



ACLD SCHOOL & LEARNING CENTER NEWSLETTER



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RE-TENSION

By Linda Webster, Ph.D.
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As November rolls around, many of you might find yourselves seated around a table of teachers, principals, and parents discussing students for whom the teacher is considering retention. As a graduate student in the mid-80's, I had been shown the numbers regarding the non-effectiveness of retention and I was convinced. Working with large numbers of emotionally disturbed children for 10 years (the majority of whom had been retained at least once) convinced me even further. Automatic social promotion, on the other hand, has recently come under fire which has served to give retention a prominent place in educational interventions.

Echoing CASP (California Association of School Psychologists) President Roy Applegate's call for school psychologists to rely upon sound research, NASP promotes the use of interventions that are effective and research-based and discourages the use of practices which, though popular or widely accepted, are either not beneficial or are harmful to the welfare and educational attainment of America's children." NASP's (National Association of School Psychologists) position statement on retention succinctly summarizes the research:

Retention is associated with poorer academic achievement when groups of retained children are compared with matched groups of children who are promoted. The effects are greatest in reading, the primary academic delay for which students are retained.

Although some children may show some initial gain during the retention year, achievement declines within 2-3 years of retention.

- Children who are the most delayed are most likely to be harmed by retention.
- Retention is associated with increases in behavior problems as measured by behavior rating scales.

NASP further notes some alternatives to retention or social promotion, including but not limited to the following:

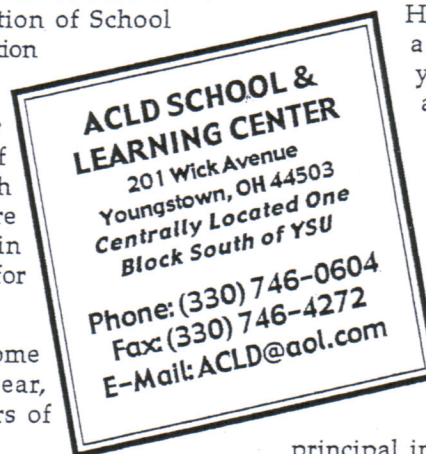
- encouragement of parent involvement
- the use of developmentally appropriate instruction/ curriculum

- effective early reading programs such as Reading Recovery or Direct Instruction
- functional analyses and interventions specifically designed to address the problem
- participation in extended year/extended day programs
- participation in tutoring programs with peer, cross-age, adult tutors

I am encouraged by Roy's observance that school personnel, including teachers, are making more reference to research and empirically validated interventions. My own experience has, unfortunately, found the opposite to be true for retention with anecdotes, clinical experience, and "folklore" outweighing research by a large margin, I would like to use a recent experience of mine as an illustration. I found myself at the retention table last spring for a retention decision involving a (yes, male) kindergartener. The youngster was the youngest of three children, had a July 30 birth date, and a visual handicap for which corrective lenses could not fully compensate. He was of small physical size and somewhat immature. His visual handicap had resulted in some fine motor delays, so his handwriting was pretty poor. His teacher complained that while he had made a lot of progress since the beginning of the school year, he still had difficulty sitting and attending, and that he "just wasn't ready" to move on. (Sound familiar so far?)

The retention team consisted of the principal, vice-principal, a resource specialist, three teachers, the school psychologist, and the parents. His current teacher brought out work samples as illustrations, and everyone concurred that he had indeed made progress, but that the expectations in the first grade were considerable and might prove to be a challenge to this child. The

principal initially (and prematurely as it turned out) concluded that the youngster probably should not be retained as he might be "bored" with another year of the same material. Several of the teachers jumped in at this point to share their various experiences of successful retentions-it seemed that several of them knew students who had once been retained and then gone on to greatness (while 1, on the other hand, could name several who had gone on to CYA). One teacher exclaimed to the parents that they would "never regret it." Not once was any mention made of the retention literature, nor was discussed any attempts to modify the youngster's behavior or methods to improve his academic performance by modifying curriculum, instructional approaches, etc. Now,



this may seem puzzling, but the survey research on teacher opinion/perceptions of the benefits of retention is consistent with the viewpoints presented at this meeting. Teachers continue to believe in the benefits of retention, despite consistent research to the contrary, and many teachers believe that retention can mean the difference between success or failure (NASP, 1998).

After listening to the presentation and opinions of the education professionals, the parents introduced their plan. They offered to conduct an analysis of the child's skills, including his strengths and weaknesses, and then come up with a plan of intervention that built upon the child's "bedrock knowledge" and systematically monitored his progress. They planned to use a variety of curricular media including direct instruction, innovative and engaging computer software, and a teen "tutor" who would come after school at least three times a week. They also planned to make accommodations for his visual handicap, but interventions would also be aimed at improving his fine motor skills. This plan, they thought, would be more helpful for the child than retention, which they feared would affect his self-esteem.

The reaction of the education team was, shall we say, less than pleased. The vice-principal and the school psychologist both thought this plan would put too much pressure upon the child, and they challenged the parents to reconsider their position and "give the child a chance to be a child." The parents winced at the thought of themselves as "slave drivers," but held to their plan. What's wrong with this picture?

Retention is probably one of "the" most extensively researched educational interventions, with most studies demonstrating either harmful or ineffective results (NASP, 1998), and yet it continues to enjoy widespread popularity. Despite the resistance that one may encounter, a responsibility of the school psychologist is to promote effective, research-based practices to intervene with academic underachievers and to discourage the use of retention. You may visit the NASP web site at www.NASPweb.org to find the NASP position statement on grade retention and social promotion and to find a handout for parents and teachers.

PS. If you didn't figure it out already, I was the parent in the illustration.

TURN STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES INTO WRITERS

By Bonnie Terry

Writing is the bane of many students with learning disabilities. But, by keeping in mind some key points and using some specific strategies, you can turn your students with disabilities into good writers.

NOTE TAKING

A first step to helping your students become good writers is to help them become good note takers:

Step 1. After your students read a selection, decide if it was informational (expository) or if it had a beginning, middle, and end (narrative). Then give your students fill-in-the-blank, notetaking forms. Students can stare at their blank papers, unable to take notes, because they do not know where to start. However, once they are given fill-in-the blank, note-taking forms, they can succeed.

Younger students often start out by dictating the notes, and you write them on the board or on a second fill-in-the-blank form. This way, students do not lose track of their thoughts while trying to write them out. Use different colors for each thought so that your students can recopy with greater accuracy. As soon as the younger students are able, they write the notes independently.

Step 2. Spend several weeks at Step 1, giving your students lots of practice with note taking. Then your students will be ready to write a paragraph from their notes.

THE PARAGRAPH

Step 1. Do not expect your Students to know how to write a paragraph. They have a habit of freezing up when they are asked to do this independently the first time. Instead, give your students another fill-in-the-blank form with an association they can relate to.

Since the hamburger is familiar to most students, a three-dimensional hamburger and a graphic organizer fill-in-the-blank hamburger is a good tool. Put the format on the overhead in the form of a deluxe hamburger. If your students can make themselves a hamburger or a sandwich, they can write a paragraph!

A. The topic sentence is the top of the bun.

B. The detail sentences are the ingredients of the hamburger. We want an interesting paragraph, so we have to make it a "deluxe" hamburger with tasty ingredients.

C. The concluding sentence wraps up or restates the topic. The bottom bun is bread like the top, but it is usually a bit thinner. Without the conclusion, you would have a sloppy mess so you need to conclude or "wrap up" your thoughts.

On the day your students write, place the three-dimensional hamburger in front of them and remind them how the paragraph is constructed: First, we tell what we are going to talk about (topic sentence). Second, we tell all about it (details). Finally, we tell what we told before (concluding sentence).

As you can see, the secret to writing a good paragraph is to make a good American hamburger.

Step 2. Have your students write their rough drafts and final copies in spiral notebooks on the left-hand side of the page. Your students should write their rough draft without being hindered with word choice.

- screening and diagnostic program to identify students with reading disabilities.
- evaluation of program effectiveness that goes beyond mandated periodic testing.
- teacher certification requirements for elementary, secondary, and special education teachers include substantive courses in reading methodologies.
- individualized reading programs for students with learning disabilities, and
- a strong commitment to research which will identify causes / prevention of reading failure and effective interventions.

Data reported in 2001 by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) indicates that 20% of elementary school students are at risk for reading failure and of that number, 5-10% of those students have difficulty learning to read despite reading- instruction that is successful for most Students. LDA believes that these are students with learning disabilities who require more individualized reading programs that are specially designed to help them succeed.

LDA supports the current efforts at both the federal and state levels to strengthen reading instruction in the early school grades by:

improving teacher competence in teaching reading. using careful diagnostic reading assessments, providing reading instruction that is research-based: and implementing data-based evaluation of student reading achievement.

However, it must also be reemphasized that such programs will not meet the educational needs of all children.

Some children in the early grades will require more intensive. highly individualized instruction from specifically trained teacher specialists in order to learn to read. Many students who acquire basic reading skills will have difficulty understanding, organizing, and retaining content information that they read. Other students will encounter problems in speaking, writing, spelling, and mathematics that impact life skills, post-secondary education, and workplace success. For many students with learning disabilities, basic reading skills are a necessary, but not sufficient base upon which to build lifelong success.

The variety of new local, state, and national initiatives that seek to improve early reading skills in all students can be an important approach to improving the academic skills of individuals with learning disabilities. Those same initiatives, however, should not be expected to:

- markedly reduce the number of students identified as having learning disabilities,
- justify elimination of the specific teaming disabilities category under IDEA, or
- reduce the cost burden of special education at any of these levels.

LDA reiterates its recognition that reading is crucial to success in school, to realizing one's potential, and to becoming a productive member of society. Therefore every person must be given the opportunity to learn to read. LDA also reiterates its expectation that appropriate reading programs be available to all students at all ages ... it is never too late to learn to read.

HELPFUL INFORMATION FOR THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR: WAYS TO CON YOUR TEACHER

by C. Wilson Anderson

Note to the student: Like any good con artist, you must master each con one item at a time. If not the victim is wary if you con too hard or too fast.

1. Look at the teacher when he or she is speaking.
2. In class politely call / use the teacher's name at least once a day when you talk to him / her.
3. Make one good comment or observation in class each day.
4. Arrive early and smile at your teacher. (It will drive him or her crazy wondering what you are up to.)
5. Get ready to leave only when the bell rings.
6. Never slam your book shut.
7. When a teacher offers suggestions or corrects your errors, always say "thank you."
8. Even if you are not completed with an assignment or didn't like it, always hand your paper in on time.
9. If you do not understand, ask the teacher if she or he would explain it differently using other words or other examples.
10. If you make mistakes, neatly cross out the error with one thin line and continue.
11. For in class assignments and tests don't forget to use "The Underlining Option".
12. Learn how to use word processing. Corrections are easier and the saving disk holds a lot of reports and papers that just might be re-cycled or revised.
13. Always go to your teacher first if there is a "hassle" with your work. If you can't get help, it is "ok" to ask another teacher for some help.
14. Find a "Study Buddy" who is good in the subject you are having trouble in. Offer to help the "Study Buddy" in areas that you are good in, but he or she is not. Finally, NO teacher fails a student who tries. By carefully doing each of the above, you'll successfully con your teacher and most of the problems with him / her will disappear.