



# **UPHILL AND INTO THE WIND: HOW ADULTS WHO REPEATED A GRADE IN K-12 PERCEIVE THE IMPACT OF RETENTION**

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## **Abstract**

Beginning in early 2020, COVID-19 drove decisions to adopt learning platforms and strategies on a scale never before contemplated. Recent research suggests that, as classrooms have returned to face-to-face instruction, many students have experienced learning losses. Once again, grade retention has surfaced as offering lagging students a gift of time. This qualitative study relies on interviews with adults, ages 43-67, who were retained in grade as children. Using narrative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015), we probed the perceptions of participants, seeking to understand the extent to which their experiences align with extant research. The study offers current education leaders and those who aspire to these leadership roles insights into the long-term impact of a decision to retain a student in grade.

## **Keywords**

Grade Repetition, Impact, Leadership

## **Introduction**

An abundance of research has explored whether grade retention serves effectively as a corrective to lagging student academic and social progress. This research unveils several salient themes: academic gains that accrue from repeating a grade are scant and fleeting (Shepard & Smith, 1989a); students who are retained often equate their repeating a year with being slow or bad (Byrnes, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 1998a; Darling-Hammond, 1998b; Jimerson, 2001; Shepard & Smith, 1989b; Thomas, 2000); and an increased probability that the student who repeats a grade will drop out of school (Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Kurtz, 2002; Parker, 2001; Roderick, 1993; Thomas, 2000; Whipple, 2002). A longitudinal review of extant research on grade repetition (Holt, Range, & Pajonowski, 2009) concluded that the data from earlier studies discouraged retention. A RAND study found that retention in an early elementary grade was less likely to be accompanied by increased likelihood of dropping out than when retention occurred in seventh or eighth grade (Mariano, Martonell, & Berglund, 2018). "For students in 7th or 8th grade, retention increases dropout once students reach their original on-time graduation year and reduces the likelihood of passing enough [New York] Regents exams to graduate from high school" (Mariano, Martonell, & Berglund, 2018, p. 24).

The grail of accountability has served as a starting point for many conversations focused on grade retention. A 2007 study reported that, despite the surge of research from the 1980s and 1990s that debunked the efficacy of requiring students to repeat a grade, "The push for educational accountability . . . has brought this issue back to the forefront of education debates" (Jacob & Lefgren, 2007, p. 2). Late 2019 brought first reports of a global health crisis that, by early 2020, prompted schools to resort to distance-learning platforms, a sweeping technological shift previously unthinkable to most education practitioners. Seeking to predict how the COVID-19 pandemic might result in students falling behind academic

achievement markers upon their returning to face-to-face learning, a 2020 report stated, “Students who were already facing adversity [before the pandemic] will struggle in the coming year for multiple, intertwined reasons, including loss of learning from the prior year, trauma, long-term stress, and declining family resources” (Allensworth & Schwartz, 2020).

Early indications of how student achievement has been affected by these instructional adjustments, and, more specifically, by remote learning, suggest that the impact has been broad and will likely manifest for years to come. “New research suggests students still haven’t regained the academic ground they’ve lost in the disruptions of the ongoing pandemic, and many high school students will continue to struggle after graduation” (Sparks, 2022). A decline in student achievement in the secondary grades has been documented through testing programs such as the ACT; however, “the learning losses were worse for lower grades” (Sparks, 2022).

In the early months of the pandemic, as the U.S. and other countries careened into lockdowns and social isolation, schools rushed to adopt virtual learning platforms, a strange learning landscape for teachers and children alike.

Children spent months out of the classroom, where they were supposed to learn the basics of reading — the ABCs, what sound a “b” or “ch” makes. Many first and second-graders returned to classrooms needing to review parts of the kindergarten curriculum (Goldstein, 2022).

As the pandemic entered its third year, new evidence showed that “about one-third of children in the youngest grades [were] missing reading benchmarks, up significantly from before the pandemic” (Goldstein, 2022).

While children from every demographic were touched by the effects of learning modifications, “Black and Hispanic children, as well as those from low-income families, those with disabilities and those who are not fluent in English, have fallen the furthest behind” (Goldstein, 2022).

Anecdotal conversations we have had with graduate and post-graduate students in classes we teach in the principal and superintendent certification programs at Western Washington University suggest that grade retention is once again emerging as a proposed antidote for lagging student achievement. Parents initiate the conversation. Though school leaders and teachers may oppose a parent’s insistence that a child repeat a grade, some parents have been vocal in suggesting that having their child remain in kindergarten, third, or sixth grade will fill gaps in math or reading rooted in virtual teaching and learning.

Absent from extant research on the efficacy and outcomes of grade retention is an exploration of how, if at all, the effects, intended and unintended, on those who have failed a grade persist into their adulthood. How, if at all, did the experience of retention shape their perceptions of themselves? In what ways did events and circumstances not apparently tied to school achievement accompany the school’s decision to retain? What should guide current school administrators and those who aspire to these leadership roles as they consider how to support students whose progress lags behind expectations?

#### Method

This study employs narrative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015) as the qualitative vehicle for exploring the perspectives of participants. Through narratives, the researcher delves into the perspectives drawn from participants’ lived experiences. “First-person accounts of experience constitute the narrative ‘text’ of this research approach” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 34).

Previous research (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Gottfredson, Fink, & Graham, 1994; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Hu, 2008; Kaase, 2002; Larsen, 2002; Parker, 2001; Shepard, 1989) would lead us to predict that most of our participants would be male. In fact, only one of the participants in this study, Brian, was male. The sample included one African American female, one female who was born in the United Kingdom but raised in Canada and the United States, and one female whose mother was widowed when the participant was a child. Two in our sample went to private schools during the elementary grades. Participants ranged in age from 43-67.

## Narratives

### *Silence and secrets*

“Lizette” was born and raised in the Bay area of Northern California. She is African-American. At the time of our interview, Lizette was 52 years old, lived in a comfortable home in a suburb of a city in the Pacific Northwest, and worked as an administrator in the urgent care unit for one of the city’s major hospitals. The genesis of the skills she uses in her profession may be found in her service in the United States Army, her career path after graduating from high school.

Lizette, along with her two older sisters and two younger brothers, attended St. Mary's School, a Catholic school. Because of her December birthday, she began kindergarten several months after she had turned 5. She has fond memories of the primary grades, recalling, among other events, churning milk until the milk turned to butter. One day, as the third-grade year was about to end, Lizette's mother stood in the hallway outside her classroom at the end of the day. Her teacher, Sister Josephine, and her mother had talked about Lizette's progress. "My Mom told me that they were going to keep me back in the third grade. I just broke down and started crying." Mom tried to be reassuring as she gently played with Lizette's bangs. "It's not because you're dumb," Mom said. "It's because we want you to speak up, to speak out. Because you're really quiet." Lizette had no inkling that her inclination to be quiet raised a red flag. She thought she was on par with her peers academically. "I did the work; I got decent grades. They were just concerned with me socially." More than 40 years intervened between that hallway meeting with Sister Josephine and our interview. "I always go back to that whenever it's time to share about your childhood or childhood experiences. I always go back to third grade. It was like somebody was dying—the impact of it."

As the next year began—Lizette's second turn in third grade—she was again in Sister Josephine's class. Her brother, one year younger than she, was now one of her classmates. The friends she had developed in the primary grades moved on to fourth grade. She remembers the embarrassment she felt, the sense that her former classmates looked down on her. "They weren't my friends anymore," she said, her voice falling to a whisper. "I didn't keep any friends."

Being required to repeat third grade was the official consequence for not developing the social skills Lizette's teacher identified as essential for advancement to fourth grade. But there was also a consequence at home. As her older sisters progressed through the elementary and middle school grades, they were allowed to attend parties and school dances. Her younger brothers enjoyed similar privileges. Lizette did not. "It was like they were keeping me back at home socially as well. I was repeating the grade at school. At home, I was being kept back also, not just at school. So, it was a double whammy for me." All four of her siblings earned driving privileges at age 16. Lizette learned to drive when she was 30, after she was married and had moved to Los Angeles.

Being retained was not the only trauma that marked Lizette's third-grade experience. "We were going to Saturday afternoon Mass, my two brothers and I. We walked through St. Mary's School." As they passed a secluded part of the school, an unfamiliar odor offended their noses. We looked over the little brick wall, and we saw all this trash. We said, "Look at all this trash? Where are all the flies coming from?" And then we looked, and we saw a foot, another foot, a hand; then we saw the head with the mouth open. And it was someone under the trash that [pauses] had expired. We were shocked. And we were really young!

They waited to approach Father Matthews until the Mass had concluded. We told Father Matthews there was something in the kindergarten area we needed to show him. So he followed us. When they moved the trash, sure enough, it was a girl . . . a young girl. And they found she was trying to get into the church.

Though Lizette slept but fitfully for weeks after the discovery, there was no therapy and no attempt by adults to help Lizette and her brothers make sense of their experience. "They told us, 'You guys go home.' That was it. And I just knew for a long time that, whoever it was that harmed her, he was coming after me. I was afraid for a long time."

In her eighth-grade year, Lizette was ASB president and a member of the student council. Her parents had divorced, and the family's straightened circumstances meant Lizette would move to the public high school for grades 9-12. There she took summer school classes to speed her path to graduation. Lizette was 19 when she finished diploma requirements. She did not attend her graduation. "I was really ashamed, ashamed that anyone knew how old I was, and I'm in high school," she said.

Our interview had reached its logical conclusion, the coda where the interviewer asks, "Is there anything I haven't asked that should be a part of this conversation?" Lizette clutched the recorder. Seconds passed. Her voice almost a whisper, she began, "Well, maybe there is one more thing." There were secrets. My stepfather was an alcoholic. My mother was manic-depressed. She was not medicated until she was like in her 40s. There was a lot of violence in our home. We gave the appearance that everything was okay. But when we were at home, we weren't allowed to play with other children—unless we were at school. We were kind of locked in the house, because we didn't want other people to know how ugly it was on the inside. So, I think that was why I was so quiet.

Her mother's manic-depression manifested in explosive anger. "She raged a lot. And when I say raged, there was violence where there were holes in the walls." Lizette spoke quietly. "That kind of violence." When Mom was on a tear, Lizette and her siblings would stay out of sight. "I would run and hide to protect myself," she said. Lizette reflected now on how her mother's unmedicated ailment may have affected the experience of being retained. "Most moms would probably try to help you understand, to work through it. But I didn't—we didn't—have any of those tools."

Now more than 40 years distant from her experience of repeating third grade, Lizette views this event with lingering resentment. "I revert back to how they kept me back because I was quiet. It just didn't make sense to me." It still doesn't make sense. "I wish that someone would have worked with me, or talked to me, or I had had some type of mentor, or someone to hold my hand through it," she says. "I just never really understood why."

If there is a silver lining, it has manifested in her determination to succeed. "I did graduate, and I stayed focused. I became responsible to take care of myself, and that's what I needed to do." She adds, "You know, the whole world is dysfunctional. You have to overcome. That's what I've done."

*Thanks, Mrs. Sanchez!*

"Julie" has been a teacher in a community nestled in the San Joaquin Valley in northern California for the past 20 years, the first four years as a fifth-grade teacher. The past 16 years teaching first grade have been the most rewarding. Before starting her career in teaching, she worked for 10 years as a medical records specialist. "From the time I was very young, I always wanted to help people," she explains.

At age 53, Julie has experienced noteworthy success in higher education. She recently completed California's requirements to be a school principal. She has also earned a master's degree in education, a teaching certificate, and a baccalaureate degree in hospital administration. Junior college classes that followed her high school graduation led to an AA in medical records. "As my mother says, I'm a never-ending student," Julie offers.

Julie's early childhood was marked by loss and sadness. Her father, an airman in the United States Air Force, died of a brain tumor when she was four. Though Julie's maternal grandparents, who lived in San Francisco, offered to have Julie's mother, Julie, and her older brother move in with them, Mom chose to stay in the community near the Air Force base where the family lived when Dad died. Mom found part-time work at the local Catholic church. After completing kindergarten in the public elementary school, Julie started first grade at St. Ann's.

Whereas Julie's brother, four years older than she, seemed to adjust easily to the loss of their father, Julie did not. She recalls,

During all of this, I had great trauma and anxiety over my father's death. We were not allowed to talk about it. I had a lot of difficulty. There were a lot of things, some medical, that were all related to stress because of my father's death. It was like a hush-hush thing, and I didn't understand it.

Although Mom found a tutor to help her daughter learn to read, Julie struggled through the primary grades. "All of the teachers had really tried to work with me," Julie recalls. "They knew that my mother was doing everything that she could do, that was within her ability, that she knew how to do."

Fourth grade brought new challenges. As the year progressed, Julie's teacher, Sister Mary Catherine, identified seven of her students, including Julie, as lagging in their achievement. Julie and the other six students were assigned to sit at the back of the class.

She believed that either you had it or you didn't. The students who didn't went to the back of the class. And you sat there by yourself trying to pick things up. She spent less time with us because she felt we were not worthy.

The seven relegated to the back of the class were targets of demeaning comments from their teacher. Some of the seven, including Julie, reported to their parents what was happening in the classroom. Sister Mary Catherine denied any allegations of impropriety.

As the school year ended, Sister Mary Catherine met with Julie's mother. Julie was present as the teacher told Mom that Julie needed to repeat fourth grade.

I will never, ever forget when we went to the conference. Sister said I really needed to be retained. She said, "There's something wrong with her. She's not right! She'll never be *anything*! She'll *never* even make it out of the eighth grade."

Julie's mother was devastated.

Over the summer, the school principal followed up on complaints she had received from parents about Julie's teacher. Julie's six classmates whom the teacher had isolated at the back of the classroom did not return to St. Ann's. Instead their parents enrolled them in the public school. In the fall, as Julie began

her second attempt at fourth grade, she discovered a new teacher, Mrs. Sanchez, in the classroom. Mrs. Sanchez, whose husband was an airman at the Air Force base, introduced Julie to a more positive approach to learning. Whereas Sister Mary Catherine had belittled Julie and others who lagged in their learning, Mrs. Sanchez encouraged. “There’s nothing wrong with you,” she assured Julie. “You can learn to read. But you need to be taught.” Julie learned to read and learned to study; she learned to take notes. “I would stay up until all hours of the night, if my mother would let me, to get my work done for this woman,” Julie said. “I would do anything she wanted.” At the time of our interview, more than 40 years had elapsed since Julie encountered Mrs. Sanchez. “I’m sure I have learning disabilities,” Julie says. “I don’t doubt that for a minute.” Mrs. Sanchez’s gentle but persistent nudging taught Julie that learning for her will take additional time.

Julie’s second try in fourth grade was not without challenges. The children who had been in the class with Sister Mary Catherine but who had been promoted to fifth grade did not forget that Julie had been held back. Some of the taunts still sting.

I had glasses, so I was “dummy four-eyes.” They would come up with all kinds of things to remind me I was retained. “You don’t know how to read, and people who are dumb don’t know how to read!”

The relationships she had had with the previous year’s classmates faded and vanished.

The year in Mrs. Sanchez’s classroom was the turning point. “I excelled,” Julie said. “I wasn’t the dummy who couldn’t read.” As she began the secondary grades, she participated in student government. As an adult she has found success as a hospital administrator and as an educator. So, was being retained in fourth grade a good thing or a bad thing? Julie acknowledges that, at the time she repeated fourth grade, she was angry and resentful. From her perspective as an adult, she views repeating fourth grade as the trigger point for the success she has experienced.

I often wonder what would have happened to me if I had just been pushed on, and pushed on, and pushed on, and ended up in high school still struggling, not having the strategies to know how to help myself and to be an independent learner. For me, I think it was, in a way, a divine intervention [laughs], because I don’t know if I would have learned those strategies had I *not* been retained. What would have happened to me if I hadn’t had Mrs. Sanchez? For *me*, retention was a positive thing.

### *Cinderella*

“Jenny” is 45 years old. She and her two school-age children, a daughter, age 12, and a son, age 10, live in a semi-rural Pacific Northwest town nestled on the U.S.-Canada border. She chose not to marry her children’s father. Over the years, she has held several jobs; at present, she works at a gas station.

Jenny was born in England and lived there with her parents until she was 4. Her family emigrated from England, settling first in Minnesota, then Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, then Vancouver, B.C. Her father, who was a musician, traveled frequently to perform gigs with his band. Two more children followed. The marriage ended when Jenny was 5. Not long after, her father married again. Jenny was now 6. Jenny’s new step-mother had four children of her own. After resettling the family on the U.S. side of the border, her father and step-mother opened a restaurant. Her father continued his music career; her step-mother managed the family business.

For Jenny, the elementary grades were not marked by success. “I was pretty much a C student,” she recalls. “I don’t think I was F, but I knew I wasn’t great.” There were some bright moments, like when she took a math class in summer school. “I loved it,” she says. And she enjoyed reading and spelling. “I was really good at spelling.”

When she was 11, her step-mother put her to work in the restaurant. Jenny was in fifth grade. Her assigned tasks included scrubbing the floor, washing dishes, laundering tablecloths and ironing them, and getting everything set for the next morning.

My mom would make me work until midnight. Sometimes I’d spend the night there and just fall asleep. I think that really started the downfall of school for me. I was tired. I was working all the time.

Though Jenny’s older step-siblings worked in the family’s restaurant, their roles were different from Jenny’s. “They did their shift, and they got paid. My step-mom would say, ‘Oh, just leave. Jenny will clean up the tables and take your tips off the table. She’ll finish the cleaning.’”

As sixth grade ended, her step-mother decided Jenny should repeat that grade. There was little discussion. “My stepmom just said, ‘My daughters were all held back in sixth grade, and you’re gonna be held back, too.’” Jenny does not remember discussing her progress with her parents, her teachers, or the principal. “I just thought, ‘Okay, I’m getting held back.’ And that was that.” The school principal, Jenny recalls, attempted to dissuade her step-mother. Her step-mother remained adamant.

In the fall, Jenny began her second attempt at sixth grade. Her friends had moved on to seventh grade. At the end of each school day, she worked in the restaurant. School faded in importance. “I felt like an idiot. I felt like a loser,” Jenny recalls. “I felt numb. And I think at that point I kind of gave up. My life was dishes and laundry and ironing and housework.” Her grades in school did not improve.

At age 15, at the end of her eighth-grade year, Jenny dropped out of school—with her stepmother’s blessing. “My stepmother said, ‘You don’t have to go to school. You can earn money. You’ll get paid to work.’ I was like, ‘Okay!’ I had no life. I didn’t care about anything.” Not long after she dropped out, Jenny had second thoughts. She wrote letters to some of the teachers she had had in school expressing her hope that she could return to school. Her younger brother carried her letters to school. She never received a reply.

Jenny completed the requirements to receive her GED when she was 18. In hindsight, Jenny sees her being retained in sixth grade as the precursor to a succession of unproductive decisions and developments that have followed her into adulthood. “I don’t think retention was positive in any way,” Jenny avers.

It’s not like I was retained and then I did a great job, and my grades were great, and it motivated me to finish school. If anything, it had a negative effect. I always felt like everybody knew I was held back.

After the passage of more than 30 years, Jenny recalls her childhood with bitterness. She views the context of her early years—the life she remembers from England, her immigration to Canada and the U.S., her father’s second marriage, her child-labor in her parents’ restaurant—as “messed up.” Jenny struggles to separate the experience of repeating sixth grade from the fabric of her childhood. Still, Jenny insists, she harbors no resentment. “That was my life,” she says, shrugging her shoulders.

In Jenny’s view, there is “no necessary reason for the average kid to have to fail.” The school should have been a safety net for her. Her teachers or a school counselor could have communicated with her parents, could have advocated for alternatives to retention. She was alone.

### ***No regrets***

Brian’s story represents an outlier amid other narratives we obtained purposefully through contacts with students in our graduate-level principal preparation classes. Larsen met Brian, who worked on a Kauai County road crew, when he and his wife vacationed in Hawaii. The narrow road to their vacation rental on Anahola Bay traversed a section where the roadway had been eroded by relentless Pacific tides and storms. Using a large backhoe, Brian’s crew scooped sand from the beach, filled truck-size sandbags, and expertly placed the sandbags at the road’s edge to prevent further erosion.

An exchange of friendly greetings as Larsen and his wife returned from an early-morning walk led to the initial conversation with Brian. Brian wore a green construction hardhat and a neon-yellow reflective vest over knee-length sand-colored shorts and flip-flops. Beneath his hardhat, his nearly-white hair flowed to his shoulders in gentle waves. His neatly trimmed beard was white, his skin deeply bronzed by daily exposure to Hawaiian sun. Brian was 67 years old.

The conversation with Brian developed over several days. Initial morning pleasantries led to more detailed conversations, including life events that preceded Brian’s current role on the county road crew. He repeated two grades—third and seventh—before he dropped out of school in eighth grade. “I was 16, driving myself to school in my own car,” Brian says. “I was bored. I never regretted that I left school. You know, school isn’t for everyone.” His father died when he was 17; his mother died six months later. Brian was married at age 18. He sired three children, the eldest now 48. He speaks with pride about all his children, including four step-children. “They’re all successful,” he says.

Brian was an orphan when his parents adopted him at age 2. The family lived in Delaware. Third grade was the beginning of Brian’s disengagement from school. He recalls that his teacher, Mrs. McGill, wore a whistle on a cord around her neck. “If you did something she didn’t like, Mrs. McGill would hit you with that whistle,” Brian remembers. “One day, I did something she didn’t like, and she took that whistle and hit me across the neck with it. It left a mark!”

Brian’s behavior seemed to attract Mrs. McGill’s displeasure. “She called me impudent and said I was going to reform school. I didn’t know what impudent meant. Can you imagine—telling a third-grader that he’s going to reform school? I was in *third* grade!”

As the school year neared its conclusion, Brian again ran afoul of Mrs. McGill’s ire. The teacher had given a vocabulary assignment, a task to be completed before the final bell. Minutes ticked by. Brian

struggled to finish. When he asked Mrs. McGill for help, she handed him a dictionary and directed him to look up words whose definitions escaped him. "I told her, 'There's so much to do that I'll never get done!'" Mrs. McGill replied that, if he did not finish the assignment, she would have to hold him back in third grade. "And that's what she did," Brian recalls. Brian remembers the event with sadness: "I wanted to know why I couldn't go on [to the fourth grade] with the others in my class. I thought, 'What's the matter with *me*?'"

His next try at third grade was different from the first. His new teacher, Mrs. Morgan, liked him. "She cared," he recalls. Though his behavior often bespoke his tendency toward mischief, Mrs. Morgan remained his ally.

Seventh grade again brought Brian to the brink of failure. As the second semester began, he had an F in English, another in history, a third in French, and yet another in math. He confesses that he had no use for learning another language. "Why did I need to learn to talk French?" He and his friend, Robert, had earned a reputation for being more inclined to disrupt the class than to conjugate verbs. Brian was often the ringleader. Called to task one day, Brian offered the French teacher a deal. "Me and Robert won't come back for the rest of the year if you'll just pass us," Brian urged. The teacher agreed. Brian and his friend received passing grades in French though they never again attended that class. No such deal could be struck with Brian's history, English, and math teachers. At the end of the year Brian was again retained.

He remained enrolled until midway through his eighth-grade year. Brian was expelled after he got into a food fight in the cafeteria. Lime Jell-O and spaghetti were on the menu that day. When a teacher attempted to intervene, Brian grabbed the teacher by the tie and punched him in the nose. Brian's visit with the principal was brief. "Brian, you're out of here!" the principal declared. "Don't even bother to turn in your books. You're expelled!" From a vantage point more than 50 years removed from that day, Brian insists, "I was never so happy in all my life. I never regretted it. Never!" He was 16.

Following his expulsion, Brian got a job in home construction installing Sheetrock. He worked hard and prospered in a physically demanding trade. One day he encountered his middle school principal. "Don't you regret that you dropped out of school?" the principal asked. Brian asked the principal how much he made in his job and thus learned that he, working in construction, was making more than the school administrator. "Do you want a job?" he asked the principal. As a drop-out, Brian was making more than the principal.

The next morning, Larsen and his wife, now on their way to the Lihue airport, passed Brian. Brian, clad in his green hardhat, yellow vest, and flip-flops, leaned on the broom he employed to sweep the ever-present sand from the area where his colleagues toiled. "I still don't like school, Professor!" he announced with a broad grin. "You haven't taken my class yet," Larsen retorted. "I'd have you teach part of that class." Brian replied, "Okay, but I'd tell 'em to quit school and get a job!"

## Findings and Recommendations

What should current school administrators and those who aspire to school leadership roles understand about grade retention and its impact on those who repeat a grade? Our earliest research on the topic of retention (Larsen, 2002) concluded that teachers and principals who are parties to a decision to retain a student experience ethical conflict. As one middle school principal averred, "We're [darned] if we do [recommend retention], and we're [darned] if we don't" (Larsen, 2002, p. 120).

A robust body of literature shows that retention in grade is often accompanied by unbidden consequences, including diminished self-esteem (Byrnes, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 1998a; Darling-Hammond, 1998b; Jimerson, 2001; Shepard & Smith, 1989b; Thomas, 2000) and an increased probability that the student who repeats a grade will drop out of school (Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Kurtz, 2002; Parker, 2001; Roderick, 1993; Thomas, 2000; Whipple, 2002). Recent research (Mariano, Martonell, & Berglund, 2018; Sparks, 2022). echoes these concerns.

The current study suggests that those who were retained as early as the primary grades recall in minute detail the circumstances that surrounded the announcement that they would repeat a grade. Several themes emerge from the current study. Without exception, the trauma of being retained remains an indelible and painful part of each individual's memories. The academic deficiencies that teachers identified as the motives for retention were accompanied, in every instance, by circumstances that lay outside the school environment, circumstances over which the child had no control. From her vantage point more than 40 years removed from the day she learned she would repeat third grade, Lizette echoes the pleadings of

others in our sample: "I wish that someone would have worked with me, or talked to me, or I had had some type of mentor, or someone to hold my hand through it."

Our findings lead us to recommend the following: (1) Having determined that a child's progress in school portends a decision to have the student repeat a grade, school administrators and teachers should feel ethically bound to evaluate whether circumstances not manifested in the classroom may be at the root of the child's academic lag; (2) teachers, school leaders, and other school personnel should explore interventions and alternatives to retention that might provide the child with the support needed to meet requirements for promotion; (3) the child whose academic progress has introduced the possibility of retention in grade should be included in the conversation.

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