EXPERIENCES WITH GRADE REPETITION: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY USING A
RESILIENCY LENS

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Abstract

For decades, retention has been a common practice implemented as an intervention for the at-risk or underperforming student (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Jimerson, Pletcher, & Kerr, 2005; Murray, Woodruff, & Vaughn, 2010; Penfield, 2010; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Warren & Saliba, 2012). While practitioners believe grade repetition raised students to grade level standards, often this intervention resulted in short-term academic achievement gains, followed by a fade in progress, and a negative student attitude toward school (Ou & Reynolds, 2010).

Research shows that grade repetition does more academic, social, and emotional harm than good (Alexander et al., 2003; Bowman-Perrott, Herrera, & Murry, 2010; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Penfield, 2010; Penna & Tallerico, 2005; Shepard & Smith, 1990). The majority of grade repetition research is approached from a quantitative view, with focus in relation to race (Balfanz, 2014; Fine & Davis, 2003), socioeconomic status (Willson & Hughes, 2009), age- and grade-level comparisons (Jimerson, 2001; Peterson & Hughes, 2011), student dropout rates (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Hornig Fox, 2010; Bowers, 2010; Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002; Parker, 2001; Rouse, 2007; Shepard & Smith, 1990), and political policy (Martin, 2009; Murray et al, 2010; Penfield, 2010; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Tanner & Combs, 1993; Van Breda, 2011). Recent data further supported that there is a potential disconnect between research and practice, and given that practitioners continue to repeat students, it might be advantageous for researchers to evaluate students’ lives post-retention (Gottfried, 2012). It is through the lens of academic resilience theory that this narrative inquiry presented the long overlooked stories of eight students retained in elementary school in order to explore the following research question: How did students’ experience with grade repetition in
elementary school shape their own understanding of their educational, social, and emotional life stories?

*Key words:* readiness, grade repetition, retention, social promotion, academic resilience, accountability
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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

Retention of students based on academic failure has been a common practice in American schools since the beginning of public education (Fager & Richen, 1999). Yet for over a hundred years, research has failed to support the efficacy of grade repetition as an intervention for the underperforming student (Ayres, 1909; Key, 2013; Range, Pijanowski, Holt, & Young, 2012; Warren & Saliba, 2012). Despite the preponderance of research suggesting grade repetition is of little use in remediating learning difficulties and its various documented detrimental consequences, practitioners continue to recommend this alternative for at-risk or low-performing students (Alexander et al., 2003; Anagnostopoulous, 2006; Bali, Anagnostopoulos, & Roberts, 2005; Burkam, LeGerfo, Ready, & Lee, 2007; Gottfried, 2012; Jimerson, Pletcher, Kerr, 2005; Martin, 2009; Murray et al., 2010; Penfield, 2010; Penna & Tallerico, 2005; Warren & Saliba, 2012; Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004).

Allen, Chen, Willson, and Hughes (2009) remind that attempting to study the effects of grade repetition on student outcomes with random assignment is neither feasible nor ethical, concluding that the most challenging issue facing grade repetition research is research design. For this reason grade repetition practices will never be subject to true scientific examination; therefore, it is impossible to determine how repeated children might have fared had they been promoted to the next grade (Burkam et al., 2007). Studying the personal perspective of the retained student and their proclivity towards academic resilience will supplement the research base and answer many raised questions. The addition of the personal perspective may better address: are outcomes due to placement or pre-existing vulnerabilities? However, if one looks deeply enough at the decades of reasons why one particular student was retained over another,
randomization is in reality, taking place. The effectiveness of grade repetition research has done little to embrace the insight from the student participants’ perspective in regard to placement decisions and the creation of grade repetition policies (Range et al., 2012).

Although the majority of educators believe grade repetition will raise students to grade level standards, prevent future failure, and maintain standards, research supports that often repeating a year does not achieve the desired result (Bocks, 1997; Range et al., 2012; Shepard & Smith, 1990). Varied longitudinal studies initiated by seminal researchers have debated results and research from the past ten years with no less controversial findings. Recent point in case, for over six years Gottfried (2012) employed a longitudinal study that included a sample of entire cohorts of students in an urban Philadelphia School. His unique results identified a spill-over effect in regard to student repetition and class placement. His study found that for the approximate 21% of students retained in the sample, post-retention reading and math results revealed that retained students had a lower rate of academic success when placed in classrooms with students of higher means and standard deviation in ability than did comparable peers placed in classrooms with lower means and standard deviations in ability. This suggested that there is a post-retention achievement gap in the performance of repeated students versus continuously promoted students; further supporting that over time the effects of grade repetition are not positive (Gottfried, 2012).

Over decades the bulk of respected grade repetition research has been quantitative and longitudinal in design. This research has concluded that the long term benefits of grade repetition on students’ academic achievement and socio-emotional adjustment did not outweigh its risks (Balfanz, 2014; Penfield, 2010; Reynolds, Magnuson, & Ou, 2010; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2010). In fact longitudinal studies have supported that it may be harmful (Bowman-
Perrott et al., 2010; Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Kowitz, & Armstrong, 1961; Penfield, 2010; Shepard & Smith, 1990). Studies have shown that retained students were most at-risk for dropping out of school before graduation and that retaining a student often undermined overall potential (Bowers, 2010; Guèvremont, Roos, & Brownell, 2007; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986; Ou & Reynolds; 2009; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1987; Penfield, 2010; Penna & Tallerico, 2005). As the literature revealed, an overwhelming amount of research demonstrated a global ineffectiveness of grade repetition on academic achievement (Chen, Liu, Zhang, Shi, & Rozelle, 2010; Greene & Winters, 2009; Lorence & Dworkin, 2006; McCombs, Kirby, & Mariano, 2009) and socioemotional outcomes (Anderson, Whipple, & Jimerson, 2002; Hong & Yu, 2008). However, very little research explored the personal experiences and effectiveness of repeated students. “Practitioners have not fully heeded the potential disadvantageous effects of retention found within some of the educational literature” (Gottfried, 2013, p. 193). Given the gap in literature and the inconsistencies in empirical research due to variable research designs (Allen et al., 2009; Burkham et al., 2007; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Wu et al., 2010), researchers might move forward by not only assessing the effects of grade repetition, but by also evaluating any post-repetition gains and losses based on a more detailed examination of the context of the retained student’s schooling (Gottfried, 2013). Therefore, the primary question guiding this study is: How did students’ experience with grade repetition in elementary school shape their own understanding of their educational, social, and emotional life stories?

Significance of the Problem

Decreasing graduation rates. John Hopkins University, America’s Promise Alliance, documented that in 1970 America’s graduation rate was 78%. In 1984, when the nation was
considered educationally at-risk, the graduation rate decreased to 74%. In 1994, the rate declined further to 73%, and in 2001, the beginning of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era, the graduation rate fell further, to 72% (Balfanz et al., 2010).

Through the work of Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007), it was revealed that students who drop out of high school exhibit strong predictive warning signs. They labeled these warning signs the ABCs of dropout: infrequent attendance, behavior infractions, and course failure. The ABCs are more predictive of dropout than socioeconomic factors and are predictive as early as the start of middle school. These results detailed the serious implications of placement decisions and indicated the need for a careful review of the warning signs so that processes, policies, and practices are altered to support the student and work to change dropout behaviors, earlier in their academic career.

Balfanz et al. (2010) reported that in 2008, at least one-fourth, or more than one million, of all public high school students, and close to 40 percent of minority students (African American, Hispanic, and Native American), continued to fail to graduate with their class every year. Additionally, they received lower education and employment ratings and were paid less per hour, compared to similar low achieving, but promoted peers (Jimerson, 1999). Since the 1970s graduation rates flat-lined with millions of students disconnecting from school, employment, and communities. With graduation data indicating at best a 50-50 proposition, awareness grew regarding the staggering dimensions of the problem. “The Grad Nation campaign emerged to set the common goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate by 2020, a Civic Marshall Plan (CMP) of action to meet it, and regular reports to remain accountable for both progress and challenge, so efforts could be strengthened over time” (DePaoli, Hornig Fox, Ingram, Maushard, Bridgeland, & Balfanz, 2015, p.3). Schools, districts, and states, for the first
time, were required to keep more students on pace to graduate and to demonstrate real progress each year in meeting these goals. Reforms at the state, district, and school level were driving improvement in progress (DePaoli et al., 2015). Grade repetition and its effects on the student population were factored into the overall educational picture. The literature on the predictors and effects of grade repetition is extensive and is agreed by many that understanding the early predictors of grade repetition is valuable (Davoudzadeh, McTernan, & Grimm, 2015).

**Societal costs of grade repetition.** The costs of grade repetition have bled into society in a variety of ways. Levin (2012) stated that “flunking” a student fails to boost short-term achievement, and research indicated that there is a significant positive correlation between grade repetition and decreased long-term achievement. Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, and Pagani (2008) asserted that dropping out of school is a process of gradual disengagement. Indeed, research suggested that repeating a grade in school has attributed to increased risks of high school dropout. Retained children become older underachievers, and a combination of over-age and low achievement are very powerful predictors for dropping out (Zimny, 2003).

**Financial costs.** The actual monetary expense of grade repetition remains extremely under estimated, is often overlooked, and in fact, is rarely pursued. Ironically, the cost of grade repetition does not appear as a line item in any educational budget (Shepard & Smith, 1990). It is logical that having a child repeat a year of schooling would cost that educational system an additional amount in funding. However, no one knows for sure what the national annual cost is to repeat a child. It is assumed that as the cost of living increases, so does the cost to educate children, and thereby the cost for those who repeat a year of school as well. One estimate by researchers, Ehmke, Dreschel, and Carstensen (2010) and Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) report that the national annual cost to educational systems for repeating a grade is over 14 billion
dollars, with little return in the child’s academics. The Massachusetts Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics, the statistical branch of the U.S. Department of Education, does not maintain information about the financial cost related to retaining students. When information was requested regarding the financial expense to retain students, Melissa King, Massachusetts State Aide Coordinator, School Finance, responded, “We don’t collect expenditure information categorized by whether the student has had to repeat a grade” (M. King, personal communication, February 10, 2014). Additionally, the U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, representative, Frank Johnson’s response to a written request for annual cost of retaining students was, “I asked several people here and none of them knew of any study on this. Sorry” (F. Johnson, personal communication, February 19, 2014). However, “the National Center for Education Statistics shows that in 23 states, districts serving the highest percentage of students from low-income families have fewer state and local dollars to spend per pupil than districts with fewer students in poverty” (DePaoli et al., 2015, p. 30).

In order to estimate the annual cost of retaining students in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the fiscal year, one would need to first calculate how many students are retained and then multiply by the average educational cost per student. The average cost per student is a figure agreed upon by municipalities and Massachusetts School Committees for budgetary purposes. This total is then added to the general expenditure for the entire population of students statewide (www.doe.mass.edu/finance/accounting/ppcost.html). Shepard and Smith (1990) argued that money spent to retain a child is better spent on other, more effective remediation alternatives.

**Individual costs.** The emotional costs to students of grade repetition were highlighted in Yamamoto’s (1980) study. This research postulated that repeating a grade caused certain
emotional stressors in a student’s life. It specifically emphasized the effect on a child’s self-esteem. Children reported that “wetting in class” or getting caught stealing was less stressful than repeating a grade. Yamamoto (1980) detailed that going blind or losing a parent were the only reported issues more stressful than repeating a grade. In follow up studies conducted by Anderson, Jimerson, and Whipple (2005) and Yamamoto and Byrnes (1987) grade retention was among the top three stressful events of sixth-grade students. The scars of early retention appeared to be long-lasting. Berliner and Casanova (1986) repeated Yamamoto’s (1980) research with post-high school students to determine whether their additional maturity had changed their view of no promotion. Berliner and Casanova (1986) asked students to rank the psychological trauma of fifteen different life experiences. The results were similar, although even stronger, than those of the earlier study: 95% of the young adults ranked being retained in elementary school as equivalent to losing a parent or going blind. Royce, Darlington, and Murray (1983) found that the stresses of repeating a grade and subsequently dropping out of school, increased the likelihood that retained students ended up unemployed, living on public assistance, or imprisoned.

**Longitudinal grade repetition research findings.** To look forward, in regard to the practice of grade repetition, one must first look back. The multitude of longitudinal research is not positive towards grade repetition as a practice. One such meta-analysis of 63 controlled studies where retained students were tracked and compared to socially promoted students, found that 54 of the studies exhibited overall negative effects from grade repetition, especially on measures of academic achievement (Shepard & Smith, 1990). This analysis corroborated, “that when retained students went on to the next grade they actually performed more poorly on average than if they had gone on without repeating” (Shepard & Smith, 1990, p. 84). Holmes
(1989) found similar results indicating that repeating a grade actually worsened achievement levels for those students in subsequent years. In addition, data analyzed from the Beginning School Study, a longitudinal study following children in Baltimore Public Schools, found that most retained students will be “off-time” for the rest of their school career (Alexander et al., 2003). Eight years later the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Position Statement (2011) admitted that there may be individual students who benefit from grade repetition, but little has been written to accurately predict which students will gain from repeating a grade, further attesting to the reality of randomization in the practice of grade repetition.

Researchers have long concluded that grade repetition negatively impacts students’ development academically, socially, and emotionally (Abidin, Golladay, & Howerton, 1971; Akbar, 1978; Bowman-Perrott et al., 2010; Goodlad, 1954; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Niklason, 1987; Ogbu, 1994; Reynolds, 1992; Shepard & Smith, 1990). Results from Alexander et al. (2003) discovered that, “Cognitive and affective development go hand in hand, … and retention could affect both children’s intellectual growth and their socio-emotional functioning” (p.33). The Harvard Education Letter (1986) recounted that repeating a grade is detrimental to the social and emotional development of boys and girls. The Letter also suggested that grade repetition could impair self-esteem or undermine confidence. From the beginning of its practice researchers have agreed that grade repetition is often associated with undesirable school attitudes and socio-emotional behaviors (Gadeyne, Onghena, & Ghesquière, 2008; Goodlad, 1954; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Penfield, 2010; Wu et al., 2010). Cryan (1985) pointed out that academically retained children often spend the next forty weeks redoing the same work. Similarly, C. Peterson, Maier, and Seligman (1993) found that grade retention
sapped control from students and coerced them to disengage and actually give up, so that they did not attempt to avoid future failures.

In 1978, Lloyd’s longitudinal study monitored 788 boys and 744 girls from grade six through graduation or dropout to determine if there was a correlation between dropping out of school and early school failure. He started his exploration by using the students’ third grade data to identify sixth grade participants. Through the course of his research, Lloyd found that the third grade data was instrumental in identifying who might later drop out of school. His data identified seven out of every ten dropouts from the collected third grade information. These findings allowed him to argue that grade repetition in the first three grades can be a determinate for later school failure (Lloyd, 1978). These results were also supported by a study completed about ten years later by Grissom and Shepard (1989). In their three large-scale, longitudinal studies, which included 20,000 to 80,000 students each, they found that students who repeated a year were twenty to thirty percent more likely to drop out of school. This practice was not, however, limited to urban school districts (Grissom & Shepard, 1989). Shepard and Smith (1990) added to the literature, “A substantial increased risk for dropping out after repeating a grade was found even in a large affluent suburban school district with only a four percent dropout rate” (p. 85). Kerckhoff (1993) and Kerckhoff, Haney, and Glennie (2001) documented that placement on a particular educational path was determinant of the student’s final educational outcome. These findings supported Bernardi (2014) in his research. He found that the current level of accumulation of a given resource, such as cognition, educational functioning, socioeconomic status, and health, directly affected its future level. He concluded that, “Cumulative disadvantage explains a pattern of growing inequality over time, when the current level of a given resource has casual effects on accumulation of future resources” (Bernardi, 2014,
Additionally, a longitudinal study by Davoudzadeh et al. (2015), which included a nationally represented sample of children in grades kindergarten through eighth, concluded that students who are repeated in school are more likely to suffer from depressive symptoms and eventually drop out of school. This study complemented the early literature by finding that early school readiness predictors were the most significant in predicting a grade repetition. However, this study added a new concept to the existing literature by finding that at the child-level when readiness predictors were controlled for, previously established risk factors for grade retention actually became protective factors (Davoudzadeh et al., 2015).

**Contradictory longitudinal research findings.** There are also views from the other side of the debate which reported findings of benefit in regard to the practice of grade repetition. A four-year, longitudinal study completed by Wu, West, and Hughes (2008) implied that if the purpose for repeating a child is a one-time adjustment in the academic pathway, then students who are repeated in first grade are more likely to pass statewide criterion-referenced tests than they would have had they been promoted to second grade. Their findings challenged years of empirical research that grade repetition is harmful to students’ future academic performance. In the context of high stakes testing and the growing establishment of promotional gates for the practice of grade repetition, retention in the early grades may in fact increase a student’s chance of meeting academic challenges in subsequent grades (Wu et al., 2008).

Hong and Yu (2007) suggested that early-grade retention may benefit students only if schools adapted curricula and instruction to meet those particular students’ developmental level, as opposed to asking students to repeat the year utilizing the same materials. Just as important, at-risk students who were promoted may suffer in their later learning years if schools do not attend to their special needs at the time of a suggested grade repetition. Kaplan and Owings
(2001) suggested that low student performance was better served when educators employed the “monitor–adjust–teach” method. This more effectively answered individual needs because as decades of research had proven, the answers were not found in grade repetition, fancy pre-scripted programs, or assessment alone. Karweit (1988) maintained that to ensure learning takes place, students must be actively engaged in the process. The quality of instruction must be high, and the instruction must match the learner’s needs because students did not benefit from an additional year waiting to mature or a frustrating, boring, extra year in the same grade (Karweit, 1988).

In a four year, longitudinal study, Wu et al. (2008) found that same-grade comparisons are more likely to indicate benefits of grade repetition, at least for the short term, than are same-age comparisons. Additionally, according to the American Federation of Teachers (1997), promoting children to the next grade unprepared, clearly sets them up for future failure, as well as poses challenges for their teachers. The study of Davoudzadeh et al. (2015) offered that once school readiness and academic skills were accounted for, teachers, schools, and policy makers had a more direct target when assessing at-risk students and were better informed as to where and how to implement appropriate interventions.

The results of Pierson and Connell’s (1992) study suggested that when compared to social promotion, grade repetition for students in the early years was not harmful to a student’s general self-worth or to perceived relations with peers. Moreover, repetition was beneficial to these students’ academic performance. This study supported the belief that grade repetition is a potentially effective remediation strategy for those experiencing academic difficulties in the early elementary school grades.
Of the many studies on grade repetition that exist, Dong (2010) found that kindergarten students academically performed better than they would have had they been socially promoted. However, he also noted that holding students back in kindergarten did exhibit diminishing academic performance effects up to third grade.

Voices and studies from within the academic community have consistently weighed in, both positively and negatively, on the practice of grade repetition (Alexander et al., 2003). Yet as the literature shows, the voices of those who have lived the experience have often been overlooked (Golding, Dent, Nissim, & Stott, 2006). Additionally, Penna and Tallerico (2005) reported that the literature base neglects to provide a balance of the immediate and longer-term emotional reactions in response to these academic setbacks or the peer pressures conjured up by repeating a grade.

To that end, this study will focus on the experiences of participants retained at the elementary school level guided by the following research question: *How did students’ experience with grade repetition in elementary school shape their own understanding of their educational, social, and emotional life stories?*

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in a qualitative study offers a vehicle that expands analysis in a way that the data cannot provide alone (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). Often considered a problem for the qualitative researcher, Wolcott (1995) said that, “theory offers strategies to cope with the dual problem of purpose and generalization” (p. 189). Theory and paradigm sustain the design of the study by not only providing labels, categories, and vernacular, but also supporting expressions and comparisons of the phenomena. The two opposing concepts help develop a thick description transferable to broader applications. A theoretical framework and a paradigm...
help clarify and organize data and provide the necessary lens to better detect and identify biases brought by the researcher to the research experience (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). Anfara and Mertz (2006) additionally claimed that, “A theoretical framework has the ability to (1) focus a study, (2) reveal and conceal meaning and understanding, (3) situate the researcher in a scholarly conversation and provide a vernacular, and (4) reveal its strengths and weaknesses” (p. 192).

This research design derived from and expanded the present literature base.

Resilience is typically defined as the capacity to spring back from setbacks, rebound or adapt in the face of adversity, learn from failure, develop social, academic, and vocational competence, and believe in your own abilities to deal with severe stress and difficulties in life (Fraser, Galinsky, & Richman 1999; Garmezy, 1991; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; NASP, 2010). Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) referred to resilience as the “capacity for or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (p. 425). Resilience is often used to describe the ability to recover from exposure to chronic or acute stress (Ungar, 2012) and has been identified by educators as critical for helping an individual adapt and succeed despite risk and adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Resilience is akin to playing a bad hand well: focusing more on what one can do with the cards dealt, as opposed to obsessing over the poor cards in one’s hand (Henderson & Milstein, 2003).

Academically resilient students are defined as those “who sustain high levels of achievement motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out” (Alva, 1991, p.19). The structure of the social environment exerts a strong influence on a child’s behavior and is crucial in shaping attitudes and positive approaches to educational learning (Boorn, Hopkins Dunn, & Page, 2010).
**Resilience and its origins.** Resilience as a field of study is not a new concept. Masten et al. (1990) asserted that the scientific study of resilience emerged around 1965. During this time pioneering researchers kept coincidently finding examples of successful development in children labeled at-risk. The findings raised questions as well as offered striking consistencies.

The study of resilience came into prevalence in the 1970s when researchers began to notice adaptations among subgroups of children who were at-risk for developing later psychopathology (Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013). Goldstein and Brooks (2013) declared that the best predictor of positive outcomes for at-risk individuals were not addressed by the relief of their symptoms, but required an understanding, appreciation, and nurturance of the individual’s strengths and assets. In order to correct the inconsistently applied construct of resilience across disciplines, and to better allow its use for heterogeneous levels of analyses, resilience became defined as, “The capacity of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development” (Masten, 2001, p. 494).

In the 1980s the term resilience appeared with greater frequency in the psychological sciences and became “a metaphor for the ability of individuals to recover from exposure to chronic and acute stress” (Ungar, 2012, p. 13). The resilience research increasingly indicated that protective factors were much more predictive of positive results than risk factors were predictive of negative results (Benard, 2004; Werner & Smith, 1992); and it was this belief that led to a shift in the resilience literature from work focused on identifying risk factors to studies focused on identifying protective factors (Benard, 2004; Masten et al., 1990). The groundbreaking work of Rutter (1987) and others like him (Garmezy, 1973; Werner & Smith, 1992, 2001), shifted the understanding of resilience. Rutter’s (1987) work changed the concept
from looking at “individual traits that predict coping under stress, to processes that included reducing risk exposure, developing adequate self-esteem, preventing the negative impact of risk factors on developmental trajectories, and opening new opportunities for development by shaping the child’s environment” (cited in Ungar, 2012, p. 14). Educators can no longer overlook the positive assets of children when making decisions regarding their ability and potential (Masten, 1997). Masten (1997) indicated the most important individual qualities were normal cognitive development, good attention skills, and “street smarts.” Benard (1993) summarized the literature on the resilient child as one who “works well, plays well, loves well, and expects well” (p. 44).

Resilience theory, therefore believes that individual assets are distinguished from resiliency. Resiliency is the active engagement in productive processes that promote well-being even if disorder is present. It is through changes to social structures that assets interact with levels of disorder and lead to changes in the developmental pathway (Ungar, 2012).

The potential for disorder is still there, but the adapted social ecology changes the likelihood negative qualities get expressed. An intervention that assesses only assets and not risk is likely to miss the complex interchange in which assets become protective factors and contribute to what is understood as patterns of behavior associated with resilience when risk is present. (Ungar, 2012, p. 17)

Goldstein and Brooks (2013) research put forward that the best predictor of positive outcomes lay not in the relief of symptoms, but in the understanding, appreciation, and nurturing of individual strengths and assets developed within the environment. Ungar’s (2012) research through the Resilience Research Centre at Dalhousie University in Canada explored culturally and contextually sensitive ways to show that the resilience of an individual growing up in
challenging contexts or facing significant adversity is far more likely dependent on the quality of their social and physical environments than on their personality traits, cognitions, or talents. The process oriented arguments of Lerner (2006) and Rutter (1987) showed that environments, or ecologies (Ungar, 2012), count a great deal more than thought during investigation of antecedents for positive coping after exposure to adversity. This led many resilience researchers to the belief that “nurture trumps nature when it comes to explaining why many children do well despite the odds stacked against them” (Ungar, 2012, p. 1). Ungar’s research discovered that lives and the way they are lived, socially and physically, help to make resilience possible. Therefore, it stands to reason that resilience not be viewed as a trait, but rather as a “dynamic developmental process” (Luthar, et al., 2000, p. 546). Masten’s research (2001) contended that resilience, even in the most severe cases, can be developed. Ungar (2102) consequently detailed an “expression of resilience that defines it as a set of behaviours [sic] over time that depends on the opportunities that are available and accessible to individuals, their families and communities” (p. 3). It is the quality of the resources available and the meaningfulness of opportunities which increase the likelihood that interactions will promote well-being and resilience (Ungar, 2012).

**Resilience and its seminal researchers.** Resilience as a concept emerged primarily from the work of Norman Garmezy, Ruth Smith, and Emmy Werner (Johnson & Wiechelt, 2004). One of the most cited resilience studies began in 1955 with Werner and Smith. They conducted a longitudinal study of 698 children born into poverty on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. The lives of the individuals were assessed at birth, infancy, early and middle childhood, late adolescence, and adulthood. At a time when running water and electricity were privileges for many, Werner and Smith found that approximately two-thirds of the children growing up in this impoverished environment eventually developed serious problems as adults. However, they
also noted that the remaining one-third developed and matured into competent and caring adults (Werner & Smith, 1992, 2001). The value for resilience in this study was the striking differences in outcomes given the fact that these children grew up in similar environments. From this research came the description of three different groups of resilient individuals: those from high-risk groups who overcame the odds and actually achieved better than expected, those who adapted well despite ongoing stressful experiences and, those who recovered from a single traumatic event (Brackenreed, 2010; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 1994; Masten et al., 1990). These findings also gave further credence to the resilience language of risk and protective factors (Johnson & Wiechelt, 2004).

Masten (1994) described risk as something that hinders normal functioning. For most people it leads to distress and to potentially negative outcomes. Werner and Smith (2001) categorized the risks in their study as: chronic and severe poverty, lack of maternal education, family instability, single parenthood, or significant health and physical problems. For those in this study, these risks led to problems in adolescence and adulthood, such as: teenage pregnancy, learning problems, delinquency, and mental health problems. The study found that when risks were combined the effects were even more deleterious (Werner & Smith, 2001). Because risk factors are not uniform, they can have differential effects and studies have indicated, could lead to adverse effects that vary by gender (Johnson & Wiechelt, 2004). However, Werner and Smith’s data on resilience showed that many children can overcome adverse environmental circumstances and experience healthy, productive lives with the help of protective factors (Werner & Smith, 1992, 2001). Three types of protective factors were identified that shaped much of the resilience research to date. The protective factors include: individual attributes,

Garmezy’s (1973) earliest work in the Project Competence study is recognized by identifying the two conditions necessary for resilience: exposure to stress and successful adaptation despite it (Masten & Tellegen, 2012). Garmezy’s (1973) study was cross-sectional and longitudinal, encompassing 205 children from urban Minneapolis. The children ranged in age from 8-12 and participated in three separate follow-ups after 7, 10, and 20 years (Masten, Powell, & Luthar, 2003). Garmezy (1973) also discussed the three overarching protective factor categories: individual attributes, family qualities, and supportive systems outside the family (cited in Masten et al, 2003).

Rutter (1979), another important resilience researcher, studied ten-year-old children on the Isle of Wright and inner city London. His work focused on why some children living with extreme stress and multiple risk factors, experienced positive development, while others did not. By separating children into groups according to the amount of risk factors, Rutter found that for every risk factor added, the probability of developing maladaptive behavior was four times as great when one risk factor increased to two. This research also helped to define four main processes that protect against risk and adversity: “1) reduction of risk impact, 2) reduction of negative chain reactions, 3) establishment and maintenance of self-esteem and self-efficacy, and 4) opening up of opportunities” (Rutter, 1979, p. 316). Rutter’s research also concluded that protective factors play an important role in mitigating risk factors.

Masten (2001) challenged the realization that resilient individuals are ordinary people. In fact from a systems perspective, Masten believed that resilience might actually emerge from normative function in human adaptation, and unhealthy outcomes are the anomaly. Henderson
and Milstein (2003) challenged that, “The process of resiliency development is, in fact, the process of life, given that all people must overcome stress and trauma and disruption in the process of living” (p. 4).

Through the work of these early researchers, and the continuation of others like them, resilience has become more widely accepted as the positive outcome of adverse events that result from the interaction of risk and protective factors within the context of the individual, the family and their environment (Garmezy, 1973; Rutter, 1979; Werner & Smith, 1992, 2001).

**Resilience and protective factors.** As a result of Rutter’s (1979) shift to resilience as viewed as protective factors as opposed to risk factors, optimism and hope came to replace frustration and despair as a popular resilience concept (Kumpfer, 2002). Bernard (2004) found that when studying the high-risk population, risk factors were predictive of negative outcomes in less than half of the individuals, whereas protective factors were predictive of positive outcomes for up to 80% of the same population. Additionally, “the more predictive factors present in a child’s life, the more likely they are to display resilience” (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999, p.310). Bernard (2004) described these protective factors as one’s environment, family, school, and community.

Resilience research identified that protective factors and their processes foster academic resilience in children (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). Protective factors enabled children to persevere, allowing them to become less vulnerable and therefore, more resilient (Garmezy, 1983; Mandleco, 2000; Rutter, 1987). Benard (1991, 1993) explained that children who overcame adversity possessed specific characteristics. Waxman et al. (2003) added that the resilient student exhibited both social and academic competence, strong problem solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose for their future. These protective factors buffered children
from adversity and threatening conditions (Bondy & McKenzie, 1999). Researchers detailed that enhancing protective factors in the school environment acted as a sustainable intervention for those students at-risk of school failure (Benard, 1993; Joseph & Joseph, 2001; Katz, 1994).

**Resilience and academics.** The theoretical framework for this investigation, Academic Resiliency Theory, is defined by the ability of an individual to effectively deal with an academic setback, stress, or pressure (Martin & Marsh, 2003). Academic resilience is also “defined as a set of positive behaviours [sic] over time that reflect the interactions between individuals and their environments, in particular the opportunities for personal growth that are available and accessible” (Ungar, 2012, p. 14). Wang et al. (1994) defined academic resilience this way: “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (p. 46). Academically resilient students “sustain high levels of achievement motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out” (Alva, 1991, p.19).

Ungar (2012) claimed that academic resilience was characterized by the adaptation of a system during or following significant disturbances and that an understanding of the individual’s developmental history was a fundamental part of the broader context for resilience. This study explored if this statement held true for the eight repeated participants in their life experiences.

Martin and Marsh (2006) found that students with academic resilient traits tend to meet success in the face of adversity, while other students do not and continue to perform poorly. Over the last two or three decades this field of study has become broader, and resilience studies have been addressed more frequently by social workers, sociologists, educators, and policy makers (Van Breda, 2011). Examining individual experiences of students through the lens of
academic resilience theory identified resources made available to students, because, “… in a sense, we take our environments with us wherever we go” (Stanley, 2008).

The literature of Henderson and Milstein (2003) stated that simple ordinary stresses of life may doom people to psychopathologies or further the cycle of poverty, abuse, educational failure, or violence. According to the research of Fraser et al. (1999), “If we can understand what helps some people to function well in the context of high adversity we may be able to incorporate this knowledge into new practice strategies” (p. 136).

Ungar (2012) believed that to achieve one’s maximum potential, children require a good education, a sense of love and belonging, a decent standard of living, good parenting, intelligence, and an opportunity to contribute. He maintained that exposure to adverse vulnerability factors, such as low SES, poor parental education, a large family, low self-esteem, poor parenting, family breakdown, illness, or special needs play a much larger role for the child than their individual academic and social capacity. Ungar (2010) believed that most children will do well when the right resources are applied and the stressors removed or decreased because individual capacity is less important than the quality of a child’s social ecology. A specific application of academic resilience was recommended by the study of Davoudzadeh et al. (2015) where the outcome took educational steps to turn risk factors into protective factors.

Every child’s life will at some point be touched by setbacks; no one is exempt (Grotberg, 1995; NASP, 2010). Grotberg (1995) forewarned that, “With resilience, children can triumph over trauma; without it, trauma (adversity) triumphs” (p.11). For students it becomes vital that schools teach children how to approach life, and its events, with resilience (NASP, 2010) because as Werner and Smith (1988) supported, schools are the most prominent social context in which children develop and mature. Therefore, it is imperative that schools become replete with
opportunities in which children are nurtured. For this reason, resilience research is particularly relevant for schools because it reveals a shift in the way our educational institutions should be structured and a manner in which they need to foster resilience in all its members (Bondy & McKenzie, 1999). As Ungar (2010) declared, resilience solutions should not take on a student-focus, but should rather seek to make changes in the student’s social ecology.

The research of Werner and Smith (1988) affirmed that next to family, teachers were the most positive role models in the life of a child and so consequently, how educators make decisions make a difference in the outcomes students face. Henderson (1998) argued that developing a “resiliency attitude” was the critical first step to fostering resiliency in schools. This attitude involved searching for, nurturing, and reinforcing signs of resilience in a child. Educators needed to let children know through verbal and nonverbal communication that they acknowledged their risks, stresses, and problems, and that together they would find a way for that child to bounce back. Boorn et al. (2010) posited that educational institutions should aim to embed nurturing principles into every day practice. The heart of nurturing principles is in developing consistent, caring relationships during early childhood.

Hawkins and Catalano (1990) suggested three main strategies that mitigate risk factors and move children toward resilience: (1) increased bonding; (2) clear and consistent set boundaries; and (3) life skills instruction. Benard (1991) synthesized these findings to add three additional steps: (4) provide caring and support; (5) set and communicate high expectations; and (6) provide opportunities for meaningful participation. These positive influences were well documented for healthy child development. These six approaches led to stronger positive self-concepts, greater attachment to school, a belief in rules, and higher standardized test scores. Employing these approaches also resulted in decreased delinquency, drug use, and school
suspensions (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). By implementing these protective factors and nurturing principles, schools were better able to develop and maintain a healthy lifestyle for at-risk students.

A small set of crucial protective factors are important for human development (Masten, 1994; Masten et al. 1990) and Ainsworth (1989) found that the most important protective factor was a competent, caring, pro-social adult. Stanley (2008) added that the roles of teachers and parents directly related to positive outcomes for children. A positive teacher-student attachment must be protective and near effortlessly reinforced resilient behaviors through the explicit pointing out and complimenting of students’ behaviors (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Benard (n.d.) reported that the power of the teacher-student relationship can tip the scale from risk to resilience. Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008) maintained that fostering educational institutions that only focused on developing academic competencies, while ignoring the role of interpersonal relationships in educational attainment, performed a huge disservice to future generations of learners. They detailed that it was essential that both parents and teachers received the support required to develop positive interpersonal relationships with children. These relationships are important for all children’s educational success, not just those considered at-risk (Englund et al., 2008). Masten (2001) claimed, “Resilience in children and students comes from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources” (p. 235). All children benefited from attachments to responsive and responsible adults outside the family, and these attachments were especially important for at-risk children. A school’s high level of truancy often represents failure because the teacher-student relationship was not a priority. School suspensions also were a formal process of disconnecting teachers from their students. These
strategies break, not build, teacher-student relationships. They were reactive and alienated the students that teachers were trying hardest to reach (Stanley, 2008).

Benard (1996) claimed that it was the resilient individual who exhibited social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, a sense of purpose, and a belief in a bright future. Benard (1991) believed all people are born with resilience, but that it is not a fixed attribute. Howard et al. (1999) and Rutter (1987) stated that children can be more or less resilient at different times in their life. Benard (1991) posited that all children have the capacity to develop resilient characteristics and that it is the job of educators to move beyond the focus on “risk factors” in order to create conditions that facilitate healthy development. Children need to learn how to overcome the risks they face. High expectations not only communicated firm guidance, structure, and challenge, but also conveyed a belief in the child’s natural resilience. These methods promoted strengths and assets rather than identified problems and deficits in the individual.

Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) posited that self-esteem was all important for children, and acted both as a protective factor and as an outcome of resilience. Individuals with high self-esteem were reported to be more resilient in the face of adversity, and children who survived adversity were more likely to emerge with higher self-esteem. Academic resilience, therefore offered rich implications for how educators can help build self-esteem and respond in other ways to young individuals and their specific developmental needs.

Oswald, Johnson, and Howard (1999) found that teachers’ beliefs were the vital ingredients in relationship and resilience building. Luthar (2006) stated that, “Resilience rests fundamentally on relationships. The desire to belong is a basic human need, and positive connections with others lie at the very core of psychological development; strong supportive
relationships are critical for achieving and sustaining adaption” (p. 760). Noddings (1988) posited that children work harder and complete things they would not normally complete for people they love and trust. Masten’s (1994) work simply stated that if educators hoped to create socially competent people with a sense of their own identity and efficacy, an ability to make their own decisions, set goals, and believe in their own future, than educators must meet a student’s basic human needs. These needs consist of: caring, connectedness, respect, challenge, power, and meaning as a primary focus of any educational or youth development effort. Therefore, to promote motivation, education must move beyond its fixation with content and move towards a focus on context; fostering resilience is a process, not a program (Rutter, 1987).

Henderson’s (1998) work developed a list of characteristics which facilitated resilience: giving oneself to others in service, using life skills, being assertive, having a sense of impulse control, problem solving ability, friendliness, forming positive relationships, sense of humor, positive outlook, and flexibility, capacity for learning, self-motivation, personal competence, self-worth, and self-confidence. This study concluded that most of these characteristics can be learned and should be promoted in schools, with the goal of building protective factors to offset the impact of stressful events.

Hupfeld’s (2007) research established that resilience-based programs have been effective in preventing high school dropout. Such programs supported students in ways that help them develop the skills and relationships necessary to succeed inside and outside the classroom (Hupfeld, 2007). Through the Project Resilience study, researchers identified seven common themes for resilience: insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality. This list enumerated behaviors that children can learn and practice in school; skills that help them achieve success beyond the classroom walls (Bickart & Wolin, 1997).
Zimmerman and Arunkumar (1994) reported that school-based dropout prevention programs were dominated by a deficit model focused on individual lack of capacity or problematic SES (Bernardi, 2014; Davoudzadeh et al., 2015). This model targeted at-risk groups and often became a self-fulfilling prophecy for students, (e.g., “This kid is doomed”). Attitudes such as this did not lead to resilience (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). However, at-risk research was limited because it did not clearly indicate cause versus effect: was school failure the cause or the result of a problem? (Henderson, 1998). Henderson argued that our decision making needs “a corrective lens--an awareness of the self-righting tendencies that move children toward normal adult development under all but the most adverse circumstances” (p.2). She claimed that characteristics of resilience can be found in everyone and instructed that we must pursue resilient characteristics as diligently as we combat at-risk behaviors (Henderson, 1998). As resilience researchers have done, so too must educators focus more on student strengths rather than on student deficits. Benard (1993) reminded that “looking at children and families through a deficit lens obscures a recognition of their capacities and strengths, as well as their individuality and uniqueness” (n.p.). Family therapist, Walsh (2006), has shown that a “resilience lens shifts perspective from viewing distressed families as damaged to seeing them as challenged, affirming their potential for repair and growth” (p. 3-4). Indeed, it is the interaction between biology and environment that builds capacity to cope with adversity and overcome threats to healthy development (Bernard, 1993).

Considering a child’s academic resilience and stage of development, as well as past school and peer group influences, will benefit a child’s sense of cohesion and efficacy in the educational setting (Ungar, 2012). Changing the status quo means shifting the paradigm. Personally and professionally, educators need to move from risk factors to protective factors,
from control to participation, from problem-solving to positive development, from seeing youths as problems to seeing them as resources, from institution-building to community-building, in short we must move towards resilience (Sergiovanni, 1993).

Educators want to make the best decisions for children as they develop and grow (Ungar, 2012). To do so, educators must examine the environment to identify if it actually fosters the development of the child by not “blaming the victim” or attempting to “fix the child” (Berliner & Casanova, 1986; Winfield, 1994). Students labeled at-risk enter a vicious cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy (Benard, 1993). To avoid the cycle, educators must consistently maximize opportunities for student success by individualizing tasks, addressing students’ beliefs about themselves and their academic capacities, enhancing their internal belief system (Bandura, 1997), and by helping them develop skills in effective goal setting (Locke & Latham, 2002).

Martin and Marsh (2006) proclaimed that specific, targeted activities can lead to success and enhance one’s self-efficacy. Effective educators encouraged students to set goals and demonstrated how to achieve them. They provided effective and consistent feedback and taught important strategies to enhance students’ persistence, planning, control, and management. In the end, these strategies promoted coping skills and provided a clear pathway for students to improve (Martin & Marsh, 2006). Ungar (2012) taught that coping is critical: “How well young people cope and whether they achieve developmental milestones is highly dependent on the resources available--the relational, material, emotional, and practical supports available across the domains in which they participate” (p. 250).

**Academic resilience in practice.** In their study of motivation and academic resilience, Martin and Marsh (2003) found that academic resilience is comprised of four qualities: confidence (a sense of self-belief), control, composure (low anxiety), and commitment
(persistence). These qualities have serious implications for future pedagogy (Weisz, Weiss, Han, Granger, & Morton, 1995). Stanley (2008) found academic intervention should be strategically delivered as well as reflective of best practices, supported by replicable research. A simple first intervention at the primary level was to build positive parent relationships. The first parental contact should not be centered on problems or deficits. By involving families early, interventions empowered them and helped to make sense of a situation, rather than become a time perceived as the placing of blame (Reid & Eddy, 2002).

Targeting students’ emotional, social, and decision-making skills boosted their ability to stay focused in the classroom and improved school bonding, thereby affording a greater likelihood of increased academic performance. Breaking schoolwork into smaller components enabled challenged children to meet smaller successes, which lead to bigger successes and a true sense of accomplishment (McInerney, 2000). Smaller workload components and specific planning on how to complete each step encouraged the student to persist, overcome obstacles, and maintain motivation. Individualized and differentiated tasks presented challenges that met the child’s individual capabilities. These successes increased the child’s self-esteem. Students taught effective study strategies learned that hard work pays off. Reviewing study skills in class, providing lesson objective choices, setting grading criteria, offering due dates, and providing constructive feedback built the student’s sense of control, self-esteem, and motivation. Additionally, McInerney (2000) encouraged setting goals and demonstrating how students could reach them. Qin, Johnson, and Johnson (1995) also recommended promoting a climate of cooperation, self-improvement, and personal best for reducing student anxiety. Covington (1992) suggested characterizing mistakes as the springboard to success and not as a reflection of
inferior self-worth. By promoting personal progress, rather than outperforming peers, teachers reduced setbacks, stress, and pressure at school.

Finally, Henderson and Milstein (1996) insisted that it is impractical to expect students to be resilient if their teachers are not. Resilient teachers possessed a strong sense of competence, efficacy, and optimism that empowered their students. Ungar (2012) argued that a school environment that promoted attachment and maintained that attachment, contributed to a positive development regardless of the risks the child faced. Resilience depended on the quality of the environment and its capacity to meet specific needs of vulnerable individuals (Ungar, 2012).

Stanley’s (2008) research found that a student’s progress at school was dependent on his or her wellbeing; therefore, teachers must take a larger, more inclusive view of their responsibilities towards students. When young people were diserved in school, society bore the consequences in the form of violence, insecurity, disorder, and paid the costs of remedial actions, such as special education, social welfare, treatment centers, or prison. Academic resilience does not require new roles for educators, but does encourage a more empathetic and empowering approach focused on skilled strategies appropriate for families faced with the present day realities of stress (Stanley, 2008). In order to see the strengths in our children, educators first need to recognize their own strengths (Benard 1993). Educators must look beyond student risks to see student resilience, and by doing so acknowledge their own inner resilience. Masten (1997) concluded that the study of resilience offered both hope and guidance to those seeking to improve child development. The challenge for the educator is to successfully apply the lessons discovered during naturally occurring resilience to change the path for students who exhibit little resilience without intervention.
Resilience theory came into existence because researchers had to acknowledge that no matter how severe the adversity, there was a high percentage of individuals who were able to overcome acute stress and rise above disadvantage (Rutter, 1979). It was through this theory and a better understanding of why some people do well despite hardship, that policies and programs were informed to help the disadvantaged reach their full potential. Resilience as an approach can be promoted (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Many researchers now believe that the time has come to consider resilience the fourth “R” of education alongside reading, writing, and arithmetic (NASP, 2010).

Researchers have also come to accept that there are two conditions that must be met when defining the phenomenon of resilience. Wright et al. (2013) defined them as: (1) a significant threat to an individual’s development, or adaptation, and (2) despite this exposure to threat or risk, the result for the individual or system is satisfaction. Stanley (2008) maintained that the resilience framework and its protective factors follow in the footsteps of Piaget, Vygotsky, and others, because resilience implies individuals are capable of having dynamic or interactive relationships with their environments and are able to successfully modify their social settings. Oswald et al. (1999) further described that the developmental perspective of the resilience framework and protective factors can be broken down into internal and external assets: internal assets which involve personal attributes and qualities, as well as biological and psychological factors, and external assets which refer to family, peers, school, and community (Benard, 1995; Kumpfer, 2002; Oswald et al., 1999). Gilligan (2000) added that a positive school influence had a very important role in promoting a student’s protective factors.

Overview of Methods
Given the gap in the grade repetition research, a qualitative, narrative inquiry methodology design offered the missing perspective of the retained participant’s story. A qualitative method allowed the researcher to become deeply involved in order to “explore and understand the inner world of individuals” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 7). The narrative offered stories through verbal accounts and detailed as presented from the individuals own experiences (Lieblich et al., 1998). Narrative inquiry initiated a process of discovery where data drove much of the research and the participants helped process and integrate experiences into larger life stories (Riesmann, 1993).

The narrative approach provided a comprehensive description from eight retained students situated within the common context of a Massachusetts public school system and was selectively chosen because they were bound by this similar event.

The use of a narrative inquiry framework permitted exploration of “the mental realm, and functioned to organize elements of awareness into meaningful episodes” (Polkinghorne, 1998, p.1). These meaningful episodes were assembled via in-depth, personal interviews with students retained in grade school, and whenever possible, their families and specific educators. The collected personal narratives provided the research data for this study, building the primary source from which conclusions were drawn. The data offered both participants and researcher the introspection crucial to making sense of the experience (Riessman, 2008).

**Definition of Key Terms**

The definitions provided below are of the key terms used in this study. Most of the definitions are agreed upon in the research literature and are cited from the researcher whose definition most correlated to this study.
**Academic Failure.** The inability to achieve grade level benchmarks or milestones as measured by formative or summative assessments which may be grade-level, school-level, or system based (Jimerson, Pletcher, Graydon, Schnurr, Nickerson, & Kundert, 2006).

**Academic red-shirting.** Defined as the postponement of a child’s admission into primary school (Bakanlığı, 2011). These children are usually from the middle class and born in the late months of the calendar year (Alexander et al., 2003).

**Academic Resilience.** The ability to effectively deal with setback, stress, or pressure in the academic setting (Martin & Marsh, 2003).

**At-risk.** A concept that reflects a chance or a probability, often used to describe a student performing below grade level benchmarks. Children defined at-risk may have a variety of indicators, such as: limited reading proficiency, experience with abuse or trauma, a disability or illness, or exhibited behavior problems. Measures often include poverty, low level of parental education, a large number of children, single parenthood, living in a rented home, welfare dependence, family dysfunction, substance abuse, or family discord (Moore, Vandivere, & Redd, 2006; Rak & Patterson, 1996; United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1997).

**Dropout.** Leaving school at least once for an extended period prior to graduation, either temporarily or permanently (Alexander et al., 2003).

**Educational Accountability.** The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 orders schools to ensure that 100% of students test at levels identified as proficient by the year 2014. Progress towards this goal is mandated for each year. Annual accountability test scores are set for every school that are said to constitute ‘Adequate Yearly Progress.’ Results include all subgroups of students. In addition the law includes another set of requirements to ensure all
students receive education from ‘highly qualified teachers.’ The stated goals are to improve achievement and enhance equity (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

ESSA. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is a reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The goal of ESSA is to maintain the original law’s intent of advancing equity and opportunity for all students and will continue to require accountability and support for struggling schools.

Grade Repetition. The practice of holding a child back to repeat a particular grade level for a second year (Fager & Richen, 1999).

Grade Retention. A practice that requires a student who has been in a given grade for a full school year to remain at the level for a subsequent year. It is also called being held back, repeating a grade, or the opposite of social promotion (Jackson, 1975).

High Stakes Assessments. “…have become the primary vehicles for measuring student progress” (Duffy, Giordano, Farrell, Paneque, & Crump, 2008, p.53). High-stakes assessments include mandated testing of students at established points during their school career. It includes testing and evaluation of teachers; and the assessment of teaching methods, programs of study, curricula, and the school as a whole. Mandated assessments are required by local, state, and/or federal authority. High-stakes means that the assessments have direct and significant consequences for all parties as results determine promotion, retention, or graduation (Duffy et al., 2008).

Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). “The Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a written document required for each child who is eligible to receive special education services. It is provided to a student who has been determined first to have a disability and, second, to need special education services because of that disability. The IEP, the team that
develops it, and what it contains is governed by Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and amendments. The IEP provides information on children's current levels of performance and directs the special services and supports that are provided to students who have IEPs. It includes provisions for defining annual goals, evaluating progress, and formalizing what is to be a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for the student with the disability (http://www.education.com/reference/article/individualized-education-program-iep1/).

**Promotion.** Passing, or moving on, from one grade to another at the end of the academic school year (Martin, 2011).

**Promotion Policy.** The adopted guide of several large public school systems that sets a test-based criteria for a student to demonstrate a certain level of academic preparation before being promoted to the next grade (Greene & Winters, 2007).

**Propensity score.** The score used to predict the likelihood that a student will repeat a grade. It more closely equates non-randomization of grouping with randomization, when randomization as a practice would not be ethical (Wu et al., 2010).

**Readiness.** The conceptual term used to decide if a child is ready to enter school, or move on to the next grade. Readiness is not universally defined and is therefore a situational concept (Karweit & Wasik, 1992).

**Resilience.** “A set of positive behaviors over time that reflect the interactions between individuals and their environments, in particular the opportunities for personal growth that are available and accessible” (Ungar, 2012, p. 14).

**Retain.** Hold back a student who appears to be falling behind to give him/her the chance to meet the requirements of the current grade level (Abidin et al., 1971; Bali et al., 2005; Jimerson, 2004; Lorence, 2006; Owings & Magliaro, 1998).
**Retainee.** An informal term often used for a student who has repeated a year of schooling.

**Retention.** Holding a student in the same grade for more than one academic school year; repeating a grade (Martin, 2011). More recently, the language has changed in the literature from calling a student who repeated a year of schooling as a retention, or one who retained, to calling this practice grade repetition.

**Same-age comparison.** Comparison of students at different grade levels, but with the same number of attended school years; normally of the same age-span (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008).

**Same-grade comparison.** Comparison of students at the same grade level who are of different ages due to grade retention (Bonvin et al., 2008).

**Social Promotion.** Automatic promotion of students to the next grade level even when minimum competencies have not been met, hoping the child will somehow acquire those necessary competencies (Fager & Richen, 1999; Gleason, Kwok, & Hughes, 2007; Martin, 2011).

**Teacher Assistance Team (TAT).** The term used to describe the project school district’s team who meet to offer accommodating support for students exhibiting difficulties in school.

**Summary of Contents and Organization**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of individuals who repeated a year of elementary school and the academic, social, and emotional effects it had on their remaining life choices. Information of this kind has been overlooked in grade repetition research published to date.
The following chapter presents an overview of the literature related to grade repetition. Chapter two is divided into three sections: a historical review of grade repetition, the current state of grade repetition literature, and the importance of academic resilience in the life of the retained student.

Chapter three outlines the research design implemented along with the specific methods employed for data collection and analysis. It explains methods to ensure validity and protection of human subjects and outlines, in detail, the procedures used to implement this study.

Chapter four reports the key findings from the conducted research. It emphasizes what was most important after analysis of the gathered data and artifacts from participant interviews and archival records. This chapter details a comprehensive understanding about what each participant faced when exposed to the adversity of a grade repetition and how it shaped their own understanding of their educational, social, and emotional life stories.

Finally, chapter five discusses the meaning of the findings in relation to the proposed research question. The significance of the findings is explained in terms of educational practice and conclusions relate how the new research and information can benefit future learners and educators faced with the practice of grade repetition. Research cautions and analysis limitations are detailed along with recommendations for future study and any appendices used to support this research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Topics, Purposes, and Methods

The presented literature review focused on the decades of research that explored the experiences of underperforming students assigned to a grade repetition, despite a lack of empirical research to support its overall efficacy (Ayers, 1909; Key, 2013). The research dates as far back as the 1900s because findings require the detailed understanding of longitudinal, meta-analysis studies. Assigning a grade repetition has long-term effects on the life of its recipient and therefore should include long-term data to draw conclusions of efficacy for the practice. Uncovering the effects of the long term data provided a means of comparison between the past and the present, as well as explored the trajectory of a student’s entire educational career and its resulting outcomes after experiencing a grade repetition.

Additionally, the actual unadmitted randomness of a grade repetition assignment added to the complexity in research design and to true scientific examination of this topic (Allen et al., 2009). This literature review presented a summary of the decades of literature as related to an elementary grade school repetition and its effects on participants. The following review is presented in three sections: 1) the historical literature review of grade repetition, 2) the current state of grade repetition literature, and 3) the literature review of academic resilience as it specifically relates to students at-risk. In addition, the scope of the research literature highlighted both what has changed and what remains the same within the decades-long practice of grade repetition.

Historical Review of Grade Repetition

Since the organization of public schooling, grade repetition has been a commonplace practice for students experiencing academic failure (Fager & Richen, 1999). Initially, the intent
of organized schooling encouraged each student to progress at his or her individual rate (Otto & Estes, 1960). John Dewey (2001) believed that the method, purpose, and understanding in schools should exist in the consciousness of the one who does the work; that the activity should have meaning onto oneself. However, Otto and Estes (1960) reported that as more and more students enrolled in school, schools reacted by becoming more centralized, and with that Dewey’s idea of individual attention was regarded as impractical and costly. Otto and Estes (1960) reported that Dewey criticized these centralized schools as becoming highly specialized, one-sided, and narrow. Dewey complained that education was dominated almost entirely by the conception of learning, and that there was a detrimental separation of theory and practice. Consequently, large numbers of pupils left school as soon as they acquired the rudiments of learning. The rudiments were drawn from the educational textbooks utilized and accepted as the tool to judge student achievement and advancement (Otto & Estes, 1960). Thus it was, as the age-graded classroom became commonplace, finishing the course or the textbook chosen for that specific grade became synonymous with achievement (Otto & Estes, 1960). With efficiency as its target goal, schools, established for the sole purpose of creating a good society (Spring, 2001) and based on the belief that education lifts people out of poverty and hardship (Rippa, 1992), became structured by a student’s chronological age. These first learning environments were known as common schools touting a free education for all (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987). It was this age-graded system that promised it could “provide an orderly means of classifying the many young people who were to come to school as a result of increased public interest in schooling” (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987, p. 46). Because it was cost efficient, this educational practice became the forerunner to our present establishment of ‘the age-graded’ institution of schooling
(Gutek, 2012). The move from individualized learning environments shifted to a structure based on age levels and academic standing, in order to provide education more efficiently for all.

With education available to the masses, Caswell (1933) explained that age-graded standards were the means to divide large groups of students into smaller, more homogeneous groups. S.P. Marshall’s (2006) work and research on the power of educational transformation, reported that “our vast repository of measurement tools has led to an obsession with quantification” and that, “Measuring achievement is not the same as assessing deep learning” (p. 11). Her body of work unveiled that educators have long believed that learners of the same age are more alike than different and therefore, have similar learning needs. Such ideas led to public school instruction that required teaching groups of chronological age peers in order to be effective and efficient. Age-graded grouping, therefore allowed students to learn and advance together in a prescribed sequence, pursuing and passing the same subjects within a specified period of time (S.P. Marshall, 2006). Marshall reflected that student learning was credentialed by the calendar with a predetermined (and assumed sufficient) amount of time to learn the pre-selected material (2006). For the individual student, failure to complete the uniform curriculum in the prescribed time meant being ‘left behind’ until the student achieved mastery (Tyack, 1974).

Educational activists, such as Horace Mann, Calvin Stowe, and John Pierce, promoted this accepted method of gradation and by 1860 most elementary schools worked on the age-graded system of student placement (Tyack, 1974). The Quincy Grammar School in Massachusetts, established 1848, has been credited with promoting the age-graded system which resulted in this structure’s prominent use throughout the United States (Johnson, Merrell, & Stover, 1990). Consequently students of approximate ages were grouped together in a
designated grade (Otto & Estes, 1960) and the way was paved for two important components of school reform: the advent of a more uniform curriculum and the use of standardized assessments which served to advance or retain students according to performance.

The system of uniform grouping created to address instruction more efficiently supported the practice of ‘leaving back’ students who had not achieved age-grade merit (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987). The tradition of grade repetition emerged (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Owings & Magliaro, 1998) and became common in American schools (Bowman, 2005; Dawson, 1998; Fager & Richen, 1999; Smalls, 1997). Students were sorted into grades of similar achievement, creating the notion that students either ‘passed’ or ‘failed’ by year’s end (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987).

Ayers (1909) research found that retained children became known as “mis-fits,” “over-aged,” or “retarded.” He hypothesized that the underperforming child posed problems for the teacher and took learning time away from peers. Ayers (1909) reported that around the same time, researchers at the Sage Foundation were conducting a study to discover how many American students were classified as “retarded” and reported that 7% of children in Medford, Massachusetts, were classified as retarded, while 75% of the largely African-American students were so classified in Memphis, Tennessee. This huge disparity in classification clearly indicated that students’ learning needs were not being effectively addressed and by 1908, six million American students were classified as retarded (Ayers, 1909). In addition, the Sage (1907) research established a positive correlation between grade repetition and student drop out, uncovering that many retained children never completed their schooling (Ayers, 1909). This longitudinal study highlighted that there was not a consistent policy for why any particular student was asked to repeat a year of schooling. To further discredit the practice, Ayers (1909)
claimed that grade repetition resulted in labeling, early school dropout, teacher frustration, and an intervention that did not correct academic failure.

Keyes (1911) longitudinal data reported that only 21% of repeaters fared better in the repeat year than they had the year before and that 39% fared worse. The study of Klene and Branson (1929) claimed that overall, as far as academic achievement was concerned, potential repeaters were served better when promoted as opposed to retained. Arthur (1939) matched students on the basis of “mental age” and found that repeaters learned no more than non-repeaters over a two year period. In a recent study that looked at the relationship between demographics and academic achievement across multiple grades and groups of students, the findings of Tingle, Schoeneberger, and Algozzine (2012) continued to support interest in stopping the use of grade repetition as a method of academic intervention. Rather, their results spoke to the need to identify and utilize research-based interventions to remediate the struggling learner. These current findings supported the past work of many grade repetition researchers, including Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) whose work detailed that evidence does not reflect positive effects for retaining students at any level of schooling. Decades of seminal research since the very beginning of public schooling continued to show similar results and yet, despite them, the practice is sustained as a major alternative for the under performer.

It was during the 1930s that educators began to consider characteristics such as age and maturity, as well as academic achievement, when making student placement decisions. More in line with Dewey, these promotion decisions attempted to become better aligned with the needs of the individual student (Medway, 1985). Promoting students based on non-academic considerations became known as “social promotion.” Social promotion, or automatic progression, is the practice of moving a student to the next grade even if basic competency skills
have not been mastered (Fager & Richen, 1999; Martin, 2011). Its practice was motivated by the
desire to protect both the social adjustment and the school motivation of the struggling student.
Proponents believed that promoted students would learn more from exposure to new content than
they would from repeating a grade (Martin, 2011). However as a practice, it too presented
negative impacts and soon became the scapegoat for the decline in national achievement scores
(Heubert & Hauser, 1999). There was no consensus among researchers, but educators still felt
compelled to choose sides in the grade repetition/social promotion placement decision debate
(Heubert & Hauser, 1999), and even though many educators disagreed with the practice of social
promotion, the practice of grade repetition became less prevalent and the trend toward social
promotion continued well into the 1970s (Fager & Richen, 1999).

Russia’s launch of Sputnik I in 1959 and the impending Space Race called into question
whether the United States educational system was as competitive as it should be with other
nations. An educational crisis ensued because America’s national character was called into
question, forcing the federal government to re-think America’s educational identity. The success
or failure of education became interconnected with international competition and national
security. To shore up the educational system, grade repetition was once again endorsed as an
intervention for low performers (Steeves, Bernhardt, Burns, & Lombard, 2009).

In 1983 A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform report prompted the
“excellence movement” (Alexander et al., 2003), initiating a new wave of local, state, and
federal education reform efforts (Steeves et al., 2009). The report railed against declining
educational standards and called for an end to social promotion (Owings & Kaplan, 2001). It
outlined deficiencies in the U.S. educational system and delineated how to fix its vast and
complex problems. The document portrayed American students as underperforming, initiating
an increase in the practice of grade repetition for students who did not attain benchmarks. Policy makers believed that more exacting educational competencies and requirements were needed so that the United States could keep up with foreign competitors in the emerging global economy (Steeves et al., 2009). This unlikely alliance of educators and politicians, intent on revamping public schools, devised remedies and enacted new laws which have shaped the American educational system ever since. The goal of these initiatives was to make American education more rigorous than it had been in the past (Steeves et al., 2009).

Excellence reform became the new overriding national education issue and the development of national academic standards became the last gasp in the movement (Berube, 1996). To further support the new political view, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., in his best-selling 1987 book, *Cultural Literacy*, renounced John Dewey and his progressive ideas of curriculum content reform. Hirsch called Dewey, “…the writer who has most deeply affected American educational history and practice,” whose advocacy of “the content-neutral curriculum . . . was deeply mistaken” (Hirsch, 1987, p. xvii). This rhetoric became main stream and grade repetition once again became the response to the lack of rigor in United States schools.

In 1990 the Center for Policy Research (CPRE) in Education concluded that the practice of social promotion was the cause of our country's low ranking in international comparisons of student test data. Social promotion continued to be a topic of debate for over three decades (Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Rothstein, 1998; Shepard & Smith, 1989; Tanner & Galis, 1997) and came to exemplify the perceived lack of rigor in United States schools (Center for Policy Research in Education, 1990). In 1998, President Bill Clinton announced the key to building the nation’s strength in the 21st century was to end social promotion (Hennick, 2008; Jimerson, 2001; Ritzema & Shaw, 2012). As a result, 17 states implemented bans on social promotion and
the practice of grade repetition was again hailed as the answer to low performance in American public schools (Allen et al., 2009; Thomas, 2000).

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) called for rigorous standards and accountability for student achievement, and so today many students are assigned a grade repetition because of poor performance on grade-level competency assessments used by several states to make promotion decisions, (e.g., Florida, Department of Education and Texas Education Agency) (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Since the passing of NCLB in 2001, the standard of education care has led to the estimated retention rate of between 7% and 15%, or approximately three million American students being held back each academic year, with 30% to 50% of all students made to repeat a year at least once before entering the ninth grade (Griffith, Lloyd, Lane, & Tankersley, 2010; Hauser, 2001; Jimerson, Pletcher, Graydon et al., 2006; NASP Position Statement, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics (2010) and Peterson and Hughes (2011) document that as of 2007, nearly 10% of students in grades kindergarten through eighth had been retained at one time in their educational career.

In 2001, Parker testified that educational policy makers continued to revert to the past by re-adopting materials, practices, and policies, and dared to call them innovations. Any other business or endeavor would demand new practices and better products to replace the old, ineffective ones. The call was for educational professionals to consider the past century of research that clearly indicated a necessary movement beyond grade repetition and its’ alternative, social promotion, and instead focus on interventions that build upon students’ strengths as well as needs (Leckrone & Griffith, 2006). Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) warned, “In an era emphasizing ‘evidenced-based interventions’, research unequivocally fails to support the effectiveness of grade retention” (p. 335).
NCLB (2001) supported student achievement focused on standards-based educational reform. It was created to hold teachers accountable for the achievement of students by establishing high standards and measurable goals, with the specific intent to improve individual educational outcomes (Jimerson, Graydon, Pletcher, Schnurr, Kundert, & Nickerson, 2006). Presently, and in direct response to NCLB, grade placement decisions are required to appropriately ensure compliance with fair and fitting professional standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Since the inception of NCLB, many states have mandated grade repetition for students who fail to meet adequate progress as measured on annual standardized assessments assigned in third through eighth grades in reading and math, and again in grades nine through twelve (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). According to Brown (2005), “The authors of this legislation want verifiable results showing improvement in student learning--results that can be replicated across states and in all types of school settings” (p. 51). NCLB stressed penalties, strict timetables, rigorous testing, scientific measurement, and rigidly prescribed outcomes for student performance, while denouncing the practice of social promotion (Steeves et al., 2009). Marzano and Kendall (1998) estimated that it would take twenty-two years to teach all the standards students are asked to master in thirteen. It is no wonder that so many retained students are falling behind. As the research of Jimerson, Pletcher, Graydon et al., (2006) pointed out, it is paradoxical that more children than ever before have actually been “left behind” since the approval of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

However, in 2015 President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law. ESSA reauthorized the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) replacing NCLB. With some exceptions, this act took effect at the beginning of the 2017-18
school year. The goal of ESSA was to maintain the original law’s intent of advancing equity and opportunity for all students. It continues to require accountability and support for struggling schools, with a particular focus on disadvantaged and other high need students. The law consists of a number of existing and new programs; the majority of which provide funding to states and local school districts to support education in grades pre-school through twelve (www.mass.gov/ese/essa).

The reauthorization of the law requires high academic content standards to help prepare all students for success in college and careers. The Act includes the continuation of annual assessments in grades 3-8, and high school, that measure students’ progress toward reaching the state’s academic standards. The system will clearly identify the highest and lowest performing schools, schools with low-performing subgroups, and schools with low graduation rates, as well as provide clear direction about areas in need of improvement. It will require long-term goals and interim measures of progress for improving outcomes for all students in all public schools, with a focus on closing proficiency gaps and preparing all students for success at the next level. Public reporting on student and school performance must include measures that are actionable at the district or school level and include the professional qualifications of all educators. In return for funding, district and school spending must comply with requirements of this law (www.mass.gov/ese/essa).

Seminal grade repetition studies. Jimerson, a seminal grade repetition researcher, stated that education should, “emphasize a standard of care in educating children” (2004, p. 334). In regard to the practice of grade repetition, he further posited that educational professionals should take responsibility to provide intervention strategies that support research as generally effective in promoting students’ academic success. S.P. Marshall’s (2006) work in transforming
the educational “map” aligned with the research of Jimerson and Renshaw (2012) who believed that asking students to succeed in an environment that utilizes grade repetition as the intervention for low performance empirically revealed little true advantages. S.P. Marshall (2006) supported that because, “Learning is the most natural and creative of all human endeavors” (p. xiii) it powers the mind. She maintained that learning is shaped by the quality and the nature of the learning environment, and therefore it is how one is asked to learn that matters most deeply (S.P. Marshall, 2006). In fact, Jimerson (2004) and Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) argued that findings, similar to these, raised the concern that the “continued use of grade retention is ‘educational’ malpractice” (p. 334). Sakowicz (1996) called retention, “One of the clearest examples of poor communication between research and practice” (p.16) and despite decades of confirmatory negative evidence, the practice continues in our schools. Kagan (1990) in her reflective and critical review of the school readiness concept concluded that, “Recent data suggest that retention is not positive–or even benign–but negative” (p. 275). Jimerson, Pletcher et al. (2006) described, “When considering a transactional-ecological model of development, grade retention should not be construed as a single event causing all subsequent negative events but rather as an outcome associated with a disadvantaged developmental history exacerbated by an ineffective intervention” (p. 90). These studies have substantiated that grade retention has not led to improved learning and moreover is not inconsequential to the child.

The longitudinal, comparative research of Elder and Lubotsky (2009) found that younger children are more likely to suffer shortcomings in skills and maturity by the end of kindergarten, which thereby leads teachers and parents to suggest retention as a remedy. Their study used two sources of data, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (1998) cohort and the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (1988), arguing that evidence did not support the
claim that older children learn faster. They proposed that raising the entrance age as a means to increase achievement failed those at-risk children who received the least investment prior to entering kindergarten, (e.g., those with no pre-school experience or little cognitive stimulation at home, as well as those coming from low income families). In fact, Elder and Lubotsky (2009) found that children who remained home for another year with no academic or social supports were poorly served by staying out of school for an additional year prior to kindergarten. They concluded that delayed entry imposes: additional child care costs, earlier school dropout, and reduced future earnings as a result of delayed entry into the job market. Retained children frequently become older underachievers and the combination of over-age and low achievement are very powerful predictors for dropping out of school and other long-term problems (Zimny, 2003).

A widely accepted argument for kindergarten retention is that the student gains more by learning the material the second time around, developing an edge which allows him or her to bloom in the later years (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). In 2010, Abbott, Wills, Greenwood, Kamps, Powell-Heitzman & Selig found that even after additional small group intervention was provided, kindergartners did not gain academic benefits from grade repetition. Moreover, any of the gains accrued through kindergarten retention tended to dissipate within two years (Parker, 2001).

Shepard and Smith (1988) came to the conclusion,

The current fad to flunk children in kindergarten is the product of inappropriate curriculum. Over the past 20 years there has been a persistent escalation of academic demand in kindergarten and first grade. What were formerly next-grade expectations are shoved downward into the lower grade....Long hours of drill-and-
practice on isolated skills are detrimental to all children, even those who are able to meet the demands.... More seriously, higher standards injure at-risk pupils, causing many more children to fail who would have, in due course, done quite well. (p. 37)

Benjamin Bloom (1981) found that poor and minority children fail in school because of the way schools are run. He declared that if you do the same things, you will get the same results. Bloom declared that traditional approaches to education will continue to result in decreasing educational outcomes if they continue business as usual. Parker (2001) echoed that good intentions are not good enough and that making differences, that do not make a difference, is not the answer. Alexander et al. (2003) argued that the use of special placement requires evidence of effectiveness and retention literature fails to offer such empirical evidence. These researchers called for schools to rethink their approach to student learning, and in support of Kagan (1990), believed that classrooms must become sites of learning, rather than sites of teaching. “Children in kindergarten, first, second, and third grade do not fail; their lack of academic success reflects the failure of adults to provide appropriate support and scaffolding to facilitate their early development and academic trajectories” (Jimerson, 2004, p. 86). Instead, Jimerson (2004) recommended early intervention: reading support, behavioral modification, cognitive training, direct instruction, and parental/caregiver involvement. Schools should proactively promote these skills needed for mastery of the curriculum (Jimerson, 2004).

Darling-Hammond (1998) pointed out that the justification for grade repetition recommendation often focused on problems within the child and not on problems within the learning environment. For too long, schools placed the burden of school readiness on the child. Kagan (1990) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) countered that measures of school readiness should not rate the child’s performance, but rather
the capability of the institution. Without awareness and responsiveness to this reality, the children who, for whatever reasons, do not meet these arbitrary standards and are not enrolled or retained, will lose. Alexander et al. (2003), Jimerson, Pletcher et al., (2006) and Koons (1977) suggested that it is the school’s responsibility to be ready for the child and not the other way around, “. . . schools should be made to fit the student, not the students made to fit the schools” (Koons, 1977, p. 701). Schools are charged to educate all children, not only those who meet certain, random readiness standards. In his review of the literature Holloway (2003) suggested that educators must ensure the development of students’ readiness skills, otherwise society will be working and paying to sustain these children after they have failed. A more practical question should be how to best serve struggling children given the institution’s available resources (Alexander et al., 2003).

Kundert, May, and Brent’s (1995) longitudinal study looked at IQ and achievement scores at the second, fifth, and seventh grades. Results illustrated no significant difference in test scores between those retained and those socially promoted, despite an initial difference in IQ. Silberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, and Appleton’s (2006) longitudinal results of students from first through eighth grade found agreement. Their study revealed that the growth trajectories of students retained in the early grades (K-2) were comparable to those retained in later grades (3-5). Just as in the research findings of the mid 1990s, these findings from just nine years ago fail to support the efficacy of primary grade retention.

William M. Bocks (1977) reviewed twenty grade repetition studies and came to the following conclusions: grade repetition was not effective in ensuring greater mastery of school subject matter, it did not serve as a motivating force for students at risk, and it produced many harmful consequences. Jimerson’s (2001) meta-analysis of 20 studies compared retained
students with a matched control group. Sixteen of the studies documented grade repetition as an ineffective intervention for academic achievement and social emotional adjustment, with 80% of these studies having identified negative outcomes following grade repetition. These findings, consistent with the abundance of analyses examined during the past century, offer further empirical evidence that in their future, retained children are: far more likely to drop out of school, more likely to experience unemployment, are paid less per hour, incarcerated, experience dysfunction in family life, more likely to drink alcohol, smoke, engage in violent or delinquent behaviors, more likely to become pregnant, and more likely to depend on social services (Alexander et al., 2003; Bowman, 2005; Gottfredson, Fink, & Graham, 1994; Jimerson, Pletcher, et al., 2006; Levin, 2009; Penna & Tallerico, 2005; Picklo & Christenson, 2005; Xia & Glennie, 2005), as well as suffer deleterious socio-emotional and behavioral adjustments (Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). This is not inconsequential in an era where there is virtually no sustainable legal work for dropouts (Alexander et al., 2003; Balfanz, 2014).

The longitudinal report from Owings and Magliaro (1998) found that from 1980 to 1992 the national percentage rate of retained students increased from approximately 20 percent to nearly 32 percent and that students in grades kindergarten through grade one evidenced only modest gains in their repeat year. This information concurred with other studies stating that gains washed out by grades two and three. Opponents of grade repetition continued to argue that retention actually deprives the child access to meaningful intellectual challenges on a continued basis and may actually disrupt or impede that child’s academic growth trajectory (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). Additionally, Bowman (2005) found that due to the student’s growing sense of alienation, they do their best to avoid school. The research of Balfanz (2014), Bowman (2005), Darling-Hammond (1998), Jimerson (2001), and Kurtz (2002), found that for those who had
been retained, an increase in absenteeism was often the result of retention and became the precursor to then dropping out of school.

**Grade repetition determinants.** It is challenging to analyze a practice or focus on effective change without reliable data. Heubert and Hauser (1999) found that “thirteen of the thirty-six states covered in the National Research Council’s survey of state practices collected no retention data at all; others provided figures for two or three grades only and still others just gave an overall total for all grades” (p.136-137). Additionally, history has revealed that no authoritative source uniformly monitors national retention trends (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). The research by Alexander et al. (2003) also confirmed that all states do not report retention rates, and when they do, reporting policies and procedures vary. The American Federation of Teachers (1997) conducted a survey on the retention policies of 85 of the 820 largest school districts in the United States. They found that of the 85 districts in the study, all but 7 have a formal written policy; however, analyses of those policies indicated a lack of “specific academic standards against which student progress would be judged” (Sec. 3, p.1). The AFT survey also indicated that the evidence employed in decision-making varies. Sometimes, but not always, decisions included: teachers’ grading system, standardized assessment scores, developmental factors, attendance, and teacher recommendation (AFT, 1997). Heubert and Hauser (1999) reported that while the practice continues nationwide, few states, and no national agency monitors with regularity how many students were retained or socially promoted in a given year. The work of Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Balfanz (2009) identified that because there are multiple methods for calculating graduation and dropout rates, the magnitude of the grade repetition problem remained misunderstood. Research indicated that there was confusion even among teachers and administrators about the severity and magnitude of grade repetition
decisions and students’ consequential dropout, both for their own schools and the nation (Bridgeland et al., 2009). The state of Massachusetts, where this study was situated, reported grade repetition rates in this manner,

The number of students retained in Massachusetts represents students who were reported as repeating the same grade as the prior school year. The Department of Education defined retention in this report as any student reported to be enrolled in the same grade for two years in the October Student Information Management System (SIMS). As detailed in Figure 1 grade repetition data is calculated as a number and a rate (the number of students retained divided by the enrollment).

(\text{http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/retention/})

\begin{align*}
\text{Annual retention rate} = \frac{\text{Retention count}}{\text{October 1-12 enrollment}} \times 100
\end{align*}

\text{Example:}

\text{State retention rate 2007-2008} \quad \frac{20,989}{868,428} \times 100 = 2.4 \%


Since every district in Massachusetts has its own criteria for retaining students, it is likely that there are policy differences between the districts. Therefore, it is not possible to determine from this data whether an increase or decrease in retentions or differences
between districts, are due to a student achievement change or a policy change.

(http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/retention/)

Most states make estimates on retention rates based on census data; however, the Westchester Institute for Human Services Research (WIHSR; n.d.) indicated that these estimates are conservative at best.

In a study that looked at trends over time for those below the model grade (BMG), a proxy for grade retention, Frederick and Hauser’s (2008) data from 1972-2005 used a systematic variation logistic regression model and found that, “The predictive power of retention warrants tracking both retention rates and disparities in them” because the “official national and state-level statistics on either the incidence or prevalence of retention are scarce” (p. 719). Grade repetition decisions are often based on factors that are not directly linked to the student’s actual achievement or potential, and this bias created randomness in the practice of grade repetition (Bonvin et al., 2008). There were also several unsystematic factors which affected the decision to retain a student (Alexander et al., 2003). Bonvin et al. (2008) completed nationwide, empirical, three measurement points, longitudinal research regarding student retention and found that determinants for the practice were largely underdeveloped. Schnurr, Kundert, and Nickerson (2009) agreed there was limited information regarding the uniformity of how a retention decision was made and, more specifically, for which type of child. This functioned as a primary barrier to effective action for the student who was under performing.

The following sections reviewed the literature surrounding the many factors effecting grade repetition decisions, such as a student’s individual factors, the results of standardized assessments, educator biases and influences, and a practice known as academic red-shirting.


**Student individual factors and their effect on grade repetition decisions.** Traditionally, retention decisions have varied based on numerous individual student factors - such as, academic ability, social and economic indicators, ethnicity, school type, and geographic region, with retention rates escalating as risk factors are combined (Jimerson, Graydon et al., 2006). Census data demonstrated that retention in the early grades increased and that minority populations, as well as students with a limited proficiency in English, were at greatest risk (Byrd & Weitzman, 1994). Meisels and Liaw’s (1993) research attempted to provide a national profile of who was retained. They gathered data from 16,623 White, Black, and Hispanic students, and concluded that those from lower SES situations were far more likely to be retained. In addition, they found there were greater negative outcomes associated with grade repetition for female, White, and higher SES students. The research of Alexander et al. (2003) supported that poor, minority, young students were at greater risk of failure, and were therefore more likely to be repetition candidates.

A longitudinal study completed in 2001 focused on the progression of students entering high school. The data showed that almost half of African-American males were overage for grade; as opposed to roughly 30% of white males, pointing to a possible grade repetition in their past. Furthermore, boys’ retention rates exceeded that of girls for all racial and ethnic groups (Alexander et al., 2003). Overwhelmingly, retained students tended to be African-American males who did not attend pre-school (Burkam et al., 2007) and children residing in single-parent households (Alexander et al., 2003). Retained students tended to have mothers with lower IQ scores, poorer attitudes towards their child’s education, and who participated little, if any, in the educational process (Chen et al., 2010; Martin, 2009).
The U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (2006) concurred that children who repeated kindergarten were most likely those who hailed from less advantaged backgrounds, have parents who have less than a high school degree, live in poverty, have not attended pre-school, and have a diagnosed developmental difficulty. As a result of these differences, many children are viewed as failures even before their educational career begins. Yet often these factors are not considered with any degree of consistency in relation to grade repetition decision making in the United States (U.S. DOE, 2006).

Most often quantitative data is utilized to formulate hypotheses regarding the effectiveness of grade repetition. However, Morrison and Ieong On No’s (2007) study demonstrated that the decision to retain does not include one single quantifiable variable and that the many performance variables considered provide an extremely low level of consistency among educational institutions. Therefore, retention decisions at different institutions were not necessarily comparable.

Several studies have shown that retained students exhibit similar learning variables. Willson and Hughes (2009) conducted a longitudinal, comparative study which included five variables proven to be significantly related to repeating a grade: family socioeconomic status (SES), student age, gender, ego resilience, and hyperactivity. They discovered that for every correlation and logistic regression of the five variables, there was a statistical significance which was virtually identical, with results indicating lower performance for those children who were retained. Two of the variables, the family’s SES and the student’s age, proved significant, while gender did not. Several comparable studies uncovered that low SES was positively correlated with the decision to repeat a grade (Alexander et al., 2003; Bali et al., 2005; Frey, 2005; Hayes, 2005; Jimerson, Pletcher et al., 2006; Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy, 2009). In 1999, among second
graders, 5% of those living in families whose SES fell above the poverty level repeated kindergarten or first grade compared to 16% for those living in families below the poverty level (Alexander et al., 2003).

Willson and Hughes’ (2009) study further revealed that children who had parents with lower expectations for their child’s education or those with an indifference towards schooling had a potentially higher risk of retention. Frey (2005), Hayes (2005), Jimerson, Ferguson et al. (2002), and Jimerson, Pletcher et al. (2006) also detailed that the lower the level of intelligence and educational achievement of a student’s mother, the more likely her child would repeat a year of school. Alexander et al. (2003) reported that, “The risk of retention for children of college graduate mothers is less than half that for children whose mothers lack high school degrees: 6% versus 16%” (p.5).

Parker (2001) reported that the least successful students in school were usually English Language learners (EL), ethnic minority students, special needs students, or students living in poverty. Bowman (2005) found that for these students, teacher recommendation was the cited reason for assigning a repetition placement at the elementary level.

Clearly, school, family, and individual characteristics correlated with the likelihood of grade repetition and these same characteristics influenced subsequent development and achievement (Jimerson, 2001). Simply having a child repeat a year was unlikely to address the multiple factors that influenced a student’s poor achievement or maladaptive behaviors and led to a repetition decision. Decades of the literature revealed that the effects of grade repetition cannot be separated from other aspects of a student’s life (Alexander et al., 2003). Yet, despite an overabundance of evidence to the contrary, educators and their policy-makers cling to the belief that an academically slow or immature child benefits by repeating a year of schooling as
remediation for failing to master the basic skills (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Shepard & Smith, 1989).

**Standardized assessments and their effect on grade repetition decisions.** In many states, decisions regarding retention and promotion are based on standardized assessment achievement. This is the student who fails to meet promotion criteria (Dawson, 1998). The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2003) adopted the following position statement – “The retention of students, while widely practiced, is in large measure not substantiated by sound research. The NASP also affirmed that retention is often associated with an increase in behavioral problems. The cumulative evidence indicated that retention decisions cannot be validated using any standardized or competency-based tests and that retention can negatively affect achievement and social-emotional adjustment” (n.p.). Despite this position, in 2003-2004 the Florida legislation mandated retention for third-grade students who failed to meet state reading standards, as measured by the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Others states that mandated retention include Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, and Texas. The cities of Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia have added their names to this list by ending social promotion (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Kagan (1990) argued that no single test should be used to make decisions that hold major implications for a child. Additionally, assessments used to make retention decisions are not consistent in that they greatly vary across the nation and even vary from school to school within districts.

To address their dilemma of grade repetition decision making, in 1996, the Chicago Public Schools’ Promotion Policy was created in order to determine the promotion or retention of students in grades three, six, and eight by results indicated on reading and mathematics assessments from the standardized, norm-referenced, battery of tests titled the Iowa Test of Basic
Skills (ITBS) (Roderick, Bryk, Jacob, Easten, & Allensworth, 1999). It is of particular interest to note that this practice is in direct contrast to the stated purpose of the ITBS designers. According to the ITBS user’s guide, “…using the ITBS to make promotion and retention decisions is an inappropriate use of the test” (University of Iowa, 1007, p.V-4). This blatant disregard for this assessment’s fair and appropriate implementation highlighted further inconsistency in the practice of grade repetition.

Roderick et al. (1999) analyzed the effects of the Chicago promotion policy two years after its inception and found that one-third of the students in the benchmark years did not meet the criteria set by the policy. While students did make some gains, the majority did not reach the established criteria. Any gains made still left them academically and socially behind their promoted grade level peers. This policy fell afar of its intended goal and correlated with the findings of a study completed almost ten years earlier by Doyle (1989). Doyle’s study looked at progress of eighth grade students in Arizona to assess the effect of the district’s retention policy. Results indicated that one-fourth of the study class was not ready to receive their diploma by year’s end according to the state’s new retention criteria. One-third of the students were one or more years over-age. He concluded that if all the students who were not on level were retained during their elementary school career, 45% would have legitimately been permitted to leave school at the age of 16, before ever having been promoted to high school. This study clearly supported other findings that grade repetition does not help students accomplish grade level achievement. Byrd and Weitzman (1994) suggested that assessment results should be the indicator which permits student school failure to become a marker for a mismatch between a child’s performance and the school’s expectation and not necessarily the ticket to a grade repetition.
Educator influences and their effect on grade repetition decisions. Schools have been charged with the task of holding all students accountable to the same standards. These state standards, known as the Common Core, were launched in 2009 by state leaders, governors, and state commissioners of education. These members recognized the value of consistent, real-world learning goals and therefore launched this effort to ensure that all students, regardless of where they live, graduate from high school prepared for college, career, and life (http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/development-process/). Because of this, retention advocates believed that some students required more time to master the same material. Frey (2005) commented that schools were under tremendous pressure not to allow students to move to the next grade level before they have mastered all the grade-level requirements.

Past literature indicated that most grade repetition decisions were made at the school-level, with school districts relying on informal decision making processes (Bali et al., 2005; Gloecker, 1986). The literature of Bowman (2005) and Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, and Sroufe (1997) concluded that grade repetition decisions and recommendations were influenced by teachers’ subjective opinions of students’ classroom performance, social and emotional functioning, and performance on standardized assessments. The research of Bonvin et al. (2008) and Witmer et al. (2004) found that teachers’ grade repetition beliefs were most influenced by colleagues, peers, practical knowledge, or on-the-job experience, rather than by research findings. Range’s (2009) study concluded that the most powerful predictor of grade repetition is the attitude of the teacher. A study analyzing results of teacher surveys found that 44% of teachers indicated that their source of knowledge regarding retention came from personal experiences, with 22% reporting they gained their knowledge by discussing the practice with colleagues, and only 9% obtaining their knowledge from grade repetition literature or
participation in workshops (Witmer et al., 2004). This was consistent with personal experience; teachers related to the positive effects grade repetition has on students during the repeat year, but fail to observe and do not accept, that the benefits diminish over time and new problems emerge in the repeaters’ future (Schnurr et al., 2009). These teachers saw temporary advantages to grade repetition, but did not see that these advantages fade away over time (Bropy, 2006).

Shepard and Smith (1988), two more seminal grade repetition researchers, agreed that the gains sometimes reported for very young children were not maintained as the child progressed through the elementary grades. They observed,

Kindergarten teachers, however, are generally unaware of these end results. They know only that the retained children are doing better than they did in their first year of kindergarten.... For these few transitory academic benefits, retained children pay with a year of their lives. And, they understand that they could not go on with their classmates because of something that was wrong with them. (Shepard & Smith, 1988, p. 35)

This misconception, known as the retention “boost,” over time actually leaves children behind their peers, where the “collateral damage” is not yet apparent (Bropy, 2006). Assuming a relationship between time and achievement biases the decision-maker toward grade repetition and results question the rationale and equity of the practice (Beebe-Frankenberger, Bocian, MacMillan, & Gresham, 2004).

Bonvin et al. (2008) found that from a group of comparable at-risk children, a teacher might choose one child to repeat a grade while a similar peer is chosen for promotion. Research also revealed that non-promotion practices occur more frequently with younger children and non-native language speakers (Burkam et al., 2007; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Troncin, 2004). These studies reaffirmed national findings that lower SES children and children whose parents
do not actively participate in their child’s education were over-represented in the non-promotion group (Burkam et al., 2007). Notwithstanding the previous findings, the most frequent reasons cited by teachers for grade repetition were poor academic achievement and lack of maturity (Tomchin & Impara, 1992); not meeting grade-level requirements (Dawson, 1998); frequent school absences (Light & Morrison, 1990); or displays of poor socio-emotional characteristics (Alexander et al., 2003; Bowman, 2005; Jimerson et al., 1997).

Teacher assigned grades can be useful in the decision-making process and should play a role for the at-risk student; however, as the longitudinal, quantitative data gathered by Willson and Hughes (2009) illustrated, academic competence was predictive for only 25% of the likelihood of being retained. The nationwide, longitudinal empirical study, conducted by Bonvin et al. (2008) discovered that retained students often exhibited cognitive potential and academic performance, but these factors were underrated by their teacher. Their study found that when pupils’ academic achievement was controlled for, the decision to repeat was strongly determined solely by the attitude of the teacher. These decisions were distant from the student’s actual achievement or potential, which thereby lead to randomness in the practice of grade repetition (Bonvin et al., 2008). This finding implied the lack of a constant and consistent system to determine which teacher assigned grades and overall student academic competence best predicts a student’s future success. Teacher assessments, socioeconomic status, and classroom behavior combined with teacher’s educational philosophy, strongly affected grade repetition decisions.

The Alexander et al. (2003) long-term study found that, “Academic problems at the very beginning of school are the backdrop to retention” (p. 64) and many believe that skill deficiencies are “carried in” from the outside. Statistical research by Bonvin et al. (2008) and Light and Morrison (1990) identified that only a minority of the poorest performers were
retained, and among those comparable low achievers, retainees were those children perceived as most immature by their teacher. Teachers felt that the lack of maturity caused early learning problems and that the child simply needed more time to develop, staying in the grade until ready (Beswick, Sloat, & Willms, 2008; Troncin, 2004). Teachers believed that the extra year of school produced successful academic outcomes (Natale, 1991). However, the NASP (2003) revealed that while some students benefit from grade repetition, no study can accurately predict which type of child will gain from this intervention, and as Cooke and Stammer (1985) added, with the least amount of adversity, stress, or trauma.

The academic performances of students who seem immature, but possess cognitive potential, were consistently underrated by teachers; teachers who held a positive attitude towards grade repetition. Bonvin et al. (2008) found that comparisons of matched groups of retained and promoted low achieving students illustrated that retention decisions were primarily based on four variables: teachers’ attitudes towards retention, teachers’ attributional preferences, teachers’ valued criteria for retention, and teachers’ evaluations and expectations for achievement on assessments.

It was argued that assessment and instruction should be seamless, with teachers utilizing formative and summative analysis decisions to contribute to improved student learning outcomes (Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992). However, Mantzicopoulos and Morrison (1992) found that teacher bias played an important role in grade repetition decision-making. McMillan (2003) upheld that it was most often a teacher’s internal beliefs which largely influenced decisions on assessment and retention, “. . . beliefs and values about what and how to assess often conflict with the pressures of external demands, especially recent high-stakes large-scale testing” (p. 34). Assessments, measurement, and systematic data gathering methods are meant to directly be a
component of the grade repetition decision-making process and these high-stakes, or external
tests, have clearly impacted characteristics that are assessed and how decisions are made in
schools. However, these tests are often over utilized as a guide for grade repetition decision-
making. Consequently, because these decisions were significantly influenced by a teacher’s
internal belief system, the process of decision-making, despite the role of systematic
assessments, lacks consistency. Research confirmed that teachers’ beliefs were not directly
consistent with measurement principles (Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992). In fact, teachers
reported that they often fill the assessment void in various and numerous way, many of which are
difficult for them to identify or articulate (McMillian, 2003). Most teachers’ decisions were
largely based upon on-the-job experience, making it all the more difficult to identify consistent
reasons why any particular child is, or should be, chosen for a grade repetition.

Tanner and Combs’ (1993) study presented evidence that teachers of students in the
lower elementary grades, as well as more veteran teachers, held the most favorable attitude
toward grade repetition. Teachers have confidence that repeating helped prevent future failure,
maintained academic standards, and motivated students to attend school (Range et al., 2012).
Haberman and Dill (1993) accounted, that many teachers supported grade repetition because
they viewed themselves accountable to the group of students as a unit, rather than as individuals;
therefore, retaining poor performing students prevented them from interfering with the group’s
education. Smith and Shepard (1987) found that the manner in which children developed school
readiness skills, and a teachers’ direct influence on that development, shaped what the public
believed about grade repetition decision-making. Teachers believed that their sense of
professional competence was tied to their students’ performance (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Finley,
1984) and “the uncertainties generated by high rates of school failure threaten their professional identities . . .” (Anagnostopoulos, 2006, p. 30).

Most teachers agreed it was rational to repeat the child who was too immature or lacked the ability to advance. Grade repetition as a practice appeared effective and beneficial to teachers because repeaters made progress in the repeat year (Shepard & Smith, 1985; Tanner & Combs, 1993). Research reported that the majority of teachers believed grade repetition was most effective when it occurred in kindergarten, as opposed to the other grades (Range, Yonke, & Young, 2011; Silberglitt, Jimerson et al., 2006). Yet practice revealed that the concrete reasons for applying grade repetition vary from teacher to teacher (Bonvin et al., 2008).

Teachers’ inability to effectively understand the dissonance between curriculum and students (Spitzer, Cupp, & Parke, 1995) led to further difficulties which entrenched the logic of grade repetition (Martin, 2011). Bonvin et al. (2008) concurred that teacher attitudes, as well as student background and achievement, were the basis for most grade repetition decisions.

Teachers’ common sense tells them that grade repetition helped students academically and emotionally, allowing them to become more confident in themselves and their abilities (Tanner & Combs, 1993). However, most often the retained student is the student who spent the repeat year with a teacher possessing a positive attitude toward grade repetition, making it feasible that bias played a role in teachers’ positive view of the grade repetition practice (Tanner & Combs, 1993). Teachers’ and the public’s positive opinion of grade repetition is intuitively appealing (Kamal & Larsen, 2004; Silberglitt, Appleton, Burns, & Jimerson, 2006); however, these teachers do not look ahead to the benefit of future comparisons for the repeated child (Schnurr et al., 2009), and to the fact that years of empirical evidence do not support the practice (Silberglitt, Appleton et al., 2006).
Through a multi-method, questionnaire approach, Tomchin and Impara (1992) found that as long as teachers believed grade repetition was a suitable practice that saved children from facing disappointment every day, or inspired students to work harder, grade repetition will continue to be implemented as the intervention for low performers. This study also found that teachers tend to agree that repetition in grades kindergarten to three was not harmful to the student, but did not agree on the impact repetition had on students in grades four through seven. The teachers of students in the upper elementary grades therefore were far more likely to socially promote students based on the belief that repetition harmed a student’s self-concept, permanently labeled a child, and was less likely to give the immature older student a chance to catch up. Finally, results of this study also identified that a student’s academic performance, maturity, ability, gender, and age influenced the decision to repeat, as much as it influenced the decision to socially promote (Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

McMillan (2003) found that because a child’s educational and social path can be adversely affected, educators had an obligation to make systematic evaluations to ensure effective and consistent grade repetition decisions. A consistent decision-making process requires teachers to systematically accumulate external and internal evidence that supports an inference, consequence, or conclusion that is appropriate and fair for that particular child. All teachers must be trained to know and to detect relevant information and how to interpret it in order to produce just and accurate placement conclusions for students (McMillan, 2003). Additionally, repetition decisions should not be solely based on student characteristics, learning outcomes, or what kind of classroom would best help him or her achieve standards.

**Academic red-shirting and its effect on grade repetition decisions.** The accountability policy debate has re-ignited pressure on schools to ensure that students acquire readiness skills,
or the ability to ‘fit’ with his or her cohort and master basic academic concepts before moving on to the next grade level (Martin, 2009). Nowhere is this phenomenon more prevalent than in kindergarten. Hong and Yu (2007) uncovered that the primary reasons for delayed kindergarten entry or kindergarten repetition included behavioral concerns and lack of maturity.

A quantitative, comparative, longitudinal, study completed by Elder and Lubotsky (2009) supported the red-shirting practice by reporting that entering school later reduced the probability of an Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) diagnosis by three percentage points. Elder and Lubotsky’s (2009) study also reported that educators believed after an early repeat year, the child reached the developmentally appropriate stage for their learning progress.

Historically, a student’s age of school entry has played a substantial role in the grade repetition debate. Academic red-shirting is defined as the practice of delaying a child’s entry into school with the purpose of allowing developmental benefits that support the child when entering at an older age (Frey, 2005). The nativist view towards child development supported the practice of academic red-shirting because it posited that each child possessed an “internal clock” (Martin, 2009). Nativists embraced that children were ready for school when they capably sat quietly, engaged with peers, and accepted direction. Martin (2009) explained that nativists believed there was a greater risk for failure if the child’s abilities did not fit their environment, and therefore school entry should be delayed.

The decision to red-shirt primarily resides with parents (Graue & DiPerna, 2001), and Crosser (1998), and Frey (2005) added that individual reasons vary. Graue and DiPerna (2001) conducted a study which included 8,000 students enrolled in the Wisconsin schools, aimed to depict patterns related to school entry, promotion, special education services, and student
achievement. This study found that “red-shirt” parents often believed that their child did not lack the developmental skills essential to begin school. Additionally, these parents did not view their child as having failed a grade, but rather felt it would be in their best interest to delay entry into school because they simply were not ready. Pre-school teachers often shared the same belief.

The most commonly cited reason for red-shirting was that the child was born in the latter half of the year and was believed to be less mature, either academically or behaviorally, than peers entering school at that time (Graue & DiPerna, 2001). Another reason was the parent’s desire to give their child a competitive edge by having one more year to develop readiness (Kagan, 1990) or to catch up if a developmental deficiency was detected (Graue, Kroeger, & Brown, 2003).

Willson and Hughes (2009) declared that often an early grade repetition decision is not related to a child’s cognitive ability, but rather to that child’s preparation, or readiness, for school. The longitudinal study of Karweit and Wasik (1992) argued that because the meaning of school readiness was situational, it cannot be universally defined and therefore varied from school to school. Readiness incorporated a wide range of academic and social immaturity dimensions such as: impulsiveness, inattentiveness, fidgetiness, poor social and emotional adjustment, and inability to recognize and name colors, letters, and numerals. These attributes often lead to grade repetition, or red-shirting (Karweit & Wasik, 1992).

A study completed by Oshima and Domaleski (2006) estimated that between 6% and 9% of students were red-shirted each year. When considering students with learning disabilities, H.H. Marshall (2003) stated that the perception was that red-shirted students gain one year of cognitive and physical development. However, there was little evidence to suggest that an extra year out of school better prepared that child for entry when it did occur. Nor did it improve
academic achievement across time. Frey (2005) found that academic red-shirting, a predominantly middle class phenomenon, tended to elevate the rigor of the Kindergarten classroom. In other words, the practice of red-shirting did not function as an effective intervention for children, especially those possessing a learning disability, because it elevated the experience for all participants in the class, making it more challenging for those with a disability (Frey, 2005).

Litty and Hatch (2006) demonstrated that special education identification and intervention services were often delayed in kindergarten to avoid early and misapplied labels; therefore, delaying entrance into kindergarten for a child with a learning disability was counter-intuitive because this child would not typically receive special education services until the first grade at the earliest. This study identified that academic red-shirting for students with disabilities neither functions as an effective intervention for the disability, nor provides an advantage that persists across time. H.H. Marshall (2003) and Martin (2009) reported that while red-shirted students were less likely to be retained in a grade, they were more likely to be referred for specialized support. Parents who red-shirt these children were further delaying special education identification and intervention services for the child with a learning disability and rather than boosting a child’s academic development, a delayed entry postponed students’ learning and was not worth the long-term costs. Elder and Lubtosky (2009) also found this especially true for children from poorer families and those with limited educational opportunities outside the public school system.

From long-term, comparative examination studies, Grissom (2004), Martin (2009), and Stipek and Byler (2001) reported that delaying age of entry had no academic advantages. The U.S. Department of Education (2006) found, students whose kindergarten entry was delayed,
demonstrated slightly higher reading knowledge and skills at the end of first grade, but were behind their classmates mathematically when compared with those who started kindergarten on time. The longitudinal, large scale study by Bickel, Zigmond, and Strayhorn (1991) and the comparative study by Stipek and Byler (2001) further indicated that when advantages do exist, they dissipated quickly, and by the third or fourth grade they vanished. These bodies of work, along with the longitudinal work of Malone, West, Denton, and Park (2006), failed to demonstrate sustained outcomes for delayed entry or retained students in comparison to their non-delayed or non-retained counterparts. On balance, the effects of age within one’s cohort concluded that age itself is not a particularly good predictor of learning or for at-risk behavior (Peterson & Hughes, 2011).

Hong and Yu (2007) believed that if the goal is to facilitate children’s cognitive and social maturation, repeating kindergarten established a less conducive setting for children to engage in age-relevant social relationships and made these children less ready for learning activities at the next grade level.

**Grade repetition and dropout.** The grade repetition literature supports that repeating in any grade is the most powerful predictor of dropping out of high school (Anderson et al., 2002; Balfanz, 2014; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Lillard & DiCicca, 2001; NASP, 2003). Roderick’s (1994) research revealed very similar results for young children. She concluded that the earlier in school the retention occurred (kindergarten or first grade), the higher the probability, 75% greater, of that student becoming a dropout. Further, she concluded that retention once between the fourth and sixth grades held a 90% increase in the risk of dropout.

Parker’s (2001) study looked to the social-emotional consequences and costs by following students further on their educational path. Parker cited that an average of 30% of
students retained once dropout by grade nine and 60% of students retained once dropout by grade twelve; students retained twice have a 90% chance of dropping out before graduation. Additionally, a large-scale study utilizing a national database conducted by Fine and Davis (2003) revealed that when the data was controlled for gender, socioeconomic status, race-ethnicity, and achievement, students who experienced an elementary grade repetition and completed high school were significantly less likely to enroll in post-secondary education. Jimerson (1999) identified similar results. Alexander et al. (2003) found that 67% of students retained between grades one and seven, 32% of students who were low-achieving, but promoted students, and 24% of students never retained, dropped out of high school. The results of Jimerson’s (1999) study of outcome analysis for retained students compared to low-achieving but promoted students, found that the low-achieving retained students had lower levels of academic achievement at the end of eleventh grade and were more likely to drop out of school by age 20.

The exploration of Guèvremont, Roos, & Brownell (2007) used the entire Manitoba student population to create reliable retention measures. After controlling for key factors, their longitudinal research also established that retained students were significantly more likely to withdraw or drop out of school. They claimed that students who were retained once were three times more likely to withdraw compared to those who were promoted. Furthermore, students who were retained more than once were eight times more likely to withdraw (Guèvremont et al., 2007).

Bowers’ (2010) survival analysis examined students at risk for dropout at each grade level rather than the aggregate population. The data collected replicated results identified in previous studies that extend past the national and large urban district findings: retaining a child
increased the likelihood of high school dropout or withdrawal (Bowers, 2010; Jimerson et al., 2002; Roderick, 1994; Stearns, Moller, Potochnick, & Blau, 2007). Bowers (2010) study transformed the results into hazard probability to assess risk and found that retained students were 91.1% more likely to drop out of high school.

A political movement to gather statistical data was questioned when Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, raised the bar and required schools to use one standardized dropout formula to better track this under-reported epidemic (Hennick, 2008). Despite this requirement, the state where this study was conducted, Massachusetts, found that policy and practice were not uniform (http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/retention/) and in the face of dramatic increases in the student dropout rate, the public was hardly aware of the grade repetition issue and its relationship to dropout (Leckrone & Griffith, 2006). The general public, and educators themselves, were unaware of the potential long-term negative consequences of the practice (Guévremont et al., 2007) and until there is change, at risk students remain at a disadvantage.

Amrein-Beardsley (2007) supported the evidence that a consistent underlying cause of our nation’s high dropout rate was compounded by under-qualified or ineffective classroom teachers. Additionally, our most highly effective teachers were unevenly distributed across school districts, with low-income and minority schools receiving the fewest of them. Empirically proven was the importance of employing high-quality teachers (Amrein-Beardsley, 2007). Berry (2004) argued that a knowledgeable and engaging teacher was the single best advantage any student could have to raise academic, social, and emotional potential.
Hill (1989) indicated that current socio-emotional approaches to dropout prevention, including alternative and pullout programs, may be inappropriate. He suggested that fundamental changes were needed in the educational system.

First, teachers and administrators must realize that education should not be a selective process where curriculum, tests, behavioral objectives, and retention policies are developed for the purpose of screening people out of the system. Second, the realization must come that quantitative assessments that measure attainment of skills are devices that have no relationship to quality, but rather tend to reduce the creativity in learning and encourage mediocrity in teaching. (Hill, 1989, n.p.)

The outcome of Penna and Tallerico’s (2005) qualitative study confirmed prior quantitative research by illustrating a strong positive correlation between in-grade repetition and early school leaving. Their data maintained that 83% of students who left school early identified grade repetition and its effects as the main reason. This study uncovered three interrelated phenomena in regard to grade repetition: the academically unhelpful nature of the repeat year; the social stigmatization of repeating; and the immediate and long-term emotional reactions to academic setbacks and peer pressures (Penna & Tallerico, 2005).

Repeated dropouts recalled that peers teased and taunted them for being “older and dumb,” behaviors ranging from name calling to “being tormented” (Penna & Tallerico, 2005, p. 15) and that this negative attention followed them through their subsequent years in school. These dropouts felt anger, denial, disbelief, shame, humiliation, and frustration at themselves and their schools when recalling their initial reaction to the decision. The Educational Testing Service (1995), the National Research Council (1993) and the United States House of Representatives (2000) agencies found that, “Dropouts, for example, make up about half of
welfare recipients and a like fraction of the prison population” (cited in Alexander et al., 2003, p.226). Over the course of a lifetime, projections were that a student who drops out will earn $630,000 less than a high school graduate earns (Rouse, 2007).

Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) conveyed that the leading reason cited by dropouts for leaving school was that school was boring and they did not see the connection between classroom learning and their own lives and aspirations. Several dropouts stated they wanted more challenging and engaging classes – and many mentioned real-world events--jobs, money, parenthood, or other immediate family care-giving tasks--as reasons to leave school. For many dropouts, the traditional high school experience did not prepare them for life outside of school or postsecondary educational success. A sense of boredom and discouragement existed because the student was repeating instruction in areas they had mastered, in addition to repeating material failed (Leckrone & Griffith, 2006).

**Social promotion.** Grade repetition and social promotion policies assume that a student’s school success or failure is distinct and objective (Reiter, 1973). Reiter extensively reviewed the research on the practices of grade repetition and social promotion and discovered that while grade repetition appears to produce long-term damaging effects on students and does not help schools maintain high achievement standards, social promotion is only somewhat less unsatisfactory. However, considering a student’s social emotional needs, social promotion appears to have greater educational validity (Martin, 2011). Comparative research found that academically, retained students often performed more poorly than other low-achieving students who were promoted (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Schuyler, 1985; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Silbergliitt, Jimerson et al., 2006).
There are many reasons to choose one side of the grade repetition/social promotion debate over the other, none of which have the empirical research to support that either practice profoundly improved education for the at-risk learner. Because the theory behind the practice of grade repetition and social promotion assumes that the threat of repeating holds the same meaning for all students, it presupposed that students respond to the threat of demotion rationally. The supposition was that students thereby calibrate their work efforts and avoid being held back. However, research indicated that students do not automatically adjust their low performing behaviors because they are considered with retention. Nor do students catch-up to peers if socially promoted, without specific targeted intervention (Anagnostopoulos, 2006).

Social promotion was motivated by a desire to protect the low performing student’s social adjustment and achievement motivation, with advocates believing that social promotion allowed students to learn more due to the exposure of new content and curriculum (Roderick, 1995). However, Cryan (1985) stated that socially promoted children are moved ahead to spend another year in ego-reducing failure experiences.

As previously detailed, which student is promoted from one year to the next is largely determined by the school systems’ promotional policies, as well as the beliefs and attitudes held by the educators within that system (Roderick, 1994). Keeping in mind that randomly retaining or socially promoting any particular student is unethical (Allen et al., 2009), the decision to implement a social promotion over a grade repetition is often the opposite side of the same coin. Just as with grade repetition, there is no distinct determinant for socially promoting one student over another.

Recently, enthusiasm has favored the use of achievement testing to end social promotion. However, there is no data available that follows social promotion decisions or rates (Heubert &
Hauser, 1999). It may therefore be assumed that the student individual factors, standardized achievement assessments, and educator influences that support a decision to retain a student are the same indicators that would be called upon to decide on a social promotion. The conclusion therefore may be that a social promotion decision is often merely the result of not implementing a grade repetition.

Socially promoted students tend to exhibit similar learning characteristics to those repeated; however those socially promoted, for some reason, are deemed better served by moving on. Some socially promoted students may also be those who performed slightly better on benchmark assessments for promotion criteria (Dawson, 1998). These students tend to hail from families invested in their child’s education, have higher SES backgrounds, are female, and are not considered among the minority (Burkam et al., 2007; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Troncin, 2004). Additionally, the students chosen to socially promote present as slightly more mature to their teachers than their retained counterparts (Range, Yonke et al., 2011).

Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) conducted a twelve year, correlational study across several grade levels and results consistently demonstrated that promoted students attained higher achievement levels than groups of repeated students, and that statistically, low-achieving but promoted peers’ behaviors remained stable. Tomchin and Impara (1992) identified that promoted students in year two received more services relative to their repeated counterparts. Martin’s (2009) data supported the environmentalist and interactionist views, which substantiated the tradition of social promotion. Regardless of gender, grade, ethnicity, and ability, it appeared best for students to be promoted with their cohort rather than be retained in grade for another year (Martin, 2011).
Reiss (2006) wrote that social promotion as a psychological concept of positive regard went too far as a result of the 70s and 80s self-esteem movement. During this time, inflated self-esteem became incorrectly equated with what is necessary for children to gain self-discipline and self-control. The concept of social promotion attempted to address the social and emotional part of the learner, leaving academic needs at a loss.

When considering grade repetition versus social promotion, Pierson and Connell’s (1992) study indicated that students’ whose academic performance necessitated repetition performed better two or more years later than comparable promoted peers. This comparative study of students in Florida found that repeated students made significant reading gains relative to the control group of socially promoted students two years after the practice. Leading researchers to believe that social promotion did not effectively serve at-risk students in the long run, further complicating the placement decision debate (Pierson & Connell, 1992).

Social emotional aspects of grade repetition. There are however, relatively fewer studies addressing the social and behavioral outcomes of repeated students. Holmes (1989) concluded that repeated students displayed poorer social adjustment and more negative attitudes toward their schooling. The socio-emotional analyses outcome of both Jimerson’s (2001) and Kenny’s (1991) studies found no significant difference between those students who were retained and those low-performing-but-promoted students. However, Byrnes (1989) and Shepard and Smith (1990) reported that many retained students experienced social difficulty with peers. Several other researchers concluded that grade repetition affected students’ social-emotional and behavioral outcomes as well as their perceived academic competence (Gibb, 2010; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Houck, 2009; Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson,Carlson et al., 1997; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Pierson & Connell, 1992; Wu et al., 2010).
There is a direct link between emotion and learning (Elias et al., 1997). Smalls (1997) stated that grade repetition presented a lasting negative impact on students’ social and emotional growth. When trying to learn, any distressing emotion temporarily hampered ability because attention was preoccupied with the source of distress. Students and schools were most successful when efforts were made to integrate academic, social, and emotional learning (Elias et al., 1997). Students learned in collaboration with their teachers, peers, and families. Therefore, social emotional learning (SEL) was the enabling component that helped to foster academic learning for the students (Elias et al., 1997).

Grade repetition was often implemented as a global intervention for low performing students before in-depth evaluation was considered to address an individual’s needs. The consequences of this decision are many; therefore, the social-emotional needs must not be overlooked when considering the effectiveness of this practice (Peterson & Hughes, 2011).

Penna and Tallerico (2005) claimed that in order to attend to the social-emotional needs of repeated students the curriculum must be different. According to the repeated dropouts featured in their phenomenological, qualitative study, “Not much changed the second (or third) time around” (p. 14). Students reported they received the same assignments, textbooks, instruction, and tests that they failed the year prior. In many cases, they even had the same teacher. Students in this study complained that the redundancy was boring and frustrating, and repeating a grade did not help them understand the information any better than the year they failed. These students revealed that their teachers offered less support, and embarrassed or demeaned them, for example, “Surely you remember this from last year!” (Penna & Tallerico, 2005, p. 14). These students found the repeat year unproductive and in fact counter-productive, to their overall engagement in school (Penna & Tallerico, 2005; Stone & Engel, 2007).
The conclusions of Hong and Yu’s (2007) research signified that a student’s cognitive growth over multiple years depended on the sequence of treatments received in all of those years. This suggested that early-grade repetition may benefit students, but only if schools adapt curricula and instruction to meet each student’s developmental, social, and emotional levels, as opposed to asking at-risk students to repeat the year utilizing the same materials. Just as important, it established that students at-risk who were promoted may have suffered in their later learning years when schools did not address and attended to their special needs (Hong & Yu, 2007).

Transition brings times of considerable uncertainty for students, along with ongoing and long-lasting effects, both academically and socially (Fenzel, 2000; Galton, Gray, & Rudduck, 2003; Guévremont et al., 2007; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; Thompson, Morgan, & Urquhart, 2003). Great care must be taken to create a supportive environment during times of student transition (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Transitional information must include more than mere details of academic attainment in order to support those who may be more vulnerable when they move on to the next grade (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Preventative measures must be implemented for the low performing student because successful navigation of this transition must “affect not only the child’s academic performance, but their general sense of well-being and general health” (Zeedyk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope, & Lindsay, 2003, p.68).

The adoption of school-based mental health programs addressed the broad mental health of students in the most efficient manner, while promoting social and emotional competence. An essential component for social-emotional improvement in schools called for parental involvement. Inviting parents to become involved in all aspects of their child’s education was a proactive strategy that made student improvement feasible (Jimerson, Pletcher et al., 2006).
Social emotional programs included strategies with a focus on both behavioral and cognitive modifications. The use of token reinforcement, along with peer and adult monitors to model feedback and reinforcement, taught anger controlling and self-coping strategies to the students. These strategies consistently reduced disruptive behaviors and increased on-task behavior, thereby providing an opportunity to increase students’ social-emotional skills and academic achievement (Robinson, Smith, Miller, & Brownell, 1999). Student responses were carefully monitored to ensure that failed activities were modified or discarded. Those who worked closely with students were encouraged to consider the general effectiveness of each intervention strategy, its integrity, and acceptability by teachers, parents, children, and other stakeholders (Elliott, Witt, Kratochwill, & Stoiber, 2002). A comprehensive approach, implemented across multiple levels, tailored for both the larger student body and the needs of the individual, considered the cultural, linguistic, and gender differences in order to serve the underrepresented populations (Jimerson, Pletcher et al., 2006).

Seminal grade repetition researchers, Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) have long studied the comparison between promoted and retained groups of students. Behaviorally speaking, their 2007 study claimed that retained groups consistently displayed more aggression than all promoted groups. This study supported the rationale that because many children were required to repeat a year due to immaturity or poor social skills, their socio-emotional adjustments and behavioral outcomes warranted extra special consideration. Often, however, those needs went untended. Jimerson and Ferguson’s (2007) longitudinal, quantitative study failed to demonstrate any significant advantages for retaining students relative to comparison groups of students who were promoted. In fact, the major difference between those retained and those socially promoted was the emotional stigma that the retained child carried for the rest of his or her life. Owings and
Magliaro (1998) declared that there are few practices in education which have such overwhelming negative research findings arrayed against them.

S.P. Marshall (2006) explained that what and how much a student learns is influenced by motivation, emotional states, beliefs, interests, goals, and habits of thinking. S.P. Marshall asserted that students who did not do well in school were often ignored or marginalized for not being smart. This added feelings of disgrace and/or shame: feelings carried throughout life. This un-motivating failure became, “A silent and invisible albatross that diminishes future learning capacity” (S.P. Marshall, 2006, p. 144). These students became afraid, tentative, and risk averse. For them, learning became unnatural. S.P. Marshall warned against creating a one-size-fits-all educational and assessment system that “definitively and conclusively determine the achievement and promise of each one of our children, without asking them to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in multiple ways over extended periods of time” (S.P. Marshall, 2006, p.165). She attested, “Years of hearing labels like ‘failure,’ ‘underachiever,’ or ‘slow learner’ became internalized so deeply that a new ‘deficient’ learning-self emerged – one who no longer saw possibilities or promise, but saw only peril and the need to protect its fragile self” (S.P. Marshall, 2006, p.165).

Participants in Powell’s (2005) study viewed the consequences of grade repetition both positively and negatively. These participants’ positive views of grade repetition were similar to those outlined above. Their negative views were grounded in the feelings that grade repetition was a watershed experience, continually processed for years afterward. Some participants reported that they would never retain their own child. Others were embarrassed by their experience and refused to talk about it. Some lied to peers about being over-age for their grade. Many battled fear of failure; while others were determined to prove they were not “stupid,”
aiming to prove the “retainers” wrong. Some participants noted a nagging sense of insecurity like an ongoing negative mantra. These revelations suggested feelings of shame that placed the blame or failure on the student, rather than the school system. Most of the participants in Powell’s study did not view being retained as detrimental, but all characterized it as a failure in their life. Both the positive and the negative feelings expressed in this study stemmed from a deficit model of education, a model which places the retainee in a position where he or she must continually prove his or her self-worth. Powell admitted that this study was limited in scope and while the majority of participants agreed on the positive efficacy of grade repetition in their life, none were aware of the years of negative research regarding its practice. Also, in most cases, no other interventions other than grade repetition were employed by the teachers or the schools (Powell, 2005).

In two separate studies, Anderson et al. (2005) and Yamamoto and Byrnes (1987) noted a developmental trend: the stress a child perceived from grade repetition increased from first to third grade, and again from third to sixth grade. Children perceived grade repetition as punishment and not an educational intervention (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986). Burkam et al. (2007) found that kindergarten repeaters remained socially and behaviorally behind their same-age peers at the end of the repeat year, as well as at the end of grade one. A study completed by Yamamoto (1980), found that sixth grade students ranked being left back as their most stressful life event. Eighty-seven percent of repeated students reported the social-emotional feelings of fear, anger, sadness, resentment, disillusionment, exasperation, worthlessness, resignation, and withdrawal, and several students admitted to consciously acting out (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986; Penna & Tallerico, 2005).
The social-emotional results of a four-year study completed by McCombs-Thomas et al. (1992) indicated that retained students, regardless of race, were viewed as having more anxiety and problems of withdrawal when compared to struggling children who were promoted. Children interpreted the assignment of a grade repetition as a message from the teacher and school that they were not capable (Jimerson, Ferguson et al., 2002). More than half of girls in Byrnes (1989) study denied ever having repeated a grade. Most children felt sad or upset about the decision and were anxious about their peers’ subsequent reactions to them. In general, children did not view the grade repetition decision as a positive action carried out for their benefit and their parents felt that the decision compromised their child’s future (Alexander et al., 2003).

Grade repetition caused self-esteem, emotional functioning, and peer relations to decline and school disengagement, absenteeism, and truancy to increase (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). The decline in self-esteem and relationships coupled with poor treatment, added to the perceived counter-productiveness of the repeat year for study participants. This applied pressure for them to leave school as the original date of graduation approached. They reported that, “They did not fit in!” (Penna & Tallerico, 2005).

Inconsistent policies and lack of clarity force decision makers to focus on what they “feel” is the most important of factors in the decision-making process. Cryan’s statement made in 1985 holds true, “The foundation for decisive educational change must be built on what research tells us” (p. 302). The literature regarding the negative effects of grade repetition dates as far back as when public schooling began and yet today these long identified results rarely come into play when decisions are made to repeat or promote a student.

Current State of Grade Repetition Literature
As a practice, the effects of a grade repetition may not present themselves until years removed from the experience (Bernardi, 2014; Penna & Tallerico, 2005). It is a practice with ramifications for the trajectory of any students’ educational career, and therefore research must consider the decades of long-term data collected that compares students’ academic, social, and emotional growth. This section reviews the most recent research published on the topic of grade repetition, much of which builds on the richness of the longitudinal data accumulated and studied through meta-analysis over the decades.

**Current perception of grade repetition.** The majority of grade repetition studies overlooked the storied experiences of individuals who repeated a year of elementary school and the effect this repetition had on their life story. Grade repetition comes not only with monetary costs, but also with academic, social, and emotional costs for the student (Gottfried, 2013; Key, 2013). Despite the popular belief that grade repetition is a remedy for students who have failed to master basic skills, the larger body of quantitative data is almost uniformly negative (Gottfried, 2013; Range et al., 2012; Shepard & Smith, 1990).

A recent grade repetition study focused on trends over time from 1972 to 2005. The findings expressed a common theme echoed in the extant literature reviewed on grade repetition that, “Most research on the effects of grade retention portrays it as a practice that, at best, provides lasting benefit to students and, at worst, is considered a damaging practice” (Frederick & Hauser, 2008, p. 719).

The literature from opponents of the grade repetition practice presents as negative (Merle, 1998; Range et al., 2012). In fact, over the decades, quantitative, longitudinal data has found the practice of grade repetition to be academically ineffective and potentially harmful to students’
social and emotional well-being (Bowman-Perrott, 2010; Griffith et al., 2010; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Ownings & Magliaro, 1998; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Wu et al., 2010).

A longitudinal study that explored the transactional perspective of repetition further declared that the stigmatizing label “retainee” affected the child’s sense of school belonging and contributed to the fading benefits of a grade repetition (Wu et al., 2010). Robert Balfanz (2014), a research professor at John Hopkins University School of Education, recently opined in the New York Times, “Asking struggling students to repeat a grade under the same circumstances almost guarantees the same result” (p.SR5).

Supporters of grade repetition contend that, “Without an adequate ability to read, children are ill equipped to learn across disciplines and may never catch up” (Robelen, 2012, p.14). Bonvin et al. (2008) affirmed that pedagogically speaking repetition grants pupils more time to learn. They also reported that applying this practice early in a child’s educational career was meant to avoid the accumulation of gaps in knowledge and competencies in the future, and contrary to much of the grade repetition literature, Burkam et al. (2007) reported that kindergarten students with higher levels of self-control may experience benefit to repeating. Additionally, Abbott et al. (2010) found that at-risk first-grade students who received additional small-group interventions showed nearly significant positive effects. This study supported that in order for low performing students to accelerate their achievement, they must have increased levels of academic support and intensity of instruction.

**Systemic issues.** As a practice, academic grade repetition continues to be viewed as a relatively easy intervention and a straightforward strategy to administer. It does not require much innovation or change to the school structure (Temple, Reynolds, & Ou, 2004). In fact, the structure for repeating a grade continues to replicate the categories as outlined by the research of
Karweit (1988, 1991, 1992, 1999) that spans decades. Karweit classified the range of retention experiences into several categories: 1) recycling, or simply repeating a grade, 2) remediation, repeating a grade with supplemental educational resources and supports, 3) transitions, which are supplemental programming prior to failure, and 4) partial promotions, repeating only a particular subject (Karweit, 1992).

Most schools continue to cycle the student through the same curriculum a second time. As a result of interviewing students prior to and during a repeat year, Stone and Engel (2007) discovered that retained students felt their classroom experiences were extremely similar to the year before retention. Both teacher and student interviews indicated that teachers did not modify curricular content for repeating students. Students in several studies did not report high degrees of individualization in their repeat year and in fact reported that the repeat year offered the same curriculum the child failed to master the first time (Abbott et al., 2010; Burkam et al., 2007; Range, Dougan et al., 2011). Additionally, retained kindergarten students received less intervention in their repeat year and therefore did not benefit academically from the practice (Abbott et al., 2010).

The study of Abbot et al. (2010) also demonstrated that retained first grade students receiving small group intervention eventually outperformed their matched-group peers, reaching average range abilities in literacy. However, they also noted that because this study lacked a control group, it was difficult to determine whether using the small group strategies explicitly reduced the first grade retention rates. Comparatively, Holmes’ (1989) meta-analysis found similar results; that in the repeat year when students were placed on individualized remediation plans in classrooms with lower student-teacher ratios, progress improved. Again, consistent with Holmes’ (1989) data, Peterson and Hughes (2011) found that both low-performing promoted and
research.

Research conducted by Allen et al. (2009) uncovered another systemic issue, that retained children do not receive more services in the repeat year relative to their prior year or relative to their promoted peers. In fact, Allen et al. reported that there is relatively little data collected on the educational services repeating students received either prior to or during the retention intervention.

A study completed by Peterson and Hughes (2011) reaffirmed that universally, grade repetition was used as the primary intervention instead of one component in a more comprehensive remediation strategy. In fact, by studying 769 relatively low achieving first graders, 165 of whom were retained and 604 of whom were promoted, Peterson and Hughes reported that both potential “retainees” and “promotees” received the same number of interventions during the pre-repetition year. During the following school year, the retained students received less services than their promoted counterparts. The repeating children were also not recommended for summer school because it was believed they had the following repeat year to catch up. Peterson and Hughes’ (2011) findings have also been evidenced throughout the researcher’s personal experiences with low-performing students. Peterson and Hughes protested the practice of grade repetition, stating,

It may be ineffective to treat retention as a ‘do-over’ year that assumes that the second time around the student will learn the material and stay on grade level in the future. The fact that retained students receive fewer services during the repeat year than do promoted students suggests that retention may often be treated as *the* [emphasis added] intervention to solve students’ academic problems. This finding raises the concern that instead of
looking at why the child failed first grade, the school is simply hoping that the repeat year will permit the child to acquire the academic skills needed to succeed at higher grades. Many students are more carefully assessed to determine the nature of their difficulties only after retention fails to serve its intended purpose as a one-time adjustment that puts the students on a more favorable academic trajectory. (2011, p. 162)

These findings substantiate Frymier’s (1989) earlier work which discovered that most schools do not provide special interventions for retainees and so the likelihood of positive outcomes following repetition was further diminished. Retained students reported that the repeat year was very similar to the previous year. Repeating students recounted that the teachers assumed they understood the material because they were exposed to it for the second time. Even teachers reported providing fewer explanations to repeating students. Often the child who repeated a grade continued to be unsuccessful and was then subsequently assigned to special education (Peterson & Hughes, 2011).

The United States Department of Education (2011) found that in general, schools with more than one-third high-poverty were spending less per-pupil than lower-poverty schools in the same district. Additionally, there was a significant gap in teacher salaries between high-poverty and low-poverty schools. The higher salaries belonged to the teachers working in the schools with higher economic means and a smaller poverty level, proving that the funding needed to provide suggested supports was not being spent where it was most needed.

According to Frey (2005) many educators view grade repetition as proof of maintaining high standards; however, it is imperative to remember that studies illustrated the positive effects of repetition diminished over time (Bonvin et al., 2008; Penfield, 2010; Wu et al., 2010).
**Academic resilience and grade repetition.** The practice of grade repetition as an intervention has for decades considered the students’ assets and the effect of repetition in isolation (Gottfried, 2012). Through his research, Ungar (2012) came to the conclusion that the time was long overdue for educators to re-navigate the resources available to students at-risk; the role of families, schools, communities, and governments. Resources must become culturally meaningful in ways that reflect the preferences of those who need them, because differences in individual performance are situational, not child-dependent and these differences matter to the academic trajectory that turns children into adults (Ungar, 2012). Milesi’s (2010) added to this research by proving that American students following a nontraditional trajectory have a reduced chance of completing a bachelor’s degree.

As a dynamic process, resilience emerged from the interplay of the individual, the event, and the environment, thereby giving rise to a focus on individual, situational, and contextual protective factors (Cowin, Cowan, Schultz, 1996; McCubbin, Thompson, E., Thompson, A., & Fromer, 1994). Additionally, there is no one direct path to resilience. What works in one situation, for one person, at one time, may not prove beneficial at another time in a similar situation (Johnson & Wiechelt, 2004). Therefore, resilience as a protective factor is especially important to the educational setting and the student faced with repeating a year in school.

Interestingly, Davoudzadeh et al. (2015) longitudinal study of readiness predictors from students in kindergarten through grade eight also found that when previously established risk factors of grade repetition where controlled for, risk factors, in fact, became protective factors. This supported the fundamental driving force for schooling, the belief that all students can succeed (Krovetz & Speck, 1995). However many schools today, “are facing the difficult challenges of ensuring success for all students and fostering an empowered, enthusiastic staff of
lifelong learners” (Henderson & Milstein, 2003, p. 1). Since the passing of NCLB (2001) there has been immense national pressure on schools to show improvements in scores at earlier grades (Davoudzadeh et al., 2015) and when students present with performance challenges, the teacher often resorted to a default remedy: grade repetition.

The body of knowledge known as academic resilience theory has increased significance for educational institutions, because the term “resilient” implies students are able to cope, and at-risk suggests that students are endangered (Stanley, 2008). Presently, the practice of grade repetition views the child as at-risk. Grade repetition, either viewed as a negative sanction or a second chance to learn, most would agree is a disruption in the life of a student. It is the resilient child who may better manage this categorized adversity and therefore have a greater capacity for handling the decision. Social scientists and educators are beginning to understand the importance of academic resilience and support the move to resiliency in schools for both teachers and students because, now more than ever, schools need methods that help students rebound and become more competent and successful learners (Henderson & Milstein, 2003).

At-risk resilience studies illustrated that children taught to approach their life journey with resilience were better able to reach their full potential (NASP, 2010); and because some family systems experience tremendous stress, Benard (1993) suggested that schools should help students develop resilience. Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) pointed out that the school-home interaction was of utmost importance to the life of the developing child. School connectedness is defined as “the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009, p. 3). School connectedness contributed to the ability to develop a sense of connectedness, or belonging, which was often lacking, especially within the context of grade repetition.
Research affirms that when students have adult support, they experience increases in academic achievement, social competence, and civic engagement, regardless of race or family income, yet one in three young people reach the age of 19 without ever having a mentoring relationship of any kind. (DePaoli et al., 2015, p. 28)

Researchers have discovered that exposure to toxic stress can disrupt brain development, especially in early childhood. This can lead to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and health. Fortunately relationships with caring adults can help mitigate the impacts of stress and trauma (Kim et al, 2011). Resilience solutions were not meant to be specifically student-focused, but should focus on change to a student’s social ecology (Ungar, 2010). Grade repetition should therefore improve schools so that they become institutes of learning and resilience, rather than merely places of teaching.

Entwisle and Hayduk (1988) posited that early school experiences provided the foundation for the development of a child’s academic sense of self. Randolph, Fraser, and Orthner (2004) contributed to this premise by finding that when pathways and trajectories were not rigid or entrenched, early grade repetition had long-term positive consequences for the child’s academic self-development. These students were malleable and open to change; and practitioners were able to intervene and positively affected negative pathways, creating the foundation of a positive academic self-development. Cooke and Stammer (1985) posed that the difficulty in the repetition decision process was determining which students would benefit most from being repeating with the least amount of adversity, stress, or trauma. Since resilient students fared better in the face of adversity, the more teachers knew about a student’s life history and resilience skills, the better they could predict positive outcomes resulting from a grade repetition decision.
Grade repetition is a setback where the child is expected to “bounce back” in the repeat year before it can be considered effective. Policy makers and educators need to develop processes that enable repeaters to learn to approach their academic life, as well as their social and emotional life, with resilience (NASP, 2010).

The research of Willson and Hughes (2009) documented that ego resilience was negatively correlated to retention; that retained students possessed lower resilience rates, were more hyperactive, and received less teacher support. Because transitions were difficult for some children (Mruk, 1999) it was important to note that the relationship between transitions, resilience, and self-esteem has received little attention in the literature (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Jimerson, Graydon et al., (2006) found that children who experienced a grade repetition transition without appropriate support and assistance became characterized by low-achievement, poor adjustment, and additional academic failure. To prevent this cycle of failure, educational professionals have a responsibility to incorporate intervention strategies that enhance achievement while promoting academic, social, and emotional competence; giving the child the academic skills needed to succeed, rather than questioning why the child failed. Educators often fail to recognize the fact that the child did not acquire needed skills the first time, and rarely do they consider the child’s ability to be academically resilient or to face adversity when making a repetition decision. Educators must factor academic resilience into grade repetition decisions and promote its development in the repeat year in order to truly “leave no child behind” (Jimerson, Graydon et al., 2006).

Brewin and Statham (2011) found that children who were given extra support aimed at reducing the multi-factorial difficulties faced during a school career became more resilient. This suggested that these students were better able to cope with difficulties arising from stressful
events. Research showed that schools with established high expectations for all students, along with necessary supports, have very high rates of academic success (Benard, 1991, 1993, 1996). It was important to identify the specific facets of academic resilience, such as those detailed by Martin and Marsh (2003): confidence, control, composure, and commitment, because targeted interventions and supports were more effective than the practice of grade repetition alone.

To further promote resilience characteristics for the repeated student, counseling was included: (a) an understanding of why the student was repeated, (b) the students, parents, teachers, and peers perception of grade repetition, (c) short-term and long-term goal setting for the school year, (d) study skills, and (e) progress monitoring (Landrum, 2007). Planned activities such as, community service projects, scouting, hobbies and after school clubs, accompanied by social skills development helped to bolster a student’s resilience. These activities provided opportunities: to increase social bonding, establish clear expectations, teach life skills, provide a caring and supportive context for learning, and engage children in meaningful participation inside and outside the classroom (Bondy & McKenzie, 1999). Active engagement promoted well-being when disorder was present, and with practice, these assets became the protective factors and building blocks of resilience when a risk was present (Ungar, 2012).

To date, no study has examined grade repetition in conjunction with a student’s capacity for academic resilience to support or discredit repetition as a practice. In a Phi Delta Kappa article, Doyle (1989) decried the “resistance of conventional wisdom to research evidence [against retention in grade].” He further pointed out that there is “no widespread educational practice that has been as thoroughly discredited as retention in grade...the task is to uproot outdated misconceptions appealing to educators’ ‘common sense’ wisdom” (p. 219). This task
continues to be extremely difficult because educators and parents alike believe in the notion that another year will lead to success or that the student deserved to repeat because of their lack of effort.

Traditional attitudes regarding grade repetition created barriers for at-risk students that could benefit from the teaching of academic resilience. Children must be resilient to manage adversity and because every child’s life will at some point be touched by setbacks, as well as achievements, it is vital that he or she learn to approach life with resilience (NASP, 2010). Therefore, the more we know about a student’s proclivity towards resilience, the better we can predict the outcomes associated with certain life altering decisions. By considering the effects of academic resilience and the relevant variables of a child’s development, the more beneficial past school and peer group influences would be for any child’s sense of cohesion and efficacy in the educational setting (Ungar, 2012).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Grade Repetition

Advantages. Bowman (2005) argued that, “It would be unwise to suggest that students should never be retained” (p. 42). She believed that retention decisions should be made on an individual basis, and only after considering, or exhausting other options. Her study found that second-grade retainees demonstrated short-term improvements. Her results also illustrated that retained students experienced a higher level of social acceptance, an improved academic self-concept, and a more positive attitude towards school in the repeat year (Bowman, 2005). Bonvin et al. (2008) reported same-age comparison of grade repetition students often favored the retainee, with the retained student being preferred by classmates during the repeat year. Sandoval and Hughes (1981) accounted that students retained in first grade successfully made realistic gains and emerged from their repeat year in the top third of their class, and Hong and
Raudenbush (2005) argued that when low-performing students were retained, improvements were the result of a more academically homogeneous classroom where teachers easily differentiated instruction. Others believed that repetition benefitted the students unprepared to learn higher-level material because they had not yet mastered the lower-level facts and skills (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005).

Grade repetition studies asserted that having a child repeat a year in the lower elementary grades reaps more beneficial results than repeating in the secondary levels. Educators consistently claimed that primary grade repetition provided the low achieving child the opportunity to “catch up.” Proponents viewed grade repetition as a one-time adjustment allowing the student to perform at a more favorable academic trajectory (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). The belief in this efficacy was reflected in the higher number of students retained in the primary grades in comparison to rates of repetition in the upper levels (Barnett, Clarizio, & Payette, 1996; Griffith et al., 2010; Jimerson, 2001; Meisels & Law, 1993; Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Sandoval and Hughes (1981) found that the best predictors for grade repetition success were the child’s initial status in three areas: academic skills (especially in reading), emotional development, and social skills. When the child’s initial status in these areas were positive, their repetition was more beneficially effective. Sandoval and Hughes (1981) also found that a child’s physical size, visual-motor development, family background, and early life experiences were relatively unimportant in determining grade repetition success or failure.

Powell’s (2005) dissertation, which studied the effects of grade retention on the lives of adults that were retained as children, found that some participants readily accepted the decision and believed in the efficacy of the practice, reporting no long-term effects of their grade
repetition. Most participants felt that the experience had an overall positive effect and indicated that they would not be the same if they had not been retained. However, the participants in Powell’s (2005) study made it clear that they only know their life post retention. Several did question how their life might have been different had they not been retained.

Studies which compared results of retained students with matched-promoted peers explained results that favor the retained students (Mantzicopoulous & Morrison, 1992; S.E. Peterson, DeGracie, & Ayabe, 1987; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). S.E. Peterson et al. (1987) found that by the end of the repeat year, students retained in first or second grade outperformed matched-promoted students in reading and mathematics. Wu et al. (2008) found that while students who were repeated in grade one had slower growth rates in reading and mathematics in the short-term, they had faster growth rates in reading and mathematics in the long-term. The longitudinal work of Gleason et al. (2007) discovered that when repeaters were compared to their grade-peers, younger students completing the grade for the first time, they were not as far behind their younger classmates as they had been behind their same-age classmates the previous year. Alexander et al. (2003) concluded, that “Retention, so far as we can determine, does not impede Beginning School Study (BBS) children academically or assault their self-esteem in the early years, yet something about the experience apparently weakened repeaters’ attachment to school” (p. ix).

Range et al. (2012) reported that teachers generally believed parents were more motivated to work with their child after they had been retained. Another study concluded that teachers and parents alike believed that the threat of grade repetition caused students to take their academics more seriously (Silberglipt, Jimerson, et al., 2006). Hennick’s (2008) report stated that as a result of rigid retention policies, students worked harder and were motivated by the fear
of being retained. John Easton, executive director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research, stated in Hennick’s research that the threat of repeating was effective, and, “There was actually demonstrable additional effort” [on the part of low performing students] (cited in Hennick, 2008, p. 3). Easton reported that the threat of repetition encouraged children to work hard enough to gain roughly half an academic year’s growth in reading and math over the summer (cited in Hennick, 2008).

A study conducted by Wu et al. (2010) consisted of a four-year longitudinal research analysis of propensity matching used a two-piece linear curve growth system for data collection. A propensity score is the predicted likelihood that a student will repeat a grade and more closely equates nonrandomized grouping (Wu et al., 2010). This study suggested that “retention in kindergarten and first grade do not harm students’ psychological adjustment, at least through Grade 4” (p. 148). Relative to promoted peers, children retained in first grade benefited in the short- and long-term with respect to “decreased teacher-rated hyperactivity, peer-related sadness and withdrawal, and increased teacher related behavioral engagement” (Wu et al., 2010, p. 148). This further confirmed an increase in peer-likability in the repeat year. The repeating students maintained the same growth rate as those promoted. Regression results implied that repetition had a positive effect on a student’s sense of schooling. Both students and their parents are buoyed by this; however, this study upheld the years of research literature that indicated the benefits were not sustained over time. Results indicated that three years later the retained children obtained higher academic competence than their matched promoted peers; however, other details in their study where not as positive the farther removed from the repetition the students became (Wu et al., 2010). Wu et al. (2010) found that the short-term increase in peer-rated liking decreased rapidly following the repeat year and the short-term increase in school
belonging dissipated by year three. Despite the positive benefits of retention touted through grade four, the practice created vulnerabilities which did not appear until the child reached middle school, and few educators looked back to discover if a middle school student demonstrating symptoms had retained. These findings further supported the claim that the initial positive effects taper off in subsequent years.

Consistent with other short-range benefit findings, the four-year longitudinal study conducted by Wu et al. (2010) identified short-term improvements for several outcomes, such as improvements in hyperactivity and engagement, as well as peer-rated sadness and withdrawal. Gleason et al. (2007) found improvements in peer acceptance and teacher/peer perceived academic competence in the repeat year. These studies confirmed the immediate gains in peer-rated liking for children retained relative to those who were promoted; however, this research concluded that the benefits dissipated within a few years post-retention. Both retained and promoted students displayed little change in short- or long-term behavioral difficulties, such as peer-rated aggression and peer-rated hyperactivity.

In the first study of its kind Hughes, Chen, Thoemmes, and Kwok (2010) investigated the longitudinal association between early grade repetition and subsequent performance on state mandated tests using propensity scores. Hughes et al. (2010) found that the weighted average propensity scores indicated that the probability of passing the reading Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) standardized assessment in third grade was 64.6% for retained students and only 55.3% for those who had been promoted. Additionally, the average propensity score to pass the math TAKS standardized assessment in grade three was 62.9% for retained students compared with 53.0% for those promoted. They found that students retained in grade one were more likely than those promoted to receive a passing score in grade three. These
findings contradicted years of grade repetition literature. Hughes et al. (2010) found that when propensity scores were used in combination with matching they provided the strongest level of control for selection effects and therefore strengthened causal reasoning. They also claimed that grade repetition studies which employed better controls produced fewer negative effects, indicating that a higher passing rate for retained students might be reflective of intervention “dosage.”

Disadvantages. Results from several specific studies appeared to favor a grade repetition decision, but also made the point that the positive effects of the repetition faded after two or three years. Grade repetition, in comparison to social promotion, was arguably more developmentally appropriate for the academically at-risk student, allowing a venue which made learning more meaningful for the struggling child (Plummer & Graziano, 1987; Smith & Shepard, 1987). The Westchester Institute for Human Services Research (WIHSR, n.d.) found that at-risk students who repeated, academically outperformed students in the same grade, but did not outperform their same-age peers who had been promoted. Additionally, over time, those same-age retainees demonstrated poorer short and middle-term academic performance when compared to their promoted peers. The extant grade repetition literature did not unanimously support grade repetition as a practice that is beneficial (Alexander et al., 2003; Jimerson, 1999; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). In fact, very few studies measured the impact on all three areas: (a) overall academic outcomes; (b) social outcomes; and (c) school dropout (Range, Dougan, Pijanowski, 2011).

Those opposed to grade repetition cited that decades of research literature failed to show the long-term academic (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson, Anderson et al., 2002), psychological (Sandoval & Hughes, 1981), or social (Anderson et al.,
2005; Pierson & Connell, 1992;) reasons for the practice, and researchers agreed that the academic gains for retained students are minimal and short-lived at best (Holmes, 1989; Houck, 2009; Jimerson, 2001).

Karweit and Wasik’s (1992) comparative analysis study indicated that whatever advantage retention may provide, it did not continue into the next year. Lerner (1998) and Sameroff (1975) asserted that repetition in the elementary grades influenced multiple risk and protective processes. Both studies postulated that the effects of grade repetition may unfold over time and thereby affected different dimensions of functioning during a child’s development. Coie et al. (1993) found that negative effects may not emerge until much later during the child’s developmental periods. Jimerson et al. (1997) reported that statistically, students retained in early grades displayed exacerbated behavior problems by grade six.

In a comparative study of 38 high school students repeated in elementary school with a matched control group of students who were socially promoted, it was found that retained students were lower on a number of scholastic variables; had higher incidences of absenteeism; had lower scores in relation to self-esteem; and that the later in life a repetition occurred the poorer the overall performance in the areas measured (Hagborg, Masella, Palladino, & Shepardson, 1991).

Data collected during Martin’s (2009) study suggested that there was no academic advantage to being markedly older than cohort or to being retained in a grade. Zill, Loomis, and West (1997) concluded that repeating kindergarten did not help students and may have actually hurt them. The U.S. Department of Education (2006) concluded that by the end of first grade repeated children have lower reading and mathematics knowledge, skills, and scores than their peers in the same grade. Hong and Yu (2007) found that if the goal of education was to facilitate
children’s cognitive and social maturation, repeating kindergarten established a less conducive setting for children to engage in age-relevant social relationships and made these children less ready for learning activities at the next grade level.

Grade repetition, originally designed as a solution for academically challenged students, has itself become a significant problem (Bowman, 2005). The U.S. Census data revealed in 2004 that 9.6% of U.S. youths between the ages of 16 and 19 had been retained one or more times (Bali et al., 2005; Wu et al., 2008) and the global effectiveness of grade repetition was unsatisfactory (Bonvin et al., 2008) with research indicating that retained students are both academically and personally worse off than their promoted counterparts (Holmes, 1989; Jackson, 1975; Smith & Shepard, 1987). Karweit (1988) stated, “Learning takes time, but providing time does not in itself ensure that learning will take place” (p. 33).

Based on data from the Chicago Longitudinal Study, an extended study of 1,164 children, McCoy and Reynolds (1999) concluded that grade repetition was at best an insufficient strategy for student achievement, a design whose practice did not benefit the children it was meant to assist. Those who opposed the practice of grade repetition believed that repeating a grade brought only humiliation and harm. The research of Meisels and Liaw (1993) and Wu et al. (2008) indicated that, relative to peers in the same grade, the improvement in academic achievement in the repeat year and during subsequent years, was followed by rapid achievement decline as new material was explored. Additionally, student performance did not improve long-term. This struggle-succeed-struggle scenario for academic and behavioral outcomes required more research to fully comprehend the long-term consequences for student academic motivation and achievement. Gleason et al. (2007) longitudinal, quantitative research affirmed that this scenario may have long-lasting negative consequences, as well as provide an explanation as to
why repeated students became disaffected with school. According to Gleason et al. (2007) the 
positive effects of early grade repetition were most often short-term and difficult to compare. 
Sandoval and Hughes (1981) found that unsuccessful repeated students were deficient in 
academic, emotional, and social skills and were better candidates for special education, than 
grade repetition. While the question whether repetition benefits the student remains undecided 
and controversial, no one disputes the seriousness of the issue (Alexander et al., 2003; Bali et al., 
2005; Lorence, 2006; Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Wu et al., 2008).

Over decades studies have specifically looked at the “failing,” “underachieving,” and 
“slow learning” student. Holmes and Matthews (1984) conducted a meta-analysis of grade 
retention cases, examining 44 studies published between 1925 and 1981. They found that 
retained students academically performed significantly less well than promoted peers in the areas 
of language arts, reading, mathematics, work study skills, social studies, and grade point average. 
Mantzicopoulos and Morrison (1992) investigated the impact of retention on academic and 
behavioral outcomes for tracked retained and promoted kindergarten students through the second 
grade. Their results indicated that retained students improved in reading and math scores, 
however, these gains were not maintained into the first grade. Alexander et al. (2003) reported 
that almost all repeaters, regardless of the grade repeated, take remedial reading in sixth and 
seventh grades, about half take low-level math, and only 10% study a foreign language. This 
was important because it was a much lower percentage than in any other group. Burkam et al. 
(2007) revealed that the children who repeated kindergarten ended the year somewhat behind 
their same-grade peers who were promoted and that the repetition appeared to have a negative 
impact on early literacy and mathematics development.
Kagan (1990) clarified that during the year a child is “held back,” he or she is not making normal progress. As reported by Smith and Shepard (1987), a retained student often expressed a poorer attitude toward their schooling. The surveys completed by Byrnes (1989) and the qualitative study of Finney (1994) found that repeated students described the experience of retention as stigmatizing. Multiple studies have shown that the stigma associated with grade repetition interfered with assimilation into an educational setting and led to chronic underachievement (Bakker & Bosman, 2003; Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, & Lickel, 2000).

Much of the grade repetition literature supported the conclusions of Bonvin et al. (2008) that retainees achieved their most remarkable benefit during the repeat year, but over time their academic performances progressively decreased until they dropped behind similarly functioning promoted peers. Elementary students appeared to perform with greater skill, comprehension, and confidence in the repeat year, yielding results that seemingly supported the efficacy of grade repetition, but decades of grade repetition studies showed that retained students’ increases in abilities quickly diminished and gave way to negative long term effects (Allen et al., 2009; Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001; Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Jimerson, Pletcher et al. (2006) concluded after analyzing eighty-three studies published between 1925-1999 that, “Overall, the convergence of this research does not demonstrate academic advantages for retained students relative to comparison groups of low-achieving promoted peers” (p. 87). Meta-analysis of grade repetition efficacy by Holmes (1989), Holmes and Matthews (1984), and Jimerson (2001) discovered that grade repetition did not favor the retained student. In fifty-four of the studies reviewed, Jimerson, Pletcher et al. (2006) found evidence that the retained child exhibited negative achievement when he or she went on to the
next grade level. In nine of these studies where students experienced positive achievement, those benefits were short-term and diminished or even disappeared over time.

In 2003 the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) reported in their “Position Statement on Student Grade Retention” that the child identified as the most behind academically is the same most likely harmed by repetition. They posited that grade repetition has a negative impact on all areas of a child’s achievement (reading, math, and language) and socio-emotional adjustment (peer relationships, self-esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance). The NASP (2003) concurred with many of the findings already presented, that elementary grade repetition is the most powerful predictor of high school dropout and that retained students were more likely to have poorer educational and employment outcomes during late adolescence and early adulthood.

Barnett et al. (1996) found that 71.6% of students evaluated and then diagnosed with special needs were repeated at least once before referral to special education. McLeskey and Grizzle’s (1992) data from 689 students in Indiana found that 58% of all students with learning disabilities were retained before they were identified for special education. This suggested that grade repetition was used as the remedial measure before discovering a student had a learning disability. These studies perpetuated the “wait to fail” model of education, meaning that students must first fail academically, socially, or emotionally before more serious or formal interventions are implemented (McLeskey & Grizzle, 1992). This practice was consistent with over 30 years of personal experience in the field of education.

Darling-Hammond (2004) found that,

Policies associated with school funding, resource allocations, and tracking leave poor and minority students with fewer and lower quality books, curriculum materials, laboratories,
and computers; significantly larger class sizes; less qualified and experienced teachers; and less access to high quality curriculum. The fact that the least qualified teachers typically end up teaching the least advantaged students is particularly problematic, given recent studies that have found that teacher quality is one of the most important determinants of student achievement. (p. 1056)

Failing students need extra support, not necessarily an extra year. The long-term consequences of not providing adequate support in the early years of a student’s life was serious as indicated by low high school performance and decreased postsecondary enrollment, both of which strongly influenced earning potential (Eide & Showalter, 2001; Fine & Davis, 2003; Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 1999; Penna & Tallerico, 2005).

Hennick (2008) and Hong and Raudenbush (2005) asserted that repeated students received no long-term benefit, with Hong and Raudenbush’s study finding that those who were retained would have learned more had they been promoted. Both studies held up what other research supported: two years after being retained in sixth grade, students had made about half a year’s less progress than students who were not retained. Hong and Raudenbush (2005) also discovered that even those students who exhibited a higher need to repeat a grade did not demonstrate evidence of an immediate benefit to repeating. The longitudinal research of Guévremont et al. (2007) summarized that the percentage of students who gained from a grade repetition was much smaller than the percentage not benefitting, with many appearing to be harmed.

School performance deteriorated when peer groups were disrupted (Felner & Adan, 1988; Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1982). Hong and Yu’s (2007) study revealed that allowing children additional time to mature did not help facilitate cognitive development during the elementary
school years. Evidence pointed to the result that for the child at-risk of repeating kindergarten they would have been capable of learning first grade reading and math content had they been promoted. Most children did not “catch up” when they repeated a year of school. Students neither outgrow their academic problems by “buying a year,” nor do they circumvent academic problems by being promoted (Karweit & Wasik, 1992).

At-risk students required long-term, continued intervention, and supportive help to progress regularly through their schooling; they did not benefit from an additional year waiting to mature or a year re-learning the same material (Karweit & Wasik, 1992). Karweit and Wasik found that the only thing that happened while schools waited to see the child “mature” was that they fell further behind their age-mates. Hong and Raudenbush (2005) found that this served to hinder the students’ cognitive and social-emotional development over ensuing school years. Whether the child was held back for academic delays or behavioral immaturity, extra year programs did not bring children up to the same level as their peers (Shepard & Smith, 1986). Beebe-Frankenberger et al. (2004) argued that the “gift” of time assumes a relationship between achievement and time; it ignores student aptitude, student motivation, and the quality of instruction.

The qualitative research completed by Landrum (2007) found that retained students often claimed not knowing the reason for their grade repetition. Some thought it was because they played a lot in class; others felt it was because they were mean; some assumed it was because they could not speak English. Several students guessed it was because they did not know how to read, had cheated, had been suspended, or did not pass the standardized assessments. Alexander et al. (2003) found that retained students felt conspicuous; “Their failure is public” (p.166). Byrd, Weitzman, and Auinger (1997) reported a positive correlation between a student’s
repetition and behavioral problems. Bredekamp and Shepard (1998) acknowledged that this particular effort, meant to protect at-risk students, actually exposed them to greater social and emotional hazards. The work of Pagani, Tremblay, Vitaro, Boulerice, and McDuff (2001) claimed self-increased behavioral problems during the repeat year, while Akmal and Larsen (2004) found that students often equated being retained with being “slow” or “bad.” Years later retained students felt their grade repetition was unjust or illogical, with one recalling, “I don’t know how I messed up Kindergarten. I guess I didn’t color in the lines” (Penna & Tallerico, 2005, p. 15).

A study by Small and Memmo (2004) added to the literature that as problem behaviors of a student steadily increased, the number of assets an individual possessed decreased. They determined that the presence of even one risk factor may double or triple the occurrence of problem behaviors. Because grade repetition presents as a risk factor, the time is long overdue to allow students’ expressed experiences to become an integral aspect of the grade repetition decision-making process (Kagan, 1990).

Beebe-Frankenberger et al. (2004) uncovered that our “difficult-to-teach students are prone to a host of adverse educational and life outcomes” (p. 214). Levin (2012) declared that successful schools must “set out to ensure that students are supported as soon as they have problems, allowing them to catch up, thus avoiding the expensive and unhelpful experience of repeating a course or grade” (p. 72). Martin’s analysis of high school students who experienced a grade school repetition found,

Based on data from 3,261 high school students, structural equation modeling demonstrated that, after controlling for interactions with other factors, demographic covariates and ability, there were significant (p < 0.001) main effects of grade retention.
In terms of academic factors, grade retention was a significant negative predictor of academic self-concept and homework completion and a significant positive predictor of maladaptive motivation and weeks absent from school. In terms of non-academic factors, grade retention was a significant negative predictor of self-esteem, but was not significantly associated with relationship with peers. (Martin, 2011, p. 739)

Martin’s 2011 research sought to address the gap in the decades of research directed at peer relationships and self-esteem, (i.e., academic motivation, academic engagement, and academic self-concept). When controlled for sociodemographic and ability factors, this study concluded that the implications of grade repetition and social promotion for both academic and non-academic outcomes were predominantly negative. “The findings of this investigation extend substantive and methodological work by researchers studying grade retention (and social promotion) and present further insights for educators and policy makers seeking to enhance the educational outcomes of students, particularly those students at risk of underachievement relative to others in their cohort” (Martin, 2011, p. 759).

Gibb (2010), using data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development and the Child Development Project, found that students improved in language and mathematics after retention, but performed less well in the second year post retention. Griffith et al. (2010) found that the reading achievement of retained students was worse than low-performing, promoted peers during the repeat year and that these deficiencies persisted into the tenth and twelfth grades.

Dombrek and Connor (2012) accounted that in general students were not likely to benefit from retention. Their quasi-experimental study concluded that grade repetition at best maintained academic achievement, and at worst, hindered academic growth. As a practice,
Dombrek and Connor described that grade repetition was a losing proposition, where initial gains diminished as these students progressed through their school career. Cost-analysis studies completed by Reutzel, Smith, and Fawson (2005) and Reynolds et al. (2010) indicated that grade repetition has a negative cost-benefit ratio. In support of these arguments, the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) reported that high school graduates earn 1.4 times more than high school dropouts, and college graduates earn 2.3 times more. This reinforces that educators must work to effectively keep students in school.

Balfanz et al. (2010) informed that by the year 2020, three-quarters of all jobs in America will require high-pay and high-skill. At the current high school and college graduation rates, only 50 million Americans will be qualified for the 123 million Americans needed to fill those jobs. Jobs that do not require a high school diploma and postsecondary credentials are quickly disappearing and the Americans who do hold those jobs are not likely to remain in the middle class. These Americans will have less access to quality health care, the ability to save for retirement, or ensure that their children have access to higher education. Statistics showed that students who had been retained and then dropped out of school will likely fall into this unskilled pool of people.

Grade repetition especially requires a thoughtful transition and in order to better prepare the child for future success, it demands a deep, concentrated assessment of the whole child. Brewin and Statham (2011) asserted that transition periods are often regarded as one of the most difficult in a pupil’s educational career. Information sharing should be in-depth, involving all key stakeholders, both prior to and following any transition; and most especially when transitioning a student assigned a grade repetition decision (Brewin & Statham, 2011).
Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004) discovered that comprehensive programs designed to support social-emotional development were most successful when they integrated strategies to promote academic, social, and emotional learning. Sugai, Horner, and Gresham (2002) said such programs must emphasize a systems approach to prevent academic and behavior problems though proactive instruction, such as resiliency training, and other school-wide behavior support systems, as well as promote problem solving and conflict resolution skills. Comprehensive programs require a significant commitment by the school administration and faculty, and should include considerable training, personnel, and resources, with success leading to a reduction in grade repetition (Jimerson, Pletcher et al., 2006).

Ritzema and Shaw (2012) utilized the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC) to examine depressive symptoms of students who experienced grade repetition. The results of parent, teacher, and student reporting exhibited significant differences in scores before and after repeating, citing a significant increase in depressive symptoms one year later for the retained students regardless of the grade retained. Their study illustrated results harmful to the short- and long-term mental health of repeated school children.

Wu et al. (2010) research debunked the myth that grade repetition was a “gift of an extra year.” While their study found that retained students possessed benefits for up to four years, the benefit of repeating one year did not prevent regression once the student was placed on the regular promotion schedule. Thomas (2007) found that retained students tended to get into trouble, disliked school, and felt badly about themselves when compared to similar peers who were promoted. This weakened self-esteem contributed to how well the student coped in the future (Thomas, 2007) and may actually have placed students at increased risk for developing serious mental health problems (Ritzema & Shaw, 2012).
In conclusion, equating the achievements of same-age to same-grade groups is not a valid comparison as a stand-alone measure. Students are comprised of many complex factors and all must be deeply explored when considering a decision that alters the educational path of a student.

**Summary of Literature Review**

Over the decades little has changed in the practice of grade repetition. The reason why a specific student is chosen to repeat over another continues to be complex. Researchers have argued for and against both grade repetition and social promotion. The reality is that repeating a year might make a difference for some. Without the repeat year the student’s results might be even lower; however, once the decision is made, the path is established and there is no turning back. We cannot know which path is best because we cannot change the decision to see whether the student fares better in the opposite direction (Burkam et al., 2007; Powell, 2005). Research into the qualitative perspective of the person who has lived this experience has been lacking in the existing research. The rationale for a grade repetition decision rests predominantly in the hands of the educator (Bovin et al., 2008); therefore, educators must listen to the people who have lived through the long-term outcomes of this decision and consider the research that claims the present practice as ineffective.

American educators have become all too familiar with the challenges of finding a balance between enforcing rigorous academic standards, promoting students to a grade for which they are ill prepared, and the possibility of forcing students to repeat a grade that will not help in the long run. The NASP (2003) proposed that grade repetition, if absolutely necessary, was more likely to have a benign or positive impact when a student was not just simply held back. They proposed that the student should also receive better prevention and intervention measures, along
with specific remediation aimed to address and support the lacking skills and behavioral problems. Additionally, grade repetition, when employed should promote achievement and develop social skills.

Akmal and Larsen (2004) found through educator interviews that school district policies did not reflect current research regarding the practice and efficacy of grade repetition. If NCLB and its reauthorization, ESSA, succeeds it requires all children to be instructed with best practices that meet the child’s individual needs (Beebe-Frankenberger et al., 2004). “Effective teaching that leaves behind no child requires teachers to have a skill set that is tremendously intricate, sophisticated and based upon converging scientific evidence” (Thomas, 2007, p. 3).

Highly effective teachers must continually monitor student progress and design lesson plans that meet the specific, individualized students’ needs (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001). Thomas (2007) reported that school systems must provide teachers state-of-the-art, ongoing, continuous professional development, delivered by experts, because high teacher quality leads to high quality learning for students. It is therefore, both logical and ethical to emphasize and invest in improved teacher education and training, replete with the knowledge of best practices and an informed understanding of the grade repetition research. Teachers should be taught to examine local policies and identify personal beliefs, in order to establish more effective solutions for at-risk students. Thomas (2007) argued that the billions of dollars spent to retain children would be better reallocated to more effective educational alternatives; alternatives that meet the instructional needs of chronically low-performing students. Doing so would drastically reduce the number of students retained or enrolled in special education programs, and improve the educational outcomes for all students, ensuring that no child is left behind (Thomas, 2007).
Future policies must be created to facilitate success for all students. “It is time to rethink what accountability entails and how it is designed and implemented to promote not just excellence, but also equity” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 37). Moreover, students must be judged on multiple broad measures, including achievement growth, attendance rates, graduation rates, participation and performance in advanced courses, college and career readiness rates, and preparation for citizenship (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

It is important that when districts and states implement grade repetition, they do it with as much precision and care as possible. Without clear data, analysis, or directives and a “different” experience for the student, the loose structure of grade repetition will continue to leave children behind (Stone & Engel, 2007). Willson and Hughes (2009) pondered, if a variable is able to predict grade repetition, but does not predict a positive outcome for the decision, than the wisdom of considering that variable (grade repetition) should be called into question. This means schools should monitor results both before and after a repetition decision as a key to educational accountability (Willson & Hughes, 2009).

Educators cannot assume that students are fine because they are not struggling in their repeat year, because doing so ignores the reasons the child failed in the first place (Abbott et al., 2010; Burkam et al., 2007; Penna & Tallerico, 2005; Range, Dougan et al., 2001). The task of determining the source of a child’s failure belongs to the educators and policy makers, not to the student (Kagan, 1990). Given the disconnect between grade repetition research and practice, it is logical to recommend that researchers evaluate students’ school lives after grade repetition.

The grade repetition literature confirmed that as humans, students’ retention experiences became a part of their historical reality. Whether a positive or negative experience, grade repetition played a role in the child’s development. Studying past experiences is critical to
understanding what came before and illuminating what lies ahead. Through this study, the researcher worked with the participants in an interpretive process that enabled both researcher and participant to explore what the grade repetition experience meant to them, how it related to their past, and how it might be used to inform their future. Through a design that used an academic resilience lens, data such as this takes a more comprehensive examination by evaluating the post-repetition achievements with a focus on academic, social, and emotional components. By gaining an understanding of the participant’s academic resilience, schools can use results to create improved policies aimed at breaking the intergenerational problem of grade repetition. The methodology that follows served to see if this was true for the lived experiences of the participants in this study.
Chapter Three: Methodology

The literature review presented key aspects of the age-old custom of grade repetition. It detailed the decades of research that claim the practice as ineffective. The review also offered the positive and negative context for this practice, as well as detailed insight regarding the long debate associated with grade repetition as a placement decision. Therefore, the purpose of this narrative research study was to investigate the educational, social, and emotional stories of individuals who repeated a year of elementary school so that their stories might lead to improved practice for the future of those assigned this intervention.

This chapter presents the research question, paradigm, rationale for the use of a narrative approach, and positionality statement. It presents an outline of the procedures including participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and ethical research practices.

Research Question

The following question drove this study: How did students’ experience with grade repetition in elementary school shape their own understanding of their educational, social, and emotional life stories?

Paradigm

This study focused on that which was common among actions, as well as that which was particular and special for each action. It followed a constructivist-interpretive paradigm. A constructivist-interpretivist view holds that reality is constructed in the mind of the individual. Its framework offered a clear methodology, an execution of interactive data, and an experience-centered analysis that offered consistency (Ponterotto, 2005). The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm allowed participants to jointly create and interpret findings. Ponterotto (2005) believed
that this paradigm encourages the transportation of the lived experience into the consciousness; creating a solid foundation which served as anchor. The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm was subjective and since there was more than one reality of experiences, all were thereby influenced by the context of the situation (Ponterotto, 2005).

This paradigm as described by Ponterotto (2005) reflected the following assumptions related to ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetorical structure, and methodology. Ontology was concerned with the nature of reality and being. It enabled the researcher to analyze the multiple realities within a lived experience (Ponterotto, 2005). Ponterotto’s (2005) description of epistemology was the anchor in the relationship between the student-participant and the researcher. It supported how one understood the experience and detailed that the participant-researcher relationship was essential to capturing the nature of the experience under study.

Axiology referred to the role the researcher’s values played in the scientific process and lent support to the trustworthiness of this research. Rhetorical structure was the language and arguments utilized in the written research (Ponterotto, 2005). In this study, researcher experiences, expectations, interpretations, biases, and values were identified, referenced, and incorporated.

Finally, methodology established the processes and procedures implemented during the study. The constructivist-interpretivist position was able to steer the anchors towards a naturalistic design; incorporating in-depth, face-to-face interviews and observations (Ponterotto, 2005). This study of personal experiences filled the gap that exists in present grade repetition literature and additionally, attempted to determine the presence and effect of academic resilience in the process.

**Qualitative Design**
Qualitative research emphasizes individual stories, reflections, perspectives, and beliefs as the foundation of understanding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The purpose of this study was to investigate the overlooked experiences of individuals who repeated a year of elementary school and the academic, social, and emotional effects it had on their remaining educational career. The research question met the criteria of a qualitative design because it sought to rely on text and image data to describe an experience, rather than establish detailed causes and effects.

Qualitative study designs are appropriate when the focus is on process, rather than product (Maxwell, 2005) as was the goal of this study. Seeking to examine the value of a grade repetition on its subjected participants, the utilization of a qualitative method enabled a greater understanding of the personal side of this phenomenon, providing in-depth information which is difficult to convey through a quantitative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). New perspectives in the form of qualitative research complemented the decades of existing quantitative research in regard to grade repetition.

As suggested by Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso (2010) the qualitative researcher became an “active learner,” allowing for the participants’ point of view to be detailed though a thick description of individual experiences. In a qualitative design, the researcher becomes the primary instrument of choice because humans are able to respond to environmental cues and interact within the present situation, processing data as soon as it becomes available and requesting immediate feedback or checking for verification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The human element of this qualitative study allowed for the further exploration of unexpected responses (Anfara & Mertz, 2006; Creswell, 2009).

However, because a qualitative design utilizes humans as the instrument of choice, Anfara and Mertz (2006) informed that the qualitative researcher must acknowledge that human
bias often shaped the inquiry and its findings. Additionally, qualitative studies must be open to insights that fall outside the preconceived notions or chosen theoretical lenses. Since humans instinctively filter all collected information through their worldviews, values, perspectives, and chosen theoretical framework, the researcher searched for data that may contradict expectations and promote a change in understanding. Maxwell (2005) believed that there was an advantage in a qualitative design strategy that was inductive and open-ended, because it offered emphasis not only on the perspective of the participants, but considered the researcher’s comprehension of the phenomena as well.

**Narrative analysis approach.** Narrative analysis is an experience-centered inquiry with information uncovered through the process of discovery. Clandinin (2013) tied its application to educational narrative research by arguing that stories of school profoundly shaped all of us. She informed that, “The stories we live by, and the stories we live in, over time are indelibly marked for all of us by stories of school” (p.22). Stories of school experiences are powerful shapers and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated, “…narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience. Experience is why we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it” (p. 18). As further described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the secondary focus for a narrative study concentrates on trying to make sense of a life as lived. Clandinin (2013) wrote, “Narrative inquiry is situated in relationships and in community, and it attends to notions of expertise and knowing in relational and participatory ways” (p. 13).

McAdams’ (1988) concept of narrative as a “storied autobiographical account told in a person’s own words” (p. 2) was also valuable because as Bogdan and Biklen (2003) recognized, it was through personal experience that one understands the social world. Finally, Clandinin
(2013) wrote that, “…narrative inquiries begin and end in the storied lives of the people involved” (p.18). This study looked at the participant’s experiences as studied in the world; experiences storied in the living and the telling. The narrative inquirer listened and observed the lives alongside the other, wrote, and interpreted their texts. Through this type of inquiry the research seeks ways of enriching and transforming the experience for themselves and for others (Clandinin, 2013).

While narratives do not provide generalizable data in which to make definitive claims, the depth and duration of observations allowed the researcher to identify and begin to theorize about the sets of relationships significant to the understanding of grade repetition. These relationships would have remained largely invisible in a large-scale quantitative approach (Hartley, 1994). The narrative tradition offered the most effective way to give voice to otherwise voiceless stories (Creswell, 2009; Riessman, 2008).

**Participants**

Primary data collection took place in the form of in-depth interviews and used a life history grid with student participants who repeated an elementary grade. Secondary data was collected through interviews with parents and educators involved with the decision. Additionally, artifacts such as: cumulative student records, documentation of school/home communication, formal and informal assessments, district Progress Reports, state mandated reporting, Individualized Educational Plans (IEP), annual IEP progress reports, and Teacher Assistant Team (TAT) minutes were analyzed to create each participants’ story in context. The collected artifacts and the life history grid were used in an attempt to trigger memories, to verify accuracy in the remembering of past events, and to make comparisons between and among participant data.
This study included eight student participants, 18 years of age or older, who experienced an elementary grade repetition. It also included three family members and six educators associated with a specific participant. All participants were situated within the common context of a Massachusetts public school. This purposive sampling was used to produce deep and detailed data, reflective of each participant’s unique history (Riessman, 1993).

Maximum variation sampling was attempted because it captures and describes vital themes observed across the participant pool, produces detailed descriptions of each case, and identifies shared patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Every attempt was made to include as many of these characteristics as possible: men and women, those who repeated at different grades, those who repeated for academic, social, and/or emotional reasons, those who repeated with the same teacher, and those who did not. Additionally, family members of the repeated student and educators who were associated with the decision to repeat, or worked with the student after a grade repetition, were recruited and retained as participants.

As a result of recruiting from one specific school system, the researcher attempted to collect and analyze data from an assumed similar set of grade repetition protocols and an assumed common system of record keeping. The word assumed was used because much of the research indicates that the data utilized within school systems often is not uniform (Willson & Hughes, 2009). This finding was upheld as true in this study as well.

Initial participant letters were distributed only to participants eighteen years of age or older. Participants were identified as those having repeated an elementary school year. They were contacted based on approved district-wide data obtained through the support of the high school principal and vice principal. Family members and school personnel related to the
particular grade repetition were recruited using snowball sampling as identified by the student participants.

Recruitment

Upon approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), permission was requested from the superintendent and the principal of the target school district (Appendix A). Initial contact requesting permission from the school system, and thereafter with potential participants, included a description of the study, the nature of the inquiry, and participant requirements. (Appendix B). The high school principal and the potential participant pool was also asked to recommend the names of other potential participants, such as family members, specific educators who may be knowledgeable of their grade repetition experience, or other repeated students (Appendix C).

Recruitment and informed consent documents explained the use of pseudonyms to protect confidentiality in transcribed interviews, data analysis, and final presentation. These documents additionally included statements regarding withdrawal from the study as permissible at any point in the study, as well as the study’s potential impact and benefits. An incentive in the form of a $10.00 Dunkin Donuts gift card was added after the recruitment procedure began because it was proving difficult to find willing participants. Documents also disclosed the researchers’ personal and professional background (Appendix D).

Data Collection

Data collection for narrative research takes many forms. For this study, data was primarily collected in the form of in-depth interviews. The primary data was collected from study participants who repeated an elementary grade. Information was also gathered through the use of a life history grid. The secondary data was collected through family member interviews
and educators involved with the decision as well. Secondary data was also collected from artifacts which helped to put participants’ stories into context. Collected artifacts and the life history grid were also used in an attempt to trigger memories.

**Interviews.** Interviews helped to relate narratives from the time before, during, and after the grade repetition placement decision. The purpose of interviewing participants was to gain access to their perspectives and their recollections. Rubin and Rubin (2012) reported that interviews illuminate the manner in which perceptions and attitudes shaped future developments. This study attempted to understand the individual and personal experiences in the inquiry manner which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated is the closest one can come to any specific experience.

Study interviews were designed to be open-ended and were created from a structured set of guiding principles. Each grade repetition participant met for two-interviews; family members and school personnel met for one. Questions were essentially open-ended. Therefore, preparation, planning, and structure was crucial (Appendix E). A life history grid (Elliott, 2005) was utilized in the first interview and completed for use in the second. This helped structure and guide the conversation as needed (Appendix F).

Elliott (2005) warned that some participants may find it difficult to respond when simply asked to recount their experiences. He taught that a lack of guided questioning may deprive the interviewer of relative historical accounts of the participants’ experience. Elliot believed that people are more likely to talk about specific times and events if a pre-prepared life history grid was used to initiate and direct the conversation. Elliot said it was the readily remembered events that provided important reference points for recalling the less salient ones. Elliott advocated for presenting results in a ‘Balan’ type of grid where each row represented one year in the
participant’s life with their age noted in the left hand column. The remaining columns were used to record major events under different headings that related to the topic of study. The process of completing the grid was done jointly with the interviewer and interviewee (Elliott, 2005).

During the two interviews, integrating the information collected in the life history grid allowed both parties to move backwards and forwards between the different areas in the participant’s life to further stimulate memory. The completed grid in the first interview was used to help plan questions and guide participant recall of specific life events throughout the experience. Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, and Young-DeMarco (1988) explained that a life history grid used in subsequent interviews helps respondents and researcher identify inconsistencies. Therefore, integrating the use of a life history grid as a tool in the first interview improved the quality of the retrospective data by helping respondents relate visually and mentally to their individually recalled events (Freedman et al., 1988).

Rubin and Rubin (2012) supported analyzing interview responses concurrently because resulting follow-up questions assured thoroughness and offered credibility through depth, detail, richness, vividness, and nuance. Therefore, concurrent analysis encouraged the use of probes to either open up or redirect the conversation; serving to keep the interview on time, on topic, and relevant to the study’s overall objectives. Working in this way helped expose preliminary insights which generated new questions to guide subsequent data collection, as well as identify recurring patterns and thematic regularities during analysis.

Interviews were conducted in an informal, interactive, and open ended manner lasting approximately 90 minutes each. The researcher selected the location of the interviews based on the participants’ availability and convenience. The high school vice principal was able to coordinate an interview schedule that allowed the students to meet with the researcher during the
school day. Factors such as timeframe and location were designed so that the interviewer and the interviewee could enter into an open and trusting relationship as “conversational partners.” Two separate interviews allowed the participant to reconstruct their experience, put it in the context of their lives, and reflect upon its meaning. Furthermore, implementing a 90 minute, structured timeframe gave unity to each interview and respected the balance between the interviewer and the participants’ life schedule.

The first interview focused on life history by establishing the context of the experience for each participant. The participant was asked to tell as much as possible about him or herself and to refer to the life history grid to support or supplement memory triggers in regard to their educational experiences and the role of the grade repetition in these recollections. The option of a second interview enabled a greater focus on the more specific details of the experience, enabling the reconstruction of the details within the context of the participant’s experience. Participants were asked to discuss relationships and stories were requested about the experience as a manner in which to elicit details as they related to their current life. The second interview (Appendix E) served to encourage a reflection on the meaning the experience held for participants. Questions addressed the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ experience and their life.

Utilizing Elliott’s life history grid improved the quality of participant recall, serving to also respect the time constraints inherent in narrative inquiry, and provided sequence structure and data for in-depth reflection of meaning.

Each series of interviews was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim with the help of an online application called, Rev, Voice Recorder. It was then coded and analyzed. Du Bois (2006) in his Delicacy Hierarchy for Discourse Transcription advised interviewers to notice and record
aspects of responses such as pauses, gestures, laughter, intonation, tempo, stress, accent, and pitch. These factors highlight how attentive and attune the interviewer must be, not only to what was said, but also how it was said. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested augmenting the audio recording with field texts to reflect these nuanced responses. Therefore, all responses were routinely and rigorously kept during research. Subsequent interviews connected nuanced responses to what was recalled, as well as assessing the validity of the field texts, in order to provide participants with an opportunity to elaborate on their initial narratives. Reviewing details through the life history grid and field texts allowed participants and researcher to confirm that their stories, experiences, and perspectives were properly represented.

Throughout this study, meaningful narrative episodes were assembled via in-depth, individual interviews with elementary grade school repeaters, their family members, and associated educators. The focus for family members and educators was on their recall of the experience. Their input helped develop a more comprehensive story of the overall experience. These personal narratives provided the data for this study design, building the primary source from which to draw conclusions.

**Artifacts.** In this study artifacts were used as a secondary source of data, helping to put the stories into context. In a narrative inquiry, where artifacts often trigger memories (Clandinin, 2013), the use of field notes, source documents, archival records, cumulative school records, journal or diary entries, researcher observations, photographs, drawings, memory boxes, life experiences, recorded statements and other textual articles, better stimulated, supported, and contextualized responses of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These types of artifacts provided materials which aided an in-depth analysis to better comprehend the essence of the individual recounted experience.
Through the use of artifacts such as school report cards, school transcripts, parent/teacher correspondence, student/teacher assistance team meeting minutes, parent/school correspondence, reflective memos written regarding the participant’s repetition process, standardized assessments, and other student cumulative records were sought as the data used to initiate conversations and provided the resources necessary to produce the in-depth analysis required to comprehend the essence of the grade repetition experience. According to Marshall and Rossman (1995) it is essential to include an assortment of data resources because variety enables an analysis which exhibits order, structure, and meaning for the research. They explained that in order to conduct a qualitative data analysis one must use all available resources to, “search for general statements about relationships among categories of data” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p.111). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) reported that by creating a process that clearly organized all that is heard, seen, and read by the researcher, better enabled the researcher to make sense from what has been gathered.

These artifacts were studied after the first participant interviews in order to help plan and prepare the second interview. Additionally, diaries and personal summaries were requested to be analyzed among the artifacts collected, but none were received. Use of artifacts such as these must be used cautiously because they are not literal renditions of facts, but rather personal interpretations. Rubin and Rubin (2012) warned that diaries and other personal summaries are prone to emphasize the remembered accomplishments of the creator. However, they also concluded that most participants are more open to discuss personal events in-depth if they believe the researcher is well prepared and knowledgeable (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Through the use of personal diaries and journals the researcher had hoped to become more familiar with each participant, to no avail. Through a comprehensive exploration of the listed artifacts prior to
interviews and utilized throughout, the researcher was able to gain a deeper understanding before and during interviewing of the participant as an individual. In addition, some of the participants had a familiarity with the researcher due to sibling or teacher associations, allowing the initial interview to begin in a more relaxed space. The researcher also met individually with each participant to sign the consent forms and to explain the study. This allowed the researcher an opportunity to introduce herself and break the ice before the first scheduled interview.

Collecting and analyzing the artifacts helped to facilitate setting the stage for each participant’s grade repetition recall experience.

Analysis, Storage, and Management

Data analysis. This study turned field texts into research texts that “grow out of the repeated asking of questions concerning meaning and significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132). Goodson and Sikes (2001) posited that narrative analysis is about “making sense of, or interpreting, the information and evidence that the researcher has decided to consider as data” (p. 35). Therefore, data collection and analysis took place concurrently, with the personal stories examined inductively (Lieblich et al., 1998). Concurrent analysis allowed the oral history interview to range from a structured set of questions to free form where the participant tells their story in their own way (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Data analysis in this study followed the advice of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) who posited that it is only through an analysis of field texts and artifacts, where the researcher thoroughly reads, re-reads, and reviews, as well as sorts in some specific order, that a chronicled account of the material can be constructed from within the different data sources.

Manual and computer program analysis and coding. Narrative analysis and the interpretation process do not follow a simple series of steps. Initial themes, patterns, and
categories must be analyzed from different and changing perspectives. The data related to the participants’ life experiences gathered from in-depth interviews, along with the collected artifacts, was first manually analyzed and organized into increasingly abstract units of information. Through the progression of inductive reasoning and an iterative process that worked between themes and data, the data was aligned to the framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

A system of manual analysis was utilized for reflective memos composed during data collection. Concurrent manual analysis with data collection helped to document the outflow of ideas, insights, and observations throughout the research and analysis process. Because reflective memos served to stimulate and chronicle analytical thought, they were used as one part of the analysis process in order to organize generative ideas and develop emerging themes. It was only through a collaborative interaction between the researcher, participants, and the data that the researcher was able to create and shape themes that emerged during study (Creswell, 2009).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) documented that ample field texts allow narrative inquiry to look backward and forward, inward and outward, and situate the experience within time and place. The researcher manually and electronically coded field texts to create balance between the interpretative, argumentative, and narrative passages, while being mindful that, “memory is selective, shaped, and retold in the continuum of one’s experiences” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.143). Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) described that the iterative nature of qualitative research was not linear, therefore, operational analysis must self-correct. Their work posited that the effective qualitative researcher alternates between design and implementation constantly, systematically checking data, maintaining focus, monitoring, and confirming interpretations throughout. The researcher coded the data by working temporally
backward and forward from the field notes, making feelings and events visible, while being attentive to place. This procedure was followed as part of the manual analysis.

Any narrative research is fundamentally developed around the stories told and the themes that develop as a result of the field text experiences. Hence, after the collection of secondary forms of data as artifacts and interview transcription, the researcher began with manual coding, temporal organization, restoration, and thematic analysis of the data, supported by use of a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) titled NVivo.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Huber and Clandinin (2005) posited that field text experiences must be analyzed in terms of three-dimensions: temporal (time), personal-social (sociality), and within place (space). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) found that, “The narrative research text is fundamentally a temporal text” (p. 146), consisting of the progression of past, present, and future (Huber & Clandinin, 2005). The temporal dimension existed for the participants, as well as for the researcher and was used as a dimension to analyze and code data. The personal-social or sociality dimension, which was the state or quality of being social, also served to analyze the interactions between researcher and participant as the social dimension; and the within place or space dimension helped to analyze the situation, location, and contributing factors of the experience itself in the form of the academic dimension (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Huber & Clandinin, 2005).

In a narrative, word images became the particular representational form, with particular attention given to moments of what Clandinin (2013) called tensions as related to the participants’ lives. These word images were summarized and became what Huber and Clandinin (2005) called “multiple storylines” which were then woven across each life and integrated into the themes that emerged across the field texts.
Clandinin and Connelly (2000) recommended the process of carefully coding journal entries, field notes, and all collected documents. Further, the notation of dates, the context for each composition, characters involved, and topics discussed, should also be recorded and coded. Names of individuals, locations of actions and events, interconnected story lines, apparent gaps and silences, palpable tensions, continuities and/or discontinuities, were all possible factors for further analysis. It was important to keep in mind that what was heard was always partial, contextual, and relational in the space between the researcher and the participant (Clandinin, 2013).

Computer coding was employed as a means to prepare the lived stories for organization and thematic analysis. Detailed records of participants’ recollections of context, people, actions, and perceptions served to co-compose a narrative account of the lived experience. It was through the use of both manual and computer coding within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space that the structural devices of plot, setting, activities, climax, and conclusion informed, restored, and crafted this narrative so as to honor the participants’ storied experiences of their grade repetition.

Researchers explained that not long ago qualitative data analysis (QDA) was purely a manual process, terribly daunting for the researcher. When QDA software first became available that efficiently performed repetitive analysis functions, it tremendously enhanced the process of theory building and testing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, “The use of a computer is not intended to supplant time-honoured [sic] ways of learning from data, but to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of such learning” (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013, p.2). QDA further enhanced the work of the researcher by enabling the replication of the data analysis process by tracking decisions and processes used to code data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).
NVivo was implemented to help manage, shape, and make sense of collected, unstructured information. Bazeley and Jackson (2013) write that the software does not do the thinking for the researcher, but provides a workspace and the tools which enable the researcher to easily work through the multitudes of collected data. Bazeley and Jackson (2013) explained the features of the program as a means for efficient data collection, organization, and analysis of content. This program enabled the researcher to view all information on a theme, summarized, and located in one place. The query tools served to uncover subtle trends and facilitate further drilling down into themes and theory.

The researcher integrated a manual analysis system in conjunction with a CAQDAS system so that all assumptions, properties, and limitations of the software were understood. The chosen software, NVivo, used with manual analysis helped to ensure that all developed reports accurately reflected the data and maintained a relationship to the participants.

During analysis it was vital not to attempt to expose a solitary truth from the participants’ realities (Ponterotto, 2005) because according to Locke et al. (2010), qualitative studies, flexible by design, must be adjusted according to their context, as well as for surprise opportunities or dead-ends which arise from the interaction of researcher and participants. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) stated, “The process of analysis, evaluation, and interpretation are neither terminal nor mechanical. They are always emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished” (p.479). Qualitative data analysis reached conclusions drawn to the extent that the qualitative data confirmed, contradicted, or complicated the narrative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The voices of the study participants offered knowledge and wisdom about their experiences and were appropriately supported by implementing both a manual and computerized system of analysis.
**Chronological organization.** Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional space inquiry model allowed the researcher to give an account, or a representation, of the unfolding lives of participants and researcher, where they intersected or merged. During analysis resonant threads or patterns were explored to open up new wonders and questions and to learn more about the experience. The life history grid and contextual details, co-composed by researcher and participant, served as a starting point for organizing interactions between the spaces and tensions. The recall of the participants was “restori*ed,” or situated within place, considering the past, the present, and the future within its context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These stories represented personal and social experiences that were interactive and continuous. The interactions looked inward to uncover internal feelings and conditions, as well as outward for conditions in the environment with other people, their intentions, purposes, assumptions, and points of view. The holistic-content approach was implemented to understand the meaning of an individual’s story or for exploring the experience of the individual (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Stories were analyzed by paying attention to plot, scenes, themes, patterns, tensions, conflicts, and resolutions. It led to a narrative rich in detail with a beginning, middle, and end. Once a chronologically coded storyline developed the researcher was free to work to restore first person within the progressing research in an attempt to keep the story intact for the purpose of interpretation (Riessman, 2008).

**Thematic analysis.** Narratives are composed over time. They are both lived and told stories. A narrative chronological organization leads to the arrangement of the stories into plots. This was necessary because participants are likely to deviate from the protocol when recalling life events. These resonant threads, or plots, were organized into temporal, personal, social, and situational spaces (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Thematic analysis specifically looked to the
personal and social, which was known as interaction; the past, present, and future. This established continuity and combined with the notion of place, which is situational (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). After coding and chronological organization, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posited that the researcher knows how to construct a chronicled account of the material contained in the different data sources after a second analysis of field texts and artifacts. They claimed that the researcher must thoroughly read, re-read, and review, as well as sort information into some specific order. Analyzing artifacts for themes required a search through the participant’s specific words, life events, and turning points. It was during thematic analysis that the researcher looked across all accounts because narrative inquiry requires a deeply relational practice (Clandinin, 2013). Clandinin (2013) stated that, “Narrative inquiry is about attending to lives, the living of those lives in process and in the making” (p.141). Thematic analysis attempted to preserve the reports of the teller, as much as possible, within the retelling (Riessman, 2008).

The findings became the result of concurrent analysis of the oral history where the participant told their story in their own way. Analysis of field texts and artifacts were included and took place through a thorough reading and re-reading of data, along with coding, temporal organization, restoration, and thematic analysis of the data, manually and supported by use of a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) titled NVivo. Through careful reading and reflection, codes were assigned based on core content or meaning to detect reoccurring patterns. The coding approach was varied to include: deductive, inductive, descriptive, in vivo, process, emotion, values, and causation coding. Primary and secondary analysis of coding led to composite themes across participants in regard to how the participants’ stories impacted their social, educational, and emotional lives.
**Storage and management.** The storage and management of all data was completed both on paper and electronically. After transcribing all interviews, data was backed up and stored on one hard drive and two external USB flash drives. Hard copies and electronic versions of all collected data, raw data, informed consent, and other required signed documentation have been placed in a locked storage cabinet and will be kept for a period of three years after the completion of the study. These materials will be destroyed after the said three year time period.

**Trustworthiness and Validity**

Rigor was applied to the series of research activities utilized during the course of data collection and analysis. First, purposeful sampling criterion was employed in an attempt to identify eight participants who were 18 years of age, attended school in the same school system, and repeated a year of elementary school. Deep and detailed data, along with reflections of each participant’s unique history was gathered to address the intended study outcomes.

Second, an appropriate timeframe and structure for conducting two interviews established a sense of unity for the study and respected the balance between the researcher and the participants’ schedules. Student participant interviews were held approximately one to two weeks from one another. Parent and teacher interviews were conducted at a time that worked for all parties, with parent interviews taking place by telephone. A written transcript was given, or emailed, to each participant for member checking as soon as it was transcribed, and for student participants, prior to the second interview. The inclusion of a life history grid further permitted participants to confirm life events as gathered from memories, artifacts, interview conversations, or school related documents, allowing for further corroboration of the data as it developed.

Third, trustworthiness was enhanced by data triangulation through a comparison of information from multiple sources, including audiotapes, transcripts, participant member checks,
the researcher’s journal, and interview notes. A methods triangulation was used as a technique to ensure that the recount of participant experiences developed a rich, robust, and comprehensive story as recommended by Denzin (1978) and Patton (1999).

The researcher kept an audit trail during data collection allowing for the presentation or replication of the recorded information as necessary. To further protect the student, parent, or teacher participant from repercussions in school, the researcher obtained an agreement from the principal that none of the findings would be used to evaluate the student’s present school activities or achievement.

Finally, because trustworthiness is synonymous with credibility, credibility was established through member checking. All participant members were given the opportunity to member check findings after each interview was transcribed. Member checking validated analysis by allowing each participant to verify accuracy of the data, and interpretations thereof, and if need be, offer corrections or additions. Final revised interviews were delivered for participant negotiation and approval, and any valid participant concerns were incorporated into the final product. Only three members asked for clarification after reading the transcripts. This member checking added to the collected data by triggering some additional memories and initiating additional comments from participants. The final revised and member approved interviews were than analyzed, manually and through NVIVO, to incorporate findings into a final narrative.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) warned, “Throughout narrative inquiry, the researcher’s personal, private, and professional lives flow across the boundaries into the research site” (p. 115). Ponterotto (2005) stated that through the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the researcher acknowledges and describes her value biases so as to better facilitate the
reconstruction of the participants’ stories. Therefore, trustworthiness required that the researcher not eliminate biases from the study. The narrative researcher’s role was that of the inquirer experiencing the experience, someone who was part of the experience itself (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Riessman’s (2008) research stated that the narrative inquiry recognized the researcher as a visible and valuable participant in the conversation. Additionally, transparency was created through the use of reflective memos, to help confirm that the information supported the conclusion and served as a method for retracing the researcher’s steps (Roulston, 2010), thereby confirming that the information supported the conclusion. Effective use of reflective memos brought biases to light, acting as a form of data quality control (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Moreover, the memos later served as a method for retracing the researcher’s steps (Roulston, 2010).

In conclusion, rigor was further applied to the research tasks by developing structural corroboration during analysis and disclosing the researcher’s background and bias. Applying these practices, which addressed trustworthiness, also spoke to a qualitative study’s credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Human Participants and Ethical Considerations**

After IRB approval, the researcher contacted participants. Using the approved informed consent forms (Appendix D), participants were informed of the study requirements for participation, the study’s goals, purpose, and intentions at the outset. Eligibility for signing informed consent required that participants were 18 years or older and may decline to participate at any time. To protect participant identity, all study members were asked to choose their own pseudonym--two declined, and the specific location of the study was omitted from any written documentation.
All collected information has been stored on a password protected memory data storage device. Hard copies of transcripts and documents, recorded interviews, and signed consent forms have been sealed in envelopes and placed in locked storage cabinets, accessible only to the researcher. After three years, all data will be shredded or destroyed.

**Positionality Statement**

This qualitative study investigated the overlooked experiences of individuals who repeated a year of elementary school and the academic, social, and emotional effects it had on their remaining educational career. This information is currently under-represented in the grade repetition research published to date. The aim for this study was that the collected qualitative data would more effectively improve the grade repetition research base, as well as school experiences, for students dealing with the difficulties associated with reaching academic, emotional, and social milestones.

This white, female researcher was raised in New York to an upper middle class family, the fourth of six children, attending parochial school until twelfth grade. Educationally, the first child in her family to earn a Bachelor of Science degree, the only child to be awarded a Master’s degree, and the first to strive for a Doctoral degree.

Teaching experiences comprised of eighteen years in grades two and four, fourteen of which took place in a public school within the middle class town raised. Four additional teaching years were spent in a grade two classroom at the International School in Jakarta, Indonesia. The international families belonged to what could be considered middle to upper socioeconomic class. There was a two year hiatus from education, where time was spent educating medical practitioners as a pharmaceutical sales representative. The past fourteen years
have been spent as an elementary school principal in two moderate to high poverty areas within the state of Massachusetts.

The practice of grade repetition has always disturbed this researcher because time in the field found few cases of grade repetition producing successful long term outcomes. The academic and socio-emotional fall-out of repeated students has been witnessed firsthand. These students never fail to mention that they were “left back” and should be a year ahead when they meet to confront an academic or behavioral situation. Repeated students’ sense of shame or failure was observed as ever present in their approach, demeanor, and attention to academics and social behaviors.

As the school’s chairperson on the child study team over the past thirteen years, it became apparent that repeated students were a constant source of concern for classroom and service support teachers. Students who have already repeated a grade were afforded more discussion time at these meetings because they are often judged as deficient in their learning skills and as the literature supports, their abilities as lacking, even after having repeated a grade. When analyzing these students’ progress it became overwhelmingly evident that the alternative of a grade repetition placement did not solve the problems for the at-risk student. Too often these students were found eligible for an individualized educational plan through special education services, even after having repeated a year of school.

During placement decision meetings teachers argue that the at-risk child needs one more year to mature. They maintain that retention will give the child time to “catch up” to peers. Often the strongest proponents of grade repetition are those who only witness the short-term effect (e.g., Kindergarten or first grade teachers). They argue that an extra year of learning helps the at-risk student to progress. They asserted, and educational assessments often concur, that
these children meet success during the repeat year. These attitudes and ideas lead teachers and others to believe grade repetition is a successful remediation strategy. However, these opinions fail to consider retained students’ data two, three, four, or more years post retention, which research supports, and educational practice has observed, is not as promising. For these reasons the strongest grade repetition opponents are those who experienced the deleterious long-term outcomes.

As an administrator, I have anecdotally tracked retained students’ academic, social, and emotional paths. My anecdotal data indicated that retained students generally do well in the repeat year. However, the data also illustrated that the repeat year is followed by a plateau in progress, and thereafter by additional academic and socio-emotional difficulties. This parallels what grade repetition research has exposed since the Common School came into existence.

This thesis investigated the extent participant academic resilience skills, as well as the effects on a participant’s long term academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Exploring this topic through personal insights and narrative experiences helped discover alternatives that work to produce an increase in achievement abilities and further ensure that each child remains in school until graduation. The researcher believed that holding students back without changing immediate instructional strategies or the learning environment has been ineffective. Educators must commit to moving forward with a focus on learning the skills and strategies necessary to implement effective instructional practices for the student experiencing difficulty, before and after considering a grade repetition.

By recognizing the potential biases brought to this study, this researcher made every attempt to minimize these by acknowledging and describing these value biases through the use of reflective memos. Clearly the researcher’s own life experiences as both a student and an
educator came into play. In addition, special reflection was needed to address the fact that the researcher’s personal and career educational experiences greatly differed from those of the participants. However, a narrative inquiry utilizing a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm must not work to eliminate all bias from the research. When comprehensively detailed throughout, the researcher’s experiences, expectations, biases, and values actually helped to facilitate the construction of the students’ lived experiences (Ponterotto, 2005). Reflective memos endeavored to capture the outflow of ideas, insights, and observations from both participant and researcher made throughout the data collection and analysis process (Sweeney, 2013). Bias was clarified by revealing how interpretations were shaped by personal background, gender, culture, history, and socioeconomic origin (Creswell, 2009), most of which differed from that of the research participants.

**Summary of Methodology**

This study and its methodology were designed to illuminate the personal experiences which have long been missing from decades of grade repetition literature. The following chapter presents the personal experiences in order to identify how participants’ educational, social, and emotional lives were affected by a grade repetition placement.
Chapter Four: Data Analysis

This chapter reports the findings as related to the experiences addressing the principle question: *How did students’ experience with grade repetition in elementary school shape understanding of their educational, social, and emotional life stories?* This narrative methodology focused on the individuals and their experiences as the result of repeating a grade in elementary school. The research did not seek to support a working hypothesis, but to gain a comprehensive understanding of what each participant faced when exposed to this placement decision. The qualitative nature allowed the researcher to describe and interpret the experience of others and to question the specific components of the grade repetition practice for the individual. The qualitative method in this study unfolded as the individual personal experiences drove the data process through discovery. These experiences were then integrated into larger life stories.

Chapter four is where the broader experiences of grade repetition became personified in the stories told from the perspective of eight participants who repeated a grade in elementary grade school, three parents, and six teachers. The latter two sets of participants were chosen because they had specific ties to certain repeated participants and firsthand involvement with their individual grade repetition experience. All eight student participants were schooled in the state of Massachusetts; six having repeated within the same public school system.

**Biographical Vignettes: Stories from Grade Repetition Participants**

The following participant stories summarize the rich data collected and interpretations of their details as gathered during individual interviews. It is important to note that because participants often negotiate the details recalled in their stories as they develop collaboratively with their audience, it is often a selected self or persona that is shared.
To organize this data, each story detailed the participant’s contextual factors, followed by the rationale for their grade repetition, and the participant’s story - describing the experience with grade repetition and how it shaped their social, educational, and emotional lives. Four of the participant profiles include details from parent interviews and five include teacher interviews, with one profile including the teacher who worked with the student both before and after the grade repetition decision. Two of the eight participants are twins. Their mother often spoke to the twins’ situation as one, as well as individually. Individual identifying participant characteristics are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>DOB</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Present grade</th>
<th>Grade repeated</th>
<th>Academic support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9/2/1986</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>BA in Education, MS is Special Education</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Speech IEP Grade 1; No available school records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ven</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8/29/1996</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Academic IEP K-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11/8/1997</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>EL–after repetition &amp; Grades 4-7; Title 1 Reading-Documented for Grade 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5/5/1997</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Math Tutor/1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; grade 3 Academic IEP Grades 5-8 &amp; 10-12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>DOB</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Program/IEP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8/22/1997</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12/2/1997</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3rd EL–Bilingual Program-Grades K-2; EL Support Grade 3-Exit undocumented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica (Twin)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12/9/1997</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>4th Academic IEP Grades 4-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip (Twin)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2/9/1997</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>4th Academic IEP Grades 4-6 &amp; 504 after Grade 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. DOB = Date of Birth; IEP = Individualized Educational Plan; EL = English Language learner.*

**Story One: Sarah**

**Contextual factors.** Sarah, adopted after living in poverty and homeless shelters, had a beginning that included neglect and abuse. This sets the context for Sarah’s past, present, and future decisions and her ability to understand them. Sarah is now gainfully employed as an elementary school, special education teacher whose life story has great bearing on the educator she has become.

Both of Sarah’s biological parents were considered “developmentally delayed.” Sarah is their middle child between two sisters with cognitive disabilities. Sarah reported that, “Even though my sister’s older, she’s special needs, so I always felt like I was the oldest.” Life with Sarah’s biological family was not easy, “. . . I was taken away due to . . . It probably wasn’t a healthy upbringing, so living in poverty, and abuse, and neglect.” At the age of five, Sarah remembers being removed from her biological parents and placed with her sisters into foster care. At the age of seven, the three girls were adopted by her present family. Sarah’s adoptive
father, Mr. Peters, confirmed Sarah’s early recollections of her biological parents having met them during required, initial visitations.

Mr. Peters is a social worker who, for the past 35-40 years, has run a special needs adoption program. The Peters’ family has ten children, two biological children and eight others adopted from foster care. Sarah expressed initial ambivalence about becoming a member of this large, adoptive family. Sarah shared, “I do remember being reluctant to go with these people, while my sisters were like, ‘Oh, our new family.’ I’m like, ‘Oh, who are these people? I don’t want to do this.’ I remember not wanting to leave [the first foster home].”

Both Sarah and her father mentioned additional foster children consistently in and out of their home; Sarah recalled that the number of children rarely fell below seven. She reported that many of these children had some degree of medical disability and/or cognitive impairment. Mr. Peters said there was a great deal going on in Sarah’s life at that time she came to live in the Peters’ household. He discussed how the adoption was a really big deal for Sarah, which took place towards the end of her second first grade experience, but recalled, “Sarah never had to move again, that this was her home, we were her family. There were a lot of good things that happened then.”

**Rationale for grade repetition.** Sarah’s father recalled that her biological family and prior foster mother provided little in the way of school readiness skills for Sarah. Sarah remembered attending a public school Kindergarten, but only for a short time while placed in the first foster home. Mr. Peters recalled, “The foster home that she was in, prior to moving in with us, was a really nice lady who was older, but didn’t value education a whole lot.” Therefore, when Sarah moved in with the Peters, the family felt she would get a better education if enrolled in their local Catholic school.
Mr. Peters said that family activities, like reading aloud to Sarah, “…were experiences sort of outside of her life experiences.” Regarding her academic shortcomings in school Mr. Peters clearly detailed,

She really struggled. She had a lot of speech and language deficits and so she had an IEP for that. She just lacked a lot of early training. Her Kindergarten readiness wasn’t really good. I think it was very clear to both of us early on that she was not. . . . She didn’t have the skills halfway through first grade that she should have. She wasn’t doing addition and subtraction. Pluses or take aways, they called them. She was a terrible speller, so her phonics skills were really off, that sort of stuff. She wanted to do well. She just was missing like, basic skills.

Sarah did not share any of these details in her recount of the decision discussion experience.

As depicted in Table 1, Sarah’s adoptive family and the school decided repeating first grade would offer Sarah the readiness skills she lacked and needed for success in her peer relationships and academics. They agreed that Sarah’s education was hampered by her early upbringing and the changes to her family life situation. Mr. Peters shared,

Sarah’s grade repetition was ever a cognitive issue. She’s an incredibly bright girl, she really is. She just lacked a lot of early training. She floated around from homeless shelter to homeless shelter, and so to sit down and do homework and to do. . . . We were clearly a culture shock for her to come into our house. I mean she, like . . . her sisters would sit in my lap and be read to, but she was never like that. She would sit beside me. The emotional stuff was hard for her when she was placed here, you know?

Mr. Peters continued, “As a general rule, I’m against grade repetition. I’m not sure that it ever really helps a kid, but for a kid like her, and again she was a September baby so it wasn’t
like she was that much older than the other kids. She was emotionally not as ready.” Mr. Peters believed that Sarah’s difficult early years, her relatively young age, smaller size, and lack of academic readiness skills contributed to the grade repetition decision and helped convince Mr. Peters to overlook his opposition to the practice. He shared,

I think most kids don’t benefit at all from retention. I think for a lot of the kids that I see professionally, kids that I’ve had in my home, I think it’s a unique state of the kid’s family life. I think education comes almost secondary. So those kids are far more likely to be retained. And I think if you look at retention just from an educational point of view, I’m not sure it works real well. I think that for so many kids that come out of foster care and have been in and out of homes that have been in multiple living situations, I think once they sort of settle in they kind of figure out where they are academically.

In regard to grade repetition Mr. Peters advised, “The rule of thumb should be, do what your kids need.”

**Analytical Commentary**

**Social impact.** When recalling the grade repetition experience Sarah said, “At first it meant to me that. . . When I first heard . . . that I was dumb or something was wrong with me, but then I remember thinking, ‘This is fine. I have friends.’ I’m glad I stayed back. Everything worked out great. When I was younger, I still remember thinking like it wasn’t a big deal.”

What stood out most regarding the experience was that Sarah made friends. “I think I was nervous, but I was making friends. That time was a lot of transition for me, but I was probably happier, you know?”

Upon reflection Sarah believed that in the long run, repeating first grade had a positive social impact. She said, “I think the kids might have been mean the first time I was in first
grade. I might have been, I don’t know. I might have been trying . . . I might have not known how to interact with kids, like thinking that this was socially appropriate. I do remember just getting in trouble a lot. Maybe I was trying to be a class clown, or who knows what I was doing, but the bonds weren’t forming.”

For Sarah, becoming one of ten adopted children at the age of six presented numerous adjustment variables at the same time she had to repeat a grade. Based on Sarah’s stories, repeating first grade did present as an initial strike to her self-confidence. She was transitioning into her new family and was pleased to be making friends at school, but admitted,

I kind of always felt, not with all my teachers, but at the school, it was just the culture. I always kind of felt like I was the bad girl or that people didn’t like me because, who knows . . . my history, we didn’t have a lot of money, or whatever. And I don’t think that was related necessarily to the retention, but who knows?

Sarah shared that confronting the reality of repeating first grade did have an initial negative impact on her social outlook, but once she formed a new social circle, the view changed to one with more positivity. She actually expressed feeling more of a social impact by her family’s financial status, rather than from her grade repetition. She referenced the fact that, “Dad used to work BINGO at night because we got a discount at school. We were by no means poor, but compared to the kids at that school, we were poor.” She wondered aloud if the family’s social standing or the fact that she was adopted and repeated, excluded her from a scholarship opportunity to a private high school.

**Educational impact.** When Sarah learned that she was to repeat first grade she had self-doubts and worried that she was not smart enough. However, being one of the oldest in her
grade had its advantages. She believed her grade repetition was instrumental in her academic development because in the repeat year she performed at the high end of her new class.

Sarah also related that her academic challenges carried over into her choices as an undergraduate and that her repetition experience played a role. Sarah admitted that during college she did not apply herself to her studies; one semester ended with incompletes and as a result she almost dropped out. Looking back to her past academic troubles she reminded herself that if she could make it through the many challenges life presented her, she could make it through future hurdles as well. She said, “There’s been worse experiences in my life and I think being adopted helped me . . . made everything else easier.”

Sarah came to realize that all her educational experiences, especially her grade repetition, along with her atypical start in life, eventually encouraged her to develop into a conscientious student and educator. As a result of the challenges detailed in her life story, Sarah’s grade repetition helped her come to better understand the importance of working with diligence to meet the expectations of her role as an advocate for students with special needs. Her personal school experiences have led Sarah to the strong belief that her life story has been positively affected by the grade repetition decision. While she does occasionally wonder what her path might have offered had she been promoted, Sarah believes that she would not have it any other way.

**Emotional impact.** The beginning of Sarah’s educational career was a time of turmoil and adjustment on many levels. Her recollection regarding how she felt emotionally when her parents told about repeating a grade elicited, “I can remember being in my bed crying, and I think they said that, ‘We made this decision, it would just be best,’ but I remember crying. I remember internalizing it like, ‘Oh, I’m stupid,’ or whatever. ‘This isn’t right.’ I knew that everyone was moving on and why am I staying back . . .” For Sarah this was one more life event
construed as failure. She first worried the reason was due to lack of intellect, but later understood that the decision was made because of her immaturity, “They felt I wasn’t ready.” Sarah stated that she was “rambunctious” in school, always talking—which got her into trouble. In the end Sarah believed that, “My age was the basis for why I stayed back, so it wasn’t academic concerns.”

Sarah was eventually comforted to know she would be spending a second year with her favorite teacher. This relationship provided a first constant person in her life. However, Sarah added, “I just do remember when it was time for me to be repeated, being upset about that.” She described that she was not angry at the decision, but was saddened by it. In general, she said, “I am emotional and sensitive,” and there were intermittent periods of sadness as a result. She declared, “I was upset before it happened and then I feel like I forgot about it very quickly.”

Her father said, “I think she was nervous when she started first grade again.” Mr. Peters recalled trying to frame it positively, to be as affirming as he could. He disclosed, “I think that it was really hard for Sarah when it happened, but I think that looking back on it she would say that it was the best decision we could have made.” He continued, “I think initially she heard, ‘It’s not that you’re dumb or anything.’ It’s that . . . I probably said it nicer than that. The phrase I would use was, ‘Got to pick up some skills, that’s all.’” Her father added that once she started making friends and her home life situation became permanent, positive changes became evident.

Sarah’s early life was filled with unexpected obstacles and she recalled, “In life I had to grow up really quickly, so that would be like, ‘Yeah, this is the girl; who’s telling our kids inappropriate things, repeated a year, and is just adopted.’” Comments like these point to the mark grade repetition left on Sarah’s self-concept. Through her narrative it became evident that her lack of confidence and her self-social concept hindered her academic performance. In my
role as her principal, it was only after discussions of grade repetition for a student in her class that the knowledge of her grade repetition and her personal emotions regarding the experience became known. Her insecurity resonated in this comment made during our interviews, “I remember feeling slightly uncomfortable that I could tell someone that I stayed back, because I was thinking, ‘They’re going to immediately think I’m stupid, but I know that I’m not.’” It was also during her interviews that Sarah shared details of her grade repetition experience that point to its necessity in her life development. It helped lead her to become the successful educator she is today. Sarah worked hard to improve her sense of self-worth and took delight in being right when making important social, emotional, and educational decisions for her students. Through our discussions and this new opportunity for reflection, Sarah realized that the experience of her grade repetition helped to shape her educational, social, and emotional decisions along the way, and certainly played a role in her career as a special education teacher. She said,

I was like, okay, if I can make it through this, I can make it through that. That’s how like my life always worked. The other thing is just having, just my life growing up. Having to be independent and take care of myself forced me to be resilient, you know? I think it was the life experience and overcoming hard life experiences. . . . I would say that it was a good choice and I’m happy that I did it and it worked out okay, I guess. I don’t regret any of my experiences, because you know it made me who I am today. Yeah, I think in my case, it was good. Like I said, I wouldn’t know what my life would be like otherwise, but I have friends, I made those friendships, so yeah, in the end in turned out okay.

Story Two: Ven

**Contextual factors.** Ven was a slightly built young man with dark, curly ringlets that fell into his eyes behind eyeglasses, causing him to wag his head back and forth when he spoke.
Ven looked young for his age and commented that this has always been the case, stating that at times he has, “used it to my advantage.”

Ven used a sophisticated vocabulary and presented as introspective, looking up as he thought before speaking directly to the researcher and responding to questions. He often paused for long periods before responding and at times his responses were almost apologetic; keeping Ven on topic was also a constant challenge. He consistently redirected the conversation towards divergent topics or veered off topic all together. This quickly identified behavior was noted consistently in the documents and reports found in Ven’s cumulative school records, “He continues to require a large amount of teacher/therapist support to maintain topics, organize his discourse, and make relevant comments during conversation and class discussion.”

Ven’s personal recounts and teacher recorded comments were often contradictory; specifically his experiences with being bullied and bullying, along with his memories of why he repeated second grade. In Kindergarten, Ven attended the before school program, where the proclaimed bullying history began. However, Ven’s records were void of any documents to support this claim. Nevertheless, his narrative was consumed with bullying stories. These were the overarching element in the retelling of his life experiences. There was no other documentation available to support Ven’s claims. Additionally, Ven shared three very different stories regarding how he acquired the knowledge he would repeat second grade.

Ven’s parents, who never married, have blue-collar jobs; both completed high school, neither attended college. His father is an electrician and his mother “has worked as a bartender, a counselor/nurse, of sorts, and also admissions, helping people get inside.” Ven was raised in a bilingual home, English and Cape Verdean Creole. His father left the relationship when Ven was five or six years of age. Ven said, “I do not remember what it’s like having him around.”
When Ven was eight or nine, his mother and father both had daughters with their respective spouses; giving him two siblings. Ven lived with his mother and one of his sisters and only visited the second sister when he visited with his father.

Ven’s background story paints a picture of many residential moves, the first in second grade. He hinted this move was due to living in a “kind of gang-like” neighborhood. He talked about living with gun violence and the fear of kidnapping. However, Ven also referred to these neighbors as if they were family. He shared that when he was young the ‘neighborhood’ watched over him when his mother was not at home. He moved to California in fifth grade for another relationship of his mother’s, and then a third undisclosed time, to his grandmother’s home. Each family move elicited extraneous details that took the interview off topic.

Ven’s school records contained repeated details from his mother of Ven falling from a third story window at the age of one. Subsequently, he suffered brain trauma which required surgery. Ven had minimal hearing loss as a result of his head injury and consequently received support for speech. His mother reported to special education evaluators that Ven had a diagnosis of ADHD. He never took medication for this condition because his mother objected. Ven never mentioned his accident or his ADHD diagnosis during the interviews or listed them when working on the Life History Grid. In fact, the recollections on his Life History Grid only began at age eight, even after probing for life events before this time.

Ven attended day care for several years prior to public school. At his mother’s urging, Ven was evaluated at the age of four for speech and language concerns. The evaluator noted that his mother’s concerns were evident and assessment results (low average range) found Ven eligible for an IEP. Assessments confirmed that despite his head trauma, Ven appeared to be developing well and was making good progress; however, he had great difficulty following
directions. As illustrated in Table 1, Ven’s academic problems persisted. They were noted throughout all of the educational progress documents reviewed regarding Ven.

When asked to tell as much as possible about himself Ven said, “Myself as a person, I admit, I’m pretty darn lazy. How can I say it, um . . . lazy, I guess you could also say I’m lucky.” When asked to detail why he felt he was lucky, after a long pause he responded, “So I’m optimistic and I try to be optimistic otherwise things would drag on, become a pain, so to say that everything is lucky, makes you really happy, even when the smallest thing happens.”

**Rationale for grade repetition.** Knowledge about Ven’s early intervention services was collected from school documents. After his initial educational evaluation Ven did not attend the recommended early childhood class because the hours conflicted with his mother’s work schedule. Documents indicated that Ven began his formal schooling at the age of six. His records stated that the school, “switched him into a Kindergarten class because he was not ready for first grade.”

During Ven’s first grade experience documents indicated that he demonstrated limited progress and completed minimal work. He was evaluated again and found eligible to receive direct services for occupational therapy, speech and language services, and reading. The IEP recommended small group instruction with specific teaching accommodations and interventions to meet his distinct needs; recommendations consistently listed in each annual report and re-evaluation for the duration of Ven’s academic career.

In second grade, after Ven moved to the district where this study was situated, the school re-evaluated Ven’s special education programming. Assessments indicated that he was reading on a first grade level, articulation was functional, but vocabulary was lacking. Ven required constant one-to-one support to complete assignments, had difficulty staying on task, focusing,
and understanding directions. Ven’s global intellectual functioning abilities fell within the low average range and his teachers described him as fidgety and impulsive. It was documented that Ven verbalized excessively about unrelated subjects, further evidenced during both interviews. This evaluation classified Ven with a developmental delay disability; the classification was maintained on his IEP until his senior year.

Table 1 specifies the year Ven repeated. Ven resented his mother for this decision and shared differing reasons why he thought he repeated - excessive school absences during a family relocation, to get away from the bullying, or that he did not do the work. Ven’s school records were void of exact details for the grade repetition decision; his records were however, replete with IEP plans from the moment he entered school. His mother was not available for study inclusion and her concerns for Ven were obtained solely from her statements documented in Ven’s IEPs.

**Analytical Commentary**

**Social impact.** When Ven was asked to detail how his repeat experiences in grade two helped to shape him, Ven’s discussion centered on being bullied as early as Kindergarten and that it continued until the fourth grade. Known as a “scaredy-cat,” Ven was an easy target for bullies. Ven sometimes retaliated against these early bullies. He said it did nothing to improve his relationships, but felt it helped him gain a small amount of respect. Ven shared that the teachers did little to support him or keep him safe when he complained of being bullied. He said,

> I reported it a lot and particularly to the nurses. The nurses were kind of my best friends because I was always in the room. They were feeling my scratches and my bruises . . . some of the kids that were in that bullying squad would have teachers as parents so they would negate the punishment and then every time that they were punished, the rest of the
classmates in school would say, ‘Hey like this guy’s a tattle-tale,’ and then they would stop talking to me, like I get flashbacks because I remember.

He communicated many detailed recounts of the early altercations and the various ways he hoped to seek revenge. The stories of bullying had a definite impact on how Ven responded to social situations. He said, “I did everything to stay away from the bullies. I would always beg my mom, like I don’t want to go to school. I would try to skip school. Hell, I even tried to hide in the backyard at one point.” Ven said that eventually, “I guess she caved. I think that may have been the reason why we moved out.” Ven said that these anti-social events, which stopped when he moved, increased again when he repeated. Bullying became the overriding focus of his day-to-day in school. “I just wanted to like . . . be fine socially . . . like . . . I didn’t even care if I had any friends. I just didn’t want to be bullied and that sort of followed me quite a long time.”

All these factors exacerbated an already weak sense of self. For Ven the social concerns superseded his academic attention, but it became evident in his school documents that for the school, the focus was on academics. There was little to document the schools’ social concerns.

Ven’s early narrative rendered him as the victim, but after his grade repetition experience his stories changed. Ven became the aggressor. Ven said, “If self-defense counts as trouble-making, then I was a trouble-maker.” Ven recalled that at first he enjoyed the new school. He was not bullied and he referred to it as the “party school,” as a result he stopped doing his school work. Ven added this new dimension to his narrative; that not doing his work was the reason he was made to repeat. He also shared that when his peers learned of his repetition, “The bullying kicked back into gear.” However, Ven realized he was stronger and taller than his younger peers and was able to fight for himself. In his repeat year Ven became the bully, “I got used to it and wanted to do it more.”
At length, Ven discussed learning the meaning of the word empathy. He concluded that gaining this knowledge, “was when I started to dial it down.” Ven had lived both sides of the “bully” coin. As Ven slowly came to understand the concept of empathy, he stopped his bullying activity and stated that he turned to “nihilism in place of aggression and intimidation.”

Ven admitted that, “Stubbornness got me through transitioning into the second grade the second time.” The fact that he wanted to move back to his rightful cohort made him “come out swinging,” because he explained, “Fighting was how we talked.”

Ven stated, “It was because of the grade repetition . . . because I lost my [home] friends and my friends were what was keeping me from liking school. It was an obstacle, but after grade repetition without my friends, it was no longer an obstacle and I liked it.” Statements similar to these made Ven’s story confusing and at times statements came across as if he was trying to merely illicit a reaction from the interviewer.

Ven disclosed that he often worked at being a loner in elementary school. He pulled away from friends because he was depressed and did not want to, “bring them down when hanging out.” He also related a long story about feeling conflicted over playing the role of leader and/or follower at various times with his social circle. Ven’s recollection of his social interactions were expressed with inconsistency and varied depending on the stage of life under discussion or his frame of mind during the interview. He shared,

If I didn’t get held back I’d probably maybe mix with the wrong crowd, to the friends I was with and then I wouldn’t be, I couldn’t say I was happy then because if I was in the wrong crowd then bad things would happen. If I didn’t get bullied then maybe I would’ve stayed at the school and maybe that wouldn’t be the right thing for me.
This contradicts his original statements regarding the anger he felt towards his mother for taking him away from his neighborhood crowd.

Ven claimed that he did not care about school, not even the social aspect because of all the bullying, but later refuted this statement. He said,

Since my own case is like special, I’d say in general umm, I’d say, yeah, I would want for other kids that have been held back to have teachers to care a lot more about what happens to the students socially and I would want those students to receive the proper push into the drive to want to get back into their main year; not just succeed and do well, but to actually get back.

At the end of the second interview Ven stated, “In the past I would have chosen to go without the repetition, because it affected me socially.”

**Educational impact.** Many of Ven’s specific recollections about his academics were confused, contradictory, or altogether off task. However, his discourse regarding his overall academic progress was consistent with the data found in his academic records; from the very beginning Ven was challenged by the school work set before him. He did not explicitly express that his educational path was impacted by his repeating second grade, but his educational story was consistently conflicted. Ven vacillated between bullying episodes, loss of friends, and his grade repetition as reasons not to work at his academics. This first became evident in his overtly expressed desire to get back to his original year of graduation. He said that he held onto this wish until his sophomore year in high school, “I was all about hey, I’m going to do so good that they’re going to, like it would force them to put me back in my grade.”

Ven was angry at the repetition decision and harbored that anger for years. This anger occasionally fueled an increase in school efforts in the hopes of being promoted to his rightful
year and because, “I just refused to get held back again. That’s why I did more work than I did before.” On the other hand, Ven readily admitted to being a “slacker” and repeatedly recalled not giving much effort, preferring to take the easier path, “Yeah, at any point I would say, that even after being held back, I didn’t care about academics.” However, Ven claimed that he gives 99% of his attention to new tasks, but was not always motivated to complete them, “My life will go on whether I try hard or not.” Conversely, school reports detailed that Ven completed most of his work, albeit not on time. By Ven’s admission there was no value in studying because it did not help him, “Besides, I was not willing to put in the time.”

Ven freely admitted that he does not value academics to this day because of his “belief in nothingness.” Frustrated that no one specifically taught him what was needed to be promoted to his original year, Ven offered a suggestion for future repeaters, “I would want them to get the tools to do that [move back to their original grade] because I never got the tools when I was in that retention period. They said I could, but they never did anything to help me do it.” Although referenced many times, there was little in his dialogue or school academic records to support substantial actions on his part to enable such a promotion. Instead, Ven blamed others for allowing him to falsely believe moving up was an option.

The IEPs written to support Ven in school were filled with specific modifications and accommodations to meet his developmental delay disability classification. His goals consistently included steps to ensure clear and consistent boundaries, high expectations, and opportunities to participate meaningfully in his academics. These strategies were not motivating to Ven.

When asked how he was supported with his academics at home, Ven reported that nobody at home cared enough to take an interest and complained that because no one pushed him he never tried very hard. He recalled that after he repeated,
It was like very minor motivation, like… hanging up tests on the wall and saying good job and that’s about it. Every now and then they would say, you should do your homework now. I would do it and that’s about it. Maybe change my bedtime for me to get a lot more sleep. Just really minor stuff like that.

Ven discussed attending a local community college to pursue a career in computer game programming, but in line with his previously expressed sentiments about his work ethic, “I will not be giving that a whole lot of effort either. If I have to work hard to reach the computer programming goal, I will forget about it.” This lack of effort and conflicting ideals were presented throughout Ven’s narrative educational history. School documents, however, did not present Ven as a slacker who lacked effort. His educational challenges were detailed and some teachers declared he was somewhat of a perfectionist. There seemed to be many factors in Ven’s life to have impacted his academic record, with his grade repetition self-identified as one of them.

**Emotional impact.** Ven’s report surrounding what he was told at the time of the repetition decision was very confusing. However, the common thread through his narrative was, “The problem is that my mom directly said to me that she was the reason why I was held back. She felt that I should be held back because if I didn’t, I would not remember anything about what happened. I’d be hurt moving on and I resented, I became really hateful during a short brief period of time towards her and the school for letting that happen.” When questioned further his responses did not help to clarify why his mother was the reason for the decision, but only made it clearer that he resented her for it.

Ven presented with conflicted emotions. He described himself as a person with a low self-esteem and a self-proclaimed nihilistic belief. He consistently referenced wanting to return
to his original grade, but then detailed how he stopped caring about school in general. He thought working harder would be the answer to his wish, but then did less work once he liked school more. He remained confused and angry in regard to the grade repetition decision and at times blamed his new teachers’ for the decision, “I thought they liked me.”

Ven expressed a flood of emotions throughout his interviews. Referencing his bullied experiences, “I felt outnumbered in many ways in my old school. I felt personally as if the school was out to get me.” Ven admitted that his change towards bullying his peers was directly related to repeating a year of school. His emotional life was impacted by a variety of challenging events; with grade repetition one among them.

When asked if he spoke with counseling resources, either at home or in school, Ven responded, “I had my own counselor in my head,” which he referenced a couple of times in discussions. Ven mentioned feeling as though he had a split personality,

In fact multiple, sometimes, I’ll have my personality take on different forms like, people. I use that as a counselor because I get good runs now. I realize it’s just all in my head. I’m the same person no matter what, but it’s nice believing that there’s someone else that is like . . . there. Always to the end and that’s why I keep like, that different idea with me.

This story, along with others, seemed as if Ven was trying to prompt a response from the researcher and because the conversation was alarming, the researcher referenced it to Ven’s high school vice principal. This came as a genuine surprise because Ven had not presented to the high school staff in this manner. The vice principal promised to keep a close eye on Ven and also alerted his counselors.
Ven readily shared that he saw a therapist for a time where “being held back” was not the stated reason for these visits, but the topic would come up for discussion. Of these therapy sessions Ven detailed,

I treated them more like a friend. I didn’t actually tell him what was bothering me. I was just playing games. Like, I didn’t really do what they were supposed to do like, umm you know like talk of mental stuff, though they did try hard, I just kept wanting [sic] to play board games with them. It was like, if I play this game with you, you will tell me about this. That’s the only way they would get me to talk, but I would just piece it and mix up the pieces and then tell them a broken story.

Ven had expressed to his counselor his wish to work hard so that he could be promoted to his rightful cohort. In hindsight, Ven realized that the counselor did not want to give him false hope that moving back was truly a possibility, but at the time the lack of help angered him. Ven said the counselor suggested that he, “try his best because anything could happen.” Ven confessed that all he heard was…“anything could happen,” indicating that Ven believed his lack of skills was the reason he repeated and if his skills improved he would be permitted to move to his original group.

Ven presented as a sensitive soul; alluding to inner feelings of depression as related to his relationships with his mother, father, and friends, the fact that he was bullied, and that he repeated. These were feelings he did not confide to many people; however feelings that often interfered with his social, educational, and emotional development. He detailed anxiety over his parents’ ambiguous priorities and therefore declared, “I do what is best for me.” He admitted that he wanted praise and recognition from his parents, teachers, and upon reflection, even his
peers. Ven said, “I thought the world was always about me, that’s how I felt so...like..., hateful.”

Most of Ven’s stories seemed geared to ensure that the researcher believed he was not a student who tried, but one who wanted to try; that he was not committed to school, his relationships, or his family. That he did not really care about the social, educational, or emotional impacts of school on his life. Ven described himself as lazy and that he rarely gave school his effort. This retelling contradicted the stories of his teachers and the documented reports that stated otherwise.

Ven spoke of several educators and relatives who did set high expectations for him. This not only communicated firm guidance and structure, but set challenges he was reticent to accept. Throughout his life, Ven related times when he was shown caring, connectedness, respect, challenge, power, and meaning as a primary focus of his educational development. At times it appeared to the researcher that he met these challenges, despite himself.

In conclusion, Ven stated,

Now I’m happy I repeated the year because, I would say that it was just that, but now I’m happy for everything, even the bad memories I had, even the bullying that happened. I’m all happy that happened because if none of that did happen, I wouldn’t have the knowledge I have now. Overall I’m just happy everything happened the way it did.

Ability to feel nothing is a pretty cool thing. It’s like this trade off. I get to be lazy. I don’t have to worry about stress. I feel zero anxiety. Always in a good mood, but at the cost of not being real intimate with the world.

Ven said that students need to, “attack the root of why were you repeated.” His belief is that once students realize why they were repeated, they may change their opinion of the
placement. A conclusion only recently discovered for Ven, but one that clearly addressed the impact grade repetition had on his development.

**Story Three: Elizabeth**

**Contextual factors.** Elizabeth presented as quiet and reserved. She described herself as, “Like, I was always kind of shy.” During the first interview Elizabeth’s initial responses were one word answers, with little if any eye contact, but by the end she was holding detailed, animated conservations. She was engaged and overall seemed eager to share her experiences. Elizabeth laughed more and was more open in her responses as the interviews progressed. In fact, at the end of the second interview Elizabeth seemed disappointed in her expression, “Oh…we’re done?”

English is Elizabeth’s second language, which is apparent in her patterns of speech. She lives with her working class mother and step-father. She has one half-sister, seven years younger. Elizabeth’s father is employed by a company to deliver food to restaurants and her mother works in a hotel. Her parents’ English skills remain limited.

At the age of two, Elizabeth’s parents left her with her grandmother in El Salvador while they relocated to America to find employment. Elizabeth lived in El Salvador for about five years, after which she followed alone to settle with her family in Massachusetts. When she arrived in Massachusetts, as a fluent speaker of Spanish, Elizabeth was placed in a first grade class even though she had completed first grade in El Salvador. Elizabeth’s recollection of her experience in school in El Salvador was similar to what she experienced in America. However, there were no records available of her time in the El Salvador school or of her first grade experience in America to analyze for comparative purposes.
Therefore, Elizabeth’s education in the U.S. began with a second experience in first grade and at the end of that year the family moved within the state. Elizabeth began second grade in a third new school and at the end of that year was recommended for repetition. Benchmark assessments indicated that she was at least two-plus years behind her age-appropriate peers; however, after this repetition she would actually have been two years older.

Until Elizabeth reached the fourth grade and the school system where this study was situated, she moved three times for her parents’ employment opportunities and attended four different schools. In the location prior to where the family finally settled, Elizabeth had to take public transportation to her mother’s place of employment to wait before the school day began. This made for very long days and a difficult third grade year for Elizabeth. Life had many upheavals and transitions for Elizabeth. Once she arrived at her fifth and current school system she developed a greater sense of security and through the supportive help of her compassionate fourth grade and EL teachers, began to apply herself to her studies.

**Rationale for grade repetition.** Elizabeth’s first second grade teacher, Mrs. King, wrote that Elizabeth was needy and had difficulty relating to her peers,

She was often inappropriate in talking to others. She is very low in all academic areas. Her English language development is very slow. She has learned a few sight words and consonant sounds, but progress even for an EL student is very slow. Math concepts are at first grade level.

It was also noted in her file that Elizabeth’s parents were concerned by her “poor behaviors and lack of academic progress,” but the file was void of any further parental input. Elizabeth reported that she did not have difficulties in the school she attended in El Salvador, “But I felt like…I was kind of a rebellious child so I feel like I wasn’t really learning much.”
She also stated that her grandmother could not help her with her school work because she was not educated. When asked if her parents were able to offer support in the American school, Elizabeth said her parents limited English got in the way of real support.

Records indicated that in second grade Elizabeth struggled with letter reversals and had difficulty with sound-symbol association; however, orally she appeared to have all the sounds required of the English language. Elizabeth’s school records did not point to any specific reason for her difficulty in school, but they did present unanswered questions as to how to best plan for her educational needs. Often it is difficult to ascertain if English language learners are educationally challenged by language/cultural barriers, a learning disability, or required more time to mature. This struggling student profile fit Elizabeth and her school assigned grade repetition was the chosen intervention as depicted in Table 1.

Analytical Commentary

Social Impact. When Elizabeth first started school in America, she said, “I did not feel like I fit in.” She was placed in first grade, which she had completed in El Salvador. Elizabeth was frightened and she gave her parents a really hard time about going to school. She said, “I struggled a lot because I did not know any English. Um, also, I had like, no friends.” Her dislike for school was compounded when Elizabeth was made to repeat grade two. Elizabeth said, “I didn’t really like school, even before I repeated. I think until this day, I don’t kind of like school, but I hated it more after I repeated second grade.”

Second grade was the first year that Elizabeth felt she had made a few connections with her peers. Elizabeth continued, “Great, another year that I have to be stuck in school. I’m going to be the oldest kid, I already am. Everyone’s going to be questioning me. Ah, I just hate
school!” Elizabeth felt alone and friendless; she remained quite angry at her parents and the teacher for repeating her. These events added to her already deep shy character.

**Educational impact.** It was Elizabeth’s firm belief that the reason she repeated second grade was because she did not know the language. She also believed, I just did not get help at all. Like, it was hard because I didn’t really speak. You know and by the time I was in second grade, I could understand a little bit, but not a lot. So then the teacher thought it was best for me to stay back another year. But it didn’t really work out because I wasn’t getting any help.

Elizabeth’s insecurity in both languages was a barrier to support at home and at school. She expressed her difficulties in communicating led to a sense of frustration, “I did not really know how to read or write in either Spanish or English. I was never taught how to do that to start with.” Her cumulative records illustrated that Elizabeth only began to receive extra language services titled, “Bilingual Subject” in her repeat year. There was no documentation to explain exactly what this support encompassed and her yearly report card after the repeat year simply stated, “Fair Progress.” Her documented grades were only slightly better than the report received after her first experience in grade two.

When Elizabeth began second grade the first time she was actually a little more comfortable in the academic setting because it was the first year when she was not moving schools or homes. She could understand her teacher and was very proud of her efforts. So at the end of second grade, Elizabeth was quite surprised when her teacher recommended that she repeat the year. She did not quite understand what had gone wrong, even though she remembers having difficulty in both reading and math, “Like, I sucked at math so bad.” Math was the one area Elizabeth could get help from her father. However, she always worried that he would yell
or become angry and if she got a problem wrong, “I was kind of scared of my dad a little” and did not like the hours of math work he required her to do at home.

On the self-reported ‘Life History Grid’, Elizabeth wrote, “I got no help from anyone.” She said she received no interventions and was given the same work as all the other students in her repeat year. Elizabeth expressed a desire to succeed in school, but never knew quite how to go about it and that her grade repetition did little to address her specific needs. It was not until her time in fourth grade, two years later, when Elizabeth felt she finally received effective EL services and was able to implement learning strategies to meet greater success. Strategies she had to teach herself.

Elizabeth said that her reading difficulties have followed her to the present,

You know I’m still reading kind of slow. I’m better at reading in my head than out loud because I never really like to read out loud. I always struggled. Every time it would take me so long and they would send my dad like, um, reports saying like, ‘She needs to get a tutor’ or something ‘because she can’t really read.’

Academically, Elizabeth knew she needed more help. Early school records did not distinguish if the support needed was language related or a disability. Elizabeth expressed that she was neglected because she only began to receive EL support in the fourth grade with other children who had similar needs. Elizabeth repeatedly commented on how much the specialized EL class helped her and should have been offered earlier in her schooling, “I was like, okay you know you’re telling me you want me to put another year. But no, I can’t get a tutor. Maybe if I, I just think that I should have gotten more help, like they didn’t in that district have the program like they do here, like the, the EL for a student struggling with the language.” She expressed that having this support might have deterred the repetition placement. Her response to peers when
asked why she repeated was, “Because I don’t really know the language.” However, years after
the repetition Elizabeth came to the conclusion, “…I finally felt like I should just accept it.”

Mrs. Jones, Elizabeth’s fourth grade teacher, remembers that she required extra reading
support, as well as EL services. Her school records after the grade repetition indicated that she
continued to struggle and was reading two years below grade level. The majority of Elizabeth’s
ratings on her 4th grade Progress Report (the title of the reporting document used within the
study district) indicated that she was not meeting the grade level standards. At the conclusion of
the first term, Mrs. Jones wrote, “Elizabeth is struggling to do grade level work, even though she
works very hard.” The last term stated, “Elizabeth is still struggling to meet grade-level
standards, but we are working on getting her the support she needs.”

Elizabeth was asked if the impact of her grade repetition and its meaning in her life has
changed over time. She responded,

Not really, because I still think it was a waste of time that I can’t graduate early.

Technically, I stayed back for nothing because I didn’t really get anything out of it. If I
stayed back here [her present district], I feel like, you know, I feel like I would have
gotten something out of it, but like their system [where she repeated] is just so different,
it’s like plain that nothing goes on.

Only once Elizabeth reached her present school district, two years after her grade
repetition, did she begin to engage in her learning, “I feel like moving to this town helped me so
much. Due to . . . like their lessons are just so different like you know they try to interact with
the students.”

Elizabeth was cognizant that learning did not come easily for her and that her grade
repetition offered little change or support. It was only once she experienced her turn-around year
in fourth grade that she was ready and able to implement new found strategies learned to support future successes. She said, “A few years after I repeated the grade I was like, okay, I think it’s time to work hard and see things differently. I think that helps because you kind of motivate yourself.” Elizabeth taught herself coping mechanisms and utilized them to focus on the task at hand. Not wanting to repeat again, Elizabeth developed stronger study habits. Hard work paid off for Elizabeth in seventh grade when her teachers voted her “Top Student of the Year.” She was extremely proud of this accomplishment.

Elizabeth came to understand and accept that for her, school was always going to require hard work. She learned firsthand that her grades suffered when she did not put in effort. As a result of finally receiving appropriate support, Elizabeth was thrilled to earn good grades and now takes responsibility for her academic actions. At the end of one recent school year Elizabeth recalled a motivating comment a teacher offered, “You’re one of the most improved students I ever had. I’m impressed.” Elizabeth said this positive motivation led her to honor’s classes and was much more motivating than the threat of repeating a year in school.

**Emotional impact.** At the end of second grade Elizabeth’s teacher discussed the repetition placement option with Elizabeth’s father. He then shared the decision with Elizabeth. She recalled,

I remember that day; you know when my dad is like, ‘Oh, you know, I went to your school today. We talked about you. She [the teacher] says that you’re doing pretty well, but she’s like…She thinks it’s better for you to skip back a grade.’ I was 9. I was like, why? I was like, that’s going to affect me so much. NO! I’m like, I’m going to be so old when I graduate. I’m like, ‘Oh my God,’ I was like, they already had to keep me a year behind because of my birthday.
Elizabeth recalled being very upset when she spoke with her teacher about repeating; there may even have been tears. Additionally, after the many moves Elizabeth experienced, she finally felt connected to her class. To this day Elizabeth does not like the emotions conjured up when thinking about her grade repetitions. As a result, Elizabeth keeps to herself the fact that she was placed into a first grade class for a second time upon arrival in America and that she repeated second grade, to herself. She held onto the fear that others think, “Oh, you weren’t smart enough to go to the next grade.” She continues to maintain the attitude, “Whatever . . . I repeated.”

Elizabeth’s parents easily accepted her grade repetition decision and that made Elizabeth “crazy.” She complained, “You don’t understand, you guys, I can’t. God, I can’t believe you made me stay.” She said, “I feel it wasn’t easy. You know in elementary, I was kind of picked on by a couple of students, it was hard.” Emotionally, Elizabeth not only had to deal with concealing the fact that she repeated, but students also made racial slurs against her because of her heritage and language. It was not the experience of the grade repetition that encouraged Elizabeth to report these behaviors, but rather the support she finally experienced when placed in, what she believed to be, the most effective school/educational system since she repeated second grade. She came to trust the fourth grade teachers who helped instill confidence in Elizabeth. They offered helpful educational support, both inside and outside of the EL classes and provided advice on how to handle the students’ taunts. In addition they asked the other teachers on the grade level to watch out for unkind comments aimed at Elizabeth. However, Elizabeth expressed that the methods in this district made her feel safe and emotionally supported in school.
Looking back, Elizabeth had a hard time accepting the grade repetition decision on an emotional level and said it was worse because she did not receive support in the repeat year. Elizabeth also felt that her third grade academic experience did nothing to help her overcome the struggles she had in her repeat year. Of her third grade teacher she said, “He really didn’t like me to begin with. He was like, ‘You’re so talkative.’ I really did not understand what was going on. Theirs was a bad system.” Elizabeth said this caused her to give up on school. She did not do her homework and did not really care about anything. Elizabeth proclaimed, “I think I gave up because no one helped. Not even him. He just hated me, like, he was just like, ‘Can you do better?’ And I was like, how am I supposed to do better?” Elizabeth truly felt as though this teacher had no desire to help her because when she let him know she did not understand, his only response was, “Well, pay attention!”

Elizabeth’s turnaround year was also the year she moved to her fifth and final school system. Her fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Jones, was available and interviewed for this study. Mrs. Jones recalled that Elizabeth never spoke about repeating second grade. Elizabeth would share some of the struggles she experienced as a result of moving to the United States, but never referenced her grade repetitions among them. Mrs. Jones recalled that, “Elizabeth never said very much.” She shared stories about life in El Salvador, but only if an opportunity presented itself. Her past teachers’ comments about Elizabeth being overly talkative or being inappropriate when talking to others was not observed in this new school, in fact, Elizabeth was considered very shy.

When Elizabeth thought about school in her early days, repetition was not a concern; but after repeating, she worried about it all the time. High school was worse because students
received quarterly academic reports; Elizabeth declared, “It’s just like, it’s always been a horror for me. I have to pass all of the classes.”

Although Elizabeth struggled through her elementary and middle school years, she seemed very clear in her realization that she needed help. It was obvious that she wished her instruction had been more intensive, in smaller groupings, and tailored to her individual needs; instead she felt like she floundered through her difficulties on her own until she found the right support system in the district she was presently enrolled.

**Story Four: Aaron**

**Contextual factors.** Aaron was a soft spoken, calm-mannered, slender, not very tall, young man. Aaron’s individual repetition attributes are presented in Table 1; however, he also had to retake some freshman courses, therefore he was 19 years old when he graduated. He was a person of few words, often responding with minimal details, except when he talked about sports. When asked, “Please tell me as much as possible about yourself, your childhood, and your family,” he answered, “I’m Aaron. I play football.” He maintained strong eye contact throughout all discussions and responded with little hesitation. His responses were thoughtful, reflective, and honest, but brief.

Aaron is the youngest of three children. He grew up living with his mother, grandmother, sister, brother, and a dog. School records reported that Aaron’s father was originally from Haiti and that Aaron had no contact with him. His mother, a college graduate, currently worked nights at a local hospital as a registration coordinator. He said, “We moved from place to place a lot.” Aaron described the moves as difficult, “I had all my friends. Making new friends was like, hard. I was always the sad person. Eventually I got used to it.”
School records concurred that transition was difficult for Aaron. Aaron had a challenging initial adjustment after his first move and was involved in a fight on his first day. His teachers noted that Aaron was drawn to and befriended students with behavioral, self-control issues. Aaron’s teacher in his repeat year made a similar observation about his choice of friends.

Aaron’s inability to complete tasks was a consistent concern in school. Reports documented that he was easily distracted and could not sit still. The school he transferred to in fifth grade evaluated Aaron for special education services because both school systems reported his weak progress. The psychological assessment from the new school detailed that Aaron was eager to please adults and teachers; a behavior observed during the research interview sessions as well. Aaron presented as serious and reserved. The reports stated that Aaron was concerned with “fitting in,” another character trait observed in the interviews.

Throughout Aaron’s school assessment sessions, he presented with low self-esteem and was unsure of himself both academically and socially. The report documented, “He struggles to ‘connect the dots’ of higher level thinking and reasoning activities and often ends up being unsure of himself and feeling anxious about how he will be seen by others.” This sentiment was expressed to the interviewer as well. The evaluation report confirmed that Aaron would bluff when confronted with things he did not know or understand. He used this mechanism when he lied to hide his third grade repetition from friends. The evaluation report was consistent with Aaron’s interview details. Additionally, Aaron’s fifth grade team of teachers identified that, “He tunes things out when they are too hard, works hard not to call attention to himself, and rarely seeks support from teachers when the material is incomprehensible.” As a result of this team’s perceptive assessment and other required evaluation findings, Aaron was placed on an IEP in the fifth grade.
Aaron was not a student motivated by school. “School is boring,” he professed. He was however, extremely motivated by sports. His annual cumulative folder identification photograph posted Aaron in a sports jersey/sweatshirt each elementary school year. Aaron had originally set his sights on becoming a pro basketball player, but in his sophomore year he did not make the team because, “…my grades weren’t good.” Aaron now credits football with turning his life around; it was football and his teacher/coach who took an interest in him.

Of Aaron’s first year in high school he said,

I was placed as a freshman. They call them here, “froshmore.” Technically, you’re a freshman and a sophomore. I was in a freshman homeroom again, because I failed math, and was taking some sophomore classes. I’ve always struggled with math, since I was young.

Aaron surmised that education is important to his mother not only because she has a college degree, but, “… because without it you can’t really go anywhere.” He said his mother believes, “Education is the first step into being what you want to be in your life.”

Early in the interview, even though Aaron detailed throughout his narrative that he felt conflicted about the experience, Aaron revealed that in the end his grade repetition was a positive event in his life. He explained that if he had remained with his original cohort of friends he may have gotten into trouble because those kids were a bad influence.

Rationale for grade repetition. Aaron’s cumulative records indicated that his struggles in mathematics began in first grade where 10/13 concept areas earned a rating of ‘Not Yet.’ His first grade teacher had concerns about his basic academic abilities and brought his name to the Teacher Assisted Team (TAT) for review of math, English language arts, and attentional issues because his classroom behaviors were interrupting his education. His first grade teacher found
him to be impulsive, inattentive, and lacking in planning and organization skills. Aaron’s mid-year and end of year math assessments show that he only successfully met 2/11 standards and 0/16 standards, respectively. In addition, his first grade report card stated that his Kindergarten teacher had considered grade repetition for Aaron, but to look at his Kindergarten records, there was nothing to indicate that grade repetition was recommended at that time. Aaron said, “I remember there was talk in kindergarten about keeping me back because of math too. My mom said, ‘He should be all right.’ They moved me on.”

Aaron’s second grade teacher also referred him to the TAT team. Her report detailed the same academic and social concerns as his first grade teacher. Behaviorally, this teacher agreed that Aaron was easily distracted, had difficulty interacting socially, completing tasks, and listening attentively. She reported his work was messy and his handwriting was difficult to read, but her major concern was his poor memory skills. He was unable to retain information from one day to the next, would use non-specific language when naming an object (e.g., “that thing”) and made the same error repeatedly. She found him to be immature and easily upset. The teacher reported that Aaron’s mother expressed an eagerness to help, but did not follow through in a significant manner. Still, Aaron was promoted to the third grade.

In third grade, Aaron’s teacher, Mrs. Brennen, documented through district Progress Reports that most grade level standards were not being met. She recommended that Aaron repeat the year. Aaron’s recollection of his mother’s understanding of his difficulties in school was that she was not informed soon enough about his struggles,

She was also upset because she felt like there should have been more. Me staying after and stuff [sic]. When Mrs. Brennen got me a tutor it was probably a month left before school was out. It was too late. My mom felt like once I struggled with my second or
third test then she [the teacher] should have realized that I wasn’t good at math and stuff. And like, she should have got the tutor then, instead of later.

However, Aaron’s cumulative records indicated that his mother was informed every year of the teachers’ educational concerns, and in October of his first third grade experience, Aaron did receive support services in school for math, one day a week for 45 minutes, one-to-one instruction provided by his teacher as needed, and an after-school university tutor. All these efforts were implemented early in the year and were aimed to help Aaron’s mathematics, to little effect.

Mrs. Egitto, a 28 year veteran teacher, was Aaron’s repeat teacher and available for study participation. She provided insight into Aaron’s first third grade experience as well because she worked closely with his teacher, Mrs. Brennan. Mrs. Egitto recalled,

Aaron was not doing well at all the first time in third grade. He wasn’t participating in anything. He really wasn’t taking any risks. He was sort of ‘just there,’ type of thing, and he was really failing everything right across the board—reading, math, everything. He just wasn’t successful. So, she [Mrs. Brennen] felt very strongly about keeping him back, and she went through the process. The mom agreed to retain him.

There was not much else in Aaron’s records to support the specific decision-making process that took place at that time.

Aaron’s Progress Report from the repeat year with Mrs. Egitto showed that Aaron inconsistently met grade level standards and was only beginning to progress towards meeting them at the end of the repeat year. Progress Reports made it evident that after two years in third grade Aaron was not able to master the grade level standard expectations; yet no additional interventions to support his struggles were noted in his cumulative file.
Analytical Commentary

Social impact. When Aaron began his repeat year in third grade, he had a difficult time relating to his peers. He lied to friends when asked about his placement. Mrs. Egitto, Aaron’s repeat teacher, recalled that he viewed his peers as second graders and took his time trying to approach developing any relationships. It was only after a while that she saw him change his attitude towards his new classmates. He eventually no longer expressed, “Oh, I’m with second graders…, but rather, these are my classmates.” She continued, “During his second time in third grade, Aaron exhibited improved adeptness at handling the basic routines of the classroom compared to his peers.” When asked about his personal social encounters Mrs. Egitto stated, “It was easier, but not easy.”

Upon reflection Aaron now believed that repeating third grade taught him how to make new friends. Relating to this time in his life Aaron said, “So me going to college is probably going to feel the same way, how I felt in third grade, meeting new people and stuff.”

It took Aaron a long time to find a comfortable social place in his life. The repetition was an embarrassing experience for him and one he tried to hide from others. He was easily agitated and scuffled with his peers. He did not fully gain a social sense of confidence until he found success on the football field. The agreement made was that Aaron could not get on the field until he gave his full attention to his academic progress. This plan motivated Aaron and soon he became a vital member of the team. The desire to play football led Aaron to academic success and enabled him to develop strong, positive relationships. It also led to a strong sense of pride when he was voted captain of the team in his senior year. This enabled him to overcome social struggles as well as increase his academic performance.
Educational impact. Aaron explained that in his repeat year, “I talked a lot less and was more focused.” He added, “My mom was way more talkative, like, ‘Did you do your homework? If you didn’t do it, you’re not going out until you do it.’ Things like that.” She put school related consequences in place and regularly checked to see that work was completed; all the things she did not do the year prior.

Aaron’s cumulative records were able to provide some insight into his first third grade experience. Aaron achieved improved school attendance and also received reading support for the first time in third grade; however, this support was discontinued in his repeat year.

Mrs. Egitto said that Aaron was never a top student, but he wasn’t one of the lowest ones either. “As time went on, he changed. He developed much more confidence. He realized he had ability. He realized he was able to do tasks, not everything. If I remember correctly, he had a greater difficulty in math, um…but he could do some of the math, whereas the year before he could do nothing. So I think because he saw himself progressing and being successful, he gained confidence,” said Mrs. Egitto. She added that overall it was a tough year for him,

He was challenged by the things [school work] he had seen last year. He was just as challenged the year he was with me. It wasn’t easy, but he was more successful. Whether he matured, or whether he had just developed more, or whatever it was, if he was a little bit more ready to accept the curriculum at that time, but in general I would say it wasn’t an easy experience for him.

Aaron took the state mandated MCAS for the first time in third grade, as do all students in Massachusetts. As Table 2 indicates, in Aaron’s repeat year his MCAS scores improved. Progressively, as the chart illustrates, Aaron’s assessment results hovered near the needs improvement end of the spectrum for the remainder of his school career.
Aaron’s MCAS Results

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>ELA</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>STE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Needs Improvement</td>
<td>Warning</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
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<td>4th</td>
<td>Warning</td>
<td>Warning</td>
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<td>5th</td>
<td>Needs Improvement</td>
<td>Warning</td>
<td>Warning</td>
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<td>6th</td>
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<td>8th</td>
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<td>9th</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Needs Improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>Needs Improvement</td>
<td>Previously Passed</td>
</tr>
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*Note.* ELA=English Language Arts; STE=Science, Technology, and Engineering.

Aaron’s academic progress, his behaviors, and confidence were continuous struggles, despite having repeated a year of school.

In grade four the teacher’s written comments stated, “Aaron’s behavior has hindered his academic progress this term. I am concerned that the work load in fifth grade will be a challenge for him.” School records documented that Aaron was reading below the fifth grade level and mid-year his teacher’s comments were similar to his fourth grade teacher, “Aaron’s knowledge of key/foundational concepts is limited. He requires much teacher support to keep him on task and focused. He has difficulty mastering the concepts of the grade five curricula and at this time promotion to sixth grade is doubtful.” Aaron did not report grade five as another year of grade
repetition discussions and records showed that he moved with his mother after his fifth grade year. This new school system referred Aaron for an educational evaluation, where he was found eligible for an IEP.

In sixth grade, Aaron returned to his former school system. Distractibility, inconsistent achievement, incomplete homework, and inconsistent quiz/test grades were noted in his district mid-trimester Progress Report. In eighth grade, progress remained inconsistent; yet anecdotal notes in his cumulative file, an educational evaluation completed in 2012, and Aaron himself, confirmed that he was taken off his IEP before he entered high school. According to the written documentation, Aaron was discharged, “because he was found to no longer be eligible.” Nothing else to support this decision was found in his file.

However, there was an email in Aaron’s folder from ninth grade, indicating lack of progress. It noted he was failing five out of six courses. The TAT team reconvened to re-evaluate for the re-instatement of an IEP for Aaron. The team established interventions: a mentor to check in with Aaron, inclusion in a social organizational group, and monitoring to ensure work is complete. Aaron’s performance remained inconsistent and all teachers reported that he was not doing his classwork or homework and was not attending recommended after school sessions. He was also disruptive in class. The school struggled to decide if Aaron’s problems stemmed from lack of ability or lack of effort. Several teachers emailed his mother regarding their concerns; however, there was no improvement in Aaron’s work performance. The new assessment data and teacher reports made it possible for Aaron to once again be eligible for special education services with a primary disability categorized as specific learning disability in math.
As his records indicated, Aaron was a student who struggled with academics. After tutoring and small group learning was ineffective, the school implemented grade repetition as the next intervention. However, Aaron continued to be challenged throughout his educational career and it seemed that no matter what his schools implemented, he still could not meet the expected benchmarks.

As the result of his yearly school struggles, repeated grade repetition recommendations, and a disappointing high school basketball team experience, Aaron eventually came to realize that he had to earn and maintain good grades in school. “In order to play a sport, you have to pass four major courses and I passed all four, because right after meeting with the coach and my mom, I started doing my work and I played football.” It was Aaron’s love of sports, not the lingering embarrassment he felt at having repeated a year of school that served as the major driving force for improving his academics. It was the relationship developed with his football coach, also his math teacher - that became the important force in Aaron’s life. This relationship served as a mentorship and Aaron’s social and academic worlds merged as a result.

It was only many years after his grade repetition experience that Aaron discovered a lesson. Aaron came to reflect on the fact that besides experiencing a third grade repetition, repetition was also considered when he was in Kindergarten, sixth, and seventh grade. Each of these experiences was a setback for Aaron; ones he resented for many years. However, through a new found retrospective, which did not exist throughout his young life, Aaron came to the realization that his past school performance should not dictate his future school performance. Not doing well in school and working with his coach has made Aaron understand that he needed to work hard, do his homework on time, and not leave it to the last minute, as well as study more for tests and take notes, especially when he gets to college.
**Emotional impact.** Mrs. Egitto said that in the repeat year,

I know at points he [Aaron] would have a short fuse. There would be days when he was better able to take in something someone else had said. Then there would be days when you would look at him the wrong way, and he would really be enraged.

Mrs. Egitto recalled that with her, Aaron was not shy about asking for help, which contradicted Aaron’s self-depiction. She said,

I think he found a voice where he would advocate a little bit more for himself. I think he was maybe, more comfortable in my room, as far as just being a part of the room. If we could remove the behaviors, he would be really good, but . . . he always tried. He was not defiant or disrespectful. He was not like that.

Before Aaron repeated grade three, he said he was “a selfish student.” When asked to elaborate, Aaron detailed, “I only cared about me like, even though others tried to help me, I didn’t care. I didn’t listen and stuff. I was stubborn, too, but that changed after the second year [in third grade].” The conversation moved away from selfishness, but Aaron went back,

I never wanted help. I felt like I can do everything on my own. One of the biggest reasons like, was me not having a dad. He wasn’t around. So I can do everything on my own and stuff. I always thought people helping me was like, bad and stuff, because I wasn’t doing it on my own.

He said, “I took that attitude into school.” However, when Aaron matured, he learned “to let more people help me and stuff.”

When Aaron detailed his grade repetition experience he said, “I remember it like it was yesterday.” He remembered learning about his placement by reading it printed on his district Progress Report,
So mine said, ‘You did not pass.’ Everyone was like, ‘Are you going on to the next grade?’ I lied. I said, ‘Yeah.’ I was embarrassed. I was like, ‘Yeah, I’m going on to the next grade,’ and stuff. I was upset. She gave me the report card and said, . . . well she didn’t say anything to me. She just turned and walked away. Then I looked at it and it said, ‘You have to repeat the year.’

Returning home with his district Progress Report, Aaron said he was nervous, “I didn’t know what she [his mother] was going to say.” He thought she no idea about the repetition. He soon realized his mother had been aware and was relieved to discover that she wasn’t upset at all. He said she explained to him, “You know you struggle in math. It’s another year for you to get better at it. You’ll be all right.” Aaron said her reaction made him feel better, but he was still too embarrassed to discuss it with his friends. He said he was confused, “I thought I was doing all the work good. Even though I wasn’t doing well in math, all the other subjects I was doing good. It’s that one subject could really keep me back?”

The news of his repetition so upset Aaron that he did not do much the following summer. He played in his own yard every day; a big change from his normal behavior. Aaron was so embarrassed that he lied about it at Sunday school too, “but I felt guilty, so the next week came and I finally told them.” His Sunday school teacher consoled him and it helped him feel a little better; however, the embarrassment never really went away. Aaron recalled an instance when he had to explain why he was still in third grade. When the students asked, “What are you doing there?” he responded, “I got kept back.” He continued, “Then all of them started, well, most of them didn’t laugh, but others started laughing, so it was embarrassing.” Aaron recalled that the friends who moved ahead didn’t talk to him anymore either.
Aaron said he was happy to repeat with Mrs. Egitto though. He remembers the two teachers as very different people, “I don’t want to say Mrs. Brennen is mean, but I think she didn’t really care.” Aaron felt more comfortable with Mrs. Egitto, “She was fun all the time, but when work needed to be done, we had to get it done and stuff. Even when I went to fourth grade, Mrs. Egitto kept in touch. Mrs. Brennen didn’t know I was there.”

Only now does Aaron believe that he would not be in the same position today--captain of the football team, going off to college, and pursuing a career in sports management, if he had not repeated third grade. He is in a comfortable place and realized that he has come a long way—socially, emotionally, and educationally.

**Story Five: George**

**Contextual factors.** At the time of this study, George was an academically and socially successful student. He had plans to enter college and was the proud recipient of a scholarship. George’s characteristics are depicted in Table 1. His parents’ recommendation for repetition is otherwise known as a ‘red-shirt’ grade repetition. They requested a delayed grade one entry. He was born into a single sex couple, where both Trish and Jennifer felt George needed the year to mature. They, along with his teacher, believed George was a capable Kindergarten student and so this request was quite difficult for his teacher to accept.

George was an articulate young man. His responses clear, concise, and intelligent. He rarely verbalized to fill pauses (e.g., ‘you know,’ ‘like,’ or ‘um’). He was reserved and admitted to being shy. George was shorter than average and slender. He wore eyeglasses and had the short, patchy makings of a beard. The unshaven look gave the impression that he was trying to appear older.
George, the oldest child, was the biological son of Trish, who also participated in this study. When George was two years old, his younger brother was born to the co-parenting mother, Jennifer. His mothers divorced when George was in fourth grade and both have remarried, bringing three more siblings into George’s life. One sibling lived with his birth mother and two lived with his co-parenting mother. Trish said that the relationship between the mothers, “Can be testy at times, but we pretty much get along.”

For George the separation was a time of turmoil. He said, “It was completely out of the blue.” The news was both strange and difficult for him because the separation meant sharing time in both homes; this constant movement was unsettling to George. He said he became, “kind of introverted a little bit. I wasn’t as talkative as I had been before. I kind of kept to myself a little bit, but I still talked to people. I became more of an observer, I guess.” George missed having both his parents in the same household, but believed the separation and divorce made him mature more quickly. George realized that he had to leave behind, “the kid stuff, just playing with your toys and not really being aware of what’s around you. It didn’t seem as important anymore.”

When asked about his family, George said, “I guess I have the most complicated family in the world.” He detailed,

For eleven years I had a pretty stable family. Two mothers was a little different, but you just answer the questions the kids ask and it wasn’t a really big deal. I don’t remember it [having two mothers] coming up in either Kindergarten, but I remember it coming up in later years when I started having playdates with friends. They would ask questions and I would just answer them. I didn’t see it as being all that different, so it wasn’t that big of a
deal, having two moms. Then, when I was eleven they decided to get divorced, so that was a really big transition where life was pretty hard.

Mrs. Yancy, George’s first Kindergarten teacher, described him as shy and one who did not converse much. She remembered him as smaller than the other children too. She expressed her concerns that grade repetition would have little to no effect on his shyness and small stature, “I didn’t see that changing tremendously over time. I really couldn’t see the logic in it.” Mr. Bourne, his repeat Kindergarten teacher, along with Mrs. Yancy, were also under the impression that George was repeating because his parents felt he was not mature enough for first grade and because they wanted a male role model for their son. Mr. Bourne said that he and George bonded before he came to his classroom because George was “crazy for the soccer they played together at recess.”

George’s mother, Trish, described George as a quiet, sensitive boy, “who has been as far back as I can remember. He’s more introspective, and he’s a thinker rather than a reactor. So you know I’m sure he processed that information [his grade repetition] as best he could at the age of five and just let it roll off his back.”

**Rationale for grade repetition.** George started Kindergarten at the age of four, “I remember behaviorally I was probably a little immature. I used to get in trouble a lot in that class, I think.” However, Mrs. Yancy did not corroborate any behavioral issues for George during her interview. George recalled that his behaviors were minor, “I think I threw tantrums, but I don’t really remember it. I just remember being kind of a pest a little bit. I was pretty small so I would just be kind of annoying I guess.”

Regarding the repeat decision and learning about it, George shared,
I’m not sure if I knew it was a repeat necessarily. I just knew that I was going to a new school, a new class, and so, I don’t think I really thought of it as a repeat. My parents really, I guess, didn’t disclose that to me.

George said he only realized he repeated a year of school later in his elementary career. He stated, “I may have just figured it out by just talking to people. I think it was either first or second grade. My parents said I was young in class and so, that’s why I ended up coming back. She made it, it was because of my age.” George said, “It’s not a secret, it’s just that it’s not a big deal, because it was in kindergarten.”

Trish remembered talking to George about the final decision, but could not recall the specific discussion. She remembered that they never used the words, “We’re keeping you back.” She thought it was more like, “We’re going to do Kindergarten again because it’s going to make you smarter in the long run. Something to that effect,” and remembered that she and her partner kept it positive.

School documents did not reveal any major challenges for George. His pre-school transition report stated that George was slower to try new tasks and would seek out the reaction of peers before diving in to something new. His mothers reported that he was reluctant to try new things at home as well. George received high marks in literacy skills in pre-school and both years in Kindergarten. He engaged in conversations and had an expanding vocabulary.

By April of George’s first Kindergarten year, he had met the expected reading level benchmark. Despite this success, his parents approached Mrs. Yancy with the idea of repeating George. Trish, George’s mother said, “George was a little bit shy when he was five years old;” she believed that repetition would help him socially. She said, “George was born on August 22nd. We did Kindergarten at the regular age, and then we kept him back just because we wanted
him to be the oldest kid in class and have a better chance of succeeding.” Trish added that George did not show any signs of immaturity at the time of the decision, “It mostly had to do with his age. He was a really bright kid.” Trish consistently referenced literature that addressed the relative immaturity of boys starting school at age four and five years old versus girls. She said, “We read a lot about competition and we just figured that, why not give him a little edge, you know, to maybe do better academically? Being of a different generation, it’s very challenging for kids nowadays in terms of competition” and so their repetition request was made.

Following George’s first Kindergarten year, the school district was closing George’s school and everyone was moving to a new school with a new name. Trish remembered, “We figured that having a brand new experience in a new school wouldn’t be as impactful in terms of keeping him back, if he was at the same school, you know, that kind of thing. Everything was new.” However, Trish claimed that they would have repeated George absent the change of school.

Mrs. Yancy was shocked when the mothers came to her with their request. She was transparent in her response to this request; she had no academic, social, or emotional concerns for George. She recalled his mothers’ concern that he was physically small compared to his peers. He wasn’t as outgoing and was very quiet. Mrs. Yancy said his mothers felt maybe George would become more mature emotionally and socially if he was kept back. She said his mothers voiced concern that George might be influenced by others in middle school, especially because he was younger than his peers. Mrs. Yancy said his mothers expressed fear that his peers would take advantage of George or that he would be more gullible. Mrs. Yancy’s view of George and his abilities was clear, she wanted,
To go on record to say there was no reason why I could see this child staying behind because um, not that I didn’t want to keep him, if I did want to keep a child behind I wanted them to see that there was a strong reason, not because of a parent’s suspected future fear.

Mrs. Yancy found George to be a solid student,

I would actually say he was a model child in the sense that he followed the rules, was able to keep himself at the rug, and maintain attention for at least 20 minutes. He had no problems. He was able to go from center to center with very little support. He was certainly not a person I would even have on my list to say, ‘Gee, another year of Kindergarten would help him.’ I actually looked at it the opposite. I remember that his Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) level was solid. Certainly he was not a concern.

Mrs. Yancy recalled, “George was able to decode and understand what he read.” George had demonstrated many successful Kindergarten skills; he accepted the environment, got along with his peers, and never caused problems requiring a report home.

Mrs. Yancy used data and documents to illustrate George’s tremendous progress in her classroom. She again mentioned, “I never had any concerns;” however, Mrs. Yancy knew the principal would defer to the parents request, so she did not battle their decision. Mrs. Yancy said, “If she [the mother] had that strong of feelings about it, it wouldn’t have worked in first grade anyway.”

When asked to detail George’s reaction to the decision, Mrs. Yancy said she did not inform George and left that to his parents. She assumed George would enjoy spending the year with repeat teacher, Mr. Bourne, since they had already cultivated a friendly relationship. Mr.
Bourne recalled that there was no outward reaction from George in the repeat year. He said, “I don’t think there was any change. There was no evidence of disappointment. I thought the transition was really smooth.” However, Mr. Bourne did wonder if George was lacking socially in his first experience which caused him to spend so much time at recess playing soccer with the teacher, rather than with his peers.

**Analytical Commentary**

**Social impact.** George’s reflection of his grade repetition was that his first year was all about becoming comfortable with the environment. He said, “It’s the social aspect.” He believed his second year allowed him to become acclimated to the academics and the material, “I think for me having those two years, it kind of split up the newness of it I guess.”

George’s mother reported that George was definitely different in the repeat year. She shared,

He was totally more social and more confident. I remember this specifically. Just, in the first year with Mrs. Yancy, he was a little bit skittish. After the second year, he definitely was more confident in himself, excelling tremendously in school. He could read much better as the kids in the same grade as he was. . . especially his general openness to day to day activities at school. He would tell us about more. Being a year older, he was more mature, and his ability to communicate was much better.

George mentioned feeling socially closed in elementary school. His life experiences and his strong desire to excel academically led to a focus on school work over peer relationships. George believed his experiences were positively impacted because the repetition offered him a greater sense of maturity, but they also suggest that George was afraid to appear less than perfect in either of these areas of his life. Therefore, he focused on one over the other. He also admitted
that his parents’ divorce made him more introverted, which would make social building more difficult for an already shy child.

**Educational impact.** George’s memory of his first Kindergarten experience was filled with descriptions of the physical state of school building and the classroom’s physical appearance. He said, “I don’t remember the material, like the learning aspects and I do remember wondering why I was there.” George recalled that Kindergarten the first time seemed, “. . . more like an extension of pre-school. I didn’t really understand the difference between the two.” He added, “I think the first year of Kindergarten, I didn’t really like it. That’s maybe why I’d act out sometimes. After that, I kind of got used to it and more comfortable with it. Yeah, I think I liked it after that.”

The stated opinions of George’s mother and Mr. Bourne agreed that the grade repetition enabled George to grasp the knowledge much better the second time. Trish revealed,

He understood his academics much better. He thought about it more. He wasn’t the Cartoon Network watching kind of kid. He was more of a National Geographic and Discovery Channel kid. I think in that respect, it turned his brain on even more, to be, just more interested in things.

George recalled that in the repeat year he felt more confident with the learning process and the overall general idea of school. He stated, “I think having that first year kind prepared me for the second year.” George also believed that his grade repetition better prepared him for the transition from elementary school to middle school. He attributed this to having already experienced a transition to a new school.

George’s school records indicated a well-rounded, intelligent student throughout his school career. Mr. Bourne noted that George consistently performed well in all assessed tasks,
yet his second Kindergarten Progress Report looked very similar to his first Kindergarten Progress Report.

Unfortunately, any contemporary feedback from his year immediately after repetition was lost because there were no documents in George’s cumulative folder from first grade. His grade two Progress Report showed consistent growth in all academic and social areas, with the exception of mathematics, where he excelled.

George’s reports of progress in third, fourth, and fifth grades stated that he exceeded most grade level standards. His teachers said George made steady academic progress in all areas of the curriculum. He was articulate, expressive, responsible, and well-liked by his peers. However, George remembered fourth grade as being especially challenging because his parents separated. His overall academic results did not suffer, except for his Mathematics MCAS score, which was uncharacteristically noted-Warning.

In fifth grade George became really involved in learning. He would go home, do his work right away and found himself really, “kind of get into the material.” He said this focus continued and he worked hard to get A-pluses in all his courses. He said, “I don’t know, I didn’t plan it to be that way. It just came out that way. I continued this way, actually into freshman year I continued this thing where I focused solely on school.” However, by sophomore year it became apparent to George that school was becoming a stressor in his life. Once George realized the stress of perfection was too much, he refocused on his social life. He worked to develop strong friendships that he maintains to this day. He admitted that his grades have taken “a bit of a nose dive” as a result. He sometimes “puts work off, procrastinates . . . hating the work just a bit.” However, George’s grades are still strong; instead of straight As, he has a few Bs mixed in; admitting, “Now I’m more balanced between social life and academics.”
George’s scholastic achievements maintained a successful track throughout his career. He concluded that his grade repetition had little effect on his academics, but that his parents’ divorce profoundly affected his social, emotional, educational experiences. He explained that the lack of a solid routine was challenging to him, “I still lose stuff all the time because I am not sure where it is with the moving back and forth between houses. I guess the organization in that aspect of my life kind of suffered from that.” From an educational viewpoint, George’s grade repetition did not impede his progress and in fact, may have increased his school experiences and supported the many successes that have come his way.

**Emotional impact.** For George, the experience of grade repetition had related emotional outcomes. Mr. Bourne recalled that in the repeat year George’s stature remained small and he was not any more outgoing than the year before. George recalled feeling more experienced overall in Kindergarten the second time at age five, but remembered feeling insecure at the very beginning of his second experience. He recalled, “I kind of remember the first day of school, like not wanting to go. It was weird because I had already gone to Kindergarten, but I still had the feeling like, I wanted to stay home, and stay with my parents and stuff.” This was a similar reaction to when he started Kindergarten at age four. George found some comfort in the repetition because it offered him familiarity with school expectations, alongside the insecurities felt by the transition into a new school building and new group of friends.

George recalled that his re-entrance into Kindergarten was easier for him than for his peers because, “I kind of understood that it was not a lot different. I think, also being through a year of Kindergarten kind of made me more accustomed to it.” Presently, George now understood that his parents preferred him to be the oldest in the grade as opposed to the youngest. He believed this decision contributed to his present maturity level and that “his
parents always wanted what was best for me.” Additionally, there was little sense of loss because the friendships formed in his first year had not yet developed. George recalled, “I almost never got in trouble in Mr. Bourne’s class.” He said, “I was more comfortable with the material and the atmosphere of the [second] classroom.”

When asked to detail George’s reaction to their grade repetition decision, Trish said, I don’t remember him being upset at all. I remember him just taking it in and saying, ‘Okay.’ I’m sure he didn’t understand really the ramifications of it, being, you know, five years old, but he didn’t cry or anything like that. He just took it in and said, ‘Okay.’ You know and then the next year, he went to the new school and had new friends, so it was just an actually easy transition.

Any emotional scars George may have experienced during school were more closely related to the changes in his home life, as opposed to having repeated a year of school. However, it is possible that the lack of control George felt in his family situation transferred to his studies where he could exert firm control by putting all his focus into his school work. This eventually became too stressful for him. George came to the realization that he was backing away from social relationships; missing out on the social and emotional experiences of school.

George developed a stronger sense of self and emotionally did not view his grade repetition as an adverse event in his life; however, he admitted, “I am not sure how I would’ve felt about it had I not had to change schools. It [changing schools] probably had a big impact on my [grade repetition] experience.” Throughout George’s narrative it became clear that his parents’ divorce and the changes it brought most affected him socially, emotionally, and educationally.

**Story Six: Andrew**
Contextual factors. Andrew, a Chinese-American, lived with his mother, father, and older sister. Andrew’s start in life did not take the usual path for an American child. He was born in America from naturalized Chinese-American citizens, but his family sent him to rural China where he spent most of his first five years. His parents, Andrew said, 

Just didn’t have their bearings together. They didn’t really have anything together, so they couldn’t really raise me properly. So, they sent me to China to be raised by my uncle and his... well, I consider her my aunt because she was very attentive to me.

He revealed that his “aunt” was not actually related and was surprised to learn, at the age of five, that these people were not his biological parents.

“Life in China,” Andrew said, “was amazing. Nothing like America. We lived in a little hut that my uncle actually built himself. It was nothing like a house here. It was just brick, like tarps.” Andrew has a sister, one year older, who also spent her first years in China; however, she was raised by different relatives. No one said they were related, but Andrew confided, “I think I had a pretty good understanding that she was my sister. I just kind of knew.”

Andrew’s coming to America came as a surprise, “One day my aunt, who I actually kind of knew well, one that’s related to me, took me to an airport, and we just went to America from there.” Andrew had no knowledge that he was forever leaving the life he knew in China.

Meeting his real parents for the first time, Andrew recalled, “It was a little traumatizing. I remember in the back of my head, I was just moving in here, and I was crying. I was like, ‘Where is my mom and dad?’ and they’re like, ‘These are your mom and dad.’” Andrew continued,

I just remember my dad sitting there. A really scary guy. He was kind of tall, and my mom was there too. I was just still kind of surprised that this guy was my dad, and that
was my mom. I mean, strangely, I wasn’t like, devastated that the people back home weren’t my real parents. I guess I just didn’t really care. I was so young.

Andrew does not remember acting upset about moving to America, but found his father to be, “freaking terrifying.” When asked about his mother, Andrew said,

I did not really like my mom. I didn’t know who she was. I guess I didn’t really like interacting with her. Apparently at that time, my mom was extremely depressed, and well, let’s just say she was crazy at the moment. My sister’s theory, there’s like this condition that happens to you when you’re separated from your kids for a very long time. I guess my mom experienced that. She was just not, like sane. I actually saw her crying the next day. I was just so confused on why it was. It’s actually like embedded in my mind, a picture of my mom crying and I never really understood why.

Andrew believed those tears were caused by sadness because Andrew had not recognized or acknowledged this woman as his mother. Andrew expressed,

I guess over time I kind of barely got used to them [his parents]. My mom was still kind of, honestly to this day, I don’t really feel connected. Yeah, my mom has bipolar still, so she’s not very capable of sympathy and stuff. It’s not like she’s ruining my life or anything. She’s very quiet, very mellow, it’s not a big deal.

Andrew described his childhood as, “pretty shitty.” His relationship with his mother remains non-existent because of mental illness, “She takes very little interest in any part of my life.” However, Andrew added,

I would lose my mind if I did not have my dad. He doesn’t make much money, but he works a lot of hours just for me and my sister, which I’m grateful. He put my sister through college and he’s going to put me through college. I can’t ask for anymore.
Andrew spoke quickly, in clipped sentences. He maintained good eye contact and expressed an eagerness to help this research project. At times he talked about the manner in which life events affected him psychologically, but just as frequently proclaimed that the drastic changes in his life did not upset him in any way, “I guess it falls in the genes that my parents and me are just, we’re adventurous. I think we just don’t have problems with experiencing new things. Like, I didn’t have a problem living in America.”

Andrew’s educational experiences began in American schools. Table 1 details his late birth date and as a result Andrew was 4 years and 9 months when he started Kindergarten. He enrolled in the school system where this study was conducted and remained enrolled until his date of graduation.

**Rationale for grade repetition.** English was Andrew’s second language. It took him about six years to reach the national grade-level academic norms of native speakers, at which point school documents indicated language acquisition was no longer a problem.

After a consistent lack of progress since entering school in Kindergarten, Andrew’s parents consented to repetition (see Table 1). He had exhibited minimal progress in the small group placement with comparable ability language acquisition students. All teacher reports identified Andrew’s inability to attend. One teacher attributed his difficulties to an undiagnosed medical disability that she stated his parents refused to explore. It became evident to the school that grade repetition was a difficult concept for his family to accept given that education and “saving face” was culturally important to them.

Andrew said that his English was a little shaky when he entered Kindergarten, but claims he was fluent by the time he entered first grade. Cumulative school records indicated that Andrew was enrolled in the Chinese Bilingual Program in Kindergarten. Achievement on his
district Kindergarten Progress Report showed that Andrew scored an even combination of the indicators--consistent, developing, and not yet developing in literacy and mathematical skills. His teacher was concerned with his low attention level and behavior. Two problems were consistently reported: Andrew could not sit still and Andrew was unable to focus on his schooling. The Kindergarten teacher noted that Andrew often took a long time to respond when directly addressed and would look around the room trying to determine the source of the request. As a result, Andrew’s hearing was checked, but was determined normal. His teacher also reported that Andrew had difficulty completing independent work. Andrew was quiet in class, but when he spoke his vocabulary was limited, as well as incomprehensible. It appeared that Andrew had the ability to understand spoken English, but only after words were repeated several times. Andrew’s sight word recognition was weak and he had not mastered one-to-one letter or word correspondence. Common to Andrew’s Chinese culture, he made little eye contact when speaking to others. In Kindergarten it appeared that Andrew got along with his peers, but communicated mostly through gestures rather than language.

For grades one and two, Andrew was placed in a Sheltered English Immersion (SEI), sub-separate classroom; spending both years with the same teacher. This was a specialized program, including a small number of students each year, 8 and 6 students respectively. Andrew exhibited difficulty learning and making progress in this small setting due to his “lack of attention and body/motor issues.” His teacher wrote, “These issues are greatly impacting his progress in school.” She also noted that Andrew was unusually tired, especially in the afternoons. He often needed to prop up his head when working at his desk. It was recorded that even after the parent conference in April when his teacher made health care and wellness recommendations, his parents had not explored his attentional issues with a pediatrician.
The school documented that Andrew had difficulty with organization, routine, and that even game playing was a challenge. Documents detailed that Andrew seemed to perform best in language skills. His Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral (MELA-O) scores showed yearly improvement; therefore, at the end of second grade, Andrew transitioned out of the intensive, sub-separate, bilingual program and was recommended for grade repetition. His parents refused the recommendation. His SEI teacher noted that, “Andrew is being ‘transferred’ to third grade for the school year, 2005-2006, as he has not met second grade benchmarks.” “Transferred” as opposed to “promoted” is the term the district used when a parent refused a grade repetition recommendation. Andrew’s parents transferred him to third grade in a different elementary school within the same school district.

When discussing Andrew’s academic supports, he was confused about his EL services. He said, “I was taking mainly just third grade…I was just in a regular classroom,” but records documented that Andrew still received EL services through a “pull-out” model. Andrew hinted that being removed from the EL, small class setting played a large role in his failing third grade; however, Andrew had already been recommended for grade repetition the year before leaving the intensively supported sub-separate class at the end of grade two.

Mrs. Ward, a teacher participant, was a 15 year veteran teacher, turned administrator, at the time of interviews. She taught grades three, four, and five and was the teacher who repeated Andrew. Mrs. Ward was concerned about Andrew from the very beginning of third grade because he showed atypical behaviors. These behaviors included a lack of social skills, difficulty getting along with peers, misreading social cues and situations, and self-stimulatory behaviors. He would consistently rock his body when sitting on the rug or in his chair. She brought Andrew’s case to TAT early in the fall; registering the same concerns as his previous
Andrew was having trouble in all academic areas, his attentional issues continued, and he seemed withdrawn. Mrs. Ward reported that he lacked basic skills and concept understanding, (e.g., months of the year, days of the week, simple math facts, sight words, letter reversals, following directions, short-term memory, and repeating the same error over and over).

Mrs. Ward made many attempts to involve Andrew’s family and recommended a visit to the pediatrician to investigate the schools’ concerns. The parents did not comply. Mrs. Ward held at least two formal conferences with the family; one early in the fall, and one at Progress Report time in December. She again tried to urge them to involve the pediatrician as a part of the TAT team child review, but recorded, “that was not an option.” Mrs. Ward was disappointed, but attributed the parents’ reluctance to their cultural practices, “They did not want to admit that there could be something else going on with their son and thought having him repeat to get his skills would be better than bringing him to the pediatrician to look into something else.” Andrew revealed in his interview that his parents did take him to a psychiatrist who gave him an ADHD diagnosis. However, this diagnosis was never formally reported to Mrs. Ward or documented in Andrew’s school records.

By the end of third grade Andrew’s district Progress Report was filled with not meeting grade level standard and progressing towards grade level standard indicators in all academic areas. Additionally, his behaviors that support learning remained weak. Mrs. Ward recommended grade repetition and this time his parents supported the recommendation.

Andrew is sure his parents discussed his lack of progress with the school and they were informed he needed to repeat the year. However, Andrew had no recollection of who informed him, “I don’t remember any of it, but yeah, my dad was really upset about it actually. He was very, very upset that I failed third grade. He was like, would not let me live it down because you
know, Asian parents.” Andrew stated that communication with his parents “has always been a problem,” with Andrew often filling the role of translator for his family. He said language deficits have always had an impact on his life, “I still can’t communicate with my parents to this day.”

**Analytical Commentary**

**Social impact.** Andrew stated, “I was a weird kid. I wore like weird sweaters that my grandma knitted and girl’s shoes. I didn’t talk to anyone. I just went along with the motions. I looked forward to lunch because, surprisingly I loved school lunch.” Food was a recurring theme in Andrew’s discussions; he often associated life events (e.g., moving to America, arrival at the airport, meeting his real parents for the first time) with food. Andrew declared, “I actually like when my dad buys me food, so I guess we bond over that.” Andrew acknowledged that for many reasons, he was not the typical third grader.

Andrew described himself as a, “TV kid,” because he watched television all day, every day. He said he learned English pretty well because he watched so much television. His social life was limited to his sister and cousins. Andrew said he does not remember playing outside, playing any sports, or having any friends. Andrew does speak Chinese at home, admittedly, “Very poorly,” but his parents never speak English. Nevertheless, Andrew was extremely articulate during interviews.

Andrew confessed, “. . . teachers weren’t all that nice to me as a kid. I thought my third grade teacher did not care about me whatsoever.” He recalled, “My main teachers were stone cold. I don’t know how to say it. She was cold, . . . Mt. Everest cold. It was just nothing.” He felt both of his third grade teachers did not care about him,
I didn’t feel like I was part of the class. All these teachers were having conversations with the kids and tell them all stuff and they were just, they just kind of pushed me to the side, like I didn’t really matter.

Andrew felt a sense of doom when he learned he had to repeat third grade. He remembered, “I have to waste another year of my life and I guess my dad was giving me a lot of attitude for it, but I understand why.” Andrew was a quiet student who says his peers did not notice him much in school, “So repeating the year had little effect on me socially.” He admitted feeling a tiny bit more connected to the new group; however, he did not make any genuine connections with his peers until the fourth grade.

Andrew described his first experience in third grade,

It was just like, tedious. I went there, didn’t do anything. Waited for snack time. Had snacks and then just went home. Like throughout the day, I’d just see kids talking to each other, making plans to hang out after school and I’d just be there alone and umm, yeah, that’s what it is.

These seemed like painful memories for Andrew.

Mrs. Ward said Andrew seemed a slightly more confident student in the repeat year, “He chatted a little bit more; he was a tad more conversational. The first year he was with me, he was much more introverted. But I didn’t see those social quirks dissipate [in his second year].” Through their interviews it became evident that both Andrew and Mrs. Ward agreed that the grade repetition did not lead to a drastically positive change in the social interactions he experienced in school, and if anything, in the repeat year Andrew may have felt even more neglected by the students and his teacher.
**Educational impact.** When questioned about his school experiences Andrew reported, I’ll be honest. I didn’t care about anything. I didn’t care about school whatsoever, not as a rebellious thing. It just didn’t faze me whatsoever. That’s just how education was to me. It’s just something that wasn’t relevant to me. For lack of a better word, I just didn’t care.

Andrew remembered that grade repetition was discussed as possible options in both first and second grades, but it was rescinded because he attended summer school. Summer school attendance for two years was not documented in Andrew’s school records.

Andrew did not remember any academic changes or if he had difficulty with his school work in the repeat year. He didn’t talk; he saw his peers participating, but he would sit there, “just thinking about other stupid stuff, because I have ADHD, so that probably didn’t help.”

Andrew recalled that he was diagnosed with ADHD around third or fourth grade. Initially, he took medication for it; Andrew said,

It makes you pay attention a little bit, but it gives you no energy and honestly, some people, it makes them even a little bit suicidal. So I stopped taking it. I already had no motivation. At that point, I guess my grades improved slightly, not much, but umm I was just better off not taking it.

Andrew recalled that his performance improved slightly in the repeat year because he actually gave some effort to his work. Andrew realized, “I actually learned what the teacher was saying because you can’t be helped if you don’t want to be helped.” When Mrs. Ward was asked if she did anything differently in Andrew’s repeat year, (she occasionally worked with Andrew during the grade level writing block) she recalled, “I really don’t know.” She remembered that Andrew was better able to follow routine and she was able to count on him to help his new peers
locate needed materials within the room. Mrs. Ward noted that he still was not an exemplar for work accomplishment and his parents’ continued language barrier meant they were little support at home. She recalled Andrew striving to go beyond literal concrete thoughts and branch out with greater details. She remembered Andrew as academically more successful, but that his atypical behaviors continued.

Andrew admitted that the repeat experience was “kind of cool” because he felt more comfortable with the curriculum expectations, “I was experiencing the work for the second time.” However, Andrew’s district Progress Report the second time in third grade indicated growth and achievement consistent with the year before. There were some meets the grade level standards ratings, but they were inconsistent. His repeat achievement was mainly not meeting the grade level standard and progressing towards the grade level standard indicators; unsatisfactory results by the school’s standards and weak academic improvement for a student learning the material for the second time. The repeat year did not afford Andrew an increase in academic or social results. He grades still floundered and socially, he lacked friendship development. Increasingly, it became evident to the school that Andrew’s attention deficit and behavioral issues were the cause of his academic struggles. Yet, there was nothing in Andrew’s cumulative files, or his recollections, to indicate that extra supports were added to his school day to address such concerns.

The MCAS scores for both years Andrew spent in third grade were missing from his cumulative folder; however, the results filed for subsequent years illustrated success. He scored proficient in both assessed areas each year tested, with the exception of needs improvement on 8th grade math and advanced on 10th grade math. District Progress Report results for Andrew’s fourth and fifth grade also illustrated improvement. His teachers viewed him as a student who
enjoyed school and continued to do satisfactory work, but also commented on his challenges with listening attentively and focusing on what is taking place in front of him. He consistently required a great deal of guidance and support from school to complete tasks. The only other progress report available in Andrew’s cumulative folder was from his eighth grade year, where his letter grades ranged from high to low.

A student presenting with Andrew’s academic profile, poor grades, and attentional issues, is typically assessed for a learning disability. According to his records, Andrew was never assessed. In light of his subpar yearly achievement and growth reports, his difficulty attending to tasks, and not meeting district benchmarks, Andrew’s results on state mandated assessments were surprisingly proficient. These results were unexpected because they were not consistent with teacher progress findings. Additionally, the gap in data left by Andrew’s missing MCAS scores for the repeat year could not be used to draw a deeper conclusion regarding repetition success or failure for Andrew. As it stands, the disparity between Andrew’s poor performance on academic teacher reports and his successful results on his MCAS assessments further clouds the discussion regarding how schools can effectively measure academic success and make decisions for struggling students when both measures hold valuable influence in the process.

Presently Andrew’s beliefs about needing grade repetition have changed,

I guess it just kind of a, well, actually, I’m glad I didn’t move on because I probably would have just missed a lot more information and probably would have just did the same thing until I did get held back. I understand it was necessary. I didn’t understand anything I learned in third grade. I wasted my time doing absolutely nothing, but I think they had to hold me back.
**Emotional impact.** About his grade repetition, emotionally Andrew stated, “It doesn’t bother me at all,” and he added that his parents no longer refer to it. Andrew recalled that he was not included in the grade repetition decision, but admitted, “There was just no way I was gonna [sic] pass.”

Mrs. Ward recalled, “His parents spoke to him first and then I spoke to him. I thought that was important.” She did not recall any outbursts or anger when she spoke with him. She spoke to him one-to-one and then introduced him to his teacher for the repeat year; this introduction was an exception made to help reduce anxiety for Andrew.

Andrew said watching his peers move on was the best thing about having to repeat the year, “Didn’t bother me. I hated all those kids.” Andrew did not interact much with the students and stated that despite this, they were mean and disrespectful towards him. Andrew said that he still did not care about school in the repeat year, but knew that he had to participate so that he would not get held back again, “I acted like I didn’t care, but deep down inside I was just scared as hell, like what would my dad say?”

After his repetition, Andrew recalled his father saying, “You get held back again and you watch out.” He worried a little bit about how his poor school performance stressed his father, “I know that would give my dad a panic attack if he realized I failed a class again.” When asked to detail situations that might have impacted his repeat year, Andrew quickly responded, “Some of my dad’s constant, constant nagging.” However, Andrew came to believe that his father’s nagging has prepared him for the real world because, “When my boss calls me out on something, I am not fazed!”

Andrew has changed, socially, educationally, and emotionally. He believed that his grade repetition caused him to learn to adapt to an unwanted change. He admitted that the
experience recently called upon him to put more effort into his schooling. He declared that his repeating is a distant memory, but one, along with the fear of his father’s reaction, that made him pay attention more, urging him to finally participate in his academic life.

**Story Seven and Eight: Twins, Jessica and Phillip**

**Contextual factors.** As twins, Jessica’s and Phillip’s histories intertwined (see Table 1); however, their interviews were conducted separately. They both attended the school district’s Vocational High School at the time of interviews. Their mother, Mrs. Pinkerton, participated in the study, along with Phillip’s fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Headler.

There are three other children in the Pinkerton family; with only four years separating all five children. There are two sets of bookend twins; Jessica and Phillip the youngest pair, a middle sister, and an older pair, also a boy and girl. Jessica and Phillip were attractive, well-groomed, and polite. They willingly supported this study and were not reticent to share their grade repetition experience; however, Jessica was more reserved than her talkative and confident brother.

All members of the Pinkerton family interviewed spoke of a tight knit group that truly enjoyed spending time together. They have a large extended family living in the community and they interact regularly. Jessica considered her twin one of her closest friends. She said, “If anything is wrong, he’ll always help me through it. He’ll stick up for me if something ever happens,” she added, “the feeling is mutual.”

Phillip shared, “Jessica and I, we got the same group of friends, almost. It’s either I’m going to hate everything I do because I am with my sister, or I’m just going to have to like, learn how to enjoy it and incorporate her into it. I love my family.”
Jessica looked to her older siblings for guidance in her decision-making and believed she would have grown into the same person whether she repeated fourth grade or not. Repetition did not have a detrimental effect on her life choices, “I would most likely be the same person regardless.”

Jessica informed, “My dad is more about working. He grew up working, so we get taught to work and clean and do all that stuff.” Phillip said their dad went to a “kind of a culinary school” and their mom studied to become a hair dresser. Mr. Pinkerton was employed as a baker/cook and Mrs. Pinkerton was a legal secretary. Their older siblings were gainfully employed, even while attending college. Additionally, Phillip worked construction and Jessica worked at a nursing/rehabilitation center while both attended vocational school. Jessica realized that her parents could not afford all their high school needs and so she happily helped wherever she could, “Once we get older, get closer to getting our license, they wanted help paying for things. So once we graduate, we’ll be paying for our cell phones bills, we pay for our car insurance, gas, pretty much everything.”

Jessica described herself as quiet and someone who likes to keep to herself. She said, “I’m not really outgoing. People are just so crazy sometimes. I don’t like the way they act.”

Phillip described himself as an energetic child, “because I have ADHD.” His parents did not put him on medication because the medicine changed the personality of his older sister who also has ADHD. Ever since he can remember Phillip has been on the go. In fact, he said that no one was surprised when he was diagnosed with ADHD. He revealed, “I kind of knew it all along.”

**Rationale for grade repetition.** Mr. and Mrs. Pinkerton suspected academic difficulties for the twins early on. Mrs. Pinkerton attributed it to the fact that they were born in early
December. In fact, if not for the prohibitive cost of pre-school, they probably would have kept the twins out of Kindergarten until the following year. Pre-school paperwork for both Jessica and Phillip indicated that they received early intervention services, but the reason was undocumented. Philip’s pre-school teacher noted that he could be aggressive at times, but was learning to seek adult help. Mrs. Pinkerton requested the pre-school monitor Phillip’s progress closely because she was concerned about his ability to perform successfully in Kindergarten; however, his pre-school transition progress report indicated he was meeting expectations in most areas, with the exceptions of working in a group, self-direction, and independence.

Phillip received occupational therapy in Kindergarten; and the twins’ Kindergarten Progress Reports indicated that they consistently met all expected benchmarks. Jessica’s grade one Progress Report indicated decline, with many academic benchmarks only being met sometimes; however by the end of grade two, Jessica was again consistently meeting grade level expectations. By the end of grade three, her district Progress Report indicated that Jessica’s growth and achievement met the grade level standard and was progressing toward the grade level standard indicators evenly in all academic areas. By the district’s standards, Jessica appeared to be making adequate yearly progress.

Phillip’s cumulative folder did not contain a district Progress Report for grade one. His second grade district Progress Report indicated Phillip was consistently and sometimes meeting grade two benchmarks. In third grade, Phillip’s tendency towards aggression was again noted. Phillip’s third grade teacher recorded that his transition into the class was bumpy. She noted he was easily distracted, had the need for consistent practice with reading and math, and was not able to remain focused on tasks to completion. His teacher recommended extra help at home,
studying for tests, and nightly reading. However, Phillip viewed himself as pretty smart and always willing to try to learn.

By the fourth grade, the school approached Mrs. Pinkerton with the idea of the twins repeating. Mrs. Pinkerton shared that the difficulties were more pronounced for Phillip than Jessi
ca. Phillip himself believed,

I think it was more based off of that I was going to struggle more and then like my mom just obviously didn’t want to separate us to the point we’re in different grades. I think she thought that would make things a lot worse, a lot harder.

Phillip added, “She thought it was probably going to be better for both of us to stay back, but I think it was more based off of me struggling than my sister struggling.” When asked if this created any conflict between the twins, Phillip responded, “No. It was never really any conflict between us.” Jessica agreed.

When talking about Jessica’s and Phillips’s educational concerns with their mother, Mrs. Pinkerton explained, “It was more social, like they’re, they were the youngest in the class, out of the whole fourth grade. They did recommend to me, not for the grade-wise, or any of that, but because of maturity-wise, to hold them back.”

The dynamic of being twins made the decision much more difficult for their mother, who said,

At one point I was thinking, ‘Oh do I let her move on and have him stay?’ And then it just . . . , towards the end of the year I had the meeting with them, because they were getting the IEPs, so like I had the end of the year meetings and all that, and that’s when I decided I would hold both of them back.
In January of grade four, Jessica was brought to TAT for weak academic performance in math and language arts. District Progress Reports showed that overall growth and achievement was not meeting the grade level standard indicators and was only progressing toward some of the grade level standard indicators throughout. Her teacher reported she was easily distracted when the work became too difficult. In addition, she had difficulty retaining information from one day to the next. As a result, Jessica received math in a small group once a week, MCAS preparation 1 to 2 times per week, and before school math help once a week. The report stated that while Jessica was working hard and persevering with tasks, “…the TAT Team recommends grade repetition if conditions stay the same and there are no significant improvements soon.” An actionable ADHD scale was provided and the mother was asked to take the results to the pediatrician. The notes identified that Jessica’s mother was also concerned because Jessica and Phillip were exhibiting academic difficulties similar to their two older siblings who had also been placed on educational plans. Mrs. Pinkerton asked to discuss grade repetition; a request which agreed with the TAT teams’ recommendation.

Mrs. Headler was Phillip’s fourth grade teacher for both experiences. She was the first person to note that Phillip had a severe reading problem. She stated that he was significantly behind his peers. Prior TAT notes from the cumulative folder mentioned reading difficulties, but not as a significant issue. Mrs. Headler stated he was, “significantly behind his peers in all areas.” While his young age influenced her analysis of Phillip’s progress, it was not the main concern discussed in her interview. However, Phillip, his mother, and his twin sister each understood the school’s recommendation was based predominantly on their age and immaturity.
Mrs. Headler believed Phillip was immature and had a learning disability. His academic picture was complicated. She raised her concerns and thoughts of grade repetition with his mother, but at the time they agreed to take a “wait and see” attitude.

Mrs. Headler, detailed to the TAT team that Phillip had good work habits and classroom stamina, but had poor planning and organizational skills. He was easily distracted, often fidgeted, was impulsive and hyperactive. She was concerned with his math and spoken language. His ability to memorize basic math facts was weak, making other mathematical operations long, tiresome, and difficult for him. Phillip also continued to exhibit difficulty formulating thoughts into complete sentences. His spelling remained stuck in the basic letter/sound phase with no automaticity, and he had trouble with fine motor tasks, such as cutting, coloring, gluing, and writing. He was also unable to copy at close range or from a distance. The task of writing was laborious and his results were often illegible and incorrect. His reading comprehension was weak and he often missed the point or meaning of a passage or story. Phillip received before school support two days a week and after school support one day a week. His teacher made audio CDs for at home practice and color coded his notebooks and folders to help him stay organized. Additionally, Phillip was given access to a study carrel to limit distractions, the last of which Phillip recalled as being helpful.

At Phillip’s follow up TAT meeting Mrs. Pinkerton reported his ADHD diagnosis to the team and they discussed that Phillip’s year end district Progress Report continued to show that he was only progressing towards some grade level standard indicators and was not meeting many others. Mrs. Headler reported that the work was difficult for him and he had not yet mastered the basic skills expected for the year. It was recommended that Phillip not move to the next grade level.
Mrs. Pinkerton said she was told,

In fourth grade the work starts getting a little harder. They felt it would be easier for them both to repeat the fourth grade. I put my trust in the teachers. I thought about it long and hard too. I spoke with my husband, and what have you. I didn’t want them going from fourth grade, to fifth grade, then to middle school. I didn’t want them to struggle. I know the work gets harder and everything else. Them being on such the young side, . . . I do regret not holding them back in Kindergarten, or holding them out until they were five. You know what I mean? Instead of sending them to school when they were four.

Faced with complicated student profiles, the twin’s teachers conferred regularly regarding their strengths, weaknesses, and similarities. By year end both agreed each twin would benefit from repeating the year. Mrs. Headler said, “I think my decision probably would’ve been different if the twin [Jessica] was higher [than she was], because I think it would’ve done more damage.” She remembered talking a great deal with her colleagues to make sure that the decision encompassed what was best for each student as individuals.

When Phillip was asked what made his parents think he might struggle in fifth grade, he spoke about his ADHD and the fact that, “I always fidgeted when I took tests, sometimes I doubted myself too much, wasted time, and didn’t perform well.” He said, “I get stuck and I can’t like do like what I want.” He continued, “My mother and teacher thought that moving on, because I was so young, they thought it would be a lot easier if I repeated. Stay almost above, like instead of starting off on the bottom, kind of start off on top.”

Analytical Commentary
**Social impact.** When Jessica thinks about the repetition decision she recalled that it was her mother’s idea. She recalled that she was not failing, but was not mature. She had a cousin who repeated and after considering the cousin’s outcomes of her repetition experience Jessica was more comfortable with her own feelings.

Phillip’s recollection,

My mom, she’s the reason why we kinda [sic] got like held back. She was like, she thought I would struggle too much more like in fifth grade at that age group. She thought that maybe I wasn’t like mentally there more than like actually like being able to go on, like physically and everything I coulda [sic] moved on, but she thought I was gonna [sic] struggle maybe too much. That this was gonna [sic] cause more stress and stuff. So we had like a big talk and like, Mrs. Headler at the time, she ah, she was like kinda [sic] being the one like, ‘You’ll have me again and so you’ll be used to what we do’ and like, things like that. So like, going in knowing that I was gonna [sic] have like, almost not like a repetitive thing, but like, I could almost feel comfortable, which was to help me more, than going into a different classroom with a teacher that I didn’t say really know.

Mrs. Headler remembered that Phillip did not present as terribly upset by the grade repetition discussion. She found it unusual that he was unemotional, but was not surprised by his overly concerned questions about who his teacher would be and what kids he would be with. However, in their home, Phillip’s mother reported he demonstrated that he was very upset by the decision and how it would affect him socially.

Mrs. Headler believed that socially, repetition helped Phillip succeed in the repeat year. She shared that Phillip’s inappropriate behaviors also decreased in year two,
He still had that energy, so he was kind of still known as that kid that didn’t sit still, but he didn’t have that reputation of getting into trouble all the time, you know what I mean? Or making poor choices. [sic] His choices in year two were definitely much better. He knew when it was time to walk away. He knew when something was getting out of hand and he needed to get out of it. Whereas that first year he would be right in the middle of that mix and he’d either be the one causing it, because he was truly frustrated. He was still in the mix in year two, but he wasn’t . . . he knew when to walk away. He knew it wasn’t right any more. That was a big difference. He was funny and had a lot of charm.

Students looked up to him, because he was kind of social. The kid that everybody wanted to hang out with.

According to Jessica, in the year following their grade repetition, the school called upon the twins to speak to a student facing his own grade repetition assignment. Jessica explained to the student, “It’s not the worst thing that could happen. It could actually help you.” Jessica related that this conversation made her feel like she was socially a part of something important and helped her form a better acceptance of her own repetition experience.

**Educational impact.** Jessica admitted, “I kind of like school. I kind of liked being able to get out of the house, not stay in one place all day.” This feeling did not change as a result of her repetition, but Jessica recalled that the second experience in fourth grade was not much different than her first. Phillip thought the two experiences were similar as well. Jessica reported, “I did most the same things,” but her view of this was positive. Phillip declared, “It didn’t feel much different. It felt just like another year of school. It didn’t change drastically or anything. It felt like sticking with the topic a little longer.”
Phillip realized that maybe the first time he didn’t live up to his potential, “So I thought maybe that’s why they got the perception of me like, struggling.” He remembered thinking that if he tried harder the second time, his performance would be better than average.

I wanted to try to be the best that there could be, because I already know some of the stuff. So I wanted to be above like, everybody else because you have that thought, I already like, went through this, so I’m going to be like, your leader almost and I’ll show you guys that I can do it better because I’ve already been through this.

Academically, the twins’ district Progress Reports indicated consistent problematic growth. Regarding life before he repeated Phillip acknowledged,

I felt that there were times when I was not picking up lessons as quick as my friends. It was like an up and down thing almost. Some things I was real good at, right off the jump. Some things took a little longer to understand and recognize and stuff.

Jessica reported having no idea she was having difficulty in school. She did not feel she was struggling with any aspect of her academics, up to and including the year she was recommended for grade repetition. She did not think of her school work in terms of complicated or easy, but now sees things differently. She realized,

As I’ve gotten older, the things you learn, I guess the more you look into something, like your perspective changes on it so many different times. So you like, ended up learning more than you actually learned the first year. Like, you’re repeating a lot of the same things, but you look at it differently.

However, she was sure to relate that she did not feel this way when she was living the experience.
Mrs. Headler said that Phillip received much one-to-one instruction in the first fourth grade experience because he could not do anything on his own. He was also an expert at avoidance. However, in the repeat year,

He didn’t need as much of that hand-holding, should I say, spoon-feeding of information. He could do a lot more on his own that he could not do the first year. That second year I felt was much easier for him. It was like a year where he could take a deep breath and go, ‘Ah. I caught up.’ The second year he still struggled, but it wasn’t as noticeable as it was the first year. The second year around, he really had a confidence in him he didn’t have the first year.

Jessica claimed her grade repetition, “kinda [sic] helped me.” She came to the realization that “Even though they told us it wasn’t our grades holding us back. I thought, maybe it was my grades, so maybe I should try harder.” Jessica said, “I just focused really on the work more the second time around than the first time.” She added,

I’m all about my grades now. I don’t know why, like I just . . . I don’t know if like, it’s my parents who always wanted us to have good grades or if it was just like, kinda [sic] impacted you. I don’t know if I saw other people getting good grades and I wanted to get good grades, but now umm, it’s just like, a thing now.”

After her repetition Jessica worried less about the social aspect of school as she had prior to repeating.

When asked if Phillip attempted to try harder after he learned about the grade repetition decision, Mrs. Headler said, “No. He kind of just stayed the same because he was that kind of kid.”
Challenges in school prompted an evaluation and both Jessica and Phillip were found eligible for an IEP with a “specific learning disability.” This decision occurred at the same time as the grade repetition decision. Their IEP plans were effective at the end of their first fourth grade year, June 11, 2007. Both were removed from special education services on June 9, 2010, the end of their sixth grade year. Phillip was subsequently placed on a 504 plan because of his ADHD diagnosis.

Jessica felt confused when the IEP was removed, “You held me back for no reason. Like you held me back to put me on an IEP, just to take me off the IEP. But I guess it kind of helped in a way that I focus more on goals now.” Phillip and Jessica agreed that they were helped by the extra support of the IEP.

Jessica had never been one to focus on her academic performance, but that changed after her grade repetition. She said she gave a good deal of thought to performing well on her MCAS assessments because, “I feel like teachers always made it seem like MCAS was this huge thing and like wicked important. You need to have a good grade on it. So I was like, oh, I need my MCAS grade to be good.” For Jessica’s yearly MCAS results see Table 3.

Table 3

*Jessica’s MCAS Results*

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<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>ELA</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>STE</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Needs Improvement</td>
<td>Needs Improvement</td>
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<td>4th</td>
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<td>5th</td>
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<td>8th</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>Needs Improvement</td>
<td>Absent - Medically Documented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Jessica’s IEP progress report in the repeat year indicated dramatically improved performance, placing her on or above grade level in many areas. However, she had not achieved accuracy levels for all of her IEP objectives and her teachers stated she required more time to succeed; this allowed for her IEP to remain in place. Jessica’s fourth grade district Progress Report in the repeat year indicated she was meeting the grade level standard indicators in almost all academic areas; however, she was still having difficulty with reading and math, and as indicated in the MCAS results in Table 3, she only performed slightly better in the repeat year.

Jessica’s progress in grade five was similar to that of her repeat year. Her math achievement was stronger, but reading and writing was still graded as progressing toward the grade level standard indicators. Her cumulative folder was void of any documents for middle school and her high school reports ranged in grades from As to Ds; however, her teachers’ consistently commented that she gave excellent effort and was a pleasure to have in class. Jessica believed that repeating the year encouraged her to become a better student and meet greater academic success in successive school years.

Phillip’s first fourth grade IEP progress report indicated at or slightly below grade level in all areas tested. The IEP stated teachers should clarify tasks and focus Phillip on directions. The report indicated he learned best by listening, was anxious to please, and affectionate. The report concluded, “Phillip requires more time to achieve success with his goals.”
The district Progress Report for Phillip’s repeat year was similar to his first year, in terms of student performance levels. Even though his overall growth and achievement did not change much, by the end of the year Mrs. Headler commented,

I am very pleased with Phillip’s progress. He has made a remarkable improvement both socially and academically this year. He has put forth a great deal of effort and with such determination. He seems more interested in school now and is better able to apply himself in scholastic situations. Phillip is rapidly acquiring self-discipline and is beginning to apply himself well in the classroom. I am sure he will continue to do well in fifth grade.

Phillip’s improved progress results seem to be subjective in nature and based primarily on his social and emotional progress as his academic achievement indicated insignificant gains. Obtained cumulative records depict state mandated assessment scores (Table 4) with slight improvement from Phillip’s first time in fourth grade, but his teacher’s comments portray much greater progress and scholastic achievement. Additionally, social concerns continued to be documented in his school records in post repetition years.

Table 4

*Phillip’s MCAS Results*

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<th>Grade</th>
<th>ELA</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>STE</th>
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<td>6th</td>
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Phillip’s fifth grade district Progress Report indicated academic improvement. He earned twice the amount of meets the grade level standard indicators as progressing toward the grade level standard indicators. This was the exact opposite from his repeat year. His fifth grade teacher documented that, “Phillip is a hard-working student who always wants to please and help everyone around him. Phillip has matured into a responsible and caring young boy.” His fifth grade IEP progress report documented his progress continued to be impeded by his reading comprehension and written language difficulties, as well as his impulsivity, “but he works to correct errors caused by this impulsivity.” His benchmark objectives were consistent with his prior report and it was recommended he be given more time to achieve success.

Phillip’s improved academic growth is typical of that seen in the year immediately post repetition. However, his academic progress in the years thereafter, indicated that he continued to struggle. His grades were average and below and his behavioral issues did not disappear. As reported in eighth grade, Phillip was involved in two incidents that required discipline. He received a four day, out of school suspension for inappropriate behavior and a two day, in-school suspension for “expectorating into a teacher’s soda can.”

In ninth grade Phillip was placed on a 504 plan, because his IEP was discontinued in grade six. His grades at this time were average and above. His teacher comments echoed those made while in elementary school, “Phillip has the ability to do better, he works to complete all
Phillip’s academics and behaviors improved when he was invested in the moment.”

Phillip did well with his repeat teacher because they had developed a mutual trust and he became empowered by her teaching strategies. When Phillip reached high school he enrolled in the vocational school, a choice he made because he was invested. He was therefore able to successfully meet the expectations set before him.

It became clear in the data that struggling academics, along with an early birthdate, attributed to the twins need for grade repetition, yet the twins had to come to this conclusion on their own.

**Emotional impact.** Phillip shared, “The thing that scared me most was the unknown. I felt as if everything I knew was about to change. It brought a feeling of, ‘Oh, I’m the new kid now, but I didn’t even move!”’ Phillip soon found out that his fears were unfounded.

At first Jessica was upset with having to repeat fourth grade. She described how the twins’ two teachers told them they would not be promoted to the fifth grade. Jessica said her parents were not present and that her mom and dad had not told either of them about the decision ahead of time. Mrs. Pinkerton remembered talking to the twins about the decision beforehand. She recalled, “It happened at home. We told them at home.” However, Jessica’s recollection was one of surprise when her teacher asked her to meet. She was shocked and kind of confused when she entered the computer lab and saw her brother sitting there. She remembered, “I don’t know, I had a feeling of, ‘What are they gonna [sic] talk to us about?’ Then they just kind of told us.”

Phillip’s recollection of the announcement was different. He remembered sitting down with his mom, his sister, and his teacher to receive the news. He said the decision was mutual
between his mother and the school. Regardless, the memories do not match between the twins, their mother, and Philip’s teacher.

As Mrs. Headler recalled, “We both emphasized the fact that Phillip was born in December and if he was in any other school system, he would not have been in fourth grade.” We said, “It’s not fair to you because you would’ve been placed a year behind.” The conversation focused on Phillip’s age and not his academic struggles, giving Phillip a false sense of his true academic ability. He commented that the way the teacher framed the conversation made it easy for him to accept. He was told, “It’s going to help you out in the long run. If you move on, you will struggle too much.” He understood that it would create more stress if he didn’t stay back. Mrs. Headler added, “Now that he’s older, he knows the truth;” however, based on Phillip’s interview responses, it was evident that he understood his age was the sole basis for his repetition decision.

Contrary to Phillip’s experience, Jessica stated, “It was this huge thing that could potentially affect your life. You’re just more shocked at the fact that you have to repeat another year.” Jessica had never anticipated that a grade repetition was a possibility for her. She definitely expressed her confusion. Before the repeat year Jessica thought it would be a big change because, “You don’t actually understand what’s fully going on. I was so young.” She said she wondered,

Why do we have to stay back? They were saying like, you’re not failing which is keeping you back. You literally just told us that our grades are fine and we didn’t have [emphasis added] to stay back, so why are you doing it?

Her drawn conclusion was, “It’s just your mother thinks it will help.”
Regarding the actual transition Jessica stated, “I just didn’t really think about it. Maybe I didn’t think about it on purpose. Maybe I just didn’t want to think about it.” She remembered walking into school on the first day of her repeat year thinking, “Wow, I have to repeat the same grade. Like, I just did this all last year. As the year went on though, I was like, it wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be.” Despite the fact that it was a shock to her when it first occurred, Jessica related that she does not feel the grade repetition affected her life in a detrimental way. Jessica claimed that in the end she was not affected by the loss of her friends and her new friends did not even know she was repeating. She said, “It never came up in conversation.”

Phillip admitted that at first he, “. . . was a little sore about it.” He did not want to repeat because he feared his peers would make comments like, “You’re the kid that stayed back.” He was scared because he did not want to experience too much change. He said, Losing people is what upset me, but I was thinking to myself like, ‘Maybe it won’t be that bad.’ Overtime I was like, even just in that year of repeated fourth grade, I just felt like back to normal, almost. Like, everything was back normal.

Mrs. Pinkerton shared that after their initial cold treatment towards her had subsided, there was a noticeable difference in the twins’ behaviors during the repeat year. They were no longer the two youngest in the class, “Not that that has anything to really do with it, but they were like, the two oldest. They were where they should be, with kids their age.” She felt the twins had slowly come to accept the decision over time and were able to move on.

Upon reflection of the grade repetition experience Phillip shared,

I know now looking back at it, as a senior, I know it really did benefit me. Because like now I am graduating at eighteen, you know. I’m old enough to do things like almost by
myself. You’re almost a little more free [at] eighteen. If I graduated at seventeen, I still got [sic] to wait a whole year before I can do things by myself.

The twins expressed the largest degree of positive turn-around from their initial upset over the repetition placement to acceptance of it as a necessary component of their lives.

Composite Themes

Analysis of student, parent, and teacher stories uncovered many similar themes in grade repetition experiences, both supporting and contradicting the long held grade repetition beliefs reviewed in chapter two. Details of personal interactions were analyzed for internal conditions, feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions as they related to having repeated an elementary grade. Analysis also considered the outward signs and appearances of the participants through an examination of their life experiences by focusing on identifying educational, social, and emotional protective factors. Although the participants might not have readily recognized the impact themselves, the grade repetition experience did impact their social, emotional, and educational lives. For several it was clearly evident at the time of their repetition, for others the impact was far removed or of a more incidental nature. The reality is that each of these eight lives had multiple layers of experiences happening simultaneously with their grade repetition experience and while they might not have been able to articulate the impact, data analysis was able to draw similar conclusions. Additionally, by identifying specific characteristics observed in these participants, the study may uncover methods to enable educators to more accurately predict positive results for future grade repeaters. Table 5 offers an overview of the discovered composite themes from the analyzed data.

Table 5

Composite Themes
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Social uncertainties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Stress to succeed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Feelings of self-consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Desire for control</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Opportunity and acceptance</td>
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</table>

**Composite theme 1: Social uncertainties.** The interpersonal relationships the participants developed with peers, parents, and/or teachers proved to be important to their overall sense of developmental success. When faced with the challenges brought on by their grade repetition, most participants referred to positive human interactions or relationships that had been modeled, nurtured, or offered, as resources that eventually helped them move forward. Therefore, one must look deeply into the complexities of personal relationships to learn how social life experiences may have been affected by the grade repetition decision. Analysis of each of the participants’ stories illustrated varying degrees of uncertainty brought on by the removal of or change to their individual human interactions and relationship situations.

For all grade repeaters, the repeat year means leaving behind relationships formed outside of the home (either peer or teacher). Experiencing this public event presented uncertainties and challenges for each of the study participants. Several participants expressed their fears associated with not knowing what lie ahead, not making new friends, or having to explain to others why they did not progress to the next grade. As individuals the data showed that each of the eight grade repetition participants experienced their social uncertainties differently, and while uncertainties existed for all, the individual degree of time spent concerned about this change in their life varied in length and intensity. All eight participants discussed some form of negative social ramification or self-doubt regarding this decision as their life progressed and they either
explicitly or inferentially referred to the manner in which future social beliefs and/or decisions played out as a result of repeating a grade.

**Social uncertainty with peers.** While the initial discovery of their grade repetition came with questions, concerns, upset, or fear of the unknown for each of the eight participants; it led to comfort a few. For Sarah, Andrew, and George, after living with their repetition experience for a while, they eventually came to believe that the changes it brought and the new group of peers they met, actually played a part in making them feel slightly more comfortable in their post repetition social situations.

Andrew did not come to this realization until he reached the fourth grade (two years after his repetition), and for Sarah and George, they expressed that the realization came only after reflecting on their experience as they matured. Despite the varying degree of uncertainty, these three experienced a more or less affirmative view of their grade repetition as it related to their social relationships, not immediately, but more closely to the time the repetition placement occurred. The other five participants took much longer to find any positive benefit in their feelings of social insecurity.

For Sarah and Andrew making friends eventually became a more positive experience after their grade repetition because both spoke to the fact that they had difficulty making friends in school before they repeated. For them, some of their grade repetition uncertainties stemmed from the fear that this challenge might continue into their repeat year. For Andrew, his repeat year did not change his peer relationship status, but the year following his repetition did bring greater success in this regard.

One can sense Sarah’s social uncertainties as reflected in her comments. She spoke to her sense of immaturity and possibly that the knowledge of her background kept friends away.
She said, “The bonds weren’t forming. I felt that I was just, like, they knew I was probably adopted or what not.” Sarah admitted that she often wonders if she had remained with the first cohort of friends, would she have developed the wonderful relationships she has maintained to this day. She distinctly recalled feeling insecure in the first year, but could not attribute this feeling to any one overriding factor. She also shared that currently she is not forthcoming with the fact that she repeated first grade. She worries, “people are going to immediately think I’m stupid.” In her interviews, Sarah expressed concern over having to explain why she was older than her peers. However, for the most part Sarah believed, “Yeah, I think that I’m happy that I stayed back. It’s not like I’m a whole year above all of my girlfriends. I just turn that age first.”

Andrew found his classmates in his first third grade class were “rude” and more or less ignored him. He was happy to leave them behind. Andrew shared, “They [peers] were mean and disrespectful towards me.” He said, “I tried to be friends with them, but they mocked me by repeating the things I would say.” Mrs. Ward, Andrew’s teacher, also noted Andrew’s difficulty with peers. She stressed that atypical behaviors were a challenge for Andrew. She said, “Children noticed and would not interact with him, but Andrew did not seem to be aware.” However, it became evident through Andrew’s interview responses that he was well aware of the social neglect aimed at him from his peers and teachers before and during his repetition years. Therefore, because Andrew felt his peers were unkind and the fact that he had not developed any strong bonds, the removal of these people in Andrew’s life was an expressed affirmative grade repetition outcome.

It was not until the fourth grade that Andrew made a conscious decision to actively become more involved in his social environment. After completing an assigned class presentation, Andrew realized that humor was a way to make friends. When this effort was met
with success Andrew expressed an improved social outlook on his life. He recalled, “Actually, I distinctly remember in fourth grade I sort of . . . That’s an extremely significant time in my life because that’s when I started having friends and the teacher, I guess she cared about me and I started talking with the class.” He related that his lack of academic effort in school had been affected by his poor peer relationships. He said, “I think that’s really part of . . . if you’re depressed, you’re not going to do well in school. I was pretty sad in third grade. Yeah, I just felt isolated.”

Andrew’s narrative details indicated that while his social experiences improved two years after his repetition; he presently experiences social uncertainties similar to his past. He shared, “My life, friend-wise, is still a little insecure. It feels like, in any second, they’ll just be gone.” As he explained it, this sustained sense of insecurity makes him,

Try to appease my friends, and do what I have to do, or sweep things under the rug to maintain friendships. Actually, I guess I do have this nagging feeling that I don’t want to end up like, alone, back like how it used to be, because before it was annoying, kind of slow.

George, as an outlier in this study, did recognize experiences with social uncertainty in his life; however, he held on to the most consistently positive view of his grade repetition experience and had the least degree of uncertainties overall. In his first Kindergarten class George felt he had not had the time to develop strong bonds, therefore, he had little to miss once those peers moved. He stated that his repetition found him feeling more socially secure and better prepared to meet the academic demands of school in his second Kindergarten experience. However, he also admitted that if his school had not been relocating at the time he repeated, his feelings about the grade repetition situation may have been less positive. Additionally, George
expressed some doubts as to the reason behind his repetition decision. He said at times he wondered, “If something was wrong with me,” but reflections on his successes in school made him draw the conclusion that he had not repeated for any reason other than his young age.

Ven is a participant who also found his peer social relationships change after he repeated. However, his details in this regard are often contradictory. His discussion at one point revolved around being distracted by friendships and that in his repeat year he became somewhat of a bully. The grade repetition decision clearly disturbed Ven and he reported conflicting stories about the changes to his friendships. He first related that it was hard to say goodbye to his friends, but then said he was happy to be removed from them. He shared that losing friends made him like school more, because when he got to the new school he loved it, “It was like the party school.” He said his new friends and teachers were so kind; however later he stated that he hated school and his repeat year was “hell.”

Further into his interviews Ven reflected that his repetition took him off the disreputable path he may have chosen had he remained friendly with his neighborhood, first cohort of peers. As he explained it, his friendships were, “... an obstacle to learning. Without these friends, the obstacle no longer existed, and I liked it [school].” This realization, however, was not always consistent with the other feelings Ven shared about school. He admitted that he presently does not have many friends because, “I gave up the idea of friends as a source of normality.” For Ven, the normal social interaction of friendships, “takes too much effort and it wasn’t making me feel good--in fact it was making me feel worse.” He opined,

They [friends] don’t matter to me. I didn’t want to believe it and then I thought alternately, maybe they don’t care about me and that’s when it broke my heart and I tried to avoid them, and even when we hanged [sic] out I was always sad. Just beat down.
Ven revealed many mixed emotions relating to forming social relationships that contradict the reality of the manner in which he worked intensely to try to fit sociality into his idea of what a relationship should entail and how in the end, he “happily” related to repeating a year of school.

Andrew’s and Ven’s social views differ from the rest of the participants because both explicitly, although with differing specific reasons, discussed feeling glad to leave behind their first peer relationships. As Ven remembered, the more friends he made, the more his grades declined, and a decline in one class led to a decline in others. This combination led Ven to procrastinate, which further complicated his academic difficulties; giving Ven yet one more reason to pull away from his relationships. Andrew’s experience was the opposite. He found that the more friends he had, the better he felt about school, the more he was able to focus on his academics, and the better his scholastic improvements. However, the uncertainty centered on social relationships is clearly evident in these participants’ peer relational data.

Analysis uncovered that for five of the participants’ their repeat year and social interactions were deeply complicated by the uncertainties created by the fear of peer loss and their developing sense of community. For Aaron, Elizabeth, Phillip, Jessica, and even Ven—who was consistently conflicted in his view of the decision and his relationships—the grade repetition decision changed their social relationships and associated behaviors. The shared stories of these five participants also detailed that it took a long time for them to overcome the accompanied social uncertainties associated with repeating a year of school.

Elizabeth detailed that her repetition was compounded by the fact that she had already lived through many unsettling moves and transitions in her young life. Making friends had never been easy for Elizabeth and the year she repeated second grade was especially upsetting because she had finally started to feel a connection to her peers. She said,
Like I was always kind of shy and at the same time I was always mad because I saw all my friends move on, I was just like, ‘Oh, I had to stay back.’ You know, I was just like . . . I felt bad.

This uncertainty remains evident in Elizabeth’s life as she stated that she avoids making new friends, “I still do until this day.”

Aaron, Phillip, and Jessica individually expressed serious concerns about having their friends leave them behind. For them the social/emotional impact was significant, as noted in their individual conversations, as well as in the socially related comments from the twin’s mother.

As detailed previously, Aaron lied to his peers about the decision. Several post repetition school reports, Aaron’s repeat teacher, and Aaron himself expressed concern with “fitting in” after repeating the grade. Analysis revealed his social difficulties through repeated teacher reports, with one specifically stating, “Aaron does not always make the most appropriate friend choices.” Mrs. Egitto, his repeat teacher, detailed, “He was rather shy and withdrawn. He was just uncomfortable with these little kids. His new social bonds took a long time to cultivate.” Aaron himself said, “Making new friends was like, hard. I was always the sad person.” His social discomfort was further evident in this statement, “I had went [sic] to school with them since kindergarten. It was hard to leave them and make new friends. Once they got into fourth grade, most of them didn’t talk to me.”

Jessica admitted she too did not want to leave her friendships because, “When meeting new people, I get really awkward at first and my face turns like, really red and after I was left back, I was more awkward I guess because I didn’t know any of the people.” Phillip, the participant most fixated and worried by the uncertainty of personal friendship loss, recalled that
his first question was, “Is it going to like affect my friends that moved on and stuff?” His relational concerns focused on,

When we sat down my biggest thing was losing my best friends. I was like mad. I guess upset and I guess, almost scared. I didn’t want to lose anybody. I didn’t want to try to meet new friends. The thought of change and losing people, it’s what upset me.

Phillip repeated feeling, “a little sore about it,” because for him the initial decision was laden with the uncertainties surrounding his friendships: where and when he could see them and how often. From his mother’s reports, Phillip saved most of his anger about the social aspect of decision for home.

Phillip’s social fears continued well into the repeat school year. Mrs. Headler, his repeat teacher, shared, “This makes sense because he was a very social student,” and despite the fact that Phillip was the more social twin, his teacher said, “It took him many [emphasis added] months into the new school year to realize that he had to make the effort to become friends with the new kids.”

**Social uncertainty with family.** Family relationships were important to these participants as individuals and the uncertainties brought on by the grade repetition created a fear of the unknown, even at home. For several, this led to less than positive changes in the familial relationships, even if only for a short while. Each participant had put their trust in their family to watch out for him/her. This initially unexpected and unwanted decision created a sense of self-doubt and uncertainty, both in their academic abilities and in the protection they expected from their family relationships.

Ven, Elizabeth, Aaron, Andrew, and Mrs. Pinkerton, (the twins’ mother), each related that the family relationship experienced a noticeable strain as a result. For Ven, Aaron, and
Andrew, this strain lasted well beyond the repeat year. In addition, initially for Elizabeth, Aaron, Ven, Phillip, and Jessica, there was a sense of helplessness when discussing their feelings toward their parents in relation to this decision. Elizabeth’s sentiment, expressed as well by others, said it best, “Well, I can’t make the decisions.”

Elizabeth was angry with both her parents and her teacher because,

I was just like, ‘God, I can’t believe you [emphasis added] made me stay.’ I just wanted to move up. I’m like, because I was already nine, ‘I’m going to be so old when I graduate.’ I was just so mad. They didn’t listen and, yeah, I really wasn’t getting any help.

Elizabeth discussed her fear that she would be in trouble with her parents if or when she failed in school. She constantly worried her dad would make her review lessons over and over until she got them correct. What Elizabeth considered as her father’s overbearing, watchful eye, created a constant source of anxiety and uncertainty, even now while in high school. She worried each quarter that any negative report will emit a punishment from her parents.

Aaron’s parental relationship experienced uncertainties in a variety of manners. He admitted that after his grade repetition he started coming home late and his mother spent a good deal of time angry with him. Each year the uncertainty of his mother’s reaction to his Progress Reports caused him to keep them hidden from her. He said that sometimes when she found out she grounded him or “would take away stuff,” and with that, “She usually gave me lectures. I didn’t like the lectures because it showed that she was disappointed.” The uncertainty of his mother’s possible reactions and the fact that his behaviors disappointed her was also upsetting to Aaron, but at the time this was not enough for him to change his outlook or behavioral responses.
With the passage of time, Elizabeth, Aaron, and the twins were able to overcome the strain on their family relationship. However, for Ven and Andrew the familial strain of the grade repetition was reported throughout their interviews; although for them the grade repetition was one among many factors in the familial relational dynamics.

Ven shared, often conflicting, stories that detailed his uncertainties when it came to relationships with his peers, teachers, and parents. However, the most contentious and unsure relationship Ven discussed was that with his mother, which was a recurrent theme in Ven’s narrative. From the outset, Ven described his relationship with his mother as strained, but that it was made more complicated after the grade repetition decision. Until recently, Ven said he resented his mother for the decision. His uncertainties were expressed,

I felt, really almost like a sense of confusion. Then there was a lot of feelings of betrayal and then there’s a lot of feelings of anger towards my mother. I was more mad than sad. Even after a long time passed, I didn’t want to give up hope that I could go back to my original year. But I kept on being mad about it, kept on brooding over it. It affected how I acted, but I wanted to still behave that way. That’s mostly what I felt, just a whole bunch of anger.

Ven declared that he became hateful in his relationships towards both his mother and the school for a brief period of time. Ven felt betrayed by the extremely unexpected outcome of having to repeat a grade. It was especially surprising to him because he felt he had developed a good relationship with the teachers at his new school. Ven was not the only participant to be surprised by the grade repetition decision, as both Elizabeth and Jessica expressed a similar element of deep surprise when they were informed, thus adding to an uncertain sense of self for each.
Andrew’s grade repetition definitely placed a burden on his relationship with his father. He remembered being afraid because he thought his dad might hit him, “even though my family did not use corporal punishment.” Andrew lived in the uncertainty of his father’s reaction if he failed again. In fact, Andrew recently lied to his father when he needed payment for summer school, telling his father the fee was for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

Andrew recounted that his father’s reaction to the repetition was to become stricter,

I just remembered this one time, I was in a car ride and my dad was just yelling and wailing at me because I was getting held back. It did put a lot of strain on my dad and despite his nagging my grades did not improve.

Andrew’s father warned him, “You better watch out next time so you don’t get held back.”

Andrew said his father would not let him live it down, “… because you know … Asian parents. Education is super important. He [Andrew’s dad] couldn’t get an education as a kid, so this is why he moved to America, so we could get an education. He’s doing this all for us.” Andrew said he now comprehends the push from his father and has learned to appreciate it, but struggled alone for most of his formative educational years.

The twin’s mother, Mrs. Pinkerton, recalled that at home there were many tears over the loss of friendships after the repetition decision. As a result Mrs. Pinkerton disclosed her relationship with the twins changed, “Honestly, it was the best thing I did, but it killed me to do it, because I felt bad, like they drove me crazy for the first, I’d say four months of school in the repeat year.” She believed that because their social future seemed uncertain, “It was very hard for them to adjust.” She distinctly remembered the twins giving her the cold shoulder, mentioning the fact that, “she held them back” at least once a day the entire time they processed the repetition decision and then again when the actual experience began. These specific details
were noticeably absent in each of the twins’ discussions regarding their reaction to the decision; however Mrs. Pinkerton distinctly detailed that the first day of the repeat year was awful, “They had each class line up with each grade, and they seen [sic] all their friends going one way and they had to go another. It was hard for all of us.”

Losing friend relationships was a main theme of uncertainty for the Pinkerton family that had a negative effect on their family relationships. Contemplating the decision for the twins as individuals was particularly problematic for Mrs. Pinkerton. She knew how important the social relationship aspect of school--maintaining their friendships and staying together as twins, was to each child. She revealed,

I felt bad because I’m taking them away from . . . I know it’s just not friends, but school’s school, that’s where you meet friends and everything. To pull them out of their normal environment. It was probably one of the most difficult things I ever had to make up my mind on.

This family worked through the uncertainties and the twins eventually came to agree with their mother that grade repetition was the right choice for them.

**Composite theme 2: Stress to succeed.** All participants discussed that their grade repetition placement included elements of stress. Repeating a grade was at first considered an adverse circumstance and created a state of mental or emotional strain or tension. For most it was expressed as an inherent sense of pressure to improve their actions in school. As stressors presented themselves in discussions or data, participants’ stories exposed the manner in which their repetition had an effect on their life experience.

**Academic stress.** George viewed his grade repetition as just another expected transition. His grade repetition profile had the least presentation of educational challenges; he progressed
with a very successful educational record and did not experience severe emotional issues as a result of repeating. However, the details in George’s dialogue surrounding his desire to succeed exhibited signs of pressure, or strain, to perform with excellence. At one point he mentioned, 

I would just go home, focus on my school work, and try to get straight As. It started to become more apparent because I was starting to get a lot more stressed with school and the work load. I kind of had a little bit of a break down and I finally noticed what was going on with my social life.

George did not refer to the grade repetition as stressful, but his expressed self-doubts hint at an element of stress related to repeating. He admitted that he became introverted in the repeat year and that as he aged he spent less and less time with his peers outside of school. George detailed how he shied away from outside social situations so that he could spend his free time studying. He also expressed wondering if his grade repetition was a consequence of having done something wrong or if he “wasn’t as good as everyone else that moved on.” It wasn’t until much later in elementary school that he even realized he had repeated a grade, but his doubts were evident in these comments, “I guess I felt like, why did I repeat? Was it something that was wrong with me or was it something that I did?” Regardless, George said he now completely supports his parents’ decision, “I wasn’t worse off because of it and I think I realized that I was better off because of it. Because of that, it seemed like a positive thing, not a negative thing.”

George explained that when his parents do speak about his grade repetition they always reference his young age as their reason for the request. His consistent successes in school, despite his brief moments of self-doubt or self-induced stress to succeed, enabled George to accept that as true.

All eight participants shared experiences typical of the pressures or tensions most children relate with school; getting good grades, fitting in, developing friendships, studying for
tests, and making successful transitions. However, in the cases of Elizabeth, Aaron, and Andrew, each agonized over the fact that their performance in school might receive punishment from their parents, if or when they failed and each consistently worried they might be asked to repeat again.

Elizabeth was well aware of the struggles she had learning English and often wished the EL support happened much earlier in her educational career. Her desire to succeed was strong and she recalled requesting a tutor, as well as spending her free time reading and practicing math facts on her own at home. When her grades did not show the expected progress, she developed a sense of frustration and “gave up,” explaining, “I think that was because no one helped me.”

Elizabeth related that her parents wanted more for her future and that this added extra stress to succeed as well,

My parents are really big on school and education because I’m the first generation that’s going to go to college. They were expecting a lot from me. My parents didn’t get the opportunity to have an education like I did. They feel like I should really take advantage of those opportunities because they didn’t get to go to school. They started working at a young age and they just want me to be someone, but also to have experience of my own and for them like, to be proud of, because they don’t ever want to see me go through what they’ve been through.

The lack of consistent and effective at home support for Elizabeth, Aaron, and Andrew added a sense of stress to their already challenged academics. Aaron had the extra added stress of living in a fatherless household and his self-inflicted pressure to “do it all on his own” got in the way of his asking for help in elementary school.
Andrew felt the stress of disappointment from his father when he repeated a grade. He explained that this was because his father wanted more in life for Andrew. Both Elizabeth’s and Andrew’s parents sacrificed leaving their home country, their child’s first known home, family, language, and culture in order to provide what they believed would be a better life for their children. It was only as Andrew and Elizabeth matured that they took greater control of their educational actions to better ensure the hard work needed to see their parents’ dreams come true.

Phillip recalled often talking to his teacher about the strains he felt in relation to his grade repetition. Mrs. Headler helped to soothe his anxiety and his stress about the unknown. She counseled him, offered social and educational strategies, and effective learning opportunities that set him up to succeed, thereby helping to relieve the fear and stress brought on by the decision. Phillip revealed that now he rarely has to confront the stress he experienced at the time of his repetition, but when it is occasionally comes up he informed others that, “My mother felt it was best for me to repeat the year.” Phillip can now share, “It’s not like it’s a big deal or anything.”

**Social/emotional stress.** Both Ven and Sarah experienced a major feeling of social stress they equated with their repetition experience. Sarah categorized that her individual repetition decision was based on the fact that she was immature. She admitted that her college experience was made more difficult because of this long-held belief. She recalled that making it to class and balancing her life was stressful. She shared that during a graduate level course,

I also remember being upset because there was something I didn’t know and this is just my own insecurities, and I’m like, I didn’t want to be taught by the math majors since they were like peers. And I remember really getting upset and feeling stressed, but then looking back and being like, this is ridiculous. I remember being like anxious, like, it was just like, we had like to take tests, which I hadn’t in years. And I was thinking like,
maybe I always was trying to prove myself, ‘I’m not dumb and maybe that is related to staying back?’ Or maybe that’s just my personality trait, like gotta [sic] prove to the world that I’m not dumb.

For Ven it was bullying that created his social stress. At the time of his grade repetition Ven remembered dealing with the stress, “by fighting” or bullying his younger peers. He believed, “My stress was relieved through fighting, just accepting that I was too lazy to actually put in the work to go back up a year, because it was a lot easier.” He recalled that the first year in third grade was “heaven” and the second year was a “bully-fest.” He confessed that the bullying also added a dimension of depression, “In my eyes the world became physically darker. Everything, the lighting was always bad. Everything was terrible.” Ven remembered some kids trying to give him a helping hand, but he doubted their intentions, thinking they were like the bullies of his past and found it difficult to trust them.

For Ven the stress was palpable, “I used to hate it when I thought everyone was out to get me.” When directly asked if failure created unwanted stress, Ven replied, “Not at all. Stress makes things more difficult, but is unnecessary.” However, Ven distinctly expressed the stress he experienced in making and keeping friendships. He concluded that it was better not to bother with relationships and to continue to fear them. For Ven it was a matter of too much work and not wanting to put in the effort, an example of his self-proclaimed laziness. However, it was ironic that Ven expended great effort to avoid what he considered the stress of having to maintain relationships, yet much of his dialogue addressed troublesome relationships and the negative feelings of pressure they conjured up for him.

At one time or another, some element of stress existed for all participants surrounding the time they repeated. Whether it was caused by having to face the decision, their parents, friends,
or their abilities; even if it was slight, tension was present. Seven of the participants expressed that they felt the most stress when dealing with the fear of the unknown related to the grade repetition. It affected them socially, emotionally, and educationally. In fact, when analyzing the collected data, seven of the eight participants detailed that the repeat year offered little to no additional supports for their social and emotional needs; the most affected area in their minds. Only Phillip directly discussed the manner in which his social and emotional needs were accommodated in his repeat year. However, all participants felt that any stressful impact brought on by the grade repetition eventually diminished with time. As depicted, the time it took to accept this decision varied for each individual participant, and for all but Ven, it eventually led to a stronger desire to succeed academically and socially in their individual educational futures.

**Composite theme 3: Feelings of self-consciousness.** Each participant expressed a sense of personal discomfort, self-consciousness, or embarrassment when they thought about not being promoted to the next grade level with their peers. In this study participants used terms such as, “left back,” “held back,” “stayed back,” “making me stay,” “didn’t pass,” or “retained” when discussing their experience. Aaron more specifically referred to his grade repetition in sporting terms as being “cut back.” Elizabeth said, “Staying back . . . I felt bad.” Of repeating second grade, Ven said, “Getting held back, I was hateful. I was, I yeah, I hated it, hated the idea,” and it wasn’t until Ven reached his sophomore year in high school that he gave up on the notion of moving back to his first cohort of peers. Ven now believed that the school should work with repeated students, “Not just to succeed and do well, but to actually get back.” Ven believed that it is important for a child to discuss and to know the reason they were made to repeat, “. . . because it may help them change their opinion.” This advice seemed contrary to much of Ven’s
data because he admittedly detailed that when he was encouraged to speak about his repetition with his counselor he purposefully avoided the issue and played tricks.

Being “held back” was implicit in several of George’s comments. He communicated, “I did not really understand that it was a repeat kind of thing. It wasn’t like going back and doing the same thing,” and “It wasn’t cause [sic] I wasn’t prepared or I wasn’t, I guess intellectually smart enough.” George admitted that if he had repeated in the same school, without the transition to a new building, he might have viewed his repetition very differently.

Participants Elizabeth, Aaron, Sarah, Jessica, Phillip, and Andrew specifically addressed negative sentiments in their dialogues. For Elizabeth, when the grade repetition was assigned, she remembered feeling distraught that she would be two years older than her grade level peers and was open about the embarrassment she felt regarding her grade repetition, “I was really upset. I think I did cry.” She worried that her peers would think, “Oh, you’re not smart enough to go to the next grade” and she shared that, “They look at you the wrong way.”

Aaron admitted to being embarrassed, self-conscious, and anxious about how others viewed him, especially around the issue of his grade repetition. Aaron revealed,

I feel like you shouldn’t . . . I don’t know how to put it. I was afraid. I was scared what other people were going to think. I shouldn’t base my feelings off of that. I should go off what I think, and stuff. That is what I think now, but back then I didn’t think like that.

I was more embarrassed that I had to repeat the year. I didn’t want my friends to know. Records indicated that, “Aaron has a low self-esteem and is unsure of himself-academically and socially.” Aaron remembered, “Yeah, some of the kids, they graduated last year. They knew me and stuff. They went, ‘Oh, you’re supposed to be graduating.’ That made me feel bad.”
Sarah, Elizabeth, Aaron, and Andrew each expressed feeling “dumb” because they had to repeat a grade. They worried that peers, teachers, and family members viewed them as not smart enough to be promoted. Sarah initially reported feelings of inadequacy brought on by the repetition. She said her parents informed her, “They said I wasn’t ready.” Later she remembered thinking, “This is fine. I have friends, I’m glad I stayed back. Everything worked out great.” Still, she experiences momentary feelings of discomfort, self-consciousness, and insecurity when the grade repetition experience is raised. She conceded, “They’re going to immediately think I’m stupid, but I know that I’m not. I know my case is different because I know that I was adopted, and yeah, I had to stay back because I was a lot younger.”

Elizabeth detailed how her inability to speak English made her uncomfortable and self-conscious in public situations; a fear and insecurity that continue to exist today. She added that her ability to communicate in either English or Spanish was a constant challenge. She expressed that she often felt alone, even in her own family, because she could not be a successful in conversations. She appeared angry when she shared a story about community members staring at her and her family when they went grocery shopping because they were speaking Spanish. At the time Elizabeth remembered thinking, “Are they like talking about me or what?” In another story she detailed her embarrassment over misusing the word ‘boyfriend’ to describe a boy who was her friend. She recalled feeling confused and embarrassed when her classmates commented, “Ew, you have a boyfriend!”

Aaron had a constant worry that, “If I raised my hand or ask for help on a simple question, I’d get made fun of. I still to this day, I still don’t like raising my hand a lot.” Sarah, Elizabeth, and Andrew expressed this same self-consciousness about public performance or class participation.
Andrew declared, “I’m not all that smart. I was never really an ‘A’ kid. Never really strived for achievement, just kind of did the work, just moved on.” When Andrew was in fourth grade his teacher implemented an incentive program. He remembered that whenever a student answered a question he/she got a sticker. He related, “I would see these kids, get like, their seventh or eighth and I’m still on my first one and I thought I was dumb for that.”

During the interviews, Jessica referred to her repeat experience as “being left back” and Phillip referred to it as they, “held us back.” Phillip and Jessica were told by their teachers and parents that they had the intellectual ability to move forward. However, upon reflection this didn’t seem right. Each wondered if they were told the truth because they doubted they would be made to repeat if they possessed strong academic abilities. To combat their self-consciousness about repeating fourth grade, the twins each said they tried harder in school, but both mentioned that the change of heart came only after they had come to accept the repetition decision.

These students’ life factors surely played a significant role in their social, emotional, and educational self-image and life trajectories. For these participants, overcoming these unwanted feelings of self-consciousness eventually led them to develop a stronger desire to prove they could find some degree of success in school.

**Composite theme 4: Desire for control.** Six of the participants discussed wishing they had some sense of control during their grade repetition experience. Sarah admitted that she never really felt comfortable talking to her parents about the grade repetition decision because, “I knew the decision’s already been made anyways, so it doesn’t matter.” This inability to control the situation connected to her expressed feelings of self-doubt as she struggled in her academic development throughout school. However, Sarah reported taking control during her graduate work by earning several As; yet her comment, “I knew all along that I could do it,” hinted at the
degree of self-doubt she possessed. She was not sure she could do it, but was elated when she took control and proved to herself that she could do it. As a teacher in my school, this researcher observed Sarah, develop into a proud graduate, successfully employed, and a caring and empathetic teacher, either in spite of or because of her life events.

The twins said they never really discussed the decision with one another. Jessica revealed, “We were like, ‘Oh we can’t really do anything about it so you just kind of have to deal with it.’ It just kind of happened.” At the time the decision was made, Phillip recalled, “I didn’t dwell on my work or anything. I stopped working because I was like, ‘Oh, I’m staying back anyways.’” Sometime within his repeat year, Phillip ultimately wanted to take control of his progress, “I’m going to show everybody that I know what I’m doing.”

Phillip was not the only participant who expressed the desire to take control by working hard. Both Ven and Elizabeth expressed wanting to take control and return to their first group of grade level peers. Ven, however, was the most vocal in this regard. He repeatedly shared, “I didn’t want to give up hope that I could go back to my original year.” Elizabeth expressed the same wish in her interviews, “I was like, I just want to move up.” Andrew admitted to increasing his efforts for known incentives, such as notoriety or “a prize for doing better than my peers in class” to feel more in control of his school life. In Phillip’s repeat year, he found encouragement in playing the leader and helping his new peers complete the tasks he was confident in, confidence brought on because he had already completed them. He said,

I remember one time we were doing a math thing in a group. We just learned it that day and I remembered it and as I was talking to the kids I was kind of teaching them. I looked up and me and the teacher [sic], kind of made eye contact.
Phillip believed he gained some academic control because, “I got to go do it again and I was more comfortable with everything that I was being taught, and knowing that kind of helped.” These experiences offered Phillip an element of control over the initial unwanted repeating situation.

Elizabeth acknowledged that she felt a greater sense of control when she put the energy forth required to achieve more in life than her parents. She requested school help, made study cards, developed her own set of study skills, pushed herself outside of her comfort zone, and studied every night. She said, “I remember I worked extra hard in those classes. Like, uh, like, I would go every night, I would try to study, you know even when they said nobody had a test [sic].” Elizabeth wished that someone had taught her effective study skills earlier in her life. For her future, Elizabeth described a strong desire to succeed. She stated, “I’m really looking forward to college” and has taken control of her recent life choices by finding a job that will enable her to save money. She also plans to take control of her future by interning in the medical field prior to choosing a career in nursing, to ensure that it is the right choice for her. These decisions were influenced because Elizabeth chose to develop the ability to take control as a result of having to repeat a year of school.

Andrew believed that the grade repetition led to him to make changes and to take more control of his life choices. Andrew thinks of the grade repetition as a distant memory, but a memory that made him pay closer attention and participate in his academic life. He also believed that his grade repetition experience led him to consider a career as a therapist, “There’s a couple of things that I want to go do, and it’s still all possible, but as of now I wouldn’t mind seeing myself as a therapist, counselor, talking to someone else, like find out their problems, to understand why.”
Even though seven of the eight participants understood that their academic progress needed support, the thought of repeating a grade was a decision made out of their control and without their input. The stories of these participants included details of the small opportunities in which they attempted to gain some control in the grade repetition process. This control seemed essential to each of the participants, especially because repeating a grade was not the typical progression in school.

**Composite theme 5: Opportunity and acceptance.** All participants eventually came to believe in the end that the grade repetition was the right decision for them. Several of the student participants came to define their grade repetition as an opportunity and most were able accept its placement in their life; several grudgingly and others only as a result of engaging in this study.

Sarah reported feeling more secure and self-confident after repeating grade one. She remembered participating in the “top reading group” and in hindsight, felt lucky to continue the relationships she developed in the repeat year well into her adult life. Sarah admitted, “It was not an easy road, but typical. In the end it turned out okay.” She concluded, “I don’t regret any of my experiences, because you know, it made me who I am today.” Sarah clarified,

My life did not change in too many ways as a result of having repeated the first grade. I liked school more. I would say that it was a good choice and I’m happy that I did it and it worked out okay I guess. I think in my case, it was good.

However, Elizabeth sounded defeated each time she spoke of the repetition decision. She shared,

I kind of decided to just not really think about it, to be honest. It already happened. It was second grade. It kind of stinks because I had to . . . I’ll be graduating kind of late
now. I just wish it wasn’t like, it wasn’t those two years and I kind of already stayed back because of my birthday and then another year, so technically I’m missing two years.

For Elizabeth, it was years after the repetition experience that she resigned to the conclusion, “I finally felt like I should just accept it.” She reflected that if she had to repeat a grade, it should have been fourth grade because that was the year she finally felt like she received the help she needed in school. When Elizabeth spoke of her fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Jones, she gushed, “I loved Mrs. Jones. The first day I came . . . , we moved from my old town to here and I was really shy in the beginning. But Mrs. Jones made me feel pretty good. I felt confident.”

George and Aaron were the most naturally reflective in their opinion of the grade repetition experience. Both mentioned that because of our interviews, they had thought a great deal about the topic. Each admitted that at some point in their life they allowed the learned lessons to propel them forward.

During much of Aaron’s interview he expressed a predominately negative attitude about the repetition experience. It wasn’t until his sophomore year in high school that his attitude towards school began to transform, “I wish I had the same mind set [then] that I have now.” Aaron disclosed that he only recently came to terms with the grade repetition decision. He said, “Now I look at it as an opportunity. But, I think of it like, if I had never got put back I probably would not have been playing football.” Upon reflection, Aaron stated,

Honestly, I wasn’t confident in moving on to the fourth grade, because the math wasn’t good. I had iffy grades that year and so I had a feeling I wasn’t going to pass. I think of it like, if I had never got put back I probably wouldn’t be where I am today.
Years after the experience Aaron was able to reflect that his grade repetition gave him different opportunities and changed him for the better. He said, “It is a way for you to do things better and for you to learn from your mistakes.” Aaron recently accepted that he does not regret learning this lesson. He came to the conclusion that the repetition experience fit much better in his elementary school life and he would have been much more resentful had it occurred later. Aaron admitted that repeating the grade, “Was a door opening for me, and I was discouraged at first, because I didn’t know anyone. I didn’t know what to do, and I was lost.” However, Aaron was lucky enough to develop at least two nurturing relationships that helped him build resilience and open “doors” in his life.

George’s memory of being told about the grade retention differs from his mother’s. George says, “I just remember them [his mothers] saying you’re going to a new school with new kids that you’re going to meet . . . a transition with everyone else.” George understood this change as “one change along with the greater change of moving to a different school, so it wasn’t that big of an impact in my life, so much as changing schools.” However, he further explained that looking back now,

I can kind of see the effects that it might have had on me. Going from being the youngest in the class, to being the oldest in the class, and having a greater maturity because of it. You kind of see the impact it might have had on you after that occurred. I think, definitely the way the outcome came about, I would definitely choose to repeat again.

George said his parents have asked him if he regrets their decision. He always tells them, “No. I am pretty happy with the way it turned out.” Like Aaron, George believed participating in this study pushed him to give serious thought to the repetition decision and how it affected his life experiences. George believed that he was lucky because his parents and teachers were
always supportive of him. George became proficient at self-sufficiency; he learned to solve academic questions on his own and only reached for support when necessary.

Andrew believed that only time has afforded him the opportunity to relate to significant differences between his grade repetition attitudes,

Well, I mean it just feels like a distant memory to me, honestly, like I’m a complete different person now. I’m still immature and crude and say what I want to say, but I think everything before [the repeat] third grade, I just did not care about school whatsoever. I was a kid.

The change in his attitude toward education many years after his grade repetition allowed him to conclude that before he repeated, he saw no value in education whatsoever, but in hindsight realized school is very important. Additionally, his grade repetition led to the removal of the children who neglected him, thus providing Andrew with an opportunity to change his behaviors, “Yeah, I felt like I can’t be rude anymore, I can’t be that guy, I had to adapt. I was kind of anti-social, people just kind of ignored me, so I just kept to myself with my imagination.” Andrew’s revelations, coupled with his school records, exhibited that improved relationships led to slight improvements in his academics after his repeat year.

Years later, upon reflection of his experience, Phillip said,

After a while I came around. I felt better about the idea of being able to do it over again and prove that I can go on now. And getting to like meet new people, sort of, cause staying back I got to meet all the people that I’m with now, so that’s been pretty good.

These were the exact issues that created uncertainty and greatly concerned him prior to repeating the year. In the end Phillip detailed a very positive repeat experience, even though it had a rocky
start. When asked to share his favorite grade in elementary school Phillip chose his repeat year. He said,

First, I did it twice. I had the same teacher so I spent two years with the teacher. And knowing that, you could say, it was kind of special. Cause like, not everybody’s gonna [sic] stay back, you know. And not everybody’s gonna [sic] have that chance to like really bond with the teacher like that. We got [sic] a lot of one on one time, because I would always, I knew that I was comfortable to talk to her about things. If I was upset or something, I knew that I could go to her; even the first year, but more towards the end of the first year. We grew that bond and stuff.

Mrs. Headler said she felt the decision was the right one for Phillip. She has wondered over the years if it was the best decision for his twin, Jessica. She and Jessica’s teacher had consulted over the fact that one twin was stronger than the other, but in the end it was decided that grade repetition would benefit each student as an individual and still support them as twins.

Ven presented a mostly negative view of his grade repetition until near the end of the second interview when he surprisingly admitted,

Overall, I can’t say that it was bad. I have looked back on it before, which is why I can say I’m happy everything happened the way it did. If I didn’t get bullied then maybe I would’ve stayed at the school and maybe that wouldn’t be the right thing for me.

When asked to detail how grade repetition fit into his present life, Ven responded that in the past he believed he would rather not repeat a year of school; it made him angry and he thought it could be reversed-if he worked hard enough. He believed that no one gave him the proper tools to succeed and move back to his true age cohort. Ven said, “It affected me socially, it affected me like, mental-wise. It pretty much affected every aspect of my life because of the different
people I would have been around, if I wasn’t repeated. So like, yeah, it affected everything.” He related that his first friendship group was into troublesome activities and had he not repeated the grade that would have been his life too; for this change he was thankful.

Ven said, “So to be honest, I’m always sad about this, like going back in time. I feel that I wouldn’t touch anything. I prefer things the way they are now. A sense of liberation from worldly troubles, yeah.” Before he accepted his repetition he was always “attacking the idea of it;” however, after time passed, he accepted the reality of it, “…I guess you could call it excuses, but it brought me comfort which is why I sort of blamed it on what I could have been.”

Grade repetition was not an easy decision to live with initially for seven of the eight participants. However, the interview data from each participant-student, parent, and teacher, mentioned some degree of increased comfortability for the student in their repeat year; yet this comfortability was not maintained equally for all as they progressed. For most, they came around to view the repetition as an opportunity, whether it was to try harder, prove others wrong, develop new friendships, play a new sport, or simply have more practice.

**Summary of Analysis**

The data collected showed that all of the participants felt a definite change in their attitude towards their education and their relationships as a result of having to repeat a year of school; for most it was not initially positive. The negative aspects of the decision were felt more deeply in the participants’ social and emotional perspectives. They worried about friendships, felt embarrassed by having to explain why they were older than their peers, felt frustrated, gave up, made plans to get back to their “rightful” year, lied, and were basically unhappy about this decision. It was only after five of the participants-Andrew, Elizabeth, Jessica, Aaron, and Phillip-had their social and emotional needs addressed, soothed, or identified that they accepted
the conclusion that there was benefit to repeating a year. It took one caring individual to foster a changed opinion. This relationship helped them develop a desire to meet greater school success-socionally, emotionally, and academically.

Upon reflection, Aaron, George, and Ven realized that participating in this study helped put their grade repetition experience into perspective. Ven and Aaron were encouraged by this study to reconsider their individual, personal school experiences; specifically where and how the repetition fit and affected their life overall. This understanding also gave them some insight into what might have made their repetition placement more successful. They shared that talking about their specific experience to the researcher surprisingly helped them comprehend why they had to experience school within a grade repetition. They also felt that having other students do the same, or read this study, might help them to understand their grade repetition as well. However, Jessica, Elizabeth, and Phillip requested that other alternatives be tried first, but expressed that if nothing else helps, than grade repetition should be an option.

When faced with the decision to repeat or promote a student, Aaron shared,

I know teachers feel guilty like, when they have to do that, but to be honest, they shouldn’t feel guilty because they’ve done everything they can to teach that student. And maybe, keeping them back is good for them, and they will, obviously, learn from their mistakes and from there they can thank the teacher that kept them back, because umm, they are doing better things now, and better in school. So I kind of do thank Mrs. Brennen.

George was the study outlier. His profile illustrated consistent positive academic progress; the ability to reach or exceed expected district grade level benchmarks each year. However, the difference between George’s academic performance and that of the other
participants’ was that George was not recommended for grade repetition for academic difficulties. His was purely a social concern on the part of his parents.

This chapter began with detailing the participants in this study. These descriptions identified the multiple layers of each participant’s life that were not easily separated from their grade repetition experience. Narrative analysis led to the following themes: social uncertainties, stress to succeed, feelings of self-consciousness, a desire for control, and feelings of opportunity and acceptance. The following chapter discusses these themes as they relate to prior research and theory, as well as the implications of these findings for future practice.
Chapter Five: Interpretation, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine how the eight student participants’ experience with grade repetition in elementary school shaped their understanding of their educational, social, and emotional life stories. For decades, studies have detailed the negative impact of grade repetition on areas of a child’s achievement and socio-emotional adjustment, including academics, peer relationships, self-esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance (NASP, 2003). Exploring the stories of those who repeated a grade is crucial to shape future attitudes and approaches towards this practice. This narrative study, unlike the decades of quantitative research before it, found that each participant eventually concluded that repeating a grade was a necessary step in their school life that required adjustments that are not well documented in grade repetition literature.

Eight students, three parents, and five educators were interviewed for this study. The conclusions are discussed in the four key findings detailed below. This chapter addressed the theoretical framework of resilience theory and its implications on the findings and interpretations of the study; and the direction of future research into the theory and practice.

Implications for Theory

This study used academic resilience theory as a lens for interpretation. Based on existing literature, the initial assumption was that a grade repetition experience creates insurmountable barriers for students that caused them to regret the experience and see little benefit from it. The theory of resilience is defined as the capacity of an individual to spring back from setbacks, rebound or adapt in the face of adversity, learn from failure, develop social, academic, and vocational competence, or provide a method to believe in one’s abilities to deal with severe
stress and difficulties as presented in life (Fraser et al., 1999; Garmezy, 1991; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; NASP, 2010).

Academic resilience, more specifically, is “defined as a set of positive behaviors over time that reflect the interactions between individuals and their environments, in particular the opportunities for personal growth that are available and accessible” (Ungar, 2012, p. 14). Academic resilience theory has served schools and counselors as a guiding component in the manner in which students are instructed, especially those experiencing challenge. Therefore, the theory asserts that grade repetition success is more likely when the child is taught resilience by interacting with an improved environment and plenty of opportunity for personal growth (Ungar, 2012).

The participants detailed the social and emotional challenges faced before, during, and after repeating, and the sense of dealing with a setback. They feared being placed with a younger group of students; they lacked confidence in their own social or academic abilities; they desired to return to their first cohort or to prove that they are smart; and also consistently worried they would repeat again. Students needed coping skills to help face these challenges. Ungar (2012) claimed that coping is critical for all people, particularly when challenged, and that students can only achieve their developmental milestones if the right coping resources are made available; coping skills such as persistence, planning, control, and management.

At the time of their grade repetition, none of the students were supported in their ability to make sense of why they repeated a grade and this caused social and emotional stress. Later in their career, they were able to better make sense of the rationale and this clarity served as a support mechanism. The participants often drew their own, often erroneous or naïve, conclusions regarding the reasons for repeating because they did not receive explicit
explanations or the required support to effectively implement coping skills. Most doubted their abilities across all domains-academic, social, and emotional. Starting at the time of repetition and continuing for years, students were unable to determine how repetition fit into their developmental history. In several of the narratives the grade repetition experience was perceived as a dirty secret; an embarrassing event. Often it was not shared with peers or teachers, as evidenced by the lack of documentation in students’ cumulative folders.

The research of Covington (1992) and Landrum (2007) added to the coping theme by suggesting that students’ mistakes should be characterized as a springboard towards success, not a reflection of inferior self-worth. All participants expressed self-doubt at some point after learning of their repetition. By not having a complete explanation of the “mistakes” that led to their repetition, participants could not effectively use their experience as a springboard for success. As some participants matured or were able to identify or overcome specific risks or mistakes, they met greater success. For example, once Aaron reached high school he was specifically taught how to commit to his studies and to execute his commitment; his performance improved and he was permitted to join his high school football team. Years beyond his repetition experience, Aaron was provided support from a caring adult. It was only then that he was able to develop the resilience skills of taking control, maintaining composure, and commitment to a goal; and as a result his confidence increased and he achieved his goal.

George was the only participant who consistently related a positive experience with grade repetition. He exhibited several protective factors that supported his resilience: a strong intellect, a deeply involved family, and a supportive external environment at school. His familial support in the request that he repeat Kindergarten was in fact a predictor for his child-level readiness in
school, and in part was responsible for his positive experience. For George the grade repetition itself became a protective factor.

Some students (e.g., Aaron and George) did receive support that allowed them to prosper at different points of their educational progression. Several participants learned to draw on inherent resilience skills which eventually led them to view their grade repetition as an opportunity. This was true for George immediately, but developed over time for Sarah, Aaron, Elizabeth, Jessica, and Phillip once they were able to assimilate their feelings of stress, setback, and/or self-consciousness,

As a stand-alone intervention, grade repetition presents only risks and does not benefit from viewing risks as assets in order to create protective factors that lead to positive experiences. Goldstein and Brooks (2013) found that the best predictor of positive outcomes was not in the relief of symptoms, but in the understanding, appreciation, and nurturing of individual strengths and assets developed within the environment. The quality of available resources and the significance of a student’s opportunities increase the likelihood that interactions promote well-being and resilience (Ungar, 2012). The study participants often did not understand the circumstances of their repetition or their strengths and assets; therefore acceptance often took years. However, when they finally received positive support, most were able to prosper.

**Key Findings**

**Repeating a year for academic reasons resulted in limited academic progress.** This qualitative study found that short-term academic improvements were not sustained over time; similar to the findings of past grade repetition literature (Houck, 2009; Wu et al., 2010). As emerged in chapter four, analysis indicated that seven of the eight participants, repeated for academic purposes and exhibited limited academic growth after their repetition and beyond.
District Progress Reports for six of the eight participants illustrated only slightly improved academic results from the first experience to the repeat experience. All participants, with the exception of George (who did not repeat for academic reasons) and Andrew, continued to struggle academically for the remainder of their time in school.

All participants recalled that academically not much changed in their repeat year. Andrew commented, “I wasted my time doing absolutely nothing.” Elizabeth shared, “Like, it was the same worksheets and all that,” and Jessica stated, “It wasn’t that much different for me. The teacher treated me just like one of the group. I already knew what we were doing.” The twins’ mother also admitted that she did not change what was done at home because, “I didn’t want them to like, dwell on repeating the year.”

Five of the six teachers interviewed reported that they did not offer different curriculum or alter their teaching strategies. Mrs. Egitto’s statement was representative of the others, “Aaron wasn’t able to access the information the first time.” Moreover, simply teaching more of the same did not, as research and this data showed, improve the repeaters academic growth, which was the precise reason seven of the participants were retained.

Academically, the participants exhibited what Benard (1993), Meisels and Liaw (1993), and Wu et al. (2008) identified as the struggle-succeed-struggle scenario. This cycle contributed to the student’s belief that academic outcomes are outside their control thereby undermining their motivation. A sense of control is an important resilience skill, along with persistence, planning, and management (Martin & Marsh, 2006); characteristics that were lacking in the student’s academic and behavioral narratives and school documents for Aaron, Ven, Andrew, Elizabeth, and Jessica, before and after their repeated grade.
Grade repetition was the sole intervention implemented to address several students’ academic, social, and emotional challenges. Aaron’s Title I reading support and math tutoring were discontinued; Andrew received decreased EL services; and Elizabeth did not receive adequate academic support until two years post repetition. These examples corroborated the literature findings of Allen et al. (2009) confirming a decrease in supportive, supplemental services in the child’s repeat year. This practice is illogical since educators’ desire is to help students meet academic benchmarks, as well as improve functioning and performance.

**Each grade repetition experience created social challenges for the participants.** The majority of student participants were not initially enthusiastic about the repetition decision. For seven of the eight students, the negative social feelings lasted well into the future—four participants’ held negative opinions for over a decade. Two socially challenging themes caused by the grade repetition decision apparent in the narratives were a sense of social uncertainty and the feelings of self-consciousness.

Participant statements echoed the literature; affirming that the negative effects of grade repetition are not only evident in the student’s academic progress, but on a student’s socio-emotional adjustment as well. The students’ school records lacked evidence of specific social support. Six of the eight participants expressed having to navigate the social aspects of the experience on their own. Only Phillip specifically recalled receiving support from his teacher that directly addressed the social aspect having to repeat a year. For example, Mrs. Headler groomed Phillip in the role of peer tutor for his new cohort of peers. This encouraged Phillip to reach out to his new peers and boosted his sense of social standing among them.

Ven, Elizabeth, George, Aaron, and Andrew recalled that the topic of repeating a year was not mentioned to avoid upsetting or embarrassing them. Two parent interviews and all
teacher interviews expressed these same concerns. Elizabeth, Aaron, Sarah, Ven, Phillip, and Jessica described the experience as socially stigmatizing; further perpetuating their negative feelings. Their initial feelings of disgrace created specific feelings of self-consciousness, as detailed in chapter four; and prolonged their negative outlook. They all expressed elements of resentment and a change in their relationships with their parents, teachers, and school for proposing a life altering decision.

The participants’ stories about repeating were cloaked in secrecy or shame. George, the most positive participant expressed,

I think it’s kind of interesting to go back and look at what happened and how that affected me. I realize that I put that aside a little bit. I think in later years in elementary school when I realized that I had repeated, I guess I felt like why did I repeat?

Aaron was clear, “I was embarrassed” and both Sarah and Elizabeth were concerned about people’s opinion of them and their capabilities. Sarah said, “I still feel slightly uncomfortable that I could tell someone that I stayed back, because I think, they’re going to immediately think I’m stupid, but I know that I’m not.” Sarah’s expression of self-doubt was also observed in the manner in which she revealed her grade repetition to the researcher. During a potential repetition discussion for her student, Sarah reluctantly shared that she had repeated. Despite her visible discomfort, it was obvious that the personal disclosure was shared to advocate for her student’s need.

Ven said the grade repetition decision made him come out fighting in social situations, “I let the fighting happen then because I wanted to hurt them. That’s when I became a bully because I really just wanted to keep my pride and just relieve stress.” Even today Ven’s negativity was unmistakable in all conversations about social interactions.
Jessica, Phillip, and Elizabeth expressed their outward negative social reactions to the repetition at home. Aaron shared his negative reaction at home and school. Aaron said, “I remember it like it was yesterday.” His self-consciousness caused him to hide from old friends and his uncertainty made it difficult to make new ones. For Aaron the negative social effects of the decision were long-lasting and at times led to scuffles at school. Andrew also admitted to a lingering fear of being alone in the future. He attributed it to feeling very lonely in school prior to and just after his grade repetition.

Evidence in Aaron’s school documents and through the admissions of Aaron, Ven, and Elizabeth, it became clear that they disliked the social aspects of school in their repeat year. The participants’ diminished sense of self-esteem and uncertainties influenced the way these students coped with the repetition decision.

**Each grade repetition experience posed emotional challenges for the participants.** Research has indicated that cognitive and affective development progress simultaneously; therefore, this study further illuminated the many ways in which the participants’ intellectual growth and socio-emotional functioning were affected by their grade repetition. Two themes that impacted the participants’ emotional development were an increased sense of stress to succeed and a desire for control.

The participants’ stories detailed pressure to succeed resulting from their repetition. This pressure was often followed by the attitude “I give up” brought on by the lack of control they felt regarding the decision. The struggle-succeed-struggle pattern helped to explain why Ven, Elizabeth, Aaron, Andrew, and Jessica were emotionally disaffected by school at the time and beyond their repetition. All participants at some point expressed their resignation to accept the repetition decision because it was out of their control and they could do nothing to change it.
Nonetheless, participants expressed a desire to control how others viewed them, to prove them wrong, or return to their original cohort of peers. Some participants took control by lying, physically fighting back, or spending inordinate amounts of free time studying. This pressure to succeed had several long-lasting, negative consequences. George’s stress became evident in his desire to attain academic excellence, to the detriment of his social and emotional relationships. Elizabeth, Aaron, and Andrew feared and worried that their lackluster academic performance would result in punishment from their parents or another repeated year. As first generation Americans, Elizabeth and Andrew had the added emotional stress of accomplishing more than their parents. In light of the fact that the participants knew repetition is not the norm, the participants realized that their stress to succeed helped to provide a sense of control over the experience and the desire for control led some of the participants to put more effort into their emotional, social, and/or academic performances.

During the study, the researcher found an emotional disconnect between the schools’ ideology and the student/family’s concern for individual success. The twins’ school records and the interview with Phillip’s teacher detailed the discussions between the school and parents regarding the twins’ young age, their academic challenges, their stress at having to leave their peers, and their need to remain together as a pair. However, when informing the twins of their repetition Mrs. Pinkerton explained,

I’m going to sound horrible when I say this, but I didn’t want them to think it was because they were stupid. I just sat them down and told them that they did have the grades to move on, but everybody felt it’s the best for them to do the fourth grade over. It was more socially and emotionally, that was the reason being for them being held back [sic].
The twins were confused by this explanation. Jessica related, “You literally just told us that our grades are fine and we didn’t have to stay back, so why are you doing it?” Sometime thereafter, Jessica and Phillip concluded that they had “flunked” the fourth grade, despite their parents and teachers framing the repetition decision as a result of their birth date. While they still believed their birth date played a large role, once they understood and accepted the comprehensive reason for repeating, their challenges became springboards for future learning and the emotional impacts decreased.

Most students related that their emotional needs were under-addressed. Andrew shared, “I guess I never realized how much, how I kind of felt left out.” Both Ven and Elizabeth expressed their discontent that no one addressed their desire to return to their original cohort. Analysis of the participants’ experiences revealed that social or emotional support was not a sustained or consistent part of any educational plan in the repeat year.

The participants’ eventual acceptance was apparent in a variety of emotionally reflective statements: Phillip felt better equipped emotionally to face the world because his repetition meant he would be eighteen at his graduation and old enough to face the responsibilities of the real world. Ven’s interview concluded that because he participated in this study he was able to admit that emotionally he was, “happy I repeated the year because even the bad memories I had, even the bullying that happened, I’m all happy that happened because if none of that did happen, I wouldn’t have the knowledge I have now.”

The grade repetition experience created opportunities for the participants. Despite the academic, social, and emotional challenges presented by the grade repetition decision, several participants believed that their grade repetition created new opportunities for them. All participants accepted its place in their life history, even though for some it was reluctant
acceptance. Sarah found new opportunity in the lifelong friendships developed with her second cohort of peers. She believed that her repetition allowed her to like school more and “made her who she is today.” Aaron shared the view that grade repetition was an opportunity that opened doors, forcing him to face challenges in his life. He concluded, “I think I got kept back for a reason. I had to be taught that lesson. So, I could be put in this position today, be better at football and stuff, because in order to play football you have to do your work and pass.” Both Andrew and Ven saw the value in being removed from the first cohort of peers; Andrew because those children were mean and disrespectful and Ven because they might have led him down a troublesome behavioral path.

While seven of the eight participants consistently struggled to meet expected academic benchmarks, it was the social and emotional support from a caring adult that enabled them to experience a sense of improvement in their school progress. For example, Phillip experienced social and emotional support from his strong relationship with his fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Headler. She supported him by fostering resilience-building skills and by allowing him to choose a path that boosted his confidence. Aaron’s relationship with his high school football coach/math teacher provided the tools he required to experience the greatest positive impact on his academics and social/emotional self-esteem. Elizabeth’s ability to bond for the first time with her fourth grade teacher helped her forge supportive relationships with future teachers; thereby encouraging her to feel more comfortable and better able to ask for support when needed.

Aaron and Ven expressed that they were able to view their grade repetition as an opportunity as a result of their participation in this study. Aaron shared his acceptance, “You doing this interview and helping others, it’s going to help them realize why it happened. ‘Why
did I repeat?’ And it’s not always so bad.” Ven shared, “To lose that regret you need to attack the root, like why were you repeated? When they realize why you were repeated, you may change your opinion [sic].”

Four of the participants believed that repeating a year bolstered their academic confidence. The teachers interviewed observed an increase in the academic confidence for the students they repeated. Even though participants’ recounts and school documents reported a lack of sustained progress academically, socially, and/or emotionally, the opportunities opened to the participants helped them to accept repeating a grade.

**Implications for Educational Practice**

As the data illustrated, educators cannot expect students to think positively about their grade repetition experience unless they offer additional support in all learning domains – academic, social, and emotional. Analysis found that deliberate exposure to resilience instruction can promote the development of skills that encourage less stress and stigmatizing pain for the repeated child; therefore exposure to resilience-building should be standard practice. Resilience skills helped overall self-confidence and success for several repeaters. Data showed that when the children were taught how to overcome the risks they faced and educators promoted students’ resilience characteristics as diligently as they combatted students’ at-risk behaviors, the social and emotional impacts of the grade repetition were diminished. Following are the implications for educational practice resulting from analysis findings and associated research:

1) To eliminate the students’ feelings of uncertainty and self-consciousness arising from grade repetition, schools should make an intentional effort to stop ‘blaming the victim’ or attempting to ‘fix the child’ and instead make effective changes in the social, emotional, and
educational environments in which the child learns by teaching and supporting students in the development of persistence, planning, control, and management.

2) Efforts to support resilience as a developmental process can be fostered through direct, explicitly taught resilience strategies. Institutions will then be better suited to change practices, policies, and educators’ attitudes, and as a result develop resilient learners.

3) Academic resilience building that focuses on practical decision-making and strategic responses provides meaningful practices, interactions, opportunities, and quality resources; thereby ensuring that therapeutic actions focus on the steps needed to reduce uncertainties. By focusing on interventions and their intensity, schools will not rely on individual student success, motivation, or personal traits, but will build protective processes that mitigate risk-factors and produce change in those most at-risk.

4) Educators should communicate firm guidance, structure, and challenge in teaching strategies and also convey belief in the child’s natural resilience in order to lead to improved results and a sense of control.

5) Educational practice that encouraged the development of consistent, caring, pro-social relationships moved the study participants to work hard and to meet greater success, even if short-lived. Through the continued care, confidence building, and active support sessions with an involved adult, an effective resilience building practice can bridge the gap that exists between academic and social/emotional outcomes associated with repeating a grade.

6) Despite the fact that three of eight participants continued to struggle academically, their educational supports were reduced or eliminated in the repeat year. Future practice should ensure that instruction is planned to meet the present instructional, social, and/or emotional needs of the student. This means continuing to offer supplemental services to keep the child
on track and progressing at their present level even if the child is more advanced than the peers in the repeat class. As this and past studies have illustrated, taking away services in the repeat year is not always helpful and repetition alone is not always the complete solution to the child’s challenges.

7) It is important that educational practice and protocols consistently document and maintain behavioral data on students who have repeated a grade. Such data illustrates and guides success or lack thereof, in the repeaters social and emotional school experiences.

8) For the child who repeats, teacher support should come in the form of consistent and frequent check-ins, not just academically, but socially and emotionally as well. Andrew, Elizabeth, Ven, Jessica, and Aaron specifically expressed the need for this practice. Ven was adamant, “Supports should definitely address how the student is coping in school, socially-with friends and bullies.”

9) Based on the student participants’ feedback, educational practice would be more inclusive if it implemented other remedies before grade repetition—alternatives such as: in-class support, multi-age classrooms, extended day, extended year, Saturday classes, and summer school. Elizabeth readily admitted that she would have preferred after school tutoring or summer school to repeating second grade.

10) In order to continue to foster consistent, caring, nurturing, and pro-social relationships for the child who has repeated, schools and home should make a concerted effort to ensure communication flows both ways. The data illustrated that only some of the students’ families effectively participated in the child’s repeat year. The parents who interacted and communicated consistently and openly with their child’s teachers, as well as supported their
child by supervising learning at home, had children who met greater success in their repetition.

11) Schools should consider incorporating the characteristics of confidence (self-efficacy), coordination (planning), control, composure (low anxiety), and commitment (persistence) into the teaching curriculum in order to play a vital role in the child’s academic and socio-emotional development, inside or outside the classroom.

12) School documents and student cumulative records illustrated that the study district did not have a consistent practice for academically, socially, or emotionally deciding which student would meet success in a repeated year of school. Education has undergone many changes since the timeframe of these participants grade repetition decision. One dramatic difference is the move to consistently incorporate data-driven, best practice procedures. This increased rigor should be applied to grade repetition decision-making practices as well. Therefore, in order to create greater consistency-academically, socially, and emotionally, a “Grade Repetition Protocol” is recommended for use among all elementary schools within the district so that when decisions are made to repeat a year of school it will be similar regardless of where the child is educated within the district.

13) Data illustrated that during their progression, Elizabeth, George, Phillip, and Jessica were able to inherently draw on resilience skills that supported an eventual acceptance of the repetition experience. Explicitly exploring a student’s capacity for resilience through a screening tool before assigning a grade repetition placement supports a well-informed decision. Therefore, in order to evaluate all components of the child’s development (social, emotional, and academic), and to assist in grade repetition screening and decision-making purposes, the recommendation is for schools to explore published, research-based, resiliency
scales to adopt as a tool in the district grade repetition protocol. Resiliency scales help to identify how the individual is valued and esteemed by others. They provide profiles of personal strengths and vulnerabilities. This information helps to determine why some children adjust to or recover from adversity and others do not. Resiliency scales can provide preventive screening, intervention, and outcomes assessment (Prince-Embury, 2015).

14) Study data illustrated that not all members of the child’s educational team supported the repetition decision for the participant. In this district, as in many others, the principal has the authority to override any team decision in regard to grade repetition. Two teacher participants were swayed by this authority. Phillip’s teacher had to promise she would offer a different repeat year for Phillip before the principal’s approval for repetition and George’s teacher disagreed with the parents request to retain George, but knew the principal would support the parent’s request. As a result, it is a district’s responsibility to create reliable school teams who actively participate in repetition decision-making and the development of effective approaches for the student’s transition. Using the Light’s Retention Scale (2015) (Appendix H), school teams can consider different aspects of the students’ life before making a repetition decision. The team also evaluates and assesses student data—prior to and following repetition, considering the students’ input as well. This team should consist of the school adjustment counselor, guidance counselor, and/or social worker as an integral member to offer counseling to the team, student, and family throughout the process and continuing into the child’s future.

15) For any struggling student, schools should create and pilot a system of best practice, data-driven interventions to include in a documented “Team Intervention Action Plan.” During repetition decision meetings this plan should be created as a resource for the specific
recommendation, whether the student was repeated or promoted. The plan should list specific expectations for each stakeholder: school, family, and student. It must be accepted and agreed by all members and is implemented in the following year. The child’s social, emotional, and academic progress should be documented, tracked, and monitored yearly, until the child’s date of graduation.

16) Ven, Aaron, Jessica, and Phillip were not able to attend recommended services because their parents could not afford them or because work schedules conflicted. In order to support the child’s academic, social, and emotional development, a plan, approach, or design should support all students who for reasons of finance or transportation cannot participate in before or after school academic, social, emotional supports, clubs, and/or other activities.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The conclusion that grade repetition continues to result in limited academic progression, despite the support of an IEP, 504, or a reading or math tutoring for the struggling student is borne out by the analysis of the data in this study, as well as in the data of pre-existing quantitative research. Decades of previous research and this study have not solved the problem. Future research might longitudinally explore the reason interventions implemented before or during a grade repetition experience did not support sustained academic, social, or emotional success through the child’s educational history. Future research should strive to identify what specific supports are effective, focusing on the duration, frequency, and the optimal stage of implementation. While academics must remain a vital part of the grade repetition equation to support the task of helping students reach expected state and district academic benchmarks, the psychosocial component of the student should be attended to as well. It is important for schools to understand how a student’s social conditions relate to their mental health, as well as how their
mental health affects their social conditions. A student’s psychosocial health often distracts the student from accessing the curriculum or participating appropriately in school. Such behavior is often mistakenly viewed as defiance and/or noncompliance. Research into the psychosocial health of students can put both educator and student on more secure learning ground.

This qualitative study supported the findings that grade repetition leads to social and emotional challenges for the individual assigned this practice; however, this analysis found that the grade repetition experience also created opportunities for its participants. Future research must strive to assess each challenge individually in order to comprehend how, when, and why the benefit of a grade repetition outweighed the risks to any one individual component of the child’s development, or how any one component outweighed the benefit of repetition. Additional research is required to find assessments that weigh the social, emotional, and mental health components of a grade repetition in order to better identify the negative, as well as the positive opportunities it presents. Once effectively evaluated, these components will lead to a more informed placement assignment.

The purpose of this study was to include the students’ perspective of grade repetition practice; a perspective that has long been missing from the literature. This study found that five participants eventually viewed the repeat year as a positive opportunity, but the other three experienced a longer lasting degree of social and/or emotional challenges. Future research must examine both experiences—the one where the child repeated and the one where the child would have been promoted—to learn how identified peer group data might inform future repetition/promotion decision-making. Additionally, research must continue to study both the positive and negative experiences of the struggling student—those who were promoted and those repeated.
This study found that the student who developed a comprehensive understanding of the reason for repeating came to accept the decision in their life, even if that understanding occurred when the student was a senior. Future research, therefore, might study situations where the student was effectively involved in the decision-making process or grade repetition/promotion planning to understand the extent to which student involvement leads to less social, emotional, mental, and or/academic struggles or an earlier acceptance of the need for this intervention.

Expansive, longitudinal, qualitative research following a grade repeaters’ trajectory from pre-school to grade twelve would add value to the research by exploring the continuous educational planning for the student and how it informed placement and future decision-making. Future studies would be more robust if they included the views of younger repeated students in order to close the gap between the actual experience and the participants’ memory of it. The inclusion of younger students in the discussion would make the insights more immediate and less molded over time.

Future research should explore how data-driven resilience building methods support the challenged student over time and helps to not only accept the necessity of a repeat year, but also to sustain social, emotional, and academic progress in the repeat year and beyond. In addition, resilience-building could support mental health issues that might be obstructing the student from meeting school requirements.

This study supported that the English language learner student profile poses challenges when confronting language acquisition versus learning disability. Socially, emotionally, and academically, language development plays a large role in any students’ progress in school. When students such as Elizabeth and Andrew had to confront second language acquisition and content-area achievement at the same time, their results often indicated a discrepancy between
ability and achievement. School struggles for this type of student may not be accurately evaluated because it is difficult to ascertain if second language acquisition or some other developmental challenge isimpeding student growth. The battle between second language acquisition and child development continues to complicate the decision-making process when trying to plan how to best serve EL students who are not meeting grade-level expectations.

Finally, future studies are needed to explore the results of school systems that have instituted consistent grade repetition policies to discover if consistent policies make a positive difference to any one component or the overall repetition experience.

Limitations

This study was limited by several factors. First, the age of participants created a gap of at least ten years between the grade repetition event and individual recall of it. Additionally, as a narrative, the scope of the study time frame included only a small, select sample of students. Results therefore, were limited to this one district. Conclusions may have been different had more students and/or other districts been included. The scope was also limited by the number of parents and educators available for participation, as well as by the number of interviews and how forthcoming the participants were with their memories. The associated accompanying stories were included to provide another view of the specific experience; however, their recollections did not always corroborate the student’s individual narratives. School records and artifacts were also analyzed for comparison, but they often contained conflicting information, were incomplete, or were void of necessary relevant information and documentation. The shortcomings identified in this study limit the ability to apply conclusions to a larger universe of grade repetition practices.

Conclusion
This study affirmed the decades of research documenting that grade repetition as a stand-alone intervention is imperfect. The student narratives and accompanying interpretive analysis can be used to direct the development of best practices for future low performing or challenged students when a grade repetition is considered and/or implemented. While these students were able to accept the grade repetition placement and its influence on their life choices, several held negative views of the decision until they were mature enough to see its value. Best practice indicated from this study is to provide support that encourages every student to see the value of the decision as they live the experience.

Education is a cumulative process and creating continuity in the reporting of a student’s educational experience is important to the child’s social, emotional, and academic development. All educators encountering a child who repeated in elementary school should be aware of this placement decision. The data illustrated that these grade repeaters did not have educators who communicated across their K-12 spectrum. In order to offer important academic, social, and emotional insights into a student’s experience the actions taken in elementary school must be included and evaluated because they directly affect the student’s results in middle and high school. It is time to create a common set of district grade level repetition protocols and to hold all parties accountable for improved results in the repeat year and beyond.

Viewing the practice of grade repetition through an academic resilience lens helps to ensure that decisions rely less on randomness and more on data-driven, best practice results. Monitoring should continue throughout the student’s educational career because doing so helps ensure the student’s specific and individual needs are met, as well as helps ensure the student is on track to graduation.
Contrary to the finding that grade repetition is a predictor for high school dropout and despite the individual set-backs each student experienced, all eight participants graduated from high school and seven of the eight participants had plans for post-secondary school. Each participant eventually met school and state expectations, despite consistently weak academic performance and/or social, emotional challenges. The question remains: How do schools manage repeat decisions in a manner that effectively sustains academic, social, and emotional growth? This research predicts that the answer lies in the fostering of resilience in all students.
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Appendix A

Request for Research Permission

Dear (Superintendent of Schools, School Committee Member, High School Principal),

As part of my doctoral studies at Northeastern University I have been working towards a degree that is focused in Curriculum Instruction. To that end, I have been approved by the Institutional Review Board, to conduct a narrative inquiry research study that includes the participants’ educational, social, and emotional experiences as related to an elementary grade school repetition.

I request your permission to interview students, 18 years of age or older, presently enrolled in your (district, OR school), and whenever possible, their parents. ([For Superintendent and School Committee, only] I also request permission to allow the High School Principal to permit access to student records in order to identify those who meet the initial parameter of having repeated a year while in elementary school.) Those identified will be contacted via letter, telephone call, or email, to request participation in this research. Consent letters will be required of all participants and will explain in detail the expectations for individual participation.

Those who meet the research criterion will participate in two individual interviews. Each of the interviews will last for approximately 90 minutes, during a time and in a location, convenient for each participating member. Participants will be asked to also complete a life history grid that may require input received from student archival records, cumulative school documents, journal or diary entries, photographs, drawings, observations, recorded notes or statements, and other textual articles. Finally, whenever possible, I ask that I may also be permitted to obtain consent to conduct interviews with any willing employed educator in your district who may have had some involvement in a particular participants’ grade repetition experience.

If you agree to this request to conduct my research in your (district OR school), all names and other identifying information will remain confidential throughout the entire process by way of pseudonyms. Identities will be kept confidential at the end of the research and complete findings will be shared with you. All documents collected and analyzed will be kept securely locked and will remain secure for at least three years, after which they will be shredded.

Participant inclusion is voluntary and once consent is given, any person may choose to withdraw at any time. There will be no compensation for involvement, other than receiving the data obtained through the study itself, should this be of interest.
Please contact me at kay.k@husky.neu.edu or 617.230.5483 to discuss any questions you may have regarding this request. You may also contact my Northeastern University advisor, Dr. Tova Sanders, at t.sanders@neu.edu.

Thank you for your time and for considering this request for consent to complete my research in your (district/school).
Appendix B
Recruitment Request Invitation

Dear (Participant),

My name is Kathleen Kay and I am the principal of the Columbus Elementary School in Medford, Massachusetts. I have worked for the district of Medford for the past four years. For eight years before coming to Medford, I worked in Milford, Massachusetts as a K-2 principal. Before becoming an administrator, I was a substitute teacher in middle school and a classroom teacher in grades two and four for over 20 years. During my many years as an educator I have observed the experiences of students made to repeat a year of school. I have noted that rarely, if ever, is the student asked to share his/her experiences and stories as they relate to being asked to repeat year of school.

I am presently a student at Northeastern University working on my final doctoral research project. My research is focused on the stories of a person asked to repeat a grade in elementary school. The voice of the person asked to repeat a grade has been missing in the years of research that study this practice.

You have been identified as someone who may be able to offer personal insight into this area of study. I ask you to consider becoming a volunteer in my study. Your willingness to participate is important and the number of people included as part of the research will depend on the information I receive. If you agree to volunteer you must sign the enclosed consent form which will be explained to you in detail before you sign. It is important to know that because your participation is voluntary, you may choose to leave the study at any time.

Once we have discussed and you have signed the form, you have given me your permission to volunteer in this project. If your name is chosen, I will contact you directly by telephone or email. Please let me know how to best reach you by either completing the information at the bottom of this letter and returning it to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope or emailing your interest to Kathleen Kay at kay.k@husky.neu.edu.

Once the project begins, you will be asked to meet with me for two separate interviews. Each interview will last for 90 minutes. We will meet in a location and during a time that works with your schedule. I already have the head master, Dr. John Perella’s, permission to look at your student records, cumulative school documents, and other related information the school has on file. If you have journals or diary entries, photographs, drawings, or other personal keepsakes, you are welcome to share them with me too. This information will help to paint a more detailed picture of your personal story. I will also ask to interview your family members and/or any past teacher who may have had some involvement in your grade repetition experience. They will be asked to give written permission to meet with me as well.
If you agree to volunteer for this project your name and any other information that could identify you will remain confidential throughout the entire process. You will be asked to choose your own name, otherwise known as a pseudonym, which will be used throughout the entire project. The identity of all volunteers will be kept confidential. All project findings will be shared with you during and after the research project is completed. All documents collected and studied will be kept safely locked at all times. They will remain locked for at least three years and after that time they will be shredded.

You will not be paid for your participation in this project. If you are interested, I would be willing to share my completed project with you.

Please contact me at kay.k@husky.neu.edu or 617.230.5483 with any questions you may have about this project. You may also contact my Northeastern University advisor, Dr. Tova Sanders, at t.sanders@neu.edu, if you have questions for her as well.

Thank you for your time and for considering this opportunity to volunteer in this research project. Again, if you are willing to volunteer, please complete the information below by providing your name, telephone number, and email address below and return it to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope, or email me at kay.k@husky.neu.edu to tell me you are interested in volunteering and how I can best contact you.

Sincerely, Kathleen Kay

I agree to volunteer my time for Kathleen Kay’s research project _____Yes _____No

Name ________________________________________________

Telephone Number ___________________________________

Email Address _______________________________________

The best way to reach me is by _____ telephone _____email
Appendix C

Recruitment Request Invitation Telephone Call or Email

Hello, [name],

First of all thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me regarding my study on the experiences of repeating an elementary school grade. I am calling/emailing to confirm your willingness to volunteer in this study and to also request the recommendation of other students who might want to also volunteer.

The goal of this study is to interview at least 4 participants, along with any willing family members, and/or educators, who may have been involved with your specific grade repetition experience. All participants will be asked to talk about their experiences with the repeating of a year of elementary school. The general criterion for participation in this study includes the following:

1. All participants must have repeated a grade in elementary school, or known someone who was made to repeat a grade;
2. All participants must be at least 18 years of age.

If you can recommend other volunteers who meet the above guidelines and are willing to speak with me, I would be grateful. I ask that you email me their names and the manner in which I can best contact them. In order to not surprise these people, I ask that you reach out to let them know I will be getting in touch about this project. I will share more information about their involvement when I speak with them. If they agree to participate, they too will receive a letter of consent, ensuring that their information will be kept confidential as well.

Name of person to contact: _______________________________________________________

How can I reach them? __________________________________________________________

For a telephone conversation:

I would like to review the Informed Consent Document you already received. Did you have time to review it? Let’s look it over now. Please be sure to stop me to ask any questions you may have about this document.

For an email:

When may I call you to review the Informed Consent Document you already received? When is the best time for me to call?

Thank you very much for your time.
Appendix D

Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education

Name of Investigator(s):
Principal Investigator’s name: Dr. Tova Sanders
Student Researcher’s name: Kathleen Kay

Title of Project: Experiences with Grade Repetition: A Narrative Inquiry Using a Resiliency Lens

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
You are invited to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask the researcher any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. Your participation is voluntary throughout the course of the study. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep. You also have the right to withdraw, or leave, from this study at any time.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You have been identified as someone who may be able to offer personal stories into this area of study because you repeated a grade in elementary school. Your selection in this study is not guaranteed, but will be determined after all interest is reviewed.

Why is this study being done?
The purpose of this research is to include the long overlooked, personal experiences and stories of the people who have repeated a year of schooling at the elementary school level. The personal thoughts of your grade repetition will be explored through your own words. Based on your stories regarding your grade repetition experience, this new research may improve the practice of being left back for students in the future.

What will I be asked to do? Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
Once you sign consent to volunteer you will be asked to join me in two separate interviews. Each interview will last 90 minutes. They will be conducted during a time and in a location of your choice. Each separate interview will be scheduled for a distance of about one week apart.

During these interviews I will ask you to talk about your experiences in relation to having repeated a grade in elementary school. Together we will work to complete a timeline of experiences, stories, and events that may have influenced your educational, social, or emotional life, before, during, or after you repeated a grade in school. I will also ask you to identify other
people in your life who may have influenced your life experiences regarding this placement decision, for example: family members or other teachers/educators. If they agree to participate, they too will be asked to sign an informed consent document. All interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed by a third party as a form of personal safety and confidentiality in this process.

My research will include collecting input from student records, cumulative school documents, recorded notes or statements, and other textual articles. I also encourage you to share items such as journal or diary entries, photographs, drawings, or personal observations you may have kept from the time before, during, or after you repeated a year of school.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**
You may feel some discomfort when answering personal questions about your grade repetition experiences. Because the decision to repeat an elementary school grade may not have been yours, you may experience some of the same feelings now that you felt during the time you repeated the grade. Please let me know if and when you feel uncomfortable. Let me know if the questions are upsetting to you. You may skip any question at any time during the entire study. If you feel there is any harm to you, with your permission, I can seek the support of your school principal, school psychologist, or guidance counselor to help minimize this discomfort.

In addition, you may want to continue the interview after 90 minutes have passed. However, to be respectful of your time, I will take notes of the conversation taking place and we can begin there during the next interview.

**Will I benefit from being in this research?**
There are no direct benefits to you for volunteering to be in this study. However, your answers, life stories, and experiences may help educators learn more about the practice of grade repetition as an alternative for students struggling in elementary school.

**Who will see the information about me?**
Only the researcher will know that you participated in this project. Any reports or publications based on the findings will not identify you, any individual, or the study site location as being a participant in this project.

If you agree to volunteer in this research your name and any other identifying information will remain confidential throughout the entire process. You will be asked to choose your own pseudonym for the purpose of reporting. All identities will be kept confidential at the end of the research and my complete findings will be shared with you both during and after the research is completed. All documents and audio-records collected and analyzed will be kept securely locked and will remain secure for at least three years, after which they will be destroyed or shredded.

There may be some official oversight conducted by Northeastern University. In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. I would only permit people
who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. Additionally, you can refuse to answer any question during the course of all interviews.

**Who can I contact if I have any questions or problems with this study?**
Please feel free to contact Kathleen Kay, the student researcher responsible for this project, at 617.230.5483 or at kay.k@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Tova Sanders, the Principal Investigator, at 202.549.3240 or t.sanders@neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, 02115, or at telephone number, 617.373.4588, or at the email address, n.regina@neu.edu. You may make the call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation in this study?**
There will be no payment for your participation. Water or a soft beverage will be offered at all interviews.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
The only cost to participants is their time.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**
You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project. If you know of other possible participants willing to become a part of this project, I ask you to share their contact information.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

Signature of person agreeing to take part ____________________________ Date __________

Printed name of person above ________________________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent ____________________________ Date __________

Printed name of person above ________________________________
Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Institution: Northeastern University
Interviewee:
Interviewer: Kathleen Kay
Location of Interview:

First Interview

First, thank you very much for volunteering your valuable time as a member of my doctoral research project. I would like you to know that I am and have been a dedicated educator for over 31 years and during this time I have become very interested in the personal stories of a student asked to repeat a grade in elementary school. The purpose of this research is to better understand the academic, social, and emotional experiences for the student asked to repeat a year of elementary school.

All information collected during this entire study will be handled with confidentiality. I will not use any personal identifying information at any point in this study. Therefore, your first task will be to choose a pseudonym for use throughout the interview, research, and reporting process. Throughout all interviews I will refer to you by this name. Do you have any preferences? (Pseudonym will be recorded.) I also request your permission to audio-record all interview sessions. Afterwards, I will provide you with a copy of the transcript for your review. At that time you will have the opportunity to make adjustments or to add comments on what you have read.

As a form of review, your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time, and for any reason. I will remind you of this at each session. We will meet to conduct two interviews at a mutually agreed upon time and place. Each interview will last for 90 minutes and will be scheduled approximately one week from one another. During the interview process, if you do not feel comfortable with any particular question, you are not required to respond to it, and I will move on to the next question. Questions prepared ahead of time will be used in each interview with the option to explore other issues/discussions as they arise in either interview. Because I respect your time, I will make a note regarding the line of conversation at the end of the 90 minutes and start the next interview here. At the end of 90 minutes the interview will end and the recorder will be turned off.

Let’s address creature comforts, such as the location of the restroom, water breaks, and the need for stretch breaks as they arise. The recorder will be turned off and the session time will be paused during these times. Before we begin, do you have any questions for me? Is there anything further you need to know? Let’s begin.
Upon participant agreement, the student researcher will address the participant by his or her pseudonym and the first interview will begin.

Below are the initial questions and probes to be utilized as a guide in interview number one. They will also be used to help complete the life history grid (Appendix F) at the end of interview number one.

1.) Please tell me as much as possible about yourself, your childhood, and your family.
2.) Please tell me as much as you can remember about your educational experiences.
3.) Please describe for me all you can remember about having repeated X grade.
4.) Describe any other events that may have been going on in your life at the time you repeated X grade.
5.) Describe what repeating grade X meant to you. Has the meaning changed for you over time? Describe how.
6.) Did your experience repeating grade X differ the second time? Describe how.
7.) Closing: Is there anything you would like to add that would provide insight into your educational experiences or your experience repeating X grade?

Thank you for participating in this first interview, as well as helping me to work on the life history grid to further recall life events and experiences. Let’s confirm the day and time to meet for interview number two. In the second interview we will work to reconstruct the details of your grade repetition experience. You will be asked to recall any turning points in your life at this time as well.

Please take the life history grid with you so that you can add any other details you may recall before our next meeting. Also please give thought to the following topics so that we may explore them at the next meeting.

1.) Statements recorded in the Life History grid
2.) Relationships both at school and home

Second Interview

Thank you again for participating in this second interview. Like the first interview, this one will also last for 90 minutes. In this interview we will follow-up to confirm statements made in the first interview. Then using the life history grid and guiding questions we will work to reconstruct the details of your grade repetition experience. With your permission, I would like to again audio-record this interview and save it for later transcription. Do I have your permission to audio-record? Let’s begin.

1) Think about the manner in which you became aware you were going to have to repeat a year of school. Describe how you felt about it.
2) Was there anything especially helpful to you during the year you repeated X grade?
3) Describe if your feelings towards school changed in any way as a result of repeating grade X.
4) Describe any current school experiences and detail if they are at all related to your grade repetition experience.
5) Closure: If you could tell your teacher(s), parents, siblings, and/or peers anything about the grade repetition practice now, what would you tell them? Is there anything else you would like to share about your life story and the effect your grade repetition may play in your current educational, social, and emotional decisions and choices?

Thank you for participating in this second interview, as well as allowing me to use the life history grid to further recall life events and experiences. I appreciate your reflection on the meaning of your grade repetition experience. In approximately one week’s time, I will send a copy of the transcripts from both interviews for your review, comments, and verification. Your focus should be that the data recorded truthfully tells your story as it relates to your life and your grade repetition experiences. Please share any details that need to be edited or included.

This is the last time we will meet for the purpose of interviewing. Sincere thanks for your time and honest recollections of your grade repetition experience.

Parent Interview

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview regarding a grade repetition decision for your child, [name]. By now you have read and signed the consent form regarding your participation. You may withdraw your consent at any time and do not need to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or one that simply brings no sense of recall for you. I will then move on to the next question. I will be audio-recording this interview, as well as taking notes about your recollections. I am very interested in hearing all you have to share. The notes and taping will help me gather rich detail regarding the experience of grade repetition for both you and [child]. All information will be destroyed at the end of my study and pseudonyms will be used to identify participants and their families to ensure anonymity. Your child’s chosen pseudonym is [name], you will be referred to as [name]’s mother/father throughout the written study.

The following questions will be regarding your child’s experience before, during, and after repeating X grade.

1) Please describe your family background.
2) Please tell me as much as you can remember about [child’s] educational experiences.
3) Why did [child] repeat the X grade? Who initiated this request?
4) Please share as many details as you can possibly remember to help develop a comprehensive story of your family’s experience with [child’s] grade repetition.
5) Detail how [child’s] first year in grade X compared with his/her repeat year.
6) Detail the manner in which [child] viewed him/herself after the grade repetition decision was made. Describe any positive and/or negative differences you may recall after the decision was made, within the repeat year, and in the years following the repetition.

7) Detail if/how the grade repetition experience may have changed for you over time.

6) Closure: If you could give advice to a family faced with this decision today, what would you tell them? Is there anything else you would like to share about [child’s] life story and the connections his/her grade repetition may have played to bring him/her to the present life situation?

Thank you for participating in this interview and recalling life events and experiences as they relate to [child’s] grade repetition. I will soon send a copy of the transcript from this interview to you for review, comments, and verification. I welcome any changes you deem necessary. Please be sure to focus your attention that the data is recorded truthfully and tells your story as it relates to your life and [child’s] grade repetition experiences. Remember pseudonyms will be used to protect your anonymity and all transcripts will be kept confidential and destroyed after three years’ time.

Teacher/Educator Interview

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview regarding a grade repetition decision for [child]. The Superintendent, School Committee, and school principal have approved my request to interview you for my research on elementary grade school repetition. By now you have read and signed the consent form regarding your participation. You may withdraw your consent at any time and do not need to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or one that simply brings no sense of recall for you. I will then move on to the next question. Your first task will be to choose a pseudonym for use throughout the interview, research, and reporting process. Throughout all interviews I will refer to you by this child. Do you have any preferences? (Pseudonym will be recorded.) I will be audio-recording this interview, as well as taking notes about your recollections. I am very interested in hearing all you have to share. The notes and taping will help me gather rich detail regarding the educational, social, and emotional experience of grade repetition for both you, as the educator, and [child], as the student. All information will be destroyed three years after the completion of my study and chosen pseudonyms will be used to identify all participants, thereby ensuring anonymity.

1) Explain how grade repetition decisions were made when [child] was retained.

2) Detail all you can recall about [child’s] reaction to the decision to repeat X grade.

3) Please share all the details you may recall regarding [child’s] experience before, during, and/or after repeating X grade in elementary school. These details will help develop a comprehensive story of [child’s] grade repetition experience.

4) Detail the manners in which [child] may have received support before, during and/or after their grade repetition at school?

5) Explain any challenges [child] may have faced before, during, or after their grade repetition.
6) If [child] repeated X year in your classroom, how did his/her first year in the grade compare with his/her repeat year. Describe any positive and/or negative differences you may recall after the decision was made, within the repeat year, and/or in the years following the repetition.

7) Detail any changes noted in [child’s] relationships with peers and/or teachers.

8) If you can recall, please detail any discussions [child] may have with parents, teachers, and/or counselors regarding the retention decision.

9) Closure: Is there anything else you would like to share about [child’s] life story and the connections his/her grade repetition may have played to bring him/her to the present life situation?

Thank you for participating in this interview and recalling life events and experiences as they relate to [child’s] grade repetition. I will soon send a copy of the transcript from this interview to you for review, comments, and verification. I welcome any changes you deem necessary. Please be sure to focus your attention that the data is recorded truthfully and tells your story as it relates to grade repetition experiences regarding [child]. Remember pseudonyms will be used to protect your anonymity and all transcripts will be kept confidential and destroyed after three years’ time.
Appendix F

Life History Grid

Participant’s Name (Pseudonym) ____________________________________________

NOTE: Details acquired from student school records will be placed ahead of the first interview in the accurate age locations within this grid. This grid will then be used to help plan questions and guide participant recall of specific life events throughout each interview session.

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Thank you for participating, reviewing, and helping me add details to the life history grid. Together, with the information in this grid we will work to reconstruct the details of your grade repetition experience.
Appendix G

Transcriber Confidentiality Statement in a Research Study

School: Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Researcher: Kathleen Kay
Study: Experiences with Grade Repetition: A Narrative Inquiry Using a Resiliency Lens

Transcriptionist Confidentiality Statement Agreement in a Research Study

I am asking you [name] to take part in a research study as a transcriptionist. The data collected will be one-to-one audio-recorded interviews. A recording device will be used in this research and you will use this device to transcribe all information. You are responsible to transcribe the audio from the recording device to ensure accurate written reporting of the audio information provided. You will not discuss any information with anyone other than the researcher. You are not allowed to disclose or reveal names or other identifiers, nor are you authorized to use information for any publication or for personal gains of any kind. You are responsible for storing the data received in locked files before and after transcription, and must destroy this information within two weeks of completing the transcription.

1. I agree to not use or disclose the audio received for any personal or professional purpose other than transcribing it for the researcher.
2. I agree to use appropriate safeguards to prevent inappropriate use or disclosure of the data received.
3. I agree to all the terms above.

Transcriptionist Signature: ______________________________________________________

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

Student Researcher: Kathleen Kay, 120 Brook Street, Brookline, MA, 02445, 617.230.5483. E-mail: kay.k@husky.neu.edu

Principal Investigator: Dr. Tova Sanders, Northeastern University, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts, 02115. E-mail: t.sanders@neu.edu

Who can I contact about my right as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern
University, Boston, MA, 02115, or at telephone number, 617.373.4588, or at the email address, n.regina@neu.edu. You may make the call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

Yes, payment will be agreed upon before transcription work begins.
Appendix H

Scale for Grade Repetition Decision-Making

Light’s Retention Scale (2015) details 19 different aspects of a child’s life for consideration when decision-making. It examines age, sex, knowledge of the English language, physical size, present grade placement, previous retention, brothers and sisters, parents’ school participation, child’s life experiences, family moves, school attendance, intelligence, history of learning disabilities, present level of academic achievement, student’s attitude about possible repetition, student’s interest in schoolwork, immature behavior, emotional problems, and history of serious behavior problems. It reaffirms and warns that there is much to consider before making the crucial decision to repeat a child.