AN EXPLORATION OF HOW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS APPROACH THE STUDENT RETENTION DECISION PROCESS

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Abstract

This constructivist grounded theory study sought to understand how elementary school principals approach the student retention process. Specifically, this study addressed the principals' informal and formal experiences in relation to student retention decisions. The methodological design was chosen to help explain and describe this process by allowing the researcher to develop an emerging theory about how principals approach student retention. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and artifacts with a total of 22 elementary school principals throughout a mid-Atlantic state. The emergent theory developed through this work, the Theory of Multifactor Student Retention Decision Making, details major influences affecting principals during student retention decisions. Combined, each of the influences affecting retention decisions — a principal's *beliefs and experiences*, *student developmental levels, data and assessments*, and *parental supports* — shaped how principals approached student retention decisions. These influences were impacted by different factors including the optimal time for retention, number of retentions, case-by-case decisions, targeted instruction, parental involvement, formal and informal experiences, and mentors/colleagues. Principals suggested school districts provide training for teachers and administrators about student retention, develop consistent policies and procedures for handling student retention decisions, and be as involved with student learning as possible so informed retention decisions can be made.

INTRODUCTION

Student retention is an enduring issue that has challenged educators since the establishment of graded school systems in the late 19th century. The latest national statistics from the United States Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (2009) reported that principals retain approximately 10% of students in grades kindergarten through eighth grade each year. States and school districts have strict retention and promotion strategies, but offer sometimes vague guidelines to assist in the decision making (American Federation of Teachers, 1997). These varying policies create dilemmas for principals and teachers during student retention decisions.

Student retention was the norm in the mid-1860s when one-room schoolhouses were the standard. Students living in the same area were grouped in specific schoolhouses, but did not proceed to the next grade unless they mastered all the content presented to them (Beebe-Frankenberger, Bocain, MacMillan, & Gresham, 2004; Bucko, 1986; Caples, 2005). In order to account for the large influx of students attending schools, grade level systems were introduced in the mid-19th century. Not only did this help with oversized classes, but also allowed teachers to begin teaching students with similar ability levels. The new philosophy of graded schools made educators aware that not all students learned at the same pace or ability level. This new understanding produced a steady increase in the number of student retentions, which ultimately led to a high percentage of dropouts. Coffield and Blommers, as cited by Caples (2005), reported that 7 out of 10 students were retained during the 19th and early 20th centuries. As educational systems grew and developed, policies changed and student retention began to be questioned by educators and the public (Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Roderick, 1995). Some found retention was detrimental and harmful to students, especially those students that were much older than their grade level peers (Caples, 2005). As educators began to understand the effects of student retention there was a shift from a student's academic achievement level to more emphasis on the social and emotional well-being of the student. The act of social promotion, based on the belief that time and social integration with peers would work as a form of remediation, flourished during the 1960s and 1970s (Caples, 2005). Educators found it advantageous to keep students with their same-age peers to prevent social and emotional problems. This was a very prominent practice around the nation until the early 1980s when the nation noted a sharp decline in the level of preparation of graduates entering college or the workforce. This was highlighted by the public report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), produced by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report prompted educators to implement strict promotion and retention policies to help aid school districts in retention decisions (Caples, 2005). Since this eye-opening report, several more national reports, such as *Goals 2000* and *No Child Left Behind 2001*, created more accountability to help students achieve greater success. Despite the increased amount of accountability in schools and reliance on standardized assessments, student retention is still an issue of concern across the nation (Caples, 2005).

Research on how elementary school principals approach the student retention process is nonexistent. Different philosophies, amounts of knowledge about student retention policies and procedures, and levels of engagement of principals in retention decisions may vary school to school. Lack of research on student retention decisions can cause confusion for educators about which students they should retain. Policy makers,

administrators, and educators need an understanding of how elementary school principals approach the student retention decision process in order to make appropriate educational decisions for students. This article reports on a grounded theory study completed to better understand how elementary school principals in the field approach retention decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Retention

Research on student retention is extensive and provides educators with necessary knowledge that can aid in retention decisions. Student retention research shows the majority of retained students are African American or Hispanic, receive free or reduced price lunch, live in single family homes, and have less involved parents than promoted students (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Ascher, 1988; Frymier, 1997; Jimerson, Pletcher, Graydon, Schnurr, Nickerson, & Kundert, 2006; Rodney, Rodney, Mupier, & Crafter, 1999; Wang & Wang, 2007; Wilson & Hughes, 2009). The majority of the research on academic outcomes after retention has shown little to no significant effect on academic achievement (Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). The small improvements in academic achievement were typically short term gains following the retention, after which time, students typically started to plateau academically (Jimerson et al., 1997; Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992). Similarly, research on socio-emotional outcomes of retention found no impact on self-concept, peer relations, attitudes towards school, or social and emotional adjustment (Gottfredson, Fink, & Graham, 1994; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Shepard & Smith, 1987). Although there is mixed evidence on academic and socio-emotional outcomes, there have been numerous studies that show dropout rates do correlate with student retention (Frymier, 1997; Harrington-Lueker, 1998; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Roderick, 1994). This association occurs because retained students typically have more at-risk factors, such as being old for their grade, that negatively affect their success in school (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 1998; Peel, 1997).

Principal Beliefs and Roles

Although the literature on understanding student retention from a demographic, academic, and social-emotional perspective is vast, there is scant literature on principals' beliefs and roles in student retention decisions. In order to gain a better understanding of how principals approach student retention decisions, it is essential to be aware of how principals believe student retention effects students.

Patterson (1996) examined the perceptions of educators on retention in grades K-5. In the study of 169 principals, the results indicated that principals did not believe grade retention was an effective strategy for at-risk students (Patterson, 1996). It was also found that principals believed retention "hindered students' performance, did not perform according to expectations during the second year in the same grade, and believed that the benefits of retention are not greater than the negative results" (Patterson, 1996, p. 20).

Additionally, Galford (2008) conducted a study on principal beliefs and investigated the knowledge of retention effects in 34 principals. A pre-survey was provided to assess principal beliefs on retention. After pre-surveys were filled out, principals were asked to read an article by Jimerson et al. (2006) on grade retention and social promotion (Galford, 2008). Differences in school principals' attitudes were statistically significant after the research on retention was presented to them. The results indicated that principals did not believe retention was a successful intervention, did not believe retention could help low achieving students, did not believe retention would increase student success in the extra year, did not believe retention would help students become more engaged in school, and were not pleased with the districts' promotion and retention policies (Galford, 2008).

In another study on principal beliefs and roles, six principals were interviewed using a semi-structured interview process for 45 minutes during the third year (2004-2005) of a 3-tier response to intervention (RTI) reading framework using grounded theory methodology (Murray et al., 2010). Results of the principal interviews showed several patterns including changing retention rates, factors in retention decisions, and timing of retention decisions. Three factors that influenced retention decisions found in the interviews, included assessment data, parental input, and grades (Murray et al., 2010). Principals felt that the 3-tier framework worked because it affected teachers' instructional practices forcing teachers to use data and differentiate instruction. Overall, principals felt that the 3-tier RTI framework helped reduce retention rates (Murray et al., 2010).

Owings and Kaplan (2001b) discussed principal roles in regards to students meeting high academic standards. In order for student learning to occur, teachers need to be equipped and trained on effective instructional strategies, be allotted ample planning time, and be provided resources. Both researchers contend that "a principal's leadership role involves developing a staff committed to high achievement for all students and working to identify multiple areas of change that support student achievement" (Owings & Kaplan, 2001b, p. 62). Principals need to make sure adequate time is available for teachers to work together to discuss instructional strategies, review assessments, and evaluate student performance. Owings and Kaplan (2001b) also stated the importance of improving school life to improve student performance. Suggested ways included "changes to scheduling, teaching methods, relationship building, adjusting the curriculum, ongoing assessment for diagnosis and feedback, and engaging parents as partners" (Owings & Kaplan, 2001b, p. 62). The goal of improving school life is to increase academic achievement and to create a learning environment conducive to all types of learning styles. Retention is not an effective means of increasing success in low achieving students (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003), which suggests it is vital for principals to understand the importance of alternative strategies to retention. Moreover, principals believe retention has negative effects on students.

Research suggests principals have a measurable indirect effect on student achievement (Andrews & Soder, 1987; Owins & Kaplan, 2001b). In order to fully understand the effects of leadership on student retention, more research must be conducted on how principals approach student retention decisions. The intent of this study is to close some of the gap in the research and provide educators, policy makers, and district officials with a better understanding of how elementary school principals approach student retention decisions.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sites for this qualitative study were 22 elementary schools in a mid-Atlantic state. Principals in the study were selectively sampled or identified using a snowball sampling method. The purpose for selecting elementary schools was because the majority of student retention research has been conducted in the elementary grades (Jimerson et al., 1997; Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; Shepard & Smith, 1987, 1988; Wilson & Hughes, 2009). The elementary principals selected were chosen because they had at least one year of building-level administration experience and/or had not been exited from a building-level administrative experience for more than three years. This ensured each principal had at least one experience with student retention and would be able to articulate that experience to the researcher.

Data Collection

The data sources were interviews and artifacts. Twenty-two principals interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Each of the 22 principals had a number assigned to ensure confidentiality. Only the researcher knew the true principal identities and these were secure from all other participants. During a 4-month period, the interviews conducted lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. Each interview was audiotape recorded with the participant's permission, then transcribed, after obtaining informed consent. Artifacts included any blank documents, timelines, and letters used by principals during the student retention process.

Data Analysis

A grounded theory methodology guides the analysis of the study (Charmaz, 2006). To this end, the analytic process began with initial coding to allow the research team to code line-by-line, word-by-word, or by each phrase of the data (Charmaz, 2006). From initial coding, we focused coding to synthesize the more frequently repeated codes of data. After completing focused coding, theoretical coding was used to create the emerging theory as the research team looked for potential hypotheses to explain how principals approach student retention decisions. Through theoretical coding, the research team was able to explain the proposed research questions. The intent of the initial, focused, and theoretical coding was to allow a comprehensive understanding of the data.

Once an understanding of the codes developed, we began theoretical sampling. During theoretical sampling, the researchers worked towards collecting any essential data that would enhance or clarify the categories in the emerging theory. During theoretical sampling, we asked participants new questions not discussed in the initial interview that may have contributed to the emerging theory.

The categories found helped explain how principals approached student retention decisions. School principals provided relevant documentation and artifacts used in retention decisions. These documents provided evidence of what school principals do during student retention decisions as well as showed how they approach decisions.

RESULTS

The participant responses provided important codes and themes that contributed to the development of the emergent theory. The primary findings are reported in this section regarding how principals described their approach to the student retention process.

Principals' Beliefs and Philosophies

Optimal time for retention. Throughout each interview, participants discussed the optimal time to retain an elementary student. The vast majority of participants, 20 out of 22, believed early retention in grades kindergarten, first, or second grade was the most beneficial time to retain a student. Principals mentioned *"*maturity", "social awareness", and building the *"*foundational skills for learning" as reasons for retention in the earlier grades compared to the later grades.

Repeat Retentions*.* The number of retentions a student should have throughout their academic career always brought on the same answer. Every principal in this study agreed that students retained multiple times have an increased chance of "dropping out" of school, being "overage" for their grade, and broadening "instructional gaps." With each retention, principals strongly felt that the likelihood of graduation would decrease and behavioral issues would increase due to social, emotional, and maturity differences with peers. Principals were equally concerned over the broadening of instructional gaps because targeted weaknesses of students were not being addressed during the retention year. Principal 18 said it best,

> When I see a child who comes in with multiple retentions, of course that's a red flag because that tells me that we failed them somewhere along the line….We need to dig deeper and find out what is going on…so if there have been multiple situations where they are retained you are putting a band aid over something to address an issue that needs a tourniquet or a serious operation…multiple retentions can be very harmful.

Case-by-Case Decisions*.* Participants made retention decisions on a case-by-case basis. Principal 18 summed it up by saying, "It's on a case by case basis because what works for one scenario may not work for the next child and the next and the next." No retention situation was the same because no two children are the same. Principals handle each case individually and must consider the whole child. When looking at each individual retention case, principals looked for a "year of progress", "readiness level and development", and "background knowledge".

Targeted instruction. The principals argued the best way to help students succeed when they are struggling is to target their instruction in order to fill any holes in their learning. Specific strategies for doing this included "data based decisions", "providing remedial supports", "working as a team", and "monitoring teacher quality".

Parental involvement. Parental involvement played a major part during the student retention process at the elementary level. Without parental involvement, principals felt that students would have less success academically. The three themes that developed under this category were "parent awareness", "positive support", and "parental guidance."

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Parental awareness was an essential element during the student retention process described by elementary principals. Principals discussed parental awareness in two ways: parents had to be made aware of the possibility of retention and they had to be made aware of how their child's specific weaknesses were being addressed. Additionally, in order for the retention to be successful parents had to be positive about the retention. Principal 21 said, "If we are all on board, and we're all together on it, it just works better. The parent needs to be a part of it." Parental guidance refers to the school's ability to communicate that they have every student's best interest in mind and are able to provide resources to parents to help struggling students. Providing these resources and supports is important, but so is "trying to guide them and be their cheerleader, let them know you are in their corner," which can help get them to buy into the decision to retain, according to Principal 3.

Retention Experiences

Formal experiences (planned experiences). Elementary school principals were hesitant when questioned about what formal and/or informal experiences have helped shape how they approach student retention decisions. When questioned, the principals often paused for prolonged moments or responded to the question by saying they had to think about it. Twenty-one principals stated they could not recall ever receiving formal training about student retention in any college preparatory classes or district trainings. The majority of principals commented that they learned about student retention in college courses through reading research. Principal 3 said, "It was through a master's program where you read the research about the effectiveness in your ongoing professional development…That's where I learned a lot." Principal 6 agreed, "When you're in an advanced degree program I think you have more time to focus on things like student retention." A few principals, like Principal 14, mentioned going to "conferences….When there was money, we used to go to national conferences and you would listen to speakers who would talk about retention, the pros and cons, and give you some suggestions for working with your teachers and students." Today, sending principals to conferences and seminars is often impossible due to budgetary constraints. Principals typically have to pay their own way, and often it is not beneficial for them to be out of the school building. Principal 14 has experience as a college adjunct professor and felt "It would be something good in the college curriculum for new teachers to understand, to be able to work with that topic" because there is less money for trainings at the district level. A few principals, like Principal 5 and 16, mentioned seeing Jim Grant, a national presenter with regards to retention. Most of the local school districts are currently providing their own in-house training for administrators, but often these trainings are more focused on topics such as special education and managing the budget. Principal 6 reflected, "Training was provided by the school system through leadership seminars and that kind of thing." Although trainings may be provided, the topic of discussion is usually improving student achievement, closing the achievement gap, or differentiating instruction. These topics are all related to student retention, but these trainings often do not mention how to approach retention specifically. The elementary principals believed the experiences that mostly informed student retention decisions came from the informal experiences as an administrator and being a classroom teacher.

Informal experiences (on-the-job experiences). Elementary principals learned how to handle student retention decisions while working on the job as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Some felt this was sufficient to help them make sound decisions. As Principal 5 said,

> I think you have to believe in your stakeholders, and you have to believe that if you put somebody in charge of a school, or a team of people in charge of a school, that they're going to make the best decision or hope they make the best decision for the child.

Principal 18 agreed and commented, "Downtown does a pretty good job of putting the right people in the position of principal, and they give you the trust and respect you earned to make these types of decisions." The participants felt that central office administration appoints principals to lead schools because of their knowledge and expertise in working with students. Principals believed that it would be unlikely to place an individual in such an important position of authority if they did not display outstanding professionalism and judgment. Others felt more guidance would be beneficial. Principal 22 believed, "It would be beneficial for a city wide procedure to be in place instead of having different school policies." Principal 21 wanted "semi-consistency amongst schools, and administrators could use more training, and let us see how others are doing it so we can see if we are missing something." Many principals mentioned having principal sharing meetings. At these meetings, participants reported that they could discuss topics, such as student retention, and learn different ways colleagues were handling difficult retention decisions in their schools.

Many principals, like Principal 2, mentioned, "Talking to other principals, asking what they do in their schools. Lots of sharing type stuff and just life experience of watching a child experience the retention the next year." Principal 18 also mentioned, "Living the life experience as a classroom teacher. Having to deal with it and make decisions about my own students, and OJT [on the job training] as an administrator, just living it." Participants suggested that student retention is not afforded much formal discussion in college courses or district trainings. Elementary principals appeared to primarily learn about student retention procedures and decisions while on-the-job and handling each decision on a case-by-case basis.

Although sometimes described as an informal interaction, elementary principals agreed that when making student retention decisions, it was always best to discuss cases with other principals. They all seemed to have at least one mentor they could turn to for advice and suggestions on certain situations. This was true for Principal 2 who felt, "I've just learned from experience and talking to other principals about what they do, lots of sharing kinds of stuff." Principal 14 felt sharing information, "With another peer at another elementary school...sharing our policies with each other and even new principals" was important in student retention decisions. According to Principal 6, "idea sharing wasn't formal, but informal because we are trying to consider what to do about a situation." Discussions about student retention situations seemed common for elementary principals. Every principal mentioned how comfortable he or she felt picking up the phone and asking questions and opinions of colleagues. Principal 19 mentioned,

It would always be good to hear from other people, just to hear because there is a wealth of information for administrators who have been doing it for a while because they face different situations and circumstances. Since there really is not a set guideline it is nice to have that.

These principals believed sharing student retention situations was important and necessary in order to make final retention decisions in their schools.

Theory of Multifactor Student Retention Decision Making

From the data, an emerging theory developed to explain how principals approach the student retention process in their schools. Elementary principals approached the student retention process by considering four major influences that influenced their decisions about whether or not to retain a student: *beliefs and experiences*, *student development*, *data and assessments*, and *parental support*. Figure 1 illustrates the emergent theory.
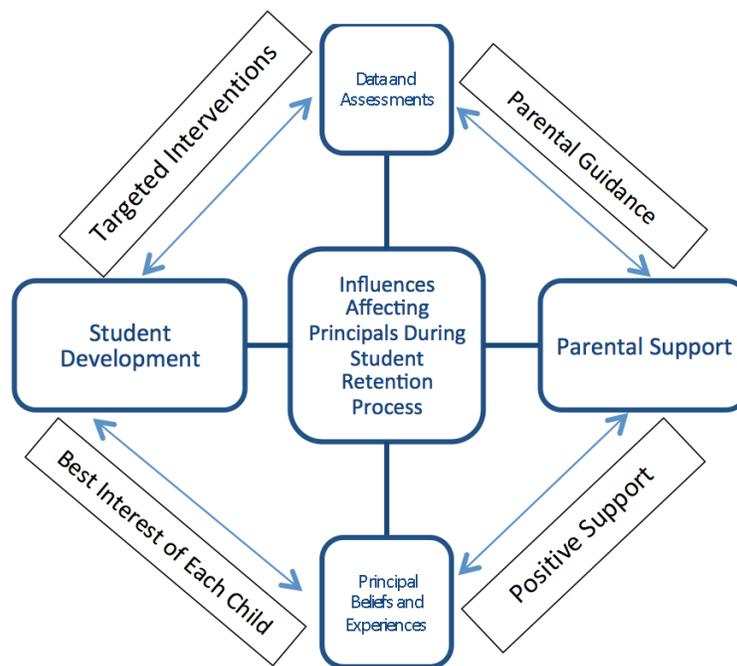
Figure 1. Theory of Multifactor Student Retention Decision Making

The diagram displays the four major influences affecting elementary principals' decisions during student retention cases. The arrows between each influence represent the flexibility and organic nature of the student retention process. Each retention case considers the four influences, but the order of how they are considered and the amount of weight each holds varies depending on the student and the circumstances surrounding the retention. Above each label is a phrase that provides more detail about how the main influences are connected. The phrases represent key concepts that most affected the four major influences considered when principals were making retention decisions. Principals

did consider other factors, however, four factors (i.e, targeted interventions, parental guidance, positive support, and best interest of the child) were consistently discussed and mentioned by principals throughout all 22 interviews. Below, the four components of the theory are addressed in turn.

Data and Assessments

The results suggested that principals required teachers to organize and collect data on an on-going basis. Principals not only collected these data frequently, but also reviewed and discussed them on a periodic basis. Teachers had to document how individual student needs were being met and discuss with administrators and parents exactly what they were doing to assist student learning. Enforcing teachers to do this not only made them more accountable for student learning, but also allowed the principals to become instructional leaders. It helped principals determine whether a student was struggling because they did not understand the concepts taught, or because the teacher was not effectively teaching. To help teachers specifically target student weaknesses in order to close any instructional gaps in their learning, principals would have a variety of remedial supports in place to help students achieve success. These interventional supports influenced the data collected by teachers and support staff. The teachers would interpret and utilize the data to pinpoint the necessary instruction to address learner weaknesses.

Student Development

Principals made decisions with the understanding that all children grow and develop at different rates. This belief influenced how principals described the student retention process because they forced principals to handle each situation on a case-by-case basis. During student retention decisions principals would consider the best interest of the student by analyzing the students' developmental levels. Student development encompasses a variety of components such as maturity, readiness levels, background knowledge, and social awareness levels. A student's developmental level also influenced the types, frequencies, and durations of the interventions provided to the student.

Parental Support

Principals also discussed the importance of constant communication with family supports. It was important for teachers to notify parents early and often of any struggles so they had ample time to assist their child. This not only helped parents assist students academically, but also gave parents a chance to accept that retention was in their child's best interest. It provided schools with the ability to demonstrate everything they were doing to help struggling learners and show parents that nothing was more important than each child's success. Collections of individual data and assessments allowed principals to target these specific learning weaknesses and keep the parents informed about their students' struggles. Consequently, the more informed parents seemed to be about the retention, the more likely they would support the decision to retain their child. Through different experiences, principals believed students of parents with more positive views of student retention would be more successful. Principals would work hard to ensure that

parents were on-board with the decision, ensuring frequent contact with the parents, and keeping them informed as to what weaknesses their child was exhibiting. Principals conceptualized parental involvement by assessing how involved the parent was with their child's schooling. Criteria such as attending parental conferences, providing up-to-date contact information, returning notes and phone calls, or attending school functions were used to gauge the level of parental involvement by these principals.

Principal Beliefs and Experiences

Without their beliefs and experiences about student retention, elementary principals would have a very difficult time making and sticking to the decisions made during the student retention process. The elementary principal's beliefs and experiences played a major role during student retention decisions. Beliefs about student retention were shaped by the various experiences principals encountered during their own education, college courses, seminars or conferences, and especially by individual student retention cases they had in their schools. The results suggested that elementary principals do not retain students multiple times. If students have been retained at least once, principals would not consider them for a second retention. The results strongly indicated that the principals understood the research about the correlations between repeat retention and dropout rates. Although this was the greatest reported deterrent preventing principals from allowing a student to be retained more than one time, not all the principals in the study put this into practice. Those principals that did believe in multiple retentions truly believed they were making decisions in the best interest of each student. Principals always handled student retention decisions on a case-by-case basis. With the belief and understanding that all children learn, develop, and understand at different rates, it only makes sense that principals look at each student individually.

The principal's beliefs and experiences encompassed a variety of concepts. The data suggested that the majority of principals believed the following: student retention was more often necessary during the earlier grades because of student developmental levels; repeat retention were detrimental to students' academic successes; interventions needed to be informed by student data; parents needed to be on-board with the retention; and each retention case needed to be addressed on an individual basis. Student developmental levels helped principals make informed decisions for each particular student and provided essential background information influencing the types of interventions used to help address individual learner weaknesses.

DISCUSSION

The results clearly suggest that principals' beliefs and experiences heavily inform how they approach the student retention process. All of the participants in this study considered the whole child when making retention decisions. If there were any questions as to whether or not a student would make substantial gains during the retained year, the retention was typically not recommended. These principals focused on the gains of the retention year. They did not mention anything about maintaining those academic gains over the next several years. This idea of students making gains during the retained year has been shown in the research, but most gains in performance are temporary and retained

students typically only remain ahead of same grade peers for about a year (Jimerson& Ferguson, 2007; Mantizcopoulos & Morrison, 1992). After a year of being retained, the research states that retained students show no academic advantage over their same grade peers and sometimes fall behind again (Mantizcopoulos & Morrison, 1992). Principals were influenced by the data collected throughout the school year when making final decisions about retention.

These principals believed that retention in earlier grades was more beneficial and productive because students are less socially aware of the negative stigma of retention. Teasing and bullying are less likely to occur when a student is younger because students have not been with the same group of peers for multiple years. This contrasts with the research literature that states retention has no negative effects on students (Gottfredson et al., 1994; Jimerson et al., 1997). Principals implied that retention would have more of a negative effect on older students' self-confidence and esteem, so by retaining earlier, they felt the students would be less aware of what the retention means. The literature does not support the finding that students are negatively affected; most of the research literature found no significant impacts on students' self-esteem, behavior, or social and emotional development (Jimerson et al., 1997; Shepard& Smith, 1987). It was suggested that it is less noticeable at a younger age and students are more likely to accept the decision in a positive manner. The research supports the finding that retained students are typically younger and less academically prepared (Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 1998; Peel, 1997). Early retentions provide students with the ability to build on those foundational skills, which are essential for understanding difficult concepts in the upper grades. If a student was young for the grade, maturity would typically play a role in why the student needed to be retained. It was suggested that this was especially evident for those students at the kindergarten through second grade level. Principals strongly felt that retention in the earlier grades was more beneficial, but the research literature shows no significant long term advantages for being retained, especially in kindergarten (Shepard & Smith, 1987). Again, the research literature has vast information about the academic outcomes of retained students, and most studies show no significant gains in academic achievement past the second year of being retained (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). It should be noted that it is unknown as to whether the retained children in these studies would have made significant gains if they had not been retained. The literature does suggest that these students performed as well or better with same grade peers for at least a year; however, it is not known whether or not the students would have made the same gains or would have fallen behind if they had been promoted to the next grade level rather than being retained.

Those principals with secondary experience also mentioned that at the secondary level, the whole child is not considered. Grades are the determining factor as to whether or not to retain a student. There is not much consideration in the upper grades as to what is in the best interest of the child. Unfortunately, these later retentions are more obvious amongst students. They can cause students to be more likely to dropout, be overage for their grade, and become too physically and emotionally mature compared to their same grade peers (Alexander et al., 2003; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Roderick, 1994). Principals knew overage students had less of a chance of reaching graduation because of maturity and developmental differences amongst same grade peers. Not only did principals know the likelihood of dropping out would increase, but they also believed that these students were

missing gaps in learning (Frymier, 1997). These gaps in learning were evident in students with histories of repeat retention, so principals would analyze student data to pinpoint weaknesses in learning in order to target student instruction.

Alternatives to retention such as tutoring, looping, multi-age classrooms, and instructional best practices should be attempted because there is no hard evidence stating that student retention is an effective strategy to make students more academically successful (Frymier, 1997; Gottfredson et al., 1994; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson et al., 1997; Jimerson, 2001; Mantizcopoulos & Morrison, 1998; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Smith & Shepard, 1987). Principals need to provide students with as many different remedial interventions as possible so that students have every opportunity to grasp concepts. Principals need to make creative decisions about what types of interventions to try to help struggling students, and they need to do so often and early. The only way for principals to know what interventions can be successful is for them to be active participants in students' academic programs.

Principals need to provide teachers with ample planning time, instructional strategies, and resources in order to meet the needs of learners (Owings & Kaplan, 2001b). Principals did this by giving teachers time to target student instruction to address specific weaknesses in student understanding and learning. This targeted instruction provided the key elements of the remedial and intervention support provided to the student. To assist at-risk students, the state and federal government (Code of Virginia, 2006; Virginia Department of Education, n.d) typically mandated the remedial and intervention strategies used by principals. Although several of the principals in this study did not serve at-risk students, all the principals chose similar best practice methods to meet the needs of all types of students they served. Several modalities, such as before, after, and during-school remedial sessions using small groups, technology, and one-on-one instruction were offered by all the principals. The research literature suggested each of these strategies in lieu of student retention (Jimerson et al., 1997). Remedial sessions were one of the most effective ways to allow teachers to target instruction in small groups and meet the needs of struggling students (Jimerson et al., 2006). Principals would constantly ask if another year would truly benefit the child, because if it would not help the student make dramatic gains needed to reach the expected level of competency, then retention would not be considered. Principals believed that these instructional gaps, if retention was the only means of remediation, would continue to increase as students got older and moved to the next grades, so they would not support retention if other types of remediation were feasible.

The background knowledge of students was mentioned repeatedly from those principals serving lower socioeconomic areas, and was less frequently mentioned from principals serving middle to upper class students. The demographics of retained students are quite evident. Most retained students are African American or Hispanic, from low socioeconomic status, and have less involved parents (Alexander et al., 2003; Ascher, 1998; Frymier, 1997; Jimerson et al., 2006). Principals in the study emphasized that the students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds struggle more because of a lack of background knowledge when beginning school, which can greatly affect how much they know and understand. Background knowledge referred to students understanding of vocabulary, key content and concepts, and being able to make connections to new material from previous taught material. A lack of background knowledge directly correlates to student readiness and developmental levels. Principals in this study believed the less background knowledge

a student has, the less likely the student will be developmentally ready to understand grade level concepts. Understanding the demographics of retained students can help principals target students early, and provide them with the necessary tools to be successful in school.

Principals in this study did not outwardly state whether they believed retention was beneficial. This contrasted with the research literature, which primarily stated principals felt student retention was harmful to students (Galford, 2008; Patterson, 1996). Overall, the majority of the elementary principals believed that the student retention was beneficial if the parent and data supported the decision (Murray et al., 2010). All the principals emphasized that parents need to be on-board with the retention in order to make it successful. Principals believed a student's negative attitude would stem from the parents' view of the retention. Principals who were against retention did not appear to let their negative feelings influence the decisions. Similar to the research, data was always the driving force (Owings & Kaplan, 2001b). It appears the negative attitudes of retention and changing retention decisions developed from prior informal and formal experiences that principals had when retaining students.

Implications for Practice and Professional Development

 In considering the implications of the findings and the emergent theory for practice and professional development, three main areas emerged. First, principals advocated for principals to have awareness and involvement regarding instruction as well as individual student performance. Second, principals indicated the need for a more standardized approach at the district level, specifically regarding timelines and data to consider in the decision. Finally, the participants indicated a need for both administrative preparation training and district based professional development to assist principals in understanding how to approach this important component of their work.

Principals in the study indicated the importance of having awareness and involvement regarding building level instruction, but also knowledge regarding individual student performance. Although principals had similar beliefs and experiences about how they approach student retention decisions, it is apparent effective decisions cannot be made if principals are not aware of what is occurring in their building. Principals emphasized their roles during student retention decisions, with some more actively involved than others. Regardless of the level of involvement, principals must get into classrooms and be instructional leaders (Leithwood et al., 2003). Without a strong understanding of what is happening in the classroom, principals will not be fully aware of how to assist struggling students and improve teacher instruction. Principals need to be active and close participants in teacher learning and development to positively impact student achievement (Robinson et al., 2008). Teacher quality can greatly affect the level of success students have. It is always easier to blame the student for their weaknesses, but it takes a strong leader to approach a teacher about his/her instructional delivery. If schools want to lower retention rates and develop successful students, it must start in the classroom setting (Leithwood et al., 2004). Teachers must understand and know the school's vision and mission and integrate this into their teaching methods (Witziers et al., 2003). In order for this to occur, principals must be visible instructional leaders guiding and directing teachers toward best teaching practices and strategies (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

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Principals suggested that consistency within their school district would be convenient and ideal during student retention decisions. Inconsistencies in what schools analyze when considering students for retention was evident when looking at the school retention artifacts, which remained consistent to the research indicating principal displeasure with district policies and procedures (Galford, 2008). Schools in the same district collected different formats and types of data. Having standardized timelines and retention packets would streamline the documentation part of the student retention process. Since principals handle student retention decisions on an individual basis, strict protocols for making decisions seem unreasonable. However, providing district timelines for making decisions and creating a district wide retention packet for each retention student would make the process more consistent across the districts. Information collected could include demographics of the student, previous school history, current grades, special education status, interventions used, success rate of interventions used, and supplemental programs offered throughout the school year to assist the student. This would enhance communication between schools and provide better snapshots of where struggling students are in the event they transfer schools. Providing schools with this type of information is invaluable and can help schools ensure they are meeting the instructional needs of each student as soon as they enter the building. Often weeks pass before teachers can get a good idea of what a transfer student knows. This would cut down on lost instructional time, allow schools to immediately remediate those instructional gaps, and ultimately better help the student achieve success.

A third implication is for increased district training and/or college coursework for current and future administrators, teachers, and parents about student retention. It appears because of the endless task list of other important items that principals have to focus on to run a successful school, student retention receives less attention than deserved. The research literature advocates that principal preparation programs need to focus more on critical problem solving and every day issues of building administrators (Daresh & Playko, 1992). School administrators and teachers can use more training informing them of recent studies and research about retention, especially effective remedial strategies and best practices to help struggling students. Parents need more information on the effects and causes of student retention and an understanding of how they can help their struggling child achieve success. School districts should implement more training educating parents about important issues, such as student retention. The more knowledge administrators, teachers, and parents have about student retention, the better they can educate all their students.

As the field of education increases the accountability demands on both teachers and administrators, it is imperative that principal and teacher preparation programs begin to address every day issues, such as student retention, to better prepare future educators. Currently, most principal preparation programs focus the majority of coursework on technical knowledge, such as the budget and school law (Hess & Kelly, 2007). Studies indicate that usually only about 6% to 7% of coursework focus on school improvement and less than 1% address issues related to teacher quality (Hess and Kelly, 2007). Both of these topics relate to student retention and can greatly affect the success of students today. More knowledge of these every day issues will help administrators and teachers prepare for day-to-day school operations and provide them with the necessary tools to ensure students are successful.

CONCLUSION

The student retention decisions made by the elementary principals in this study were influenced by personal beliefs, experiences, student developmental levels, data, and parental supports. These principals relied on prior knowledge and experiences to make informed decisions about struggling students. Student retention is a difficult task to handle. During student retention decisions, principals need to make a determination about whether holding a student back for an entire year is going to make them stronger students in the end. It is a blind decision, considering the fact that nobody knows if it will be beneficial until after the decision is made and implemented. Using prior experiences, research literature, data, and sound professional judgment, elementary principals are able to guide and facilitate teachers and parents in discussions about what is best for each student. With this being a daunting task, administrators can use all the support possible from district officials, policy makers, and fellow educators when making student retention decisions. Student retention decisions will always be part of an elementary principal's task list during the school year. Continual understanding of how principals approach student retention decisions is important for understanding how prepared principals are to lead teachers during the student retention process.

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