not making the progress he needed to make in third grade. She also expressed a concern, that she did not think Tony was going to pass the up-coming EOG test, the failing of which might cause him to be retained again at the elementary school.

Classroom Interventions Provided for Tony in the Third Grade

Ms. Perry described how she had changed her teaching styles many times to accommodate Tony’s needs “but he still wasn’t getting it.” Some of the interventions she had been using with Tony were test-taking preparedness skills--how to highlight the key words in a word problem, how to eliminate the two more far-fetched items on a multiple-choice test and instead of bubbling in on a bubble-sheet in a multiple choice test, she would allow him to mark in the test booklet to eliminate the risk of him mis-matching the item numbers with the answer numbers. She also included shortened tests and a “read-aloud” modification for math (the teacher read the problem out loud for the student if he or she had problems reading on-grade level work) on all tests.
To support her intervention strategies, Ms. Perry showed how she designed her classroom. Her classroom was well equipped with a variety of teaching materials. She said she believed in teaching students in small groups of four to five students at a time or sending students to work on a task in small groups of two or three students at a time. Her room was set up for small groups with several learning centers (places in her room where students could go and work quietly and independently on the computer, listen to books on tapes, do jigsaw puzzles or color shapes and pictures to create unique designs). Ms. Perry was eager to show the researcher different activities she was using with Tony and other students with similar problems. These activities were “focused reading groups, regrouping by ability, one-on-one tutoring, after-school homework and working collaboratively with other support staff who also work with the student.”

Ms. Perry told the researcher that Tony received a lot of support at the school. Tony went to the resource room for three hours every day. He would then come back to the classroom and would go with a buddy-teacher for lunch. After lunch, his resource teacher would come to Ms. Perry’s room to co-teach with her on an inclusion basis and to monitor Tony’s progress. This model was put in place specially to assist Tony, according to Ms. Perry.

The teacher identified Tony’s problems “as being a little too sociable.” She said that Tony got along well with all the students because he was very likable. He dressed well and did “cool things” that the students liked. Because he had so
many friends and could be in any circle of students in the classroom, she thought retention had not affected him, socially. However, the teacher was not sure about his academics. She reasoned that if he was given an additional year to master basic concepts, and if he was still having problems with those basic concepts, then “maybe retention was not the right thing for him.”

Ms. Perry said that she doubted that Tony was going to pass the up-coming EOG test because he was reading almost two grades below his current grade level. She wished that there were no testing for students such as Tony because “it is not fair to the student who is still so far behind in his grade level. Students who are behind so far should be assessed some other way, not by a standardized, normed-referenced test. We are setting them up to fail.” Ms. Perry hesitated for a while before she affirmed that she would recommend a student to be retained if that student was not proficient on grade level, although she herself had never before recommended a student for retention.

**Emerging Themes from Tony**

The following themes emerged from case number two, Tony.

- Retention in kindergarten was an unpleasant memory for the student.
- The parent showed disappointment in how the school made the decision to retain.
- The student came from a single-parent family, which meant he spent less time with the parent at home, hence, little parental help for homework.
The student went to a daycare after school due to the family structure.

The parent worked a late night shift job and was unable to assist the child with schoolwork at home in the evenings.

The student knew that he was still weak in math and reading.

The student still relied on interventions, special education services and medication in third grade to maintain minimal success in reading and math.

Academic problems can lead to expressions of frustrations by the student.

Positive parent-teacher relationships are important to student success.

Parent was supportive but was not able to help the student with academic work.

A supportive structure and routine were not evident in student’s home life.

Case Number Three - Jane

*Meeting Jane.*

Jane was a nine-year-old, third-grade female student of African American descent who attended Workhard Elementary School, and who was retained in kindergarten. Jane spoke easily and fluently with the researcher during the interview. When she came to the interview, she was neatly dressed in a pair of navy blue slacks and a pink, turtleneck sweater. Her hair was combed back smoothly and tied together in a small knot. She could have easily been mistaken for a child younger than her age, as she was small in build, with a slim figure.
Jane agreed to meet with the researcher at the end of the school day in the school’s guidance counselor’s office. At the interview, Jane talked with her mother frequently, and walked around the conference room showing her mother different objects or items with which she (Jane) was familiar. Jane brought with her a tiny, pink handbag in which she kept small trinkets that she displayed on the table. Some of the trinkets included a pink gel pen, a plastic ring and a purple Beanie bear. “Pink is my favorite color, that’s why everything is pink…” replied Jane when her mother asked her quietly ”why” she was doing that. Jane’s teacher described Jane as “a happy little girl who liked school.” The teacher also stated that Jane always liked to keep a third-grade level book with her although Jane was unable to read on her grade level. Jane was an only child from a single parent family. She lived with her mother and grandmother.

*Jane’s Home Life*

Jane’s mother was a single parent who worked on an evening shift job. She said she was a dedicated worker who rarely took time off because she liked her job. She worked as a minimum wage worker, “but I work hard for my daughter so that she can finish high school and go to college,” she said. Jane’s mother stated that she, also, was retained in the fourth grade, and she never finished high school.

Jane’s mother worked as a maid at a local motel. She agreed to bring Jane to do the interview on her (mother’s) day off, which was a Friday. Her shift started
at 11:00 a.m. and ended at 7:00 p.m. each day. The interview with Jane and her mother was cancelled three times because of emergencies at work that Jane’s mother needed to address.

Both Jane and her mother lived in her grandmother’s small, one-story house, which was located about a mile from the school. Jane rode the bus to school, and like all other third graders, she was given the option of attending the homework club after school. She would remain after school for the homework club whenever “I have a lot of homework.” Jane’s mother said that Jane rode the school bus home after the homework club and was supervised by her grandmother at home until she (mother) came home at 8 p.m.

Jane had very few chores to do around the house, so she spent most of her after-school hours watching TV or playing with her toys. Jane talked about her toys frequently in the interview. She was excited about her up-coming birthday; “I’m going to get a Sponge Bob radio,” she exclaimed.

Jane said she spent her weekends at home by herself or with friends down the street … I’ve never gone to the beach or the mountains, but I did go to a fun park in Atlanta when I was younger, “… I remembered when my mom drove to Georgia to visit my aunt. I was in kindergarten.” Sometimes on Sundays, Jane’s grandmother took her to church where she would go to Sunday school and play with the other children. Jane did not have a strict routine of chores to do when she got home from school, her mother explained. If she had completed her
homework, Jane was allowed to watch TV before going to bed which was usually at about 8:30 p.m. Jane’s mother said she rarely got a chance to read to Jane or even help her with her homework in the evenings due to her work schedule. By the time she got home in the evening she was too tired to help Jane, who usually was finished with her homework, anyway, she said.

*Jane’s Kindergarten Retention*

Jane remembered how she hated being retained. She remembered when “I came back to school in the new school year, all my friends were going to a different grade and I was still going back to kindergarten.” Jane’s mother recalled why Jane was retained, and said she wished she knew how to help her daughter then. She remembered the kindergarten teacher telling her how Jane’s reading scores were low, and she added, “I knew my daughter was struggling with her ABCs letters. When the teacher called me, I thought she was going to tell me what I needed to do to help Jane at home; I didn’t know that she was going to tell me that Jane would have to repeat her grade. I was hurt, I can’t deny.” Jane’s mother recalled how the kindergarten teacher had said that Jane talked too much in class, and if Jane would stop talking, maybe her grades would go up. She recalled that Jane cried when she told her she wasn’t going to first grade, mainly because she wasn’t going to see her best friends anymore. “Jane thought she had passed her grade, but when I brought her home and told her, she cried and cried, and I cried with her,” said Jane’s mother.
Jane’s mother said she had seen some improvement in Jane’s performance since kindergarten: “Jane is now able to concentrate better and not talk so much. She is doing a little better in third grade.” Jane’s mother said she supported retaining her daughter because she was concerned about what could have happened to her in the other grades. She was afraid her daughter would have continued to struggle and have bad experiences with school.

When Jane’s mother was asked to give her opinion on retention as she reflected back on her own daughter’s retention, she said she thought that retention in kindergarten was not a big help for her daughter. She recounted how frustrated both she and her daughter were when her daughter was not meeting the teacher’s expectations in kindergarten. “I was told that my daughter needed to quit talking. She wasn’t paying attention in class. And that was not true in every case,” she said.

In the survey that Jane’s mother filled out for this study, she wrote that she was surprised to learn from Jane’s kindergarten teacher that Jane was going to be retained at the end of the school year. After the conference with her teacher, Jane’s mother said she supported the decision to retain her daughter based on what the teacher said to her. She wrote that the school had said that “they would do things differently in the up-coming year, that they would help my daughter get on or above the kindergarten level.” She included in her survey that the school told her Jane would be placed in a special class called “TK1,” where she would
be taught on a one-on-one basis in a small classroom of not more than ten
students. She also noted in the survey that her daughter’s problems were all
academic, not behavioral or social, and “a kindergarten child talking all the time
was not a real big social problem.” Even though Jane was not diagnosed with
Attention Deficit with Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD),” Ms. Dover, her third-grade
teacher felt Jane should have been diagnosed “because she was a fidgety child
who was always out of her seat.” However, Ms. Dover said that she was able to
manage Jane through “re-directing strategies”—reminding students either verbally
or nonverbally about following the correct behavior rule.

Jane’s mother recalled in her interview that her daughter had a different
teacher who tried different “things” with Jane in the kindergarten retention year,
but that she (mother) was still not pleased with her daughter’s progress. “Things”
that the school tried with my daughter included “more teacher’s help, repetition of
tasks, singing nursery rhymes, and send-home books.” She stated that one
“thing” she as a mother did differently after the first year in kindergarten was to
help her daughter “more than she did in the first kindergarten year. I spent more
time reading to her and talking about her ABCs.”

Ms. Dover expressed in the interview that she suspected Jane had been
retained before in the very first days of their meeting due to Jane’s “poor class
performance.” She indicated that Jane was a poor reader and needed a lot of
help from the teacher. As a result, Jane was paired with a “grade level” peer in all
of the class’s reading sessions. Ms. Dover put most of the blame for Jane’s problems on “parents not trying hard enough to help their children at home.”

Jane’s mother admitted that if her daughter were not retained she (daughter) would have been doing far worse in her academic work than she was currently doing in the third grade. Jane’s mother said that she “supported the decision to retain my child.” However, she said that if she had another child who was not doing well in kindergarten she would not recommend retaining him or her because she felt that “the second year in kindergarten would only help to bring the struggling child up just a little, but not to where he or she needed to be.”

However, Jane’s teacher, Ms. Dover, stated that she supported retaining students on the basis that if “they don’t know the material, they will continue to struggle in the next grade.”

*Jane’s Perspective of her Progress in Third Grade*

When Jane was asked how she was doing in third grade, Jane said she was supposed to be in the fourth grade, and hated that all her friends were in fourth grade and not her. She said that she would see her fourth-grade friends sometimes at lunch and on the playground, and she would go over and speak with them. She thought that she was doing “great” in third grade and “didn’t know why she was retained.” However, Jane’s teacher, Ms. Dover, described Jane “as a good girl who was functioning below grade level, on the fifth percentile of her class.”
Jane shared that she liked when her teacher praised her. “My teacher sometimes tells me that I am doing a good job, or she may give me stickers or put my name in a bag for the ‘Friday drawing’. ” Jane liked playing “Word Bingo” in class because she liked the prizes the teacher gave out. Her mother stated that Jane liked to be rewarded for “good behavior” in school, so whenever Jane brought home a good conduct report, she would be rewarded with such things as riding her bike or playing games on her computer. (Jane’s mother said that she had purchased an old computer from a friend for Jane to practice her typing or just to play computer games). Ms. Dover also expressed that Jane was not a big behavior problem in her class, except for her constant “fidgetiness”. She wrote in her survey, “I believe that students need to be encouraged to do well. I typically would reward all my students for doing well even for the smallest things.” Jane said she “played with everybody and everybody played” with her in her class.

Jane’s Third-Grade Teacher’s Perspective of Jane’s Progress

Ms. Dover had been teaching for four years at Workhard Elementary School. She came to the school as a first-year teacher and immediately liked the school and had enjoyed her job ever since.

She explained that Jane was not the lowest performing student in her class, and “that there were two other students who were functioning lower than Jane, but who were in the special education’s program for learning disability.” Jane’s teacher described Jane as a “slow learner”--a student who was typically below
grade level even though the student was working at his or her highest potential. On all the standardized tests taken so far in third grade, Jane was functioning in the lower 40th percentile of the class, according to her teacher.

Jane’s teacher was disappointed that teachers at the school were expected to give so many tests, which she said took up a greater part of her teaching. She expressed, “Just when I am about to do something creative with my class, it is time to give another test.” She said she thought the tests prohibited her from being a creative teacher and added “most of the teachers felt forced to give the tests to the students.” She described that she would prefer to “teach more” than to test the students so much. She felt that taking and passing a two-hour standardized math or reading test each quarter was a big problem for students such as Jane who needed “a lot of the teacher’s one-on-one support to be successful and to maintain good grades.” Ms. Dover said she would have been able to give a lot more hands-on tasks to students like Jane if it weren’t for so many tests. (Each quarter, Workhard Elementary gave third graders a two-hour standardized test in math and reading respectively for the purposes of “getting students used to taking tests and also for measuring students’ growth,” according to Ms. Dover).
Interventions Implemented in Third Grade to Help Jane

Ms. Dover said she was trying various interventions to help all her students. She listed small-group teaching (a small group of four or five students who meet with the teacher for about fifteen minutes for tutoring), setting personal goals for students, providing student mentors, modified difficulty level of students’ assignments and lots of praise and encouragement to keep students motivated and involved with the class activities.

When asked what strategies she was using to help her low-performing students such as Jane, Ms. Dover gave a list of strategies that included learning centers, such as an art center, science center, computer center or writing center, spelling partners, and “talking with a peer” about reading in a group. She said that a student could choose a strategy, and by being allowed to choose, she felt students were being empowered to work harder. Ms. Dover felt that Jane was doing well in the small groups (groups of students without the teacher present), but she had a hard time on individual tasks, especially tests. Oral work, discussion, tutors, group work and one-on-one instruction were areas in which Jane thrived better, according to her teacher. Ms. Dover had recommended the retention of a student before, but it was because the student had poor attendance at school, which ultimately was affecting his grades.

Emerging Themes from Jane

The following are themes derived case number three, Jane:
• Retention in kindergarten was an unpleasant memory for the student and parent.
• The student still relied on interventions in the third grade to help student maintain minimal success in reading.
• The student’s undiagnosed attention hyperactivity was also affecting her academic performance.
• The parent was supportive of school and student but was not able to help the student with academic work.
• Structure and routine were evident in student’s home life.

*Cases Numbers Four and Five - Dolly and Daisy*

For background information, neighborhood and home life descriptions, case numbers four and five, Dolly and Daisy, are combined and done together due to the fact that these two cases were twin sisters who came from the same home, lived in the same neighborhood, and were of similar background. However, each student is presented as separate cases in the areas of types of Interventions and strategies implemented at the school to assist each student separately.
**Meeting Dolly and Daisy**

Dolly and Daisy were twin sisters, both of whom were retained in kindergarten in the same year. They lived with their grandmother and father and had been raised by their grandmother since they were babies according to the girls’ grandmother. Dolly’s and Daisy’s parents separated when the girls were still too young to remember. Their father came to the interview but did not participate in the discussion; he sat in another room.

The researcher’s first meeting with the two girls and their grandmother took place in the conference room at a public library in the small town in which Dolly and Daisy lived. Both girls appeared excited to be at the library, a place they requested for the interview because they remembered “we have been to this library before.” They explained that their school and the library had started a book program two summers before where a student would earn points if they joined the library and read at least five books. The girls had joined the library and borrowed books, but since that summer they had not visited again. Before the interview started, they walked around confidently, checking on different items that interested them. Neither of the girls showed any interest in the books themselves, but in the different displays, the reading rooms and the assorted seating areas. When the interview started, the girls’ grandmother sat with the girls, but as the interview continued she went to a table in a far corner in the same room to complete the parent survey.
Dolly and Daisy were of African American descent, with small builds and were very eager to talk with the researcher. They were both clean and well-groomed in appearance. They responded happily when asked if they were ready to talk about school, “Our grandmother told us get dressed and be ready to come by 5:00 p.m.” Their attention stayed focused on the subject of “school” for approximately fifteen minutes. Not long after the interview began, Daisy, became fidgety and lost attention in the discussion, and then she expressed a desire to go to the bathroom. The girls both then asked the researcher if they could leave the interview to go be with their dad in another room. They left for five minutes, and then returned to continue with the interview.

Dolly’s and Daisy’s Home Life and Background

Dolly and Daisy shared that they both liked the same cartoon character, Sponge Bob. “Everything that we have is about Sponge Bob--our bedspreads, our book sack. We have pencils with Sponge Bob erasers,” they said. Dolly and Daisy were both members of the local community college dance team. They described, “On Thursday afternoons we have to got to practice. Our grandmother would take us and wait for us until we are finished. We are getting ready for a program coming up soon.” They said that their grandmother took them to church every Sunday and Wednesday nights also, whether they liked to go or not.

Dolly and Daisy could not tell anything about their birth mother. They said, “We have never seen our mother.” Their father lived a few blocks from their
grandmother’s home and almost every evening he came over for supper and helped Dolly and Daisy with their homework. The girls also were members of the school’s homework club, “but we go only, sometimes,” they said.

When asked about chores at home, Dolly and Daisy shook their heads from side to side and said, “None. We don’t have any.” But, after they reflected for a while Dolly said, “Except to tidy our rooms.” They both expressed that they loved watching cartoons on TV and playing video games such as Pac Man. (Two years ago, their father had purchased a computer for them for their birthday, which they said they used for games and typing only).

Dolly’s and Daisy’s grandmother provided a structure that kept the girls on a rigid schedule, but to what extent such a structure affected their achievement is a question that will be discussed in chapter five. At the interview, the grandmother spoke of the girls very lovingly, “They are my babies and I love them very much. Everything that I do, it’s because of them.” She recalled when she had adopted the girls as babies after their parents became separated. She added that their father (her son) was a graduate of the local community college and later became a soldier in the United States Navy. The son now lived and worked fulltime at a business in the town not too far from his home. He lived by himself in a small apartment approximately three miles from the grandmother’s house. The girls’ grandmother said the girls’ father graduated from high school and he would like to see his daughters, Dolly and Daisy, graduate from high school as well.
The grandmother worked part time as a housekeeper, and on some afternoons, she explained, “I am not usually at home to receive the girls when they come home from school. So, I enrolled them in a daycare center so that they have someone to keep them when I am not at home. There are times when the girls had to stay at the daycare until 7:30 p.m.”

“We are a poor family, but we try to make things work,” replied the grandmother, when asked to describe the girls’ routine after school. “I do most of the chores, but I let them help with their rooms. I work and make sure their food is on the table and they have a nice place to come home to in the afternoon.”

The girls’ third-grade teacher, Ms. Larry, told the researcher that Dolly and Daisy lived close to the school in a neighborhood that was considered “poor, but safe.” Dolly and Daisy described their home as, “large with three bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room and a dining room.” They thought their home was very nice. The grandmother described her home as “a place I’ve had for over twenty five years. It is not a new house but I do my best to maintain it. It’s my home.”

Most of the families who live in the Workhard Elementary School neighborhood live in old, established houses, lined close together on both sides of the street which the principal described as “the inner city homes.” The space between the houses was small and was used for parking, which led to many children playing on the streets or curbs. Dolly and Daisy said they were allowed to go outside only “if it was safe.”
Grandmother’s Perspective on Daisy’s Retention

Retaining Dolly and Daisy in kindergarten was a decision their grandmother said she helped to make, but one that she was not in agreement with at first. The girls were both in the same kindergarten class and they shared the same teacher. “At the close of the year, the kindergarten teacher invited me to a parent-teacher conference to talk about Daisy’s retention. At first, I wanted to fight it, but when the teacher explained that Daisy was struggling with reading, couldn’t say all her ABCs and didn’t know all her colors, I agreed for her retention.” The grandmother said she was told in the parent-teacher conference with the teacher that Daisy was having a hard time in school. “I couldn’t tell what was happening, but I thought the teacher was doing her best to help the girls. I did not know they were going to be retained.”

Daisy was subsequently placed in the school’s TK1 class the following year. “I don’t know what interventions they used to help Daisy in kindergarten to help her pass her grade. I never asked. I thought she was doing just fine,” reflected Daisy’s grandmother.

Kindergarten teachers at Workhard Elementary School noted several areas that they typically observe to indicate whether the student was doing well. Academic factors they listed were “no reading readiness, low letter-sound relationships, no number concepts, no recognition of basic sight words, no ability to match items or sequence objects in a pattern and no number knowledge or
concepts.” The question that Daisy’s grandmother wasn’t sure about was what were the specific areas Daisy was weak in that warranted her retention in kindergarten. Ms. Larry, Daisy’s third-grade teacher, acknowledged that Daisy was having problems with reading comprehension, word recognition and math in the third grade. “If she were having problems in kindergarten, those problems are still present; they have not gone away. She is performing at the bottom five percent in my class,” reported Ms. Larry.

_Daisy’s Second Year in Kindergarten_

The second year in kindergarten helped Daisy more than it helped Dolly. “However, Daisy was still struggling in school. So, when Daisy got to first grade she was tested and found to have a learning disability. The test found that Daisy was far behind on grade level in reading, and so she was sent to a Resource room every day for reading as a special education support. Dolly was not in need of testing for a learning disability because she was doing better. “She did not need special education help,” explained the grandmother.

Daisy’s grandmother recounted in her interview how Daisy was placed in the TK1 class. “I wasn’t sure whether I should have fought for first grade or settle for the TK1 Class. In the end, I agreed for the TK1 class. The teacher said she would have a lot of help and support in that class and I need not worry. At the end of the year, Daisy will be on grade level and she will be in first grade. I felt I had no choice,” she said.
The girls’ grandmother was not pleased with the instruction in the TK1 class. “The TK1 teacher was pregnant, she was mean and was out a lot. The new teacher the school hired later in TK1 was a little nicer to the students, but my granddaughters were still struggling in the TK1 class, especially Daisy. Daisy is still struggling all the way into the third grade.” The grandmother felt that the TK1 year was a wasted year “because the girls were taught the same things all over again that they learned in kindergarten during the first year.” She said that the only thing they did not have that was the same was naptime. “I hated that Dolly had to do the year all over again. She did not need to be retained.”

Grandmother’s Perspective of Dolly’s Retention

“My biggest worry was Dolly--how will she move on to the next grade without her sister?” said the grandmother in her interview. “That’s when they told me what was going to happen to Dolly.”

“I never knew Dolly was having problems in school until I met with the teacher in kindergarten at the end of the year, and she told me that Dolly will be retained as well. I wanted the girls to be together.” Upon reflection, the grandmother said she should have fought Dolly’s retention because in her mind the teacher was only recommending Dolly’s retention so that the girls could still be together. The grandmother felt Dolly should not have been retained and hoped that in the future Dolly wasn’t going to blame Daisy for her being held back in kindergarten.
The grandmother said that she did go to all PTA meetings and teacher conferences, and she had always only been aware that Daisy was having problems in reading because the teacher had “told her before.” She said that Daisy struggled a lot and after she saw that, making the decision to retain her in kindergarten was “not that hard.” The grandmother reported that Dolly had done much better than Daisy ever since kindergarten even in the third grade.

Kindergarten and the Retention of Dolly and Daisy

The grandmother said that her granddaughters still remembered the day when she told them that they were not going to first grade with their friends. “Dolly was more concerned, and could not understand why she was being held back. As their grandmother, it was hard for me too, and I became upset with the school.” When asked if she would do the same things again if the girls were back in kindergarten, the grandmother said no, she would not retain Dolly.

One thing that greatly concerned the grandmother now, as a grandparent of third-grade children, was to get the girls ready for the up-coming End-of-Grade test. “If they failed that test they could be retained again, and if that happened I would be very disappointed.”

When asked if they remembered that they were held back, both Dolly and Daisy nodded. Dolly told about a girl who was “mean” to them because they were retained in kindergarten. “The girl picked on us because we did not go on to the first grade,” she said. Dolly did not appear to like to talk about the experience
and said very little else, and refused to expand on this by describing what happened when she was “picked” on by the girl. Both Dolly and Daisy said they did not like to be retained. However, Daisy said she knew she was retained because she did not like to read or write. She said she was a good reader now in the third grade.

_Dolly’s Perspective of her Third Grade Performance_

Dolly said that she was doing well in the third grade. She and her sister had the same third-grade teacher, and had the same teachers in each grade since kindergarten. “We don’t care that we always have the same teacher.”

Dolly expressed how she loved reading better than math. “My grades are usually As, Bs and Cs and a few Fs in reading,” she said. Dolly’s reading score was in the below average range in reading. Ms. Larry appeared pleased with Dolly’s reading performance in the third grade. She indicated, “Dolly’s basic sight words skills are on grade level, but her comprehension skills are only slightly below grade level. Dolly works hard.”

Dolly talked frequently about the rewards she received for good behavior. “My name is always placed in the bag for the drawing on Friday. If your name is drawn, you get McDonalds’ for lunch. I have won two times already.” Ms. Larry said Dolly was very sociable in class. “And even though she was ‘busy’ all the time, she was not a behavior concern of mine.”
Daisy’s Perspective of her Third-Grade Performance

Daisy said her grades were usually As, Bs and Cs and sometimes Ds and Fs. She said she went to a resource room where she received better grades than in Ms. Larry’s (her teacher) classroom. However, Daisy remembered she had her discipline card changed from “green” (good behavior) to “yellow” (a warning from the teacher) because she got into trouble. She said she rarely got into trouble, so she was mad that she had to pull a card in her class—yellow, indicating a warning from the teacher. Ms. Larry pointed out to the researcher on the tracking sheet she kept that Daisy’s percentile scores on standardized tests were all in the lower end of the class.

Ms. Larry shared that Daisy was having more behavioral issues than Dolly. Also, Daisy was not as motivated as Dolly was in reading on her own or completing class work. Ms. Larry wrote in her survey as part of this study’s data collection process that the problems that both girls exhibited varied. Daisy had “poor attention span, poor reading comprehension and poor fluency in reading.” Daisy’s problems were more extensive according to Ms. Larry. “She sometimes had tantrums; homework may be incomplete or hardly she finished class work, and she shows more poor personal-management skills.”
The Third Grade Teacher's Perspective of Dolly's and Daisy's Progress

Ms. Larry was in her fifties, of African American descent and had a warm personality. She was pleasant and spoke fondly of her students. She said she has been teaching for twenty-five years at the elementary level.

Ms. Larry noted that both girls were always neat and well cared for in their appearance. “No one would guess from their appearance or behavior that the girls had been retained; they behaved like any other third grader, and both were very sociable and very helpful.”

Ms. Larry’s classroom was equipped with some of the same items as all the other third-grade classrooms at Workhard Elementary School. The walls were brightly decorated with educational posters and banners. Teaching aids and supplies such as a rolling chart stand, bookcases stacked with a variety of books, three computers, tape players with headphones, and items described as manipulatives, decorated the room. Students work samples were displayed on the bulletin boards, and overall, the room had a warm and inviting atmosphere.

The teacher interview took place in the teacher's classroom. Ms Larry pointed out, “I designed a classroom that lends itself well to interventions for all levels of students. Any student can at any time find a corner that they can independently work alone in or in a small group. Dolly and Daisy both like to work in small groups with the manipulatives.”
Ms. Larry was using a variety of interventions in her classroom to help the girls. She said that both girls have attention problems, which meant that she, the teacher, had to use creative ways to keep them occupied. Dolly liked to read but, Daisy did not. Ms. Larry used strategies such as peer tutoring, limiting assignments and close monitoring of the students performance. She said that she usually paired-up a low functioning student with a high functioning student for difficult tasks.

Ms. Larry thought that the up-coming EOG standardized test was harming the girls. She said if she did not have to worry about the test, she would have been able to focus more on interventions to help the girls and the other low-performing students. Ms. Larry thought that a caring teacher was critical when dealing with low performing students. She laughed good naturedly when asked about what she thought would help students who are performing below grade level and said “prayer and praise.”

When asked if she thought Dolly and Daisy would pass the EOG test, Ms. Larry said she was doubtful about Daisy but hopeful about Dolly. She expressed that she thought retention was sometimes necessary when students lack the skills needed for the next grade level, although she herself had never recommended a student for retention before or never researched what happened to students later in school after they were retained.
Emerging Themes from Dolly and Daisy

Several themes in cases four and five--Dolly and Daisy, appeared to be similar to the themes derived from the other cases:

- The school’s notification to the parent about retention affected parent and students emotionally.
- Daycares played a key role in the students’ after-school life.
- Special education was seen as an important school support system for low performing students.
- Interventions were not adequate in the second year of retention and the TK1 class was not effective.
- Interventions continued to be a key factor in helping students to maintain academic success in the third grade.

The themes from the cases were cross-checked for commonalities and variations in their patterns or trends, and these were discussed in chapter five of this study.

Perceptions of Kindergarten Teachers and the Principal on Kindergartners’ Retention

A central point of this study was to examine how decisions to retain students were made in kindergarten at Workhard Elementary School. To do this, the principal and the nine kindergarten teachers of Workhard Elementary School were asked to share their opinions and perceptions in a survey (see Appendixes
D and E for the Principal and Teacher Surveys. The results from the surveys were synchronized and examined for overriding themes and trends on the subject of the effectiveness of kindergarten retention.

According to the nine kindergarten teachers at Workhard Elementary School, all kindergarten students at the school were screened for school-readiness skills on their initial entry to school. The screening was usually done during the first week of school by the kindergarten teachers, who used multiple methods that included a “Draw a Picture” test (a drawing test that asked the students to draw common things in his or her life such as his or her mother or father or siblings to show how well the student was aware of important people, items or objects in his or her surroundings, and how well he or she was able to communicate ideas in the form of a picture); teacher observations of various students’ activities including resting and playing, and self-help skills such as use of the bathrooms, tying their shoelaces, coloring, holding a pencil and sitting at a table. By observing the students in various settings at the school for an entire day, each kindergarten teacher collected data, which they would use later for making decisions on how to group the students for their individual classes.

After the teachers had collected sufficient data on all the students, they met as a team to analyze the data and submit a report to the principal, who then grouped the students heterogeneously for their separate individual classes. According to the principal, the school ensured that students were distributed as
evenly as possible by gender, race, strengths and needs to create a sense of fairness in the minds of parents and teachers, and most important, to support theories of heterogeneous grouping of students. Because Workhard Elementary School relied on teacher observations for grouping, students who, in the teacher’s eyes, exhibited better adjustment skills were regarded as high-functioning and were grouped with students who the teachers considered as lower functioning students to create balanced heterogeneous groups. Additional data that was important for grouping included student demographics, physical ailments, disabilities, ability to speak English and special education needs. To the extent of how well the initial screening data were used to design grouping practices to increase student success and to reduce failure it is to that extent that grouping of students is examined as a school factor in this study.

Behaviors that Determined Student Retention in Kindergarten

Academic skills

The kindergarten teachers at Workhard Elementary identified eleven academic performance indicators, which they typically considered when making decisions to retain a student: (1) No reading-readiness skills, (2) poor fine-motor skills, (3) low letter-sound relationship skills, (4) no number knowledge, (5) no skills in matching sight words, (6) poor performance on reading and math assessments, (7) unable to follow instructions, (8) does not meet kindergarten standards in reading and math, (9) not able to grasp material, (10) not able to
stay focused (11) unable to apply skills in contexts. If after the teachers have tried to assist students to improve their performance of these skills, the teachers reported that only then they would recommend retention. (See Figure 4 for a summary of the academic skills that the teachers said influenced their decision to retain students).

Social skills

In the surveys, the kindergarten teachers identified fourteen social skills areas that they generally observed to determine whether the student would be retained. What the teacher sees and decides as acceptable is generally regarded as passing the social skills test: (1) Unable to follow routines, (2) unable to focus on task, (3) unable to follow directions, (4) no personal organization, (5) no listening skills, (6) no self-help skills, (7) maturity issues, (8) task avoidance, (9) no attending skills, (10) can’t keep up with peers, (11) unable to work independently, (12) only wants to play, (13) aggressiveness, (14) unable to get along with classmates. See Figure 4 for a summary of the academic and social skills deficits that kindergarten teachers said they used to determine their recommendation for the retention of kindergarten students at Workhard Elementary School.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten Teachers</th>
<th>Academic Factors that Determined Retention</th>
<th>Social/Behavioral Factors that Determined Retention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 1</td>
<td>No reading readiness&lt;br&gt;Poor fine motor skills&lt;br&gt;Low letter-sound skills&lt;br&gt;No number knowledge</td>
<td>Can’t follow routines&lt;br&gt;Can’t focus on task&lt;br&gt;Can’t follow directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 2</td>
<td>Little letter recognition&lt;br&gt;No skills in matching sight words</td>
<td>No personal organization&lt;br&gt;No listening skills&lt;br&gt;No personal organization&lt;br&gt;Can’t follow directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 3</td>
<td>Poor performance on reading and math assessments</td>
<td>No self-help skills&lt;br&gt;Maturity issues&lt;br&gt;Task avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 4</td>
<td>No letter-sound skills&lt;br&gt;No number knowledge&lt;br&gt;Can’t follow instructions</td>
<td>No attending skills&lt;br&gt;Can’t follow directions&lt;br&gt;Can’t keep up with peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 5</td>
<td>No fine motor skills&lt;br&gt;Does not meet kindergarten standards</td>
<td>Can’t work independently&lt;br&gt;Only wants to play&lt;br&gt;Does not want to work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 6</td>
<td>Promotion standards</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 7</td>
<td>Minimum kindergarten standards</td>
<td>Can’t follow directions&lt;br&gt;Can’t concentrate&lt;br&gt;Can’t listen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 8</td>
<td>Not able to grasp material&lt;br&gt;Not able to stay focused</td>
<td>Developmentally not ready&lt;br&gt;Immature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 9</td>
<td>No letter-sounds&lt;br&gt;Can’t apply skills</td>
<td>Aggressiveness&lt;br&gt;Can’t get along</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4: Types of social and academic deficits that determined teachers’ recommendation for kindergarten students’ retention.*
Kindergarten teachers indicated that their decision to retain a student was heavily influenced by the policies and standards implemented in the district, state and school in reading and mathematics. The NC State Department of Public Instruction established strict guidelines for student performance that the teachers felt compelled to follow. “Teachers are expected to align their taught curriculum with the state’s standard course of study … tests become a measure of quality control…a way of monitoring school and teacher compliance to the standards” (Darling-Hammond, 1988, p. 4). The kindergarten teachers felt that some of the standards in math and reading were difficult for students to master, especially when the student has had little pre kindergarten exposure to structured learning. All (100%) of the nine kindergarten teachers surveyed said they had recommended students to be retained for failing to meet standards. Some of the teachers began the process of retention by “thinking about retaining a student in the first quarter of the school year” even before the student was given the necessary interventions to improve, as shown in Figure 5.
Figure 5: How soon in the school year the kindergarten teachers begin to think about retaining students.

Figure 5 shows that five of the kindergarten teachers (55%) had already made a decision to retain students by the middle of the school year. Only one (11%) of the teachers said she would wait until the end of the year to make the decision after she had tried several strategies “to get the students to perform on grade level.” Although the kindergarten teachers agreed that they did consider other criteria when they made decisions for promotion, their main consideration was the students mastering grade level academic standards.

Even if the kindergarten teachers focused on retention for low academic performance, they also said that they implemented various interventions to assist the struggling students so that they could improve.
Interventions Implemented in Kindergarten to Help Low-Performing Students

In the teacher surveys, kindergarten teachers of Workhard Elementary School shared their perceptions on the types of remedial interventions they implemented in kindergarten to help low performing students improve. Some of the interventions were: (1) Test students for possible disabilities for special education services, (2) seek parental support to help students with homework, (3) provide students with challenging work in the classroom to keep them interested and motivated, (4) provide one-on-one support in critical academic areas for struggling students, (5) conduct small group instruction for struggling students, (6) assess students’ performance more frequently to tailor instruction to match the students’ needs, (7) adjust teaching style to match students’ learning style, (8) seek other teacher’s support in the school when planning instruction for low performers, (7) be patient and provide extra time to students for completing class work, (9) teach student social skills that would help them adjust to school better. Figure 6 gives a summary of the interventions implemented by the kindergarten teachers during the kindergarten year to assist struggling students.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten Teachers at Workhard Elementary</th>
<th>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Intervention Implemented by Kindergarten Teachers</th>
<th>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Intervention Implemented by Kindergarten Teachers</th>
<th>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Intervention Implemented by Kindergarten Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 1</td>
<td>Parent support</td>
<td>Give challenging work</td>
<td>Test for special education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 2</td>
<td>One-on-one Parent support</td>
<td>Small group tutoring</td>
<td>Raise teacher expectation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 3</td>
<td>One-on-one teaching</td>
<td>Parent support</td>
<td>Assess more often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 4</td>
<td>Remediation</td>
<td>Teach differently</td>
<td>Assess carefully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 5</td>
<td>Focus on weak areas</td>
<td>Additional assistance</td>
<td>Other teacher support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 6</td>
<td>Parent help</td>
<td>More support groups</td>
<td>Test for special education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 7</td>
<td>Enlist help from parents</td>
<td>Teach social skills</td>
<td>Test for special education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 8</td>
<td>Help him/her more in class</td>
<td>New medium of instruction</td>
<td>New games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher No. 9</td>
<td>Extra time</td>
<td>Extra support</td>
<td>On-on-one help</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 6: Three types of interventions kindergarten teachers implemented to assist struggling students at Workhard Elementary School*

Figure 6 shows the types of interventions that kindergarten teachers implemented. Testing for special education issues was also an immediate
consideration from three (33%) of the teachers. While the figure shows that the
teachers did use several interventions, they each said that despite the
interventions, some students would still not master all the expected standards by
the end of the year. These students will be the ones they would generally
recommend for retention.

The Similarities in the Structures of the Kindergarten Classrooms

From the researcher’s observation on her visit to Workhard Elementary, each
of the kindergarten classrooms was equipped with the same basics items as the
other one. Similarities included centers for art, science, housekeeping (a toy-like
kitchen area equipped with toy-like kitchen utensils), listening, reading, and
boxes of items, such as jigsaw puzzles and plastic stepping stones, etc., termed,
“manipulatives” for students’ fine and gross-motor skills development
respectively. Despite the commonalities among the classrooms, teachers could
still have espoused their own individual theories of learning and created an
environment that matched their own philosophy of student learning and child
development. For this reason, taking a closer look at the teacher factor is
valuable to this study because of the impact teachers in and by themselves could
have on student performance. Spodek & Sancho (1993) pointed out, that “there
is no rule to stop a practice if it does not violate [acceptable beliefs about
teaching and learning] and meets the curriculum standards. But, how these
personal practices and philosophies influence the student’s success or failure
and could lead to their promotion or retention” (p. 27) are questions of interest to this study. Because of the variability in teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about student learning and performance, the teacher factor is regarded as a significant data source for this study.

The Principal on the Retention Process at Workhard Elementary School

According to the school’s principal, Workhard Elementary School followed strict district policies for promotion and retention. After the first semester of school, each student in each grade was assessed for his or her mastery of skills on the prescribed curriculum standards set by the NC Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS). For kindergartners, the domains include Cognitive Development, Social-Emotional Development, Language Development, Physical Development, Gross-Motor Development, Fine-Motor Development and Responsibility Development. Mastering skills in all the domains meant that the student was succeeding in school. If the skills were not mastered, the kindergarten student was categorized as “failing” by the school.

In the first and second grades, a student was considered to be in danger of retention if he or she failed to maintain passing grades in reading and math on his or her report card at the end of the school year. Additionally, poor school attendance, exclusive of school performance, could also be determined as a good reason for retention. In both first and second grades, if a student did not meet the required benchmarks in all the domains by mid-year, including
attendance to school, the teacher met with the parent of the student in question and shared his or her concerns with the hope that parental support would increase, or for the simple purpose of complying with the school policy of “parent notification.”

As one form of intervention, the principal of Workhard Elementary School further wrote that the teachers and parents intensified instruction in weak areas for nine weeks for any student who showed problems in his or her performance. (Usually, the school’s Assistance Team was asked to intervene, and recommendations may be made for a psychological evaluation for possible learning, behavioral, emotional or mental disabilities). After the intervention process was completed, another assessment of the student’s mastery of the standards was conducted at the end of the given nine weeks. If the student still did not demonstrate mastery of all the skills, the teacher, the principal and the parent made the decision for retention, typically done at the end of the school year. At the time the decision was made for retention, the school must show that it had tried its best to help the student to succeed, in order to have a justifiable case for retention.

The principal wrote that she did not know any of the students in this study any more than by their names. Her involvement with the decision to retain the students did not come until the end of the school year, when it was time to group the students for their classes in the higher grade. She indicated that she
expected the teacher to come to her if there was a problem that they by themselves could not resolve, such as a difficult parent who vehemently did not want his or her child to be retained. On the whole, the principal expressed that she trusted the teacher’s judgment in making such a decision because she wrote “the teacher is the one who knows the student best.” The principal stated she understood that she was ultimately responsible for the decision, but when all the artifacts such as the students’ report cards, their attendance record and the discipline report were all considered, the decision to retain was usually a defensible one.

Themes That Emerged From the Kindergarten Teachers and Principal Surveys

On closer examination of the survey results from both the kindergarten and the principal surveys, several themes on the subject of retention emerged:

• Most kindergarten teachers approached low performance of students with a mindset to retain.

• Interventions were applied in kindergarten classrooms to assist students, yet some students were still identified for retention.

• The decision to retain began with the teacher.

• The kindergarten teachers varied in their perceptions of what constituted student low performance.

• The kindergarten teachers relied on academic excellence for making decisions for promotion.
• The principal relied on teachers for data for making the retention decision. How the themes from the cases converged or diverged in this study’s search for commonalities and variations will be discussed in chapter five of this study.

Chapter Endnote

All the cases and data sources—students, teachers, parents and the principal--presented very valuable information and insight into whether retaining students in kindergarten was an effective intervention for low-performing students. The perceptions of the teachers on what constituted the kindergarten experience and success varied significantly from those of the parents. The question that makes the case for this study is “How has retention as an education practice designed to improve students’ low performance in kindergarten made significant difference to students overall performance three years later in the third grade?” Other questions that emerged were “Did the screening assessments done by the teachers addressed the students background information?” and “Was their flexibility in planning for instruction for each student’s specific need?” The emerging themes from the cases were cross-checked to validate the findings of this study and a discussion on the impact of kindergarten retention on students’ school performance will follow in chapter five of this study.
CHAPTER FIVE
Discussion and Findings

Introduction

The main question that this study asks is “How has retention as an education practice designed to improve students’ low performance in kindergarten made significant difference to students’ overall school performance three years later in the third grade?” and the two sub questions asked are, (a) “Was the performance of retained kindergartners impacted by factors external to the school as they advanced to the third grade?” (b) “What factors compelled the school to make the decision to retain students in kindergarten?” This study discusses the questions from three angles: (1) If there are external factors that are affecting the students’ school performance, then those external factors should be addressed to keep the students from performing poorly, hence keeping the students from being retained. (2) If, despite the intervention of kindergarten grade retention, students’ academic problems still persist into the third grade, then retention at the kindergarten level should be examined for its relevance and worth as an education practice. Repeating an entire year of school is, essentially, an entire year lost for some students if the problems that kindergarten retention was designed to solve are still present. (3) If retention is not a choice on the list of effective practices for low performance, then consider consistent, intense and appropriate interventions over several grade spans to help the student move
from below-grade level to on-grade level. By a cross-case analysis and cross-checking of the data sources, the themes that emerged from the case narratives in the preceding chapter will be further broken down or combined and then discussed under several sub-headings in this chapter.

Retention is Not a “Do-Over”

In most cases, when a beginner player is learning a new sport or game, such as baseball or softball, the player is said to beg for a “do-over” if he or she missed the first shot. The reason being, do-overs give the player a second chance to excel, to rise to the top and be recognized as an equal with his or her peers. It is the same with students in the classroom. When students are told that they are not doing well in school and their grades are not good, they usually would not mind doing over an assignment, and would be grateful to their teacher for a second chance to do better. What students will rarely do is ask that they do over the entire year, or be retained in their grade if they failed one or more subjects. In fact, none of the five students in this study said he or she felt good about being retained, even though he or she knew they were not performing well. In a study done by Byrnes (1989), he concluded that children viewed retention as a punishment and a stigma, not as a means of helping the student get on grade level. In this study, Jane shared a similar experience when she remembered her retention and remarked, regretfully, “All my friends are now in the fourth grade.” The experience of failing to meet the grade level standards was disappointing
enough to the students in this study; yet that experience was further compounded with the knowledge that he or she had to do over an entire year. For Jane, the reality of her failure in kindergarten was always present “each time she saw her friends in the fourth grade.”

**Retention--A Bad Memory**

Four of the five students (80%) in this study reflected that they did not like the fact they were retained in kindergarten; their responses included, “I felt bad,” “I felt sad” or “I don’t want to talk about it.” Tony said he had no memory of the event, even though his mother recounted the details for him. Of interest to this study, each of the four parents remembered vividly the entire event and gave very emotional and detailed accounts, but it was not a memory that they recounted with pleasure. Harry’s mother began crying when she remembered the story of her son’s retention in kindergarten. Jane’s mother remembered how both she and her daughter cried after the parent-teacher conference at the school. “She cried and I cried with her,” she said. The feeling of disappointment in knowing that her child had failed to meet the expectations of the school led Jane’s mother on her own resolve, to increase her support for the school and her child’s education. Based on the reaction of the parents and students in this study to the memory of the retention event, retention was not an experience they would like to remember or experience again. However, these same families whose children were still performing below grade level, face the harsh possibility of
experiencing retention a second time if their children did not pass the up-coming End-of-Grade test.

Retention Was Predetermined

The nine kindergarten teachers (100%) surveyed in this study said that they knew before the end of the school year which students they were going to recommend for retention. Five of the teachers (56%) knew by the middle of the year and only one (11%) said she typically would know by the fourth quarter.

The teachers pointed out that early performance indicators for retention were both social and academic. Some of the social skills deficits that the teacher listed were “can’t follow directions, can’t play with peers, can’t focus on tasks, no personal organization, task avoidance, little or no attending skills, little fine motor skills, want to play all the time, and no maturity.” Along with the students’ social skills problems, the teachers also shared that if the students were unable to attain most of the academic standards at the kindergarten level they would also recommend them for retention.

Three of the parents in this study were disappointed because the teachers knew what their students problems were, but did not do “anything” to help them from being held back. But, as the year progressed and the parents continued a dialogue with the school, the parents grew to accept the teachers’ diagnoses as “the only choice.” Jane’s mother, however, said she still felt that the school should have done something quickly to stop her child from being retained,
especially when they knew “her daughter was struggling.” The kindergarten teachers, on the other hand, listed nine different strategies they used to assist low-performing students. However, the strategies were not enough to get Harry, who was an English as a Second Language (ESL) learner, Tony, with a learning disability and ADHD, and Daisy, with a learning disability in reading, up to grade level. It appeared that the school needed to address the issue of the timeframe within which a student should be tested for a disability. Identifying students for special education or English as a second language services could be done very early in the kindergarten year rather than later in the retention year. Special education and ESL services were found to be key support mechanisms to help the students succeed. Tony and Daisy were identified with ADHD and a learning disability, respectively after they were retained, and they continued to need special education support even as they reached the third grade. It appeared unwarranted to retain students whose problems could have been addressed more effectively with special education or ESL services. In their position statement the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) draws attention to the practice of retaining students with special education needs, ESL needs or from poor minority groups when it states in its position paper that:

The most likely groups of children to be retained are those who are minorities, have a late birthday, delayed development or attention problems, live in poverty, have parents with low educational attainment
or have changed schools frequently … students with reading problems, including English-language learners, are also more likely to be retained. (NASP, 2003, p. 4).

It is not surprising, therefore, that each of the five students in this study was either from a poor, minority group, had ESL needs or an attention disorder or learning disability. In some respects, these students were already at a disadvantage in reaching grade-level goals; to retain them the school was, unwittingly, adding another burden the students must carry, hence increasing the likelihood of their continued low performance.

**How the Parents and Students Were Informed of Retention**

How the school treated the parents in the process of retaining the child determined also the kind of support the school received from the parents. When asked what kind of support they expected from the parents, all the teachers (100%) both kindergarten and third-grade said, “for them to help their child with homework, and reinforce what we are trying to achieve in the classroom.” But this teacher expectation was unrealistic in light of the parents’ work schedules. Whereas Tony’s third-grade teacher was very critical of Tony’s mother, stating that she came only “to blame the teacher whenever the child gets into trouble,” Tony’s mother expressed that her night-shift job prevented her from getting involved with the school. Tony’s mother stated, “I don’t have time to come to all the meetings, but if I get notes from the teacher then I know what’s going on.”
Maintaining a positive teacher-parent relationship is critical to the success of the low-performing child, for when there is close cooperation and trust between parents and school personnel and when students are not relegated to the sidelines as bystanders, but rather are involved as active participants in the retention process, their chances of success increased (Brooks, 2002; Anderson, 1992). Jane’s mother was very supportive of the school, even though she admitted that she had little time to come to all the meetings and conferences. Harry’s mother would go to the school for conferences and celebration events, but she said due to her language barrier and work needs, she could not volunteer at the school. None of the parents in this study, according to both the teachers and the parents, were regular parent volunteers at the school, although all the parents said they gave the school a more indirect support such as coming to a parent-teacher conference or sending items for class projects when requested. According to Anderson (2004), children who demonstrated greater success after repeating a grade, had parents who were more involved in the schools, and who had favorable attitudes towards retention. To some extent, this was not the case with the parents in this study. They all admitted that because of their jobs they were not able to stay involved with the school on a consistent basis. In Tony’s case, there appeared to be little trust between the parent and the teacher; each resorted to blaming the other for not doing all it took to help the student.
For all the cases (100%), the parents recalled that the discussion to retain their children in kindergarten started with the teacher. The principal agreed that the teachers were expected to identify struggling learners very early in the school year so that the students could be helped sooner. Of interest to this study, teachers were able to identify struggling students early, but then would later recommend these same struggling students for retention. The teachers said that despite interventions implemented to assist the students, most struggling students did not improve in their performance significantly by the end of the school year. Six teachers (66%) agreed that by the end of the second quarter of the school year they were almost certain about which students they were going to recommend for retention. However, teachers did not speak with the parents about the condition of their individual child. Harry’s mother, Jane’s mother and Dolly’s and Daisy’s grandmother all said that had they known that their child was going to be retained they would have worked harder with their children. Jane’s mother said her daughter had a tendency to get up and talk, but she insisted that the school “could have done something to help her.” Harry’s mother thought all was well with Harry until the teacher brought her in to tell her about a test he had failed. Dolly’s and Daisy’s grandmother said that she was surprised that Dolly was also going to be retained. It is not that the parents disagreed with the teachers’ diagnoses that the children needed help, but their disappointment was
in how the school chose to help the students. In Jane’s mother’s words, “the school hadn’t done enough soon enough.” What is worthy of note for this study is that, whereas teachers demonstrated that they knew how to identify learning problems early and knew by the middle of the year who would be retained, there was not an urgency or a clear plan by the school to take action immediately to correct students’ problems to prevent the students from being retained. Instead, it appeared that the school had a better plan for students after they were retained. The homogenous, TK1 class was put in place for the sole purpose of housing and assisting retained kindergarteners.

The question that Jane’s mother asked, “What were they doing about it?” is a valid one, for it is the same question that the literature addresses repeatedly—“what are schools doing to intervene early?” Although Workhard Elementary addressed the above question, it was not until the student’s second year that something was done in the TK1 classroom. Instead of implementing authentic remedial strategies in the students’ first year, all nine kindergarten teachers (100%) said they generally implemented new strategies in the child’s second year to assist the child. These strategies included “close monitoring of the student’s performance, assessing his or her strengths and weaknesses, giving more interesting tasks, one-on-one tutoring, small group instruction, having high expectations, communicating better with parents, and using new teaching formats.” These strategies are very similar to the ones recommended by
the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2003) and other
education researchers such as Slavin (1990), Holmes (1989), and Brooks (2002),
with their one main departure being that interventions should begin immediately
to avoid retaining the student.

Retention Year in Kindergarten

The research shows that most students, after retention, would show a
significant improvement in their second year of retention (Holmes, 1989). This
could be the result of the student being older and more exposed to school than
his younger peers, and because the kindergarten teachers were kinder and more
understanding of the student in their evaluation and assessment (Shepard &
Smith, 1998).

For the nine kindergarten teachers in this study, the improved performance in
the second year was enough proof to them that retention worked. But this
improvement may be misleading. For Daisy and Dolly, their grandmother said
they did better in their second year because the work was easier and the teacher
paid more attention to them. Daisy was also receiving special education support
after being identified with a learning disability. In her special education class she
was taught at her current performance level rather than on the kindergarten
grade level. This improvement was more visible also, because at Workhard
Elementary School, all retained kindergartners were placed in the separate TK1
class by ability for direct one-on-one support. The irony of the TK1 class is that it
offered intense support for retained kindergartners only; it was not available for current kindergartners who might be struggling. The success that Dolly and Daisy were experiencing in the TK1 class was seen in high grades on their report cards, which were proof to their grandmother that the girls were doing better. The students appeared to be doing better in the TK1 class because the class offered instruction that matched the students' low abilities. Regarding classes that are ability-based, NAECS states that:

Children identified as at-risk placed in homogeneous programs often encounter lower peer role models for success and confidence … heterogeneous groupings are more likely than homogenous ones to encourage growth among children who are developing more slowly. (p. 6).

This second year improvement was again evident in case number two, Tony. Tony was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), not in his kindergarten year, but in the retention year when he was then able to receive medication. In addition to the medication, Tony also received special education services and was placed in the TK1 class, all of which helped to stabilize Tony's performance, and most of his problems in the second year were eliminated. However, Tony’s mother remembered that he still had behavioral problems in the years following his placement in the TK1 class, which was evident by the nine times he was punished by being sent home. She recalled the times when she went to the doctor to have his medication changed hoping that a different
medication or a higher dosage would help improve his performance. Tony’s third-grade teacher reported that Tony was still having problems with academics and behavioral issues despite the various supports he was receiving in school. Tony’s case substantiated the idea that for some students such as Tony, adding another year for mastering standards may not necessarily be the answer to kindergarten problems. Tony’s case shows that a variety of interventions are sometimes needed to help keep students’ performance sustained in school, hence keeping students from being retained. Whereas the question in the past was “Will it be retention or social promotion?” the question now becomes, “Will it be retention or focused, intense interventions?”

None of the teachers (0%) in kindergarten or third grade said they went back and researched how well the students did after their retention year. One kindergarten teacher prided herself on retaining one of the students who “did so well” in his second year and was now in the third grade. She was disappointed to learn that that same student was still not performing on grade level in the third grade. The cases in this study showed that most of the teachers in kindergarten made the decision to retain students by using data collected only in the kindergarten classroom, with little consultation or discussion with colleagues in higher grades who received retained kindergartners, or with teachers in other settings such as the PE or music teachers. The third-grade teachers substantiated this finding when they reported that retention in kindergarten did
not prove to be helpful to their students. They further reported that they were rarely asked to share information on student performance to kindergarten teachers to assist the kindergarten teachers in their decision to retain students. Also, in almost all the cases, teachers seeking parent input in the retention process was not reported. The parents in each of cases said that they were simply “notified” of their child’s retention at the end of the school year. This practice is contrary to what the literature describes as healthy parent-school relationships, where working collaboratively with parents helps to galvanize parental support for the school and will ultimately help the student in his or her performance (Henderson, 1994).

The Variability of Kindergarten Teachers’ Expectations

Five of the nine kindergarten teachers (56%) who completed surveys said that their decision to retain was based solely on the students not completing the goals and objectives in the kindergarten curriculum. In support of the standards, one teacher said, “They give me clear guidelines on what I need to teach. Without the policy I wouldn’t know what to do with some of the students who are below grade level.” Another teacher said, “I look at rapid growth after the second quarter … even if the student is still not on grade level, I will still promote if the student is making rapid growth and his or her behavior is not a problem.” It appeared as though the teachers were not sure at what point the child’s social-emotional maturity level overrode the academic standards. “I need more help in
understanding when the child can be promoted--if his behavior is poor and he is doing well academically, I think he should go on. But if it is the other way, good behavior, but not on grade level, I think he should stay back.” The teachers claim in their surveys that there was a thin line separating social skills development and academic performance in kindergarten, making it difficult to arrive at a decision as to what should be a determinant for retention. For instance, a student verbally and coherently expressing himself, can be perceived as “student demonstrating advanced language use,” but if the teacher perceived such “verbal expression” as “talking too much” then the expression becomes a symptom of social maladjustment. Jane and her mother still believed that Jane’s retention was because Jane “talked too much.”

So, the decision to promote or retain in kindergarten is usually narrowed down essentially to the teachers’ judgment of what generally constituted student success in kindergarten. Teacher judgment is subjected to teacher experience, teacher competence, an ability to separate cultural behaviors from misbehaviors and the teacher’s level of professionalism (Conley, 1993). This study found that teacher judgment as a factor for determining retention was not consistent among the nine teachers. Teacher experience in the field of education made little significant difference to perceptions about student success or failure and about retaining students. This study found that teachers who were ten or more years experienced had no specific position about who should be retained, a position
that did not differ from the teachers with one to three years of experience. All nine teachers (100%) said they would retain a student if they thought it would help the student. They, however, differed in their reasons for retention.

Three teachers (33%) listed academic excellence as the first criterion for success, while five (56%) listed adjustment to school or maturity level as their first criterion for retention. Clearly, there appeared to be a need for precise retention and promotion guidelines at Workhard Elementary School to guide teachers on how and whom to retain or promote at the end of the school year. Not to have consistent guidelines, was not to have a shared philosophy on whom and how to retain or promote, which led to leaving the decision to retain entirely up to each teacher’s individual judgment and belief. In the interest of the students, critical theorists would argue this was not a fair approach used for making such a significant decision with such long-term effects on students’ education.

What Does the School Do to Help the Students

The decision to retain begins with the teacher, and even though the decision is very subjective, it is, however, given significant weight from the principal who ultimately makes the final decision. “There’s a lot of teacher judgment and teacher observations that come into play when assessing students,” said one kindergarten teacher. The principal wrote in her survey that, “usually I meet with the teacher and together we look at the portfolio and then I make the final
decision based on what is shown to me by the teacher. "Other factors that are considered, noted the principal, are “the big picture--assessment scores, attendance, whether they are in the special education program or in the English as a Second Language Program.” The retention process usually starts as soon as the students arrive at school. According to the principal of Workhard Elementary School, the teachers must be able to identify potentially at-risk students through their social behaviors and academic performance in the very first weeks of school. “This early identification helps the teachers to provide the students with extra support so that the student succeeds in school. A student may be at-risk of failing in the first quarter, but with help, that student could succeed and go on to the next grade,” wrote the principal. However, this position or belief does not eliminate retention; in fact, at Workhard Elementary School, there are special accommodations made for students who have been retained in kindergarten, more so than for students who are struggling in the current grade. The school has designed and implemented an exclusive Transition-Kindergarten-First (TK1) classroom to take care of the academic needs of the retained kindergarten students. This appears to be a good strategy, but when asked about their second year in kindergarten, two of the parents whose children went to this TK1 class, said that their experience was less than ideal. Jane’s mother said, “My daughter was doing fine, but the teacher was not nice. I don’t think she had been a teacher for long. Thank God she left, she became pregnant and went on
her maternity leave—and this other teacher took over. She was nicer.” Dolly’s and Daisy’s grandmother said, “I don’t think Dolly should have been put into that class. It kept her back. I really think they put Dolly in that class because they didn’t want to separate her from Daisy, but I think Dolly did not learn much.” Dolly’s third-grade teacher also admitted that Dolly was performing better academically in third grade than her sister Daisy, who had a learning disability, and she also questioned Dolly’s retention in kindergarten. The reality remains that neither Dolly, Daisy nor Jane who had been in the transition TK1 class were currently on grade level in third grade even though they had been given that extra year in kindergarten and special education support. What does this say about the practice of kindergarten retention designed to improve student performance? If the expectation was that the students would perform better as they advanced through school given the extra year, that reality never materialized. Based on the cases in this study, low performance continued three years later despite the tailored TK1 intervention in the second year of retention.

Of interest to this study, Dolly’s retention was not because of her low academic performance in kindergarten but because both her grandmother and her teacher were unwilling to separate her from her twin sister, Daisy. Despite Dolly’s “forced” retention, however, her academic performance did not improve significantly as indicated by her third grade academic reports. Dolly’s retention phenomenon raises new questions about retention: Was retention the real cause
for Dolly’s low performance? Could she have done better had she not been forced to be retained with her sister? Was retention also harmful to students who have no issues such as ADHD, ESL or SLD? Dolly’s phenomenon adds to the theory that retention may not be effective even for “normal” students.

Other Issues That Evolved Because of Retention

Several studies have been done that illustrate that there are both negative and positive consequences of retention that sometime affect students’ performance as they advanced through school (Shepard & Smith, 1990). Tony’s third-grade teacher described him as very sociable, to the extent that his likeability was the reason for his behavior problems. His need for attention prohibited him from focusing on his schoolwork, and he was constantly “calling out to someone, getting up and leaving his task to visit someone else’s table or simply talking out loudly in class. Further, if he did not get the attention, he would throw a tantrum and simply shut down.” Tony’s mother explained that Tony was frustrated with his schoolwork, so he would prefer to seek out his friends for attention as a way of avoiding schoolwork. Tony reported in the interview “Math is hard because I don’t know my times tables. My friend knows his to nine times but all I know is one’s and two’s.” Jimerson, Anderson and Whipple (2002) posit that retained “students are more likely to display aggressiveness, to have a history of suspension or expulsion, to act out in class, or display behaviors associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)” (p. 2). Tony’s
teacher and his mother agreed that Tony’s behavior problems in class were
because he lacked self-esteem, which is sometimes a by-product of retention
(Shephard and Smith, 1990). Tony’s self-esteem could not improve in an
environment where he was constantly called on, his name was put on a chart for
rule infractions, or was sent out to another room for time-out and sat apart from
the rest of his classmates in the classroom. Tony’s teacher said it was clear that
his academic performance was suffering due to his ADHD. Tony’s mother stated
that she thought that neither the school nor she had the skills or ability to
delineate Tony’s problems and address each one effectively. With Tony’s myriad
of problems in third grade, most of which persisted since kindergarten, one can
conclusively question the usefulness of adding another year to Tony’s schooling
by retaining him. On closer examination, retention in kindergarten has enlarged
Tony’s problems because now he has to deal with the by-product of low self-
esteeem due to being older, yet still not “smarter” among his peers in his class.

Both Jane’s and Tony’s mothers admitted they understood the feelings of
frustration in their children due to poor academic performance because both of
them (the parents) were also retained in school and dropped out of high school.
“I don’t want Tony to drop out of school like I did--that is why I make sure he gets
a good education,” said Tony’s mother.

But, for most retained students, finishing high school is very unlikely.
“Retention in kindergarten or first grade does not produce long-term academic
gains, but rather increase the likelihood that the student will drop out of high
gain, but rather increase the likelihood that the student will drop out of high
school” (Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple, 2002; Shepard and Smith, 1989).
The problem of age difference appears to be less significant for students at the
elementary level; however, the difference between ages is more pronounced
when students reach middle and high school where age matters for things such
as participating in a sports activity or eligibility for a driver’s license.

But there are small, individual successes of retained students in this study.
Harry, for example, had minimal behavioral issues in school. He loved school, he
worked hard and his teacher praised him for his maturity. Harry showed a great
deal of responsibility in the interview with the researcher, demonstrated in his
willingness to translate for his mother. Even though his mother was not informed
of her son’s retention in kindergarten until the final weeks of school, she said, “I
was willing to go along with the school because I knew my son’s problems were
only because he did not know enough English to pass the test. We had just come
from Mexico. But, Harry is a good boy.” Even though Harry was not on grade
level in reading in third grade, his teacher reported that he loved math and did
well in that subject. His third-grade teacher felt sure Harry would be “fine
because he was a conscientious student, he had insignificant behavioral
problems and he loved school.” For now, Harry’s maturity in school is viewed as
a positive characteristic by his teacher; but maturing earlier than his peers could
lead to him likely dropping out of high school later (Holmes, 1989).
Jane’s mother had high hopes for her daughter. She admitted that she was a school dropout, but that “despite her own struggles, she would make sure that her daughter did well in school.” Jane was aware of the pressures to do well and changed the subject several times in the interview when she felt it was not what her mother wanted to hear. She insisted that she should have been in fourth grade and that she still missed her friends. Dolly’s and Daisy’s grandmother was also aware of her granddaughters’ struggle to stay on grade level, but she maintained that a structured schedule and a positive attitude toward the school to “keep the girls encouraged and involved” would help them through school.

**Interventions in Third Grade**

In all the cases in this study, the students’ third-grade teachers were focused on one goal--for their students to pass the high-stakes EOG tests in reading and math at the end of school the year. Subsequently, they all felt the need to work together as a team to find the best strategies and interventions that would work for any level of academic performance in the classroom. Because the classes in third grade were all heterogeneously grouped, the teachers showed a great deal of innovation in differentiating instruction in their lessons. This facilitated more one-on-one direct instruction where the teacher was able to meet with each student on a one-on-one basis for any instructional need the student may have. This instructional design proved to be an effective support for struggling students.
such as the cases in this study, thereby increasing the students’ chances for success.

In this study, each of the third grade classrooms from which the cases were drawn was equipped with several types of support mechanisms for the students’ success. These include a computer station with direct access to academic games and other networked assessments tools; a class library of ability leveled books; a science center complete with microscope, science kits with minerals, rocks and other science supplies; a listening center with headphones, CDs and tape player; a drawing and writing center; and a puzzle center. During reading and math, students rotated at appropriate centers and engaged in tasks that the teacher had designed for enhancement activities. Further, the rooms were all very colorfully decorated with teaching aids, posters and students’ work samples. For an observer, the environment appeared education-rich and conducive to learning. For the struggling students, the classroom offered an array of supports that should bolster their performance and keep the students sustained in school.

Tony’s teacher said, “I love hands-on projects and small groups …,” and listed many strategies that she was using to help the low-performing students. She said she had taught the students “highlighting the main texts, reduced answer sheets, modified instruction, modified tests, take far-fetched items away in a multiple choice test, reduced spelling ... But I worry if I do much modifying, they might get too dependent and fail the test for lack of not having the modifications.” But
having the interventions for the students is the best option remaining for their school success. In a discussion on what could be the alternatives to retention and social promotion, Kelly (1999) found that a growing number of schools are beefing up academic skills by implementing more and better interventions for struggling learners both in the classrooms and out of the classrooms. Whereas this may seem to be a good trend for students like Tony, Dolly, Daisy, Jane and Harry, these interventions, including being given another year in school, are still not helping them get out of the “below grade level” range in school. According to Ms. Dover, third-grade teacher, she worried that “without the interventions and extra support the school was providing, the struggling students would have been doing far worse in school.” Some of the questions that need to be addressed include, “Are the interventions in third grade enough to help the students get over the hump of below grade level in math and reading, and keep them from being retained again?” and “Is the test a fair way of assessing low-performing students?” According to the teachers in third grade, the possibility of being retained a second time looms large for the students still performing below grade level. And, a second retention in third grade would be the final confirmation that the first retention in kindergarten was not the “fix-all” it was intended to be.

Other Support Systems at the School

This study found that there were other support systems at Workhard Elementary School that effectively assisted the students to maintain consistency
in their performance. These included a homework club, one-on-one tutoring during the day, after-school tutoring done by teachers and the incentives given for good conduct and behavior. The issue is not that Workhard Elementary School had not done enough, but maybe not enough soon enough. Consistent interventions and support mechanisms were needed from kindergarten and would have been helpful had they continued all through first and second grades to the third grade. This would have reduced the need to bolster the students with numerous and new interventions as they reached the benchmark year, third grade. Also, support systems that were necessary to sustain the students’ academic success should extend beyond the schoolhouse. The research indicates that factors outside of school, such as a structured home life have direct and indirect impact on how students perform in school (Coleman, 2001).

Home Structure

This study has shown that not all the students’ homes and families provided support and structure for the children in a manner that enhanced the children’s education. After staying for the homework club, Tony went home at 4:30 p.m. by the school bus to a babysitter’s house because his mother worked a night-shift job. The homework club lasted for one hour during which time the students were helped with their homework. Generally, students were able to finish all their homework in an hour, but if they could not, they were expected to finish at home. Tony said he liked the help he received from the club, but if he could not finish all
his homework he had to do the rest at home. A student with little motivation, low performance and with an ADHD diagnoses, such as Tony, needed a stabled home-life to sustain him when he leaves the schoolhouse. Tony’s mother could not offer this support because she worked until 10 p.m. at night.

There were several other students who went to Tony’s babysitter’s home, some of whom were younger or older than Tony. Tony expressed frustration when asked who helped him with homework. He said he could not get the help he needed because the babysitter had to help all the other children in the babysitter’s care. Tony’s teacher stated that there were several times when Tony had not done his homework or he did his work sloppily and incorrectly. To ensure that students were monitored during their homework the teachers required that a parent sign the homework to show they had checked their child’s homework for completeness and correctness, something that was rarely signed by Tony’s parent due to her coming home late from her night-shift job. Also, Tony had a difficult time getting the homework done, and secondly, if he did do them his mother did not sign it as required by his teachers. The structure of Tony’s home-life did not facilitate the school’s expectations. Tony and his younger siblings did not get home until after 10:00 p.m. each night, which meant, according to Tony’s mother, “that there was little or no time left for me, a single parent, to provide my children supper, bathe everyone and get them ready for bed.” She said she
required the children to leave their homework out on the table for her to sign, something she tried to do as often as possible.

Jane also went to the after-school homework club, and went home by the school bus because her mother worked late into the evening. Because she came from a single parent family, she went home to her grandmother’s house after school. Jane’s after-school activities appeared less structured than the other cases in this study, which allowed her to spend more time watching television. She was not required to do household chores so, Jane said, “I watch television before going to bed.” Despite the lack of structure, Jane’s teacher was pleased with Jane’s completed homework, which Jane did at the homework club. Jane said that only sometimes would she ask her mother to help her with homework, even though Jane’s mother said she always helped her daughter with homework. In showing that she cared about her daughter’s success, Jane’s mother claimed that she paid more attention to her daughter’s out-of-school assignments. However, beyond assisting with homework tasks, there was little else the parent did to enhance academic excellence. Dolly’s and Daisy’s grandmother and father appeared to provide some structure in the girls’ lives. The girls were required to do chores at the same time each evening such as cleaning their rooms before they went to bed at 8:30 p.m. Also, Dolly’s and Daisy’s grandmother took them to church on Wednesdays and enrolled them in the city’s dance club, to which they went on weekends. Harry came from a large family and lived in a smaller
house. He received no homework help from his parents and was required to do several chores in the evening, such as cooking, sweeping and doing the dishes. He stated that he loved school and he hated it when he had to go home in the afternoons. His mother seemed very supportive and proud of Harry in the interview; she stated that she did all she could do to boost his school success.

Structure at home showed that the parents are taking an interest in the students’ lives by prioritizing their activities. By placing emphasis on school work, the parents are indirectly and directly saying that high academic performance should be treated as a priority. Structure at home and providing enriching educational opportunities for children tend to have a positive effect on students motivation and desire for learning (Coleman, 2001), something that most of the cases in this study lacked in their experience.

Findings

When asked the question if they had ever recommended a student to be retained in kindergarten, the nine kindergarten teachers in this study answered in the affirmative, However, none of the teachers (100%) in either third grade or kindergarten said they had ever fully considered what the effects of retaining students in kindergarten have on students as they advance through school. Workhard Elementary School was using a narrow, restrictive approach to making decisions on retaining students by using only data collected by kindergarten teachers, versus a big picture, holistic approach that included the parents and
other school personnel. A holistic approach would more likely reduce the retention rate or make retention a more positive and productive intervention (NASP, 2003).

The kindergarten teachers in this study were adamant that retaining students helped students to make the academic progress they needed to make. However, of interest to this study, one of the kindergarten teachers expressed that her staunch position on retention was based also on her concern of what her colleagues in first grade would think of her teaching ability if she were to send students to first grade who were not on grade level. That concern was not unfounded when it was weighed against the frustration third grade teachers in this study expressed if they received students who were not on grade level. The teachers saw it as “extra work” if they had to spend the first weeks of school reviewing and reteaching the previous grade’s material. Teachers who work collaboratively in planning for instruction, developing realistic instructional pacing guides, sharing assessment tools and continuously dialoguing about student growth tended to be less concerned about how they would be viewed by their colleagues if their students failed (Literacy First, 2005). Most of the teachers in this study, regardless of their grade level or years of experience, thought that if a student did not master all the basics standards at the end of the year, the students should have more time to complete and master what they missed and be allowed to have second year in the same grade. Their concerns and decision
to retain stemmed from the pressures they feel from their state district accountability mandates that required “all students to reach grade level before they are promoted.”

Teachers’ staunch position on retention, leads to the question “But how has retention as an education practice designed to improve the students’ low performance impacted students’ overall school performance when they get to the third grade?”--a question that is rarely asked by teachers or the school when it is time to make the decision to retain. Therefore, it is to the extent that such a question is never asked and needs to be asked that this study becomes significant.

Third-grade teachers in this study also regarded students’ successful performance on standardized tests as a determinant for student growth. This points to what has already been noted in the literature as a new reality in schools. Students’ failure to pass standardized tests is an overriding factor that sometimes forced the teachers in this study to recommend the retention of students despite their personal preference to promote the student. Many of the teachers expressed frustration that preparing students for high-stakes tests inhibited their ability to deliver authentic instruction to their students, which from their perspective, is short-changing children’s education.

The kindergarten teachers in this study recommended retention of students as the final “fix-all” intervention or last resort support to help students who were
below grade level. However, the retained students (and their parents) in this study did not view their retention as the “miracle” intervention that helped them improve themselves, but more as a “punishment” for not “passing a test” (Harry), for “talking too much” (Jane) or “for writing some of his letters backwards” (Tony).

The teachers in this study found it hard to believe that the practice of retaining a student was not the “best practice” that they wanted it to be. For them, retaining a student was simple enough--if the school year has caught up with the student, and he or she has still not mastered all the grade level standards and then failed the final test, then their “common sense” tells them that you then give the student more time to reach on-grade level. But, this study found that three years later, the problem of low performance still persisted for some students. The kindergarten retainees in this study continued to be below grade level even as they reached the third grade despite all the many interventions that were applied to their schooling. This leaves one to believe that perhaps retention in kindergarten was not the final “fix-all” for some students after all, but that there could be any number of other factors that might be responsible for the student’s continued low performance.

In conclusion, there were several reasons why retention was not the final “remedy” intervention that ultimately alleviated students low performance. Based on the findings in this study: (a) Parents were not informed early enough of the academic condition of their child. Therefore, not knowing or not given the
opportunity to be involved in the decision to retain, bred a negative relationship between school and parent subsequently impeding the performance of the student. (b) Because students (with their families) were not directly involved with making the decision to retain, they were not motivated to do their best in school; instead the students reacted to their retention as a punishment that caused them to feel shame or anger and a dislike for meaningful learning. (The students in this study were more interested in the rewards and incentives they were given for good behavior). (c) Students with an existing disability, disorder or a special need (such as Harry, Tony, and Daisy), did not need to have their years in school extended because of their disability, disorder or special need; instead they needed to be taught coping skills and strategies on how to adjust to school in light of their circumstances. (d) Instead of implementing an exclusive, homogenous TK1 classroom for low-ability students, use the resources instead to design and implement a curriculum that paces learning and teaching realistically for these students as they advance from grade to grade.

Recommendations for Future Research and Policy Development

One of the teachers at Workhard Elementary School asked the question, “What if the student weren’t retained in kindergarten?” The teacher was defending the position of retaining students by positing that the scenario could have been much worse for the retained students had they not been retained. The possibility that the students could have been lagging farther behind had they not
been retained is a frightening possibility, especially for teachers. Therefore, in light of the dilemma of poor school performance with or without retention, the question becomes, “What then?” Recommendations to reduce or eliminate the need for retention are as follows:

*Identify students with at-risk behaviors early in the school year.*

Kindergarten students should be screened as soon as they enter school for behaviors that would put them at risk for failure. This screening could be for both academic and social skills adjustment behaviors using comprehensive assessment and screening tools. Although Workhard Elementary conducted a two-day screening of each student, the questions that still need to be raised are: (a) How thorough were the screenings? (b) Because the screening relied on the observer’s skill to identify at-risk behaviors, were the staff members trained on how to screen and assess for maladjusted behaviors? (c) Was the screening results validated by other staff members in the school or the parents of the child? Proper screening leads to finding the real problems quickly, long before it’s too late to help the student. It involves a thorough assessment, usually lasting for a few days, (Meisels,1997) and is comprised of five parts: 1. Drawing and copying; (a) hand preference; (b) approach to task; (c) comfort level; (e) fine motor or grip. 2. Remembering: (a) visual - remembering what is seen; (b) auditory - remembering what is heard. 3. Building with blocks: (a) perception; (b) fine motor or dexterity: (c) hand-eye coordination. 4. Using language: (a) to describe; (b) to
reason. 5. Coordinating body movements: (a) balancing; (b) hopping; (c) skipping. Critical to a fair screening is the teacher’s skill at recognizing when a behavior is a reflection of the student’s cultural mores versus the student’s maladjusted school behavior. It is reported that five to seven percent of all children entering school are considered to be in the "high risk" category. "High risk" is a term used to describe children who may have learning problems that will impede their growth and development in school and perhaps cause failure in the future. For some children screening serves as the first step leading to an evaluation and possibly special education support services (Meisels, 1997).

Design interventions that will address the students’ specific needs.

Kindergarten students come to school with a wide variety of needs some of which may not have the same level of severity as others, and therefore require a differentiated treatment approach. The needs may include, no self-help skills, an inability to express himself or herself verbally, a lack of a full understanding of the roles of the adults, little knowledge on how to respect others’ space, not sure of their own limitations, unable to attend to tasks for ten-minute blocks of time, unable to demonstrate listening skills (NCSCOS, 2000). When students are assessed and it is found that there are deficits in the students’ school entry skills or social skills, teachers must be able to put a plan in place immediately to remove the deficits. To wait and say “He or she will catch on eventually,” is leaving learning to chance, and with students with deficits, there should be no
Implement Interventions that address students’ specific needs.

Because the kindergarten curriculum is designed in a hierarchical sequence of skills to be completed in one school year, it is vital that a realistic pacing guide be applied as an intervention for at-risk students so that the students do not suffer a significant lag in mastering curriculum goals. The important goal of the school is to ensure that help is given to the student to master all the key concepts of the curriculum before the school year ends. If the key concepts of the curriculum are taught and learned in the current kindergarten year, this eliminates the need to retain students for the reason of “needing more time to master important grade material.”

Keep parents involved and informed.

Parents active involvement with their child’s school was stated by the San Diego County Office of Education (1998) as the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school … the extent to which that student's family was able to: (a) create a home environment that encouraged learning; (b) expressed high expectations for their children's achievement and future careers; (c) became involved in their children's education at home.

Keeping students interested and motivated in their education is a task that must be shared by both the school and parents. Students with at-risk behaviors
need special attention--beyond what is given to the “normal” student--so that at-risk students stay focused and motivated in school and out of school. Parent support for school comes with teachers keeping a tight communication network with parents with the intention of winning their support. Also, parents whose child is at-risk should also seek to work closely with the school, emphasizing the message to the student that school is important. The reality is, disadvantaged children enter school already behind in reading readiness skills, come from families with lower levels of education and expectations for their reading achievement, and are more likely to have parents who never married. These students have fewer financial resources, more demands on their time, and fewer of the academic and personal resources to help them succeed (Coleman, 2001). With this in mind, too much of the burden to help at-risk students is left to the schools.

*Access other support systems in the school.*

Within Workhard Elementary School were various support mechanisms established to assist students who came to school with deficits. For example, kindergarten teachers at Workhard Elementary could have accessed the support from the Special Education department when Tony and Daisy showed symptoms of ADHD and a learning disability. Waiting until the student is in his second year is not doing enough soon enough. Harry could have received services from the English as Second Language teacher on a continuous, one-on-one basis all
through first and second grades until he reached the third grade and beyond. The school social worker, the school guidance counselor and the school nurse could all offer training to parents on effective parenting skills such as how to structure productive after-school activities so that children stay focused on school tasks. Other supports at the school are expert colleagues within the grade and school, teacher assistants and remediation staff who can all collectively offer a variety of support and suggestions. A clear alignment of all the support mechanisms at the school is needed to support low-performing students.

Continue interventions with same intensity in all grades until the students can master on and above grade level material.

The TKI program at Workhard Elementary School showed that the students, who were retained, given the kinds of interventions offered in the program, demonstrated a performance improvement in the second year in the same grade. The intensity of the interventions offered in the TK1 program illustrates that given the right assistance, students will do better in their performance. It makes sense, therefore, to provide frequent and on-going support to retained students until the students are found to be working on or above grade level, independently.

The decision to retain must be very difficult for schools to make in light of the fact that not all students have been found to do well after retention. This is a dilemma for schools--how to identify the students who will thrive after retention and those who will not, making it even more critical for schools to rely on
research and data for more informed decision making and leaving no room for chance or guesswork.

Chapter Endnote

The implied recurring questions throughout this study were, “Was retention in kindergarten a “wasted” year in the students’ schooling in light of the students’ continued poor performance in the third grade?” and if it were, “What then?” These questions sum up the frustrations and the worry that educators must feel when they are faced with the choice at the end of the school year whether to retain some students. The research rarely reports success stories of retained students. If schools and educators, in their best efforts in educating students, have students who, when they look back at their schooling, still feel embarrassment, anger, and lowered self-esteem due to poor school performance that led to their retention, then the question “Was retention worth it?” is a valid one. In light of the foregoing research and recommendations, schools are encouraged to find better ways of ensuring the success of all students.

This study shows that there is need for further research to be conducted on the various sub-categories of students with needs in the areas of English as Second Language (ESL), special education, ADHD, and “normal” students (those without any of the extreme conditions that characterized the cases in this study, such as coming from a low-income family, being raised by a grandparent, a single or unmarried parent or having a less structured home-life). Additional
research on the various sub-categories of students will shed more light on how conclusive and effective the practice of retention is in relation to the achievement of all types of student-groups. Since this study was only concerned with retained kindergarten students with low performance as they reached the third grade, more research is needed on what could have happened if these students were “normal” or if they had not been retained in the first place. Such research will further validate or invalidate the claim that retention works for only a few students.

According to the National Association for School Psychologists (2003), the indicators that need to be present in order for retention to have a positive impact on a student’s schooling are; (a) supportive parents, (b) a highly motivated student who sees his or her retention as a gift of time to excel or do better, and (c) a positive relationship between school and parents (NASP, 2003). Despite the presence of the success-indicators, however, one still cannot convincingly conclude that it was solely the student’s retention that was responsible for the student’s final success or failure. For those students who succeeded after their retention, the question, “Was it the students’ retention that led to their future success?” or “Was the students’ success an outcome of their high motivation and their supportive parents and teachers, and not necessarily because of their retention?” In either scenario, the successful students or the unsuccessful retained students, the question, “How significant was the impact of the students’
retention on their later school performance?” is still valid, and needs to be further researched beyond what was done in this case study research.

Finally, there is still much more work to be done in order to conclude which of the two school practices presented in this study--grade retention, or promotion to the next grade with intense interventions--has better results on struggling students’ long-term school performance.
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APPENDIX A

SCHOOL SURVEY

This survey is part of a series of surveys to examine the current performance of third grade students who have been retained in kindergarten. Please complete this survey as best as you can.

1. How many students in 3rd grade at your school have repeated grade kindergarten?_______________________________________________________

2. a. How many of the 3rd. grade students who repeated grade kindergarten would you say are still low academic achievers?________________________________

3. In making the decision for kindergarten retention, does your school rely on:
   (Circle the one(s) that applies to your school).
   (a) Criteria prescribed by the local school district or state?
   (b) Criteria developed by the school only?
   (c) Criteria developed by both by the school and local school district or state?

School Name__________________________________________________________
APPENDIX B

THIRD GRADE TEACHER SURVEY

This survey is part of a series of surveys to examine the current performance of third grade students who have been retained in grade kindergarten. Please complete this survey using your school data and all applicable policies.

1. How many students in your 3rd grade class have been retained in kindergarten?_______________________________________________________

2. List all documented reasons why the students were retained in kindergarten:
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________

3. Of the total number of your students retained in grade kindergarten, how many are:
   a. Performing above grade level in Math?____________________________
   b. Performing above grade level in Reading?________________________
   c. Performing on average grade level in Math?_______________________
   d. Performing on an average level in Reading?_______________________
   e. Performing below grade level in Math?___________________________
   f. Performing below grade level in Reading?________________________
4. How many of the students retained in grade kindergarten are still exhibiting:

   a. Behavioral problems in 3rd grade?________________________________

      Describe:
      ___________________________________________________________________
      ___________________________________________________________________

   b. Academic problems in 3rd grade?

      Describe:
      ___________________________________________________________________
      ___________________________________________________________________

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire. 😊😊
APPENDIX C

PARENT SURVEY

This survey is designed to examine parents’ thoughts and opinions on their child’s retention in grade kindergarten. The results from this survey will be kept confidential, and will be used only in a study on whether retaining students is a valid intervention that schools use for students who are not doing well in school. Please take your time and answer the questions as best as you can.

1. I have a child in 3rd grade who was retained in grade kindergarten. (Circle your choice). _____Yes _____No.

2. My child was retained in kindergarten because: (Circle your choice).
   a. I asked for my child to be retained.
   b. The teacher told me that my child would be retained at the end of the year.
   c. The teacher and I had both agreed that my child should be retained.

3. On a scale of 1 – 10, I rate my support for my child being retained in kindergarten as: (Circle a number)

   1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10
   (Strongly disagreed) (Strongly agreed)
4. My child’s problem(s) for being retained in grade kindergarten was: (Circle one or all that apply)
   a. School work only
   b. Behavior only
   c. Both behavior and schoolwork.
   d. Other_______________________________________________________

5. In my child’s 2nd year in grade kindergarten, he or she: (Circle one or all that apply).
   a. Did better in his or her school work
   b. Did better in his or her behavior
   c. Did better in his or her behavior and school work
   d. Other_______________________________________________________

6. Have you ever discussed with your child’s his or her retention?
   _____Yes  _____No
   
   Describe how your child reacted when you told him or her that he or she was retained in kindergarten.

   ________________________________________________________________

   ________________________________________________________________

7. My child had the same teacher after he was retained in kindergarten.
   ___Yes _____No.
8. On a scale of 1 – 10, I was very pleased with my child’s progress after he was retained in kindergarten.

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10
   (Not pleased)                 (Very pleased)

9. After my child was retained in kindergarten, the teacher and the school implemented the following interventions:
   a. My child was tested for special education.
   b. My child was placed in a separate class with other retained children.
   c. My child was taught the same things he/or he was taught the year before.
   d. My child’s teacher did many different things to help my child academically.

10. After my child was retained, I helped my child with his or her school work:
    a. More than I did before.
    b. The same way as I did before.
    c. I never helped my child with his or her schoolwork.

11. My child is doing much better, now, than how he or she did in kindergarten.
    ____Yes  ____No

12. Most of my child’s progress in the third grade, is in: (Circle one or all that apply)
13. If my child were not retained in kindergarten, he or she would be doing much worse: (Circle one or all that apply).
   a. In his or her behavior
   b. In his or her school work
   c. In both his/her schoolwork and behavior.
   d. Other ____________________________

14. I think retaining a student when he or she is not doing well in school is good practice:  _____Yes  _____No

   If I had another child in kindergarten who was not doing well, I would recommend retaining him or her.  _____Yes  _____No

16. State your reasons for your choice of answer in number fourteen:

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________
This survey is designed to gather information on what teachers generally see as factors for retaining students in kindergarten. The information will be used for a study on the topic, “The effects of kindergarten retention: How students fare three years later in third grade.” Please take your time and answer the questions as best as you can.

1. How long have you been a teacher in kindergarten?________________________

2. Have you ever recommended a student for retention in kindergarten?
   _____Yes _____No

3. How soon in the school year do you know that a student will be retained? And, when do you actually make the recommendation?
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
What behavioral and/or social skills the student has to fail to reach that will determine your recommendation for his/her retention?

________________________________________________________________________________

5. What academic standards the student has to fail to reach that will determine your recommendation for retention?

________________________________________________________________________________

6. How were the student’s parents informed of the student’s retention in the past?

________________________________________________________________________________

7. What would you do differently in your classroom for a retained student, if you were to have the retained student again in your class?

________________________________________________________________________________

8. What does the school usually do differently for a retained student?
APPENDIX E

PRINCIPAL SURVEY

Please fill out the survey as best as you can. The information gathered will be used in a study that examines the effectiveness of student retention in kindergarten. Thank you.

1. Whose recommendation do you use to help you make the decision for kindergarten student retention?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

2. What other guidelines do you use to assist you in making the decision for kindergarten retention?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

3. Have you ever rejected a teacher’s recommendation for kindergartner’s retention?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

4. If “Yes”, please explain?

________________________________________________________________________
5. How do you inform the parents and students of the student’s retention?


6. What does the school actually do in the second year of kindergarten retention?


7. To what extent do you do tracking of the retained kindergarten students as they advance through school?


8. What part do you play in designing interventions to help below grade level students in 3rd grade?
APPENDIX F

LETTER TO THE PARENT

(Researcher’s Address)
(Researcher’s Phone Number)
(Date)

Dear Parent,

I am (researcher’s name), student/researcher in the doctoral program in the Education Leadership Department at (name of university).

I am requesting your participation in a research study on the topic, “Examining the perceived effects of kindergarten retention: How students fare three years later in the third grade.” The purpose of the study is to find out if retaining students in kindergarten is helping students to succeed better in school as they reach the third grade.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

a) Come to the school for an interview with me in the school’s library between the hours of 3:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. on any school day. Please indicate on the form below what day you would like to come for the interview. The interview will last for about an hour—30 minutes with you and 30 minutes with your child. This will be the only interview I need to have with you for the duration of the study.

b) Complete a questionnaire about your child and your involvement with his/her schooling. The researcher will also interview your child’s teacher about children who were retained in kindergarten.

c) Sign a contract agreeing to the terms for your participation in this research prior to the interview with me.

I would like to assure you that all measures would be taken to safeguard the rights and privacy of both you and your child in this interview. Study data will be stored in a secure location, and no reference will be made to you or your child’s name, school’s name or address at any point in the report.

This research should pose no risks to you or your child. If you or your child are uncomfortable with any of the questions, you are free to skip them or withdraw completely from
the study. While there should be no direct benefit to you or your child for participating, you will
be helping us learn how being retained in kindergarten affects children’s later performance in
school.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary; you may decline to participate at
any time without penalty. Participation in the research will have no effect on your child’s grades
or your relationship with the school. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is
completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed at your request.

If you have questions at any time about the study or procedures, you may contact me at the
above address or call me at (researcher’s phone number). If you feel you have not been treated
according to the description in this form, or that your rights as a participant in this research have
violated during the course of this project, you may contact (Chair of the university’s Review
Board) for the Human Subjects in Research Committee, (University’s address and phone
number).

Please return the consent form in the self-addressed stamped envelope by (date) so that I may
be able to contact you to schedule the interview.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

(Researcher’s Name)