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PUBLIC EDUCATION FUELS THE DEBATE: ACADEMIC OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS SOCIALLY PROMOTED FROM EIGHTH GRADE TO HIGH SCHOOL

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The College of Graduate and Professional Studies

at the University of New England

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Lisa Janosik
June 2017
Educational Leadership

PUBLIC EDUCATION FUELS THE DEBATE: ACADEMIC OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS SOCIALLY PROMOTED FROM EIGHTH GRADE TO HIGH SCHOOL

Abstract

Using archival data, this cross-sectional, descriptive study investigated the path of core course enrollment and completion of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school in a small, urban school district during 2008 to 2012. Supported by research surrounding the development of public education, the debate of retention versus social promotion, and adolescent development, this study delved into social promotion and whether it was an equitable and socially-just educational practice. Though this study quantitatively portrayed a positive outcome for students socially promoted from middle school, the data also showed that a majority of these students continued to perform academically low in high school. Identification of the inconsistencies of student grades led to a discussion of the equity of traditional grading practices and whether they were an accurate portrayal of the knowledge and skills students possessed. Additionally, the available data raised questions about class size and individual instruction impacting the academic performance of these students. Critical reviews of the current educational system along with the establishment of major change are suggested to promote positive adolescent relationships/school bonding, allow equitable assessment of the knowledge and skills of students, and provide individual instruction with smaller core class sizes to meet the academic and social needs of adolescents in a socially-just manner.

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Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A long-time debate in education has been whether retention or social promotion is the best practice for the continued academic success of students, and 40 years later this debate persists (Jackson, 1975). There is the belief that retention is harmful to the educational and social-behavioral development of students (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Frederick & Hauser, 2008; Frey, 2005; Martin, 2011; Muschkin, Glennie, & Beck, 2014; Reschly & Christensen, 2013). Yet, there is support that retention during the early elementary years is beneficial (Jacob & Lefgren, 2009). Studies involving the impact of elementary school retention versus social promotion on the future behavioral and academic success of students abound. Studies involving middle school students do not currently appear as prolific. There is a place for a deeper investigation specifically focused on middle school social promotion and whether it is meeting the needs of our students as a socially-just practice.

In the district studied, students who failed courses at the middle school level were predominantly male and had a fixed pattern of deviant behavior with an established group of like peers (Janosik, personal communication, April 15, 2015). Oelsner, Lippold, and Greenberg (2011) supported this observation by stating that boys began the middle school years with a lower feeling of school commitment. Middle school years span sixth through eighth grades and include the transition years into adolescence. The definition of student commitment or *bonding* to school did vary among studies (Oelsner et al., 2011, p. 464). The researchers of the 2011 study pursued the idea that student bonding included the connections students made at school. This encompassed whether students thought that their teachers cared and respected them, whether they were involved in school or school-related activities, and whether students engaged in the

values and ideologies of the school. They added that the feelings of school commitment for boys continued to decrease through eighth grade. Their study noted that as school commitment decreased incidences of deviant behavior, association with antisocial peers, lower academic achievement, and substance abuse increased. As a partial explanation, Oelsner et al. (2011) noted that the student feelings might have been attributed to natural adolescent development. Supporting and meeting the needs of adolescents during this period of physical and emotional growth compels middle school leaders to take a closer look at this prevailing issue.

Problem Statement

Based on the historical development of public education in the United States, an ongoing debate developed between the use and benefits of social promotion versus grade retention (Carifio & Carey, 2010; Frey, 2005). Correlative and comparative studies supported the pendulum swing back and forth from retention to social promotion. The extant literature focused on the impact of grade retention on the educational and social-behavioral development of students (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Frey, 2005; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Martin, 2011; Muschkin et al., 2014). However, social promotion was a secondary concern to retention research in the literature. Though alternatives were available, social promotion was seen as the lesser of two evils because of the negative impacts and financial cost of retention (Frederick & Hauser, 2008; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Martin, 2011; Reschly & Christensen, 2013).

As a result, social promotion is still used in districts through the middle school years. Students who are socially promoted are the same population of students who would be retained if policies stipulated and were enforced (Frey, 2005). Lynch (2013) stated that the current educational system should be overhauled to eliminate the issues connected with social promotion and retention. Though studies identified the negative impacts of grade retention, unanswered

questions arose about the direct impact of social promotion on students and whether this was a socially-just practice. Further research on the academic outcomes of social promotion on secondary students needed to be conducted. These studies may identify specific factors that would support either continuing or abolishing current educational practices associated with social promotion. This idea was supported by Lynch (2014), who wrote that investigations into current practices are necessary to move forward and improve the public educational system.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this cross-sectional, descriptive study was to use archival data to investigate the path of core course enrollment and completion of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school in a small, urban, public school district during the 2008 to 2012 school years. District administrators, board of education members, secondary educators, school psychologists, and guidance counselors may use the results of this study to evaluate the academic impact of social promotion to develop policies and programs that are socially just and serve the needs of all students.

Research Questions

To investigate the path of core course enrollment and completion of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. Which course enrollment paths do students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade follow at the high school level?
2. What percentage of students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade earn enough core course credits in their first year of high school to be promoted to the sophomore level for their second year?

3. How long does it take students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade to meet graduation requirements compared to the traditional four-year (eight-semester) period?

Conceptual Framework

Meeting the academic needs of all students in order for them to become productive members of society is a primary function of the public educational system. Our current educational system is based on teaching practices that have marginalized low-performing students for over a century (Carifio & Carey, 2010). Personal interests in middle school education with regard to the practices of retention, social promotion, and changing district policies, prompted the research. This study investigated the practice of social promotion in a small urban school district. The study was viewed through the combined lenses of social justice theory and the psychosocial theory of boundary work.

A goal of education is to meet the needs of all students. The role of social justice is to ensure that the needs of the disadvantaged are met (Rawls, 2003). Categorizing students based on academic success is an example of inequity that creates a disadvantaged population. Paulo Freire (1970/2015) wrote how traditional educational practices promoted oppression by regarding students as vessels that teachers fill with knowledge instead of seeing them as creative, inquisitive, individual beings who work with the teacher to gain new knowledge benefiting both parties. Freire went on to say that those students who were more passive about gaining knowledge from the teacher were considered the better students. For those who were not passive, the system categorized these students as the problem. The concern was not to change the system, and meet the academic needs of these non-passive students, but to change the students. The educational system marginalized and penalized these students with failing grades for not fitting

the desired mold of their more successful peers. The action of categorizing students based on academic success created inequity leading to an academically at-risk group of students. Identifying the students as the problem oppressed this at-risk population. Promoting oppression is not socially just. The need for equitable educational practices to meet the requirements of all students is necessary for social justice to prevail. The search for social justice in current educational practices guided this study.

The categorization of students based on academic performance forms additional social and self-imposed boundaries as these students develop. The formation of boundaries to psychologically establish the personal and social identities of students during adolescence is a natural occurrence; yet, some boundaries that form become a hindrance to effective communication and positive educational outcomes. As these obstructing boundaries also aided in putting at-risk students at a disadvantage, the theory of social justice further directed this study.

Assumptions and Limitations

The background of being a middle school science teacher influenced my views and potentially created a bias in this study. These views have evolved over time. In retrospect, this perspective has come full circle, but now a stronger foundation has been built to support current convictions. In the beginning, the idealistic view of making a difference in the lives of all students by building supportive relationships did not take long to fade. Negative and false ideas crept into the thought process. The view began to change to: “What is wrong with some of these students?” Additional questions arose around: “Why can’t they sit, be respectful, listen, do the homework that is assigned, and study?” It did not seem that outrageous to expect students to play their role in their education. An age-old view conveyed through the generations that students, today, lacked the responsibility of students from previous decades surfaced. Veteran colleagues

who also blamed students for not meeting the required expectations and behaviors supported my negative feelings. Other teachers identified their students as “the worst” and “the lowest of the low.” This was mortifying. They labeled these students as intentional non-learners while touting that they, as teachers, were not there to “entertain” these students who chose not to engage. This “support” was toxic.

Solace was found in educational literature. Public education had always had this at-risk population, students who had low academic performance and did not fit the ideal of a “good” student. The needs of adolescents have not always been met. These at-risk students should have received support, not disdain. This was why people were in education. Though having experienced the same frustration as colleagues, I was recharged and wondered how my practice could change to open communication with my students. The goal was to decrease boundaries and increase the academic success of this at-risk population. Colleagues, in turn, advocated retaining these students as an incentive for the students to work harder. This was counterintuitive to adolescent behavior (Anagnostopoulos, 2006).

My current position as curriculum coach for the district allowed access to archival data for the district in this study. Additionally, permission was granted from district administration to use these data for the purposes of the study. This information was housed in the computer database of a student information system. The accuracy and precision of the individuals inputting the initial information into the system were limiting factors to this study. The information was only as good as what had been included in the archival data (Creswell, 2012). The ability to access all the students in the database who met the initial criteria for the study population, and not miss information, was also a limiting factor affecting the accuracy of the results. Furthermore, students who met the initial criteria of being socially promoted from middle school,

and either left the district before graduating or officially dropping out, were not followed. Students marked as inactive without earning a diploma or dropping out were also not followed. These data were identified but potentially limited this study by impacting the results. Though the data available were cross-referenced, there was no guarantee that the data provided were complete.

The study design lent itself to a limitation. A characteristic of descriptive archival research is clear in its name. This study was descriptive. The data collected did not assist in making inferences or deeper connections with individual students. An initial hypothesis was not formed. A descriptive study identifies what is happening in a setting during a specified period (Jackson, 2012).

Significance

Policies and practice that support retention or social promotion are reactive in nature. As educators, our practice should be proactive and supported by research. The current practices of retention and social promotion do not give resolution to this problem within the confines of public education. Middle schools need to be more than holding places for adolescents; instead, they should meet the needs of all students.

The graduation rate of socially promoted students has been found to be higher than like students who have been retained (Frederick & Hauser, 2008). This does not deem the practice to be acceptable. These socially promoted students should not fall through the cracks. This study intended to give a voice to these students.

Looking at what needs to change in public education as opposed to changing a recurring population of students should be considered. These students who are deemed lazy and unmotivated are faulted for their lack of success. As educators lay blame on students for their

intentional lack of participation, the work of Paulo Freire (1970/2015) rings true. The oppressors see the oppressed as the problem. They do not look deeper into the structure of the institution and the need for internal change to allow the oppressed to flourish.

Socially promoted students are the oppressed. These students are marginalized. Their academic needs are not being met as they are passed on to higher grade levels and expectations. This creates inequity within this disadvantaged population. Rawls (2003) identified social justice as meeting the needs of the disadvantaged. This definition created a clear connection to identifying academic outcomes of middle school students socially promoted to high school and social justice. To meet social justice criteria, equitable educational practices need to be implemented. Data were needed to support a transformative change in the current educational practice. Shields (2010) wrote that implementing change through transformative leadership was the path to a more equitable approach to educating students. This path addresses the need to apply equitable educational practices, as it is not the students who have dropped out who have failed, but the educational system has failed students by marginalizing them.

Definition of Terms

Adjusted cohort graduation rate. All states and the District of Columbia since 2015 use this measure to calculate graduation rates. It is calculated by taking the enrollment of first-time ninth graders plus students who transferred in, minus students who transferred out, emigrated, or died during the high school years to graduation. It does not include students earning a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. The study district's core and standard diplomas qualify. The study district has used adjusted cohort graduation rate since fiscal year 2010 (State DOE, n.d.).

Adult education diploma. In the district under study, individuals were able to attend courses through the Adult Learning Center to earn the credits required to graduate. It is the equivalent of a core diploma with 20 credits (School District data, 2016).

Below model grade for age (BMG). A way of tracking retention based on the age of the student compared to their grade level. BMG was used in this study to identify socially promoted students who were older than their peers in eighth grade (Muschkin et al., 2014).

Boundary work. A psychosocial theory based on the self-imposed and social boundaries between individuals or groups. These boundaries may isolate and not allow for effective communication among the participants. Through a common ideal or item, these boundaries are lowered, promoting more effective communication and the attainment of established goals (Riesch, 2010).

Core diploma. A diploma earned by students in the study district, who meet the general graduation requirements and earn 20 of 32 available credits (School District data, 2016).

Dropout. A student who leaves school before graduating or earning a diploma (Ravitch, 2007, p. 80).

Dropout rate. The proportion of students who do not complete high school (Ravitch, 2007, p. 80).

High school equivalency. An alternative to traditional graduation paths. Students successfully complete the General Educational Development (GED) exam. These students have demonstrated the skills and knowledge comparable to a high school graduate (Ravitch, 2007, p. 103).

Promotion. The practice of advancing a student from one grade to the next grade (Ravitch, 2007, p. 175).

Redshirting. The practice, by parents, of not enrolling their children in school until they are older (Muschkin et al., 2014).

Retention. The act or policy of holding students back from advancing to the next grade level if they do not meet established performance standards (Ravitch, 2007, p. 184).

Standard diploma. A diploma in the study district for students who meet the general graduation requirements and earn 27 of 32 credits (School District data, 2016).

Socioeconomic status (SES). The term that describes a family's economic and social position based on income and education. Socioeconomic status in this study was determined by the free or reduced lunch status of students (Ravitch, 2007, p. 199).

Social justice. The theory that all people should be fairly treated and that there is an equal availability of rights, freedoms, and opportunities for all. Additionally, social justice includes ensuring that assistance is given to those who are disadvantaged (Rawls, 2003).

Social promotion. The practice of promoting students with their age group from one grade to the next, even though they have not demonstrated the skills and knowledge considered appropriate for the next grade level (Ravitch, 2007, p. 199).

Conclusion

Social promotion and retention are common educational practices in public school districts. Studies supported that students who were retained had lower graduation rates than students who were socially promoted, and retention incurred substantial financial costs (Frederick & Hauser, 2008). As a result, practicing social promotion may increase graduation rates, and has been found to be financially more cost effective than retention. This does not establish social promotion as a socially-just practice. Students who are socially promoted are marginalized because of their decreased academic success. In addition to a decrease in academic

performance, these same students were also noted to have a decrease in school commitment while demonstrating an increase in deviant behaviors, their association with antisocial peers, and substance abuse (Oelsner et al., 2011). Adolescents experience significant physical and emotional growth, and need unique support. A deeper investigation focused on middle school social promotion, and whether it meets the needs of students as a socially-just practice merited consideration.

A cross-sectional, descriptive study investigating the path of core course enrollment and completion of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school is presented in the last three chapters of this work. These chapters include the methodology, results, and conclusions of the research. The work was guided by the following research questions: 1. Which course enrollment paths do students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade follow at the high school level? 2. What percentage of students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade earn enough core course credits in their first year of high school to be promoted to the sophomore level for their second year? 3. How long does it take students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade to meet graduation requirements compared to the traditional four-year (eight-semester) period?

The next chapter is a review of the literature pertinent to the historical background of public education that established the practices of social promotion and retention as options educators use in placing low-achieving students. Additionally, studies involving retention and social promotion as well as the influencing factors are discussed. Following the literature review, Chapter 2 includes a deeper connection to the conceptual framework of the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this cross-sectional, descriptive study was to investigate the path of core course enrollment and completion of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school in a small urban school district from 2008 to 2012. I wanted to determine what happened to these at-risk students once they entered high school. Advocating for social justice in education, questions arose about whether middle school social promotion was an equitable educational practice and whether the academic needs of these students were met by the current educational system.

Over the past 24 months, literature was gathered on retention and social promotion in public schools. I enlisted not only the databases available through the University of New England Library and Google Scholar, but I also examined resources cited in the more current articles and books found to gain a deeper knowledge of the topics of retention, social promotion, adolescent development, and social justice. Various sources were accessed including professional journals, periodicals, web-based resources, books, and dissertations. Additionally, I communicated through email with Dr. Matthew Lynch, an author and expert in educational reform and equity. Unfortunately, his most current work, *The Educational Assembly Line: How Social Promotion and Academic Retention Ruin Public Education,* will not be published until the end of 2017. This will be a valuable resource in the future and give additional insight into the topics of retention and social promotion. Encouraged by Dr. Lynch that this is a long under-researched topic and that this was the right path, multiple resources created the foundation of this chapter.

Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature surrounding retention and social promotion, which led to a conceptual framework that guided this study on social promotion.

Through a historical view of public education, the stage is set to explain the ongoing debate between retention and social promotion. The research behind retention and social promotion is thematically investigated, and a review of insights from educators, parents, and students is included. This is complemented by a review of adolescent development, as well as an overview of boundary work and student course selection. As educational practice should be guided by research, a discussion of the oscillation between favoring retention or promotion over time is conducted. To highlight the need for change in public schools, the topics of educational reform and social justice in education are presented. Implications for further research are addressed leading to a conceptual framework to support a cross-sectional, descriptive study of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school.

The Set Up: Historical Background of Education

One does not need to be in education to recognize the name of Horace Mann. A supporter of public education in the early 19th century, Mann was integral in developing the modern school system. The Industrial Revolution and a large influx of immigrants further prompted the need for public education. Public education was seen as a way to integrate newcomers into the United States and prepare the future workforce for society. Students were placed in separate classrooms and grouped by age to meet their needs. A teacher led a large class in their lessons. The responsibility of educating the young had moved from the home to the public classroom (Collins & Halverson, 2009).

The Isolation of Low-Achieving Students

This change in educational focus from the home to public education led to grading practices where few students were expected to excel and move on to higher education (Carifio & Carey, 2010). Frey (2005) wrote that this ideology of teacher-led instruction followed by student responses encouraged retention of students who did not respond as expected. The practice isolated low-achieving students. As a result, low-achieving students lacked incentive. These students responded with more deviant behaviors that dug them deeper into a declining academic performance hole from which they were unable to climb out (Carifio & Carey, 2010). This seems eerily familiar as one looks at classrooms today. The description mirrors today's low-performing students.

Looking back, the isolation and lack of motivation had a substantial effect on the academic careers of students. In the early part of the 20th century, there was a 50% retention rate, and more than 20% of students left public school by eighth grade (Frey, 2005). According to Collins and Halverson (2009), a majority of students did not graduate high school until the 1940s.

Public education is a way to meet the needs of society. In the past, public education trained individuals to be obedient workers who would be productive members of society. Today, the world is changing so quickly that many are unable to keep up with new technologies. The original educational reform movement was flexible in meeting the needs of a growing nation and helped move children out of factories as child labor laws were created (Collins & Halverson, 2009). Yet, it quickly solidified into a static entity that rewarded few students and punished many by retaining or socially promoting them. Instead of looking deeper into the structure of

public education, the solution to dealing with underachieving students became a choice of retention or social promotion. This set the stage for the ongoing debate about these practices.

The Debate: Retention vs. Social Promotion

The dichotomy of retention and social promotion had created an ongoing debate. Both options have been studied for decades. The focus of a majority of studies had been on retention. Information on social promotion mainly came as secondary information from these studies. Questions were posed about retention and social promotion. What is known about retention and social promotion? Who are the students who are retained or socially promoted? How do educators, parents, and students view social promotion and retention?

Retention

Reschly and Christensen (2013) stated that there was no benefit to the practice of retention. Their thought was that student accountability in the form of retention would improve academic outcomes. This claim assumed that the students responded rationally and made the needed changes to meet grade-level standards. This was counterintuitive to adolescent development (Anagnostopoulos, 2006). Positive short-term effects have been noted in academics, but these effects did not continue in the long term (Carifio & Carey, 2010; Holt, Range, & Pijanowski, 2009; National Association of State Boards of Education, 2000). Additionally, Stone and Engel (2007) teamed in a qualitative, retention study involving 22 students. The data were collected through interviews before and during the retained year of the students. Interviews of their teachers were also conducted. The authors concluded that retention was not successful without a change in learning strategies. There was also a need not only to implement quality instructional strategies but also teacher guidance. The study found that most students did not receive academic interventions that would promote growth. Instead, the majority

were exposed to the same material and the same strategies. This led to a repeat of the experience from the prior year. The list of negative impacts from retention continued.

It appeared that the negative effects of retention outweighed the positive effects in numbers alone. Students who were retained in upper grades had a higher dropout rate, their academic achievement was lower, and they earned lower wages after high school (Frederick & Hauser, 2008). Jacob and Lefgren (2009) supported these findings. Collecting administrative data from the large urban Chicago Public Schools system, they used a nonlinear regression analysis to study the effects of retention on high school completion. The study population was substantial including 11,777 sixth-grade students and 7,509 eighth-grade students. Additionally, criteria for retaining students were objectively based on data from standardized math and reading test scores. The results of their study supported that older students who were retained were more likely to drop out of high school than students retained at an earlier grade level. They found that these younger retained students were less likely to be retained later. Also, they noted that older retained students moved to a transition center were more successful than earlier retained peers kept in the elementary building.

Adding to the list, Martin (2011) examined the effects of retention and social promotion on academic and non-academic outcomes of high school students. The study population included 3,261 high school students. Controlling the variables of demographics and ability, Martin found that there were significant negative effects of retention on academic self-concept, self-esteem, and homework completion. There was also a positive connection to an increase in maladaptive behaviors ($p < 0.001$). Peer interaction was not affected. A follow-up study that confirmed the results was conducted with a sub-sample of matched students (retained: n =186; promoted: n = 186). Martin is frequently cited as an expert in the field of student motivation and engagement.

He identified further implications for the practices of retention and social promotion. Frey (2005) precluded this work by identifying retained students as having increased stress, tobacco use, and substance abuse; they also had a higher incidence of serving time in jail.

Aside from direct impacts to the retained students, the impact on other students was examined. Older students who were retained were found to have a negative influence on their younger peers. Muschkin et al. (2014) documented that deviant behavior increased with the younger peers of older retained students. The researchers all share a background in quantitative analysis and sociology. Using various forms of linear regression analysis, the authors investigated the influence of retained students on the behavior of their younger peers. The focus of the study was seventh-grade students. The authors used administrative data from all grade six-to-eight middle schools in North Carolina for the 2001 school year. The sample population included 79,314 seventh-grade students from 334 schools in 94 districts. The authors found that students with a higher population of retained students in their class had higher incidences of negative behavior resulting in suspensions. Muschkin and her teammates supported their hypothesis of peer-influence by determining that as the percentage of retained peers increased by 1% the chance of other students demonstrating negative behaviors increased by as much as 3.6%. Additionally, they found that students who were retained had an increased chance of 33.3% over classroom peers of engaging in activities leading to suspension, and a 151.3% greater chance of infractions than those peers who were not retained. The negative impact of retained students on the school community was clear. Policies that supported keeping students on track and not retaining them were suggested as a solution. This study supported the practice of social promotion. The negative effect of retained students on school culture was a reason some districts

moved these students out of middle school even though the students did not demonstrate the skills and knowledge needed to be promoted to high school.

Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) conducted a longitudinal study focused on the academic and behavioral impacts of grade retention on students. In their study, 137 students were identified in kindergarten. Those who continued in the district were followed through eleventh grade (n = 72). The population size was a limiting factor. Yet, as the authors noted, this is a characteristic of this type of study. Using an x^2 analysis, the researchers determined that students who were retained in kindergarten or placed in a transitional classroom for a year prior to first grade had higher dropout rates than students who were recommended for a transitional classroom and instead promoted along with regularly promoted students (19% versus 2%, $p < .02$). Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) analyzed levels of aggression in eighth grade. They found that both retained groups (i.e., retained in kindergarten or placed in a transitional classroom) exhibited more aggression than those students who were low achieving but promoted and students who were regularly promoted. This study identified that early retention could have a negative effect later in adolescence.

The effects of retention on students and their peers have been discussed. Though the outcomes for students should be a primary concern, economics played a significant role in relation to retention. In 2010, each student who was retained cost his or her district over $10,000 per year. These costs increase incrementally each year, meaning it is significantly greater today (Carifio & Carey, 2010). The United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights collected data from over 7,000 school districts and documented that 1,320,686 students K-12 were retained during the 2009-2010 school year (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2015). Multiplying the individual 2010 cost to over a million students made retention a

huge expense when education budgets were tight. Long-term negative outcomes and the cost of retention pointed to a simple solution to save money, that is, to socially promote these students. The actual cost of making the choice to socially promote students may prove to be more than society is willing to pay, despite the initial monetary savings.

Social Promotion

Much of the information found on social promotion was supporting retention studies. Through these studies, social promotion appeared to have fewer negative results. Compared to retained students, there had been higher graduation rates for students who were socially promoted. Frey (2005) found that retained students had a graduation rate of 24% while socially promoted students had a 52% graduation rate. Additionally, it was also noted that the financial cost of social promotion was considerably less than retention (Carifio & Carey, 2010). These studies supported that the negative effects of retention were not seen as often in students who were socially promoted. As a result, the thought that social promotion did no harm and was a viable option extended the debate.

It was noted that social promotion might frustrate struggling students, and teachers may not attempt to raise these students academically (Carifio & Carey, 2010). Carey teamed with Carifio, a professor of cognitive psychology and research, to explore the practice of modified grading in relation to student retention and social promotion. The cause of these practices stemmed from political and economic influences on education that called for lower dropout rates. According to the authors, the traditional grading practices were archaic. They noted that modifying the practices to allow more students to be academically successful was not a solution, and would lead to the social promotion of an increasing number of individuals. Reinforcing these findings, Lynch (2013) wrote that social promotion lowered academic standards and that having

students not performing at grade level made it difficult for teachers to focus on students who were at or above grade level. Frey (2005) concluded that the choice of social promotion was not focused on the student or on academics, but was directed to a less harmful and economically feasible choice. This defeated the purpose of education and negated why teachers were in classrooms. Meeting the needs of all students should be a priority. Who are these at-risk students who might be retained or socially promoted?

Retained or Socially Promoted Students: Who Are They?

As educators look at the students in middle school classrooms, they are looking at the students from the past. There are those who are considered "good" students. They are quiet, pay attention, recite from memory, and produce work on time. They will be promoted. At the other end of the spectrum, there are students who are disruptive, do not pay attention, do not memorize basic items, and do not produce work on time. The thought is that if these low-achieving, unmotivated, or lazy students know that they will be held back that they will be encouraged (threatened?) to perform better academically.

Retained students. Warren and Saliba (2012) noted that a majority of students who were retained were minorities and/or of low socioeconomic status (SES). Oelsner et al. (2011) looked deeper into the life of middle school students. They traced the path of school bonding in adolescents through their middle school experience. Experts in adolescent development and developmental psychology, they used the roles of gender, academic achievement, delinquent behavior, antisocial peers, and substance abuse to examine the effects on the developmental process. The study population included 2,902 students from rural and urban schools. Importantly, the population also included equal representation of gender. Student surveys were used to collect the data. The subjects were followed from the beginning of sixth grade through the spring of

eighth grade. An in-depth quantitative analysis was conducted. A clear description of the limitations and findings of the study supported the validity of the results. The study concluded that boys began middle school with a lower attachment to the school community than did girls. Boys also had a greater decrease in their school association by eighth grade and demonstrated lower academic achievement. These boys not only exhibited deviant behavior; they also had a group of like-minded peers. The authors found that the parents of these academically low-achieving students had minimal education.

Adolescent peer relationships. Further information on adolescent peer relationships was sought to inform this penchant for like-minded peers. Kiefer, Alley, and Ellerbrock (2015) concluded that positive academic and social relationships of both teachers and peers encouraged a positive learning environment by improving motivation, engagement, and school belonging in middle school students. Ojanen, Sijtsema, Hawley, and Little (2010) wrote of the importance of peer friendships in adolescence. Friends helped adolescents identify and find themselves. The study encompassed the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of early adolescents on friendship selection. Structural equation modeling estimated the relationship between motivation and friendship quality. It was found that extrinsic motivation showed a decrease in friendship quality over time, and intrinsic motivation promoted higher friendship quality over time. Though social influences were noted in both, these influences were higher with intrinsic motivations. The authors mentioned that peer groups and a sense of belonging were very important during the adolescent years. The number of friends was less important than the quality of the friendships. Failing students had friends who promoted deviant behavior (Oelsner et al., 2011). As these relationships gave adolescents a sense of belonging, the motivation of these relationships was important.

Boundary work. Ojanen et al. (2010) wrote that friends helped adolescents form their social identities. The connection to establishing boundaries and social identity in social science was clear (Riesch, 2010). Boundary work was originally formed to understand the push to separate science and non-science (Gieryn, 1983). The theory developed into a way to intercede between differing groups to involve all stakeholders and open communication to promote action. The goal was to advocate for positive outcomes or policy change (Clark et al., 2016). According to Clark et al. (2016), the core belief of boundary work was that deep communication between groups or stakeholders would not be established or continued if a solid wall or boundary was constructed or maintained. Additionally, if the boundary was too open, personal opinions came into play. As a result, knowledge and action based on research did not surface. The authors went on to identify the use of *boundary objects*, which were tangible items produced collaboratively by all stakeholders (p. 4615). Riesch (2010) also detailed boundary objects (p. 454). These items preserved the social identity of the groups or individuals and gave the stakeholders common ground from which to work (Clark et al., 2016; Riesch, 2010). Clark et al. (2016) found that boundary objects were instrumental in successful boundary work. They also concluded that the items that worked the best were specific to the context. In other words, though they gave examples of plans, maps, or standards, there was not a one size fits all concept with developing these collaborative objects. Riesch (2010) elaborated on the extended uses for the theory of boundary work outside of science. He stated that Geiryn's idea of boundary work, though originally used to defend the interests of science from non-science groups, could be used in other social science studies. Riesch (2010) took this further by noting that even Geiryn acknowledged that boundary work would be helpful to investigate other social communities. As social identity

and the natural formation of boundaries are key factors in adolescent development, utilizing boundary work to open communication among educators and at-risk students is a valid ideology.

Course selection path. Student course selection and teacher course recommendations are part of an adolescent's academic career through high school. Who and what influences student course selection at this age level? Bokhorst, Sumter, and Westenberg (2010) showed that adolescents ages 16-18 perceived a change in the levels of overall parental and peer support. During this time in their development, adolescents believed that they received more social support from their peers than parents. This was a change because parental and peer supports were considered equal during elementary school. Student perceived teacher support also decreased for this older age group. These findings were attributed to adolescents moving toward independence as they formed their social identities. Additionally, Bokhorst et al. (2010) recognized that girls perceived more support from teachers and friends than boys did. Flashman (2014) supported these findings by stating that peers influenced a student's academic results. Students with peers who were academically successful were more likely to improve their academic results.

Riegle-Crumb, Farkas, and Muller (2006) focused on peer-influence for advanced course selection. Their study used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and an additional component, the Adolescent Health and Academic Achievement study to examine over time the influence of peers on student academics. Their study supported that the academic performance of same-sex peers had a significant influence on all course selections for girls. Though effects were positive for male students, the findings were not significant enough to suggest a connection in this setting. The researchers also noted that the influences of the academic performances of peers on female students selecting math and science courses were

greater than other courses. This suggested that female peer support balanced gender bias in these courses.

Cavanagh and Fomby (2012) noted a link between family instability impacting adolescent educational careers and the pattern of course selection. Cavanagh, an associate professor at the University of Texas, specializes in family demography involving its impact on adolescents and their transition to adulthood. Fomby, an associate professor at the University of Colorado, also has an interest in the effects of family structure on children. They used math courses for the data on course selection because of the clear path of course choices. They analyzed these data with the archival data retrieved from the family structure reports of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (n = 6,545). They found that family instability impacted students' course path more in schools that had a higher academically-focused student population. They also found that the widespread presence of family instability in a school did not lessen the individual experience of family instability in predicting course-taking patterns.

Independently, Catherine Riegle-Crumb (2006) used the Adolescent Health and Academic Achievement study to investigate student course selection paths (males n = 3048; females n = 3693). Though both genders were included, her end results focused on African-American and Latino males. Using descriptive statistics and hierarchical linear modeling, Riegle-Crumb (2006) found that Latino and African-American students of both genders tended to begin high school in math courses lower than algebra I. Her study also noted that 20% of Latino and African-American males who did begin high school with algebra I were less successful than their White and Asian peers and were less likely to pursue advanced math courses by the end of high school. Males who earned higher grades in algebra I also were less likely to select advanced math courses. This was not the case for their female counterparts. These findings supported that

Latino and African-American male students experience greater obstacles that affected the path of their high school course selections in math.

Student behavior. Behavior surfaced as a common attribute in a number of studies. Jimerson et al. (2006) stated that absences, academics, and/or behavior were what led to retention. Retained students were not of lower intelligence. Martin (2011) supported this finding. Retained middle school students were categorized as unmotivated or having behavioral problems. This meant that retained students were not necessarily of low ability.

Socially promoted students. Students who are socially promoted are typically the same students who would otherwise be retained. As a result, they have relatively the same demographics as the retained students previously discussed. Socially promoted students were minority children and/or were of low SES (Warren & Saliba, 2012). Since these students were the same, Frey (2005) identified no difference in the academic intelligence between retained and socially promoted students. The research involving adolescents, peer friendships, and behavior established a background of who was representative of students retained and socially promoted. (Frey, 2005; Jimerson et al., 2006; Martin, 2011; Oelsner et al., 2011; Ojanen et al., 2010; Warren & Saliba, 2012). Educators, students, parents, and the people in the community have a vested interest in the decisions being made that will ultimately affect the future impact of these adolescents on society. How do the main stakeholders view this debate?

Views of the Stakeholders

Perception is reality. It is very important to recognize the feelings of retention and social promotion from the point of view of applicable stakeholders. Lynch (2013) wrote that any change in practice should include the stakeholders. Though this may encompass administrators,

counselors, psychologists, taxpayers, employers, and others, the focus of this review was teachers, parents, and students.

Educators. According to An (2015), educators have differing views of retention and social promotion. Her study was based on data collected from interviews with six educators where the practice of retention recently had been replaced with social promotion. She identified several limitations to the study. One was time, which kept her from including additional educators, parents, and students in the data collection. Another limitation was her sample population. She noted that the population was all female and that further studies including males should be conducted. The outcome of the qualitative study showed that 50% of the educators supported retention and 50% supported social promotion. The educators who supported social promotion were from a high school environment. Two-thirds were administrators. Those who favored retention were all teachers from elementary or middle school. The variable of the assignment of the educators was linked directly to their preference regarding retention or social promotion. Another outcome of the study was that no matter the practice, a common intervention for low-achieving students was to give more tutoring time. Social promotion was directly addressed in this resource. This was a small study, and may not reflect the thoughts of others. Future investigations into the views of educators would add to this body of knowledge.

Teachers have differing views on the practice of retention and social promotion, but what are the teachers' views of the students involved? Stone and Engel (2007) wrote that teachers believed students needed more individualized instruction to overcome the gaps or challenges and improve retention. The teachers also thought they could not do that and sufficiently meet the needs of the other students in their classroom. Additionally, student behavior influenced how

teachers viewed retained or socially promoted students. Teachers viewed these students differently from those academically at grade level.

During the same period, Anagnostopoulos (2006) conducted an in-depth qualitative study on the implementation of a district-wide merit promotion policy. Her methods included interviewing teachers and students. In addition to the interviews, the study included over 56 hours of classroom observations. She found that ending social promotion and instituting a merit promotion system where students needed to pass a test or be retained did not improve the school academically. Instead, it divided the population into *deserving* and *undeserving* students. This essentially excluded the undeserving students from educational opportunities because teachers did not think of the students as inept, but instead as lazy. An identified problem was that students with true difficulties were grouped with those deemed lazy.

Parents. Parents are important stakeholders as well because parental involvement contributes to the increased success of their children (Jeynes, 2011; Jimerson et al., 2006; Lynch, 2013). Agreement on the amount and type of parental involvement ranged from one end of the spectrum to the other. Jeynes (2011) gave a historical background of parental involvement in education, as well as an overview of its acceptance in practice over time. He then moved to the ideologies and impact of parental involvement on student success. The conceptual analysis was important, as it displayed that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work. Different types of students varied in their response to parental involvement. Additionally, there was a focus on the level of parental involvement and the family structure on the academic success of minority students. Children with limited parental involvement and unclear family structure were the majority of retained and socially promoted students. Parenting style, expectations, communication, and reading with their children had greater impact on student success than

checking homework or attending school functions. This research delved deeper into the lack of motivation of at-risk students and showed that the reason behind the level of student academic achievement is multifaceted.

With respect to the practice of retention and social promotion, parents thought the most common reasons for retention were situational stressors, poor behavior patterns, lack of preparation for the grade level, and a lack of interest in school (Lynch, 2014). Students agreed with these reasons and had more in-depth reactions to retention and social promotion.

Students. The reactions of students to retention were profound. Lynch (2014) wrote, no matter the reason for retention, students felt victimized by their teachers and were angry about being retained. Jimerson et al. (2006) noted that sixth-grade students thought that retention was a very stressful event. They equated it with the loss of a parent or going blind. According to Stone and Engel (2007), students who were retained thought they were doing the same thing they had done the year before. As a result, the researchers reported students lacked motivation. Vedder-Weiss and Fortus (2011) conducted a mixed methods study in Israel confirming a decline in the academic motivation of students during the middle school years. They gathered quantitative data from 1,270 fifth- to eighth-grade students. The group was divided into 658 participants from traditional schools and 612 from democratic schools. Student choice was more common in democratic schools while in traditional schools the education department decided the courses taken by students. Qualitative data involving student perception was gathered through interviews. This included 106 students, 54 from traditional schools and 52 from democratic schools. The subjects were chosen based on parental approval and availability. The authors noted that there was a greater decline in motivation in the traditional schools compared to the democratic schools. They further identified a connection between school culture and motivation.

Students also voiced that they had an unclear view of what was expected from them when the teacher did not make the learning goals clear. This lack of academic clarity decreased student motivation and lowered performance. The results of the study reinforced previous findings on the decline of student motivation during the middle school years. This decline in motivation may result in student failure, leading to social promotion or retention.

The Outcome: Is Indecision a Decision?

Edgar Schein (2006) wrote that if one or more people proposed a solution, the solution might become the choice because if no one else offered alternative ideas or vocally disagreed with the proposal, the silence meant consent. Throughout the years of public education, either retention or social promotion has been favored as a solution. The decision to support one over the other has fluctuated over the years. The debate has been allegorized as a pendulum in constant motion, swinging from one extreme to the other (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2000).

Retention or Social Promotion: Which is Favored?

Research specialists Tingle, Schoeneberger, and Algozzine (2012) wrote that retention did not address the achievement gap for the academically struggling or disengaged students. The research focused on the characteristics of elementary and middle school students retained and the effects of retaining those students. The data from this study did not support retention as a strategy and encouraged further research into practices that would truly meet the needs of these underachieving students. The article included a very clear chart outlining the literature on grade retention. This chart contained the methods and conclusions of said literature. The article showed a plethora of studies available on the effects of grade retention. A connection between the demographics of the retained students and socially promoted individuals was also reported. With

limited studies of middle school students, this article provided insight about that target population and encouraged further studies of alternative practices. The authors claimed retention was *educational malpractice*, and that there was little support for continuing the practice. Currently, retention in eighth grade is not favored by a majority of the Northeastern United States (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2015). New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts are the exceptions. Using the data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education, 10.8% of eighth-grade students retained in the United States during the 2011-12 school year were from the Northeastern United States. Only 1.9% of eighth-grade students retained were from New England. Retention is more common in southern states (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2015). Ironically, though retention is not currently favored, the district under study is considering returning to the practice.

The swinging pendulum. Retention rates were high in the early 20th century. Dropout rates were also high. As time went by, there was a swing in the other direction to favor social promotion, but during the 1950s, retention of low performing students began to resurface for political reasons with the advent of the Cold War (Carifio & Carey, 2010). This practice was not sustained for long.

Again, social promotion was on the rise in some areas of the country during the mid- to late 1960s. Frederick and Hauser (2008) showed a return to retention during the 1970s. At the beginning of the next decade of the 1980s, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction and favored social promotion. Frey (2005) documented that during the mid-1980s to 1990s, 28% of students in the United States had been retained by eighth grade. Frederick and Hauser (2008) wrote that the early- to mid-1980s showed a decrease in retention. This discrepancy was thought to stem from retention being tracked in different ways. Two approaches that researchers used to

track retention measured either the *incidence* or *prevalence* of retention (Frederick & Hauser, 2008, p. 719). The incidence of retention reported the proportion of students retained in the previous year. The prevalence of retention reported the proportion of students who had experienced retention. These are very different measures, as prevalence is a summation of a student's exposure to retention. To add to the discrepancy, Frederick and Hauser (2008) identified that the national data for incidence of retention was incomplete prior to 1995. An alternative measure to track retention was needed.

***Tracking retention*.** One common way to track retention is using *below model grade for age* (BMG) data. This technique used the students' age in relation to grade. These studies corrected for the practice of *redshirting*, which is when parents hold students from entering public school until they were older (Muschkin et al., 2014). Correcting for redshirting, studies conducted in the late 1980s to early 1990s, did show some short-term gains to retention. However, those same studies found a lack of positive long-term academic effects of retention (Carifio & Carey, 2010). As a result, the percentage of retained students dropped in the mid-1990s to 20% (Frey, 2005).

Political influences. Frey (2005) wrote that changing educational stances on retention were generated by political rhetoric. This was clear not only in the 1950s but also in 1998 when there was a call to end social promotion in President Clinton's State of the Union Address (Carifio & Carey, 2010). Using a formula to calculate retention based on enrollment in first grade, Warren and Saliba (2012) wrote that retention of first graders was high from the 2003 to 2009 school years. The trend in retention at consecutive grade levels continued to decrease with a minuscule upswing during the middle school years. According to Warren and Saliba (2012), 450,000 students were retained each year from 2003 to 2009. That was a tremendous number of

children who faced the negative impacts of retention. The cost of retaining that number each year was inconceivable. That money could be redirected into programs that may have met the needs of these low-achieving students. Additionally, when these data were analyzed on a state by state level, there was no consistency across the country. Retention rates for those years ranged from 0 to 6% depending on the state (Warren & Saliba, 2012). A question arose about a connection to the increased retention rates of first-graders between the 2003 to 2009 school years and the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

With an interest in high-stakes testing, Wakefield (2012) investigated promotion rates compared to failing standardized test scores. NCLB outlined that students in grades three, five, and eight needed to pass state tests to be promoted. NCLB was signed into law in January 2002. A loophole required districts to report only passing scores and they did not need to report promoted students (Wakefield, 2012). There was a decrease in retentions beginning in second grade (Warren & Saliba, 2012). Districts did not need to report retentions or promotions. Could this finding support evidence that social promotion was still in practice, even with NCLB in place?

Wakefield (2012) brought to light that a majority of students who failed academic proficiency tests were promoted anyway, even with NCLB in place. Wakefield pointed out the arbitrary nature in the interpretation by states and districts in regard to meeting promotion standards. Policy did not always influence practice. The author noted that students who had parents advocate for them were more likely to be promoted with failing test scores while their peers without the support were retained. This article was poignant for not only the identification of policy versus practice but also the inequity of the practice. The practice in the small urban

district under study for this paper was to promote all students through middle school. The policy stated that the majority of students were to be promoted, allowing for retention when warranted.

In 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This law updated and replaced NCLB. The new law gives more control and flexibility to the individual states. Though prescribed testing is required for math, English, and science across specific grade spans, there is no requirement that these tests are to be used for promotion or retention purposes. This law will be fully in effect during the 2017-2018 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

What is the Final Decision?

The fluctuation continues between these practices. Reschly and Christensen (2013) identified the practice of retention and social promotion as a dichotomy though, in reality, it should not be so clear cut. They noted the swing of the pendulum as one practice came into vogue and the other fell out of favor. This depiction of extremes suggests that the choice was only one or the other without alternatives, which may not be the case. The authors mentioned the importance of documenting interventions during the retained or promoted year, as this would influence student outcomes. If social promotion was chosen, a positive side was that it allowed the student the opportunity to move forward academically instead of repeating material. Still, when practiced, the effects of social promotion and retention were far reaching.

Lynch (2014) explained the societal costs of the decision between social promotion and retention. Additionally, the impact of these practices on the future academics of the involved students was discussed. Lynch wrote of the further reaching impact on families, teachers, communities, employers, higher education institutions, and the economy. Lynch also reported that the academic effects of social promotion were not decisive and warranted further study. He

stated that social promotion did not help students academically and limited their potential. From this article, social promotion versus retention was the lesser of two evils, but the long-term effects reached outside the classroom. His research spoke directly to social promotion and the need for further study of the academic effects of the practice.

Furthermore, forces outside of academia swayed the choice between retention and social promotion. The political influence toward retention and student accountability was strong moving into the 21st century. Even with this direction, Frederick and Hauser (2008) found that reality did not support this focus on greater accountability. Sociologists Frederick and Hauser examined data to see if there had been a shift in the percentage of retained students over time. They used the identifier of BMG to represent retention. The lack of accuracy created by using BMG as an identifier was noted as a limiting factor in the study. The researchers conducted a linear regression analysis of demographic data collected from the school enrollment supplements of the *Current Population Survey* generated by the U.S. Census Bureau. They concluded that except for very young children, retention rates have decreased over time. As a result, the study supported the finding that the political objective to reduce social promotion was not successful. The term *no child left behind* took on a different meaning in light of current practice.

The need for further study. The research on social promotion and retention was not inclusive. Further studies focusing on middle school students should be conducted on the academic and social effects of these current practices. This would increase the knowledge base as retention/promotion policies are drafted. States and districts write their own promotion policies. States and communities may even develop norms for these practices independently of the current views (Reschly & Christensen, 2013). The district under study will be amending its promotion policy to meet the new state guidelines. These guidelines use the language of

promoting from one learning level to another based on achievement of district competencies (State DOE, 2014).

The need for educational reform. Lynch (2012; 2013) stated that the debate between retention and promotion continued not only for economic or political reasons but also because of the desire to keep the original foundation of public education in place. The ideology that students needed to be in grade levels based primarily on age, and that they all needed to achieve a certain level of knowledge and skills by specific times was most important. Student learning was not in the equation. Lynch, an award-winning author, compiled extensive resources to lead a discussion on the pitfalls of retention and social promotion. Acknowledging that both these practices happen in the United States, Lynch went on to explain how these practices are ruining public education. He stated that the United States would continue to underperform until alternative interventions were employed. Doing away with the choice of one practice over the other should be encouraged. In his 2013 study, Lynch reviewed the current literature on alternatives to social promotion and retention. The focus of the interventions was to break the failure cycle. The article concluded that the current education system was not designed to support these interventions and that an overhaul was needed to eliminate the negative outcomes associated with social promotion and retention.

Looking at the current educational system as a whole, teachers are in classrooms to promote student learning. Realizing that students do not learn the same way at the same time is imperative to the future success of public education. Educators are no longer training obedient workers to join the workforce. They need to develop thinkers who can handle the eminent changes that are taking place now and in the near future. Until this ideology is realized, the debate of whether social promotion or retention is the best decision will continue.

Equity and social justice. When thinking of equity, social justice, and education the works of Paulo Freire come to mind. Freire (1970/2015), a famed Brazilian educator and philosopher, thought education should be a way toward liberation and not oppression. He spoke of oppressors losing their humanity as they oppressed others. He believed that it was through the resistance of the oppressed as they sought freedom that the oppressors would also be freed. Ultimately, humanity would be restored to all. He acknowledged the contradictory nature of this statement.

Freire's leading work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was written in 1968, and first translated into English in 1970. He expounded on the concept of *banking* in education (p. 71). Banking in education was the process where teachers bestowed knowledge to the students. In doing so, educators justified their positions, creating a cycle. He affirmed that this established educational practice decreased the creativity of the students. This prohibited critical thinking, leading to oppression. Those who conformed to the practice by remaining passive were rewarded, yet passive in their learning. Those who did not conform were isolated. These students were labeled outsiders in need of integration. Freire (1970/2015) emphasized, "The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they become 'beings for themselves'" (p. 74).

John Rawls (2003) addressed the ideology of social justice. Drawing from Kant's theory of utilitarianism, he equated *justice with fairness* (p. 3). He believed that justice not only included an equal availability of rights, freedoms, and opportunities but also that assistance should be given to those who were disadvantaged. His theory was based on a hierarchy of principles that allowed an evaluation of a system or situation to determine if it was socially just.

Perspectives on access to appropriate and fair education are informed by the tenets of

social justice. A change in educational practice should be guided by supporting not only a disadvantaged population of students but also an entire population of students through encouraging creativity and stimulating critical thinking. Equity is attained through change. The works of Freire and Rawls advocating for social justice provides deeper insight into the ongoing debates surrounding social promotion.

Summary

A review of the establishment and development of public education in the United States provides a deeper understanding of the current educational practices of retention and social promotion. The concept of teacher-directed education with student responses isolated students who did not respond as expected (Frey, 2005). As a result, retention rates and dropout rates were high in the first half of the 20th century, and a majority of students did not graduate high school prior to the 1940s (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Frey, 2005).

Though educational reform met some of the needs of a growing nation and provided a better environment for children to develop, it was restrictive to a majority of students by rewarding only a few and punishing many (Collins & Halverson, 2009). The solution to working with underachieving students became the dichotomy of retention and social promotion.

Studies supported findings that retention had negative effects on graduation rates, academic achievement, behavior, and post-high-school wage earnings (Frederick & Hauser, 2008; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009). Frey (2005) added that retained students had a higher incidence of tobacco use, substance abuse, and a higher chance of serving jail time. These negative effects were compounded by the additional financial cost of retaining students (Carifio & Carey, 2010). The main arguments in favor of social promotion included higher graduation rates compared to retention and monetary cost savings (Carifio & Carey, 2010; Frey, 2005).

Retained or socially promoted students were identified as having similar demographics. Warren and Saliba (2012) noted that a majority of these students were minorities and/or of low SES. Though negative behaviors were noted in these students, they were not necessarily of low-ability (Jimerson et al., 2006; Martin, 2011). Oelsner et al. (2011) conducted a study that supported that boys not only began middle school with a lower connection to the school community than girls did; they also had a greater decrease in school association by eighth grade. It was noted that these students also had a group of like-minded peers. Peer relationships were needed during adolescence to help teens form their social identities (Ojanen et al., 2010).

Over the decades, the practices of retention and social promotion have been in and out of favor. This change was often equated with the swinging of a pendulum (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2000). This swinging pendulum over the decades has been influenced by economic and political rhetoric. At the beginning of this century, an influential political iteration was NCLB (Wakefield, 2012). This policy has since been updated and replaced with the ESSA, which was signed by President Obama in December 2015. It will be in full effect during the 2017-2018 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

In addition to economic and political influences, a desire to keep public education unchanged continued the debate (Lynch, 2012; 2013). Lynch (2013) encouraged educational reformers to respond to all students and to do away with the isolating practices of retention and social promotion. He suggested this could not be accomplished without restructuring education and that new interventions should focus on breaking the cycle of failure.

The call for educational reform was not new. Paulo Freire spoke out during the 1960s in response to unjust educational practices. The practice of bestowing knowledge on students stunted creative thinking. Those who conformed were rewarded while those who did not were

labeled as outsiders in need of integration. Freire (1970/2015) thought that integrating these oppressed individuals was not the answer, but instead for social justice to prevail, the structure that was oppressing these individuals should be changed. John Rawls (2003) believed that justice not only included equal availability to rights, freedoms, and opportunities but also that those who were disadvantaged should be given assistance. Both these ideals on social justice inform the debates on social promotion.

In this literature review, a multitude of studies reported positive and negative outcomes of retention. Studies on social promotion were not as prolific. As a result, information on social promotion was secondary to retention studies. As both practices continue in districts across the United States, finding a baseline for the effects of social promotion through a descriptive study prior to the implementation of interventions or a change in practice is warranted. This will enlighten individuals to the practice of social promotion and allow for a comprehensive comparison of studies once interventions or new programs are implemented.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of a study is unique to the researcher and the study. There is no one template that needs to be followed. Developed by the researcher, this framework energizes and guides the work throughout the research process. The components of a conceptual framework include personal interest, topical research, and a theoretical framework (Ravitch & Riggans, 2012). Conceptual frameworks are not necessarily balanced among the components. Identifying the personal, topical, and theoretical influences of retention and social promotion, the following conceptual framework was designed (see Figure 1).

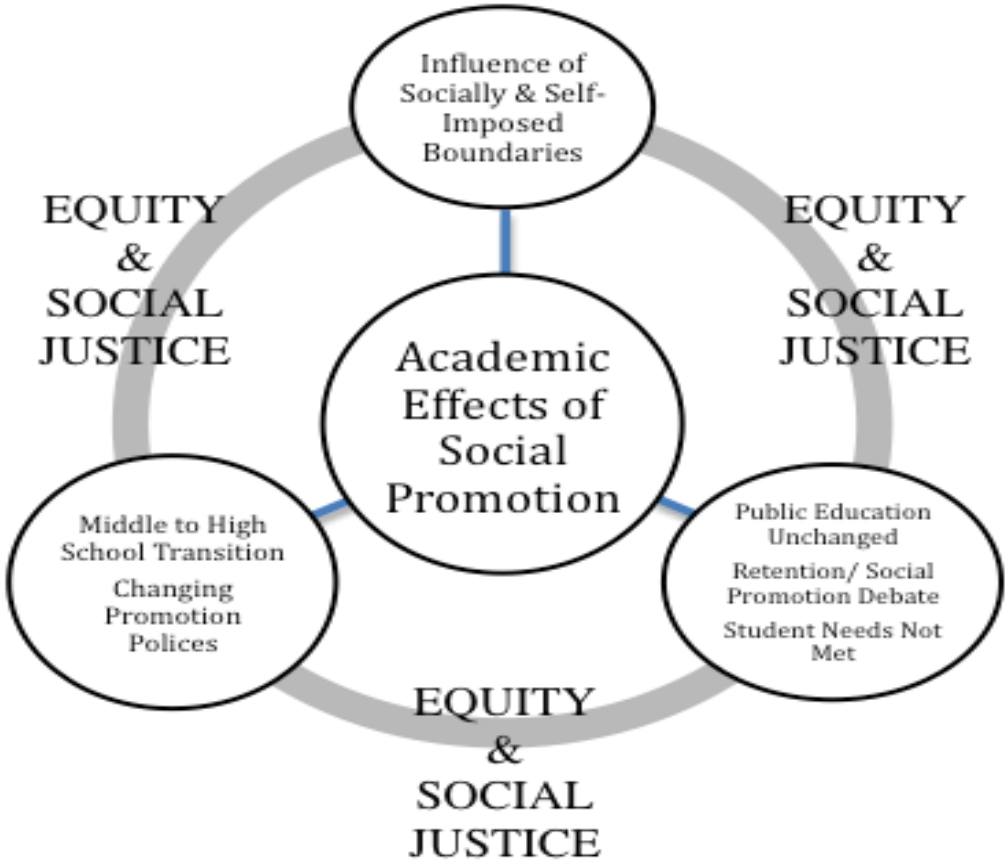

Figure 1. The conceptual framework map guiding the investigation on social promotion.

Personal Interest

Viewed from the position of a middle school teacher, it appeared that many students in the district under study were passed on to high school without meeting academic expectations at the middle school level. They had not demonstrated that they had the knowledge or skills to be successful. Basically, these students had failed courses but had moved on to more difficult content and expectations. What happened to these students once they left the middle school? The solution to this question of whether to retain or socially promote, however, became an opinionated debate among educators in the district. One side felt the need to hold these students accountable, or, in other words, hold them back. The other side felt that this response was punitive without evidence of positive outcomes. Currently, the practice in the study district is to

socially promote students through middle school. Do these students become accountable in high school when they are not held accountable for previous content and skills? Are they being helped or hindered by social promotion? There was a personal interest to investigate the practice before the pendulum swung, again.

My interest in these students not only came from the classroom, but also from the struggle a sibling experienced with the public school system. He was intelligent and well read, far above his grade levels in a variety of genres. He worked well with his hands and was artistically inclined. He had a natural talent for inquiry and problem-solving. He also did not fit the traditional student model. As a result, he was retained twice. He did graduate from high school, but I wondered how different his life would have been if public education had met his needs during the 1960s and 1970s. I saw my brother from a half century ago in the tired, unmotivated, frustrated and, at times, angry eyes of students throughout the school.

Both professional and personal experiences prompted me to investigate the literature about this at-risk population as well as the practices of retention and social promotion. Students who did not meet the expectation and behaviors of "good" students have existed since the beginning of public education (Frey, 2005). The problem ran deeper than generational differences. My view of these students and how I saw my role returned to my new teacher ideals, but with the conviction of the need for systemic change.

The study district was on the verge of changing its policy/practice of social promotion through eighth grade to an official policy including retention. The curriculum had been realigned; yet, numerous teachers still graded in a traditional fashion. Standards-based grading was very slowly being assimilated into K-8 teacher practice. A number of transformations were moving the district forward to respond to the needs of students; yet, a part of the population of

students was currently slipping through the cracks. The need for research within the study district on the effects of social promotion as a baseline before policy/practice changes and other initiatives proceed in the district was apparent.

Topical Research

While investigating the technological changes that have taken place in public education, it became apparent that the structure of public education had not changed dramatically since its inception. Further investigation brought to light that the design of public education rewarded certain individuals and punished others (Carifio & Carey, 2010). In the past, students who did not do well academically could quit school once they reached the state-required age. They could find jobs in the trades or factories. They could make a living, buy a house, and raise a family (Frey, 2005). This is no longer the case. Students need an education to be employable in the technical trades of today. These marginalized students have existed since the beginning of public education. When these students had failed to meet minimum academic requirements, the choice had been social promotion or retention, depending on the political and economic influences of the time (Collins & Halverson, 2009).

There are gaps in the literature directly associated with social promotion. Much of the information found on social promotion was dependent on retention studies. These studies revealed that socially promoted students were the same population of students who would be retained. Specifically, they were minority students and/or of low SES. It was also noted that retention was costly and caused more harm than social promotion by increasing dropout rates. Social promotion became the lesser of two evils (Frederick & Hauser, 2008; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Martin, 2011). In addition, research on adolescent psychosocial development involving

their social identification had a strong association with academically high-risk students (Ojanen et al., 2010).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework involved the integration of boundary work and social justice. Riesch (2010) wrote of boundary work coming from a psychosocial background. This was a direct connection to the literature on adolescent social identification (Ojanen et al., 2010). Boundary work involved the social constructs that individuals placed on themselves and were placed on them by others. It stood out as a key framework for pursuing the topic of social promotion, as boundaries among students had been established since the beginning of public education. Students have been segregated into the “haves and have-nots” according to their academic success. Those who were successful were rewarded while those who were not successful were punished or ignored. As students were socially promoted, another boundary formed. Performing below grade-level expectations in high school courses continued to separate these students from their peers and teachers. These boundaries have put these students at a disadvantage socially and economically.

Building on the theory of boundary work, the lens of equity and social justice connected the components of this study. Through educational practices set in place at the beginning of public education, low performing students have become an oppressed group. Their creativity has been stifled, and critical thinking discouraged. Education was meant to liberate, not oppress (Freire, 1970/2015). A function of social justice is to equitably meet the needs of those who are disadvantaged (Rawls, 2003). A goal of education should be to meet the needs of all students. Categorizing students based on academic success is an example of inequity that creates a disadvantaged population. Challenging injustice is a way of pursuing social justice. To

accomplish this task, educators must apply the theory of transformational social justice to quell this inequity. As there were studies that reported the effects of retention, there are studies documenting the effects of social promotion on this disadvantaged population. Understanding both dimensions of the problem will lead to transformational education practices based on social justice.

Summary

This study was compelled by professional and personal interests based on the needs of middle school students transitioning to high school and the implementation of new promotion policies at the study site. The literature review showed that marginalized students who were socially promoted or retained have existed since the beginning of public education. As a result of the static structure of public education, an ongoing debate over the use of retention versus social promotion to place these students has continued within districts. Theoretically, social, and self-imposed boundaries naturally occurred with all students. Students who were retained or socially promoted experienced additional social and self-imposed boundaries. These boundaries may isolate these students by promoting a lack of communication and common ground creating inequities in their education and the need for social justice. Building on the concept of boundary work, the overarching framework of social justice completed the components of this conceptual framework.

Conclusion

The debate between retention and social promotion found its origin at the onset of public education. The move from the private to the public sector led to grading practices that isolated low-achieving students (Frey, 2005). Retention was prevalent among these low-achieving students. In not meeting their needs, many students left the system by eighth grade and did not

complete high school (Collins & Halverson, 2009). The students seen today in classrooms are reminiscent of these students from the past. Educators are still not addressing the academic needs of all students. The once adaptive reform movement of public education became fixed. Low-achieving students were either retained or socially promoted. These two practices are prevalent today.

Using the foundation of this literature review on retention and social promotion, and guided by the conceptual framework, the stage was set in a small urban school district in the Northeastern United States to conduct a descriptive study involving the path of core course enrollment and completion of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school. To make an informed decision, both sides of the debate between retention and social promotion needed to be presented. The opportunity to collect and analyze data surrounding social promotion was at hand with a strong conceptual framework to support the work. This work adds to the knowledge base as educators move forward with transformational policies and practices that meet the needs of all students. The methodology of this descriptive study is presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Public educators and policy makers have debated the merits of social promotion and retention since the beginning of public education. Though studies have shown that one practice might outweigh the other based on the intended outcomes, taking the stance of social justice for all students calls into question the use of either of these practices in public education. A study about current practice in one district was warranted before initiating a change in policy and practice. The purpose of this study was to investigate the path of core course enrollment and completion of middle school students who were socially promoted from eighth grade to high school in a small urban school district. District administrators, Board of Education members, and school personnel can use the results of this study to evaluate the academic impact for the current practice of social promotion.

This cross-sectional, descriptive study, supported by past research on retention and social promotion, provided data to the above stakeholders to promote informed decisions to develop socially-just policies and programs that serve the needs of all middle school students. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. Which course enrollment paths do students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade follow at the high school level?
2. What percentage of students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade earn enough core course credits in their first year of high school to be promoted to the sophomore level for their second year?

3. How long does it take students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade to meet graduation requirements compared to the traditional four-year (eight-semester) time schedule?

The methodology chapter provides a deeper understanding of the formation, rationale, and ethical concerns of this study. Beginning with a description of the study setting, this chapter progresses with the identification of the sample population. Further information is provided about what data were collected and about the sample population as well as the method of data collection and analysis. Ethical concerns involving the anonymity of participants and their rights were important considerations in this study and are discussed in this chapter. Completing this chapter, the limiting factors of this study are examined. The chapter closes with a summary of the applied methodology.

Setting

The setting for this research study was a small urban school district in the Northeastern part of the United States. This district is referred to as the study district for purposes of anonymity. The city had a population of approximately 88,000 residents (School District data, 2016). During the 2016 school year, between 11,000 and 12,000 students from pre-K to twelfth grade attended public schools in the study district (State DOE, n.d.). These schools included 12 elementary schools, three middle schools, and two high schools. The study district had a diverse population, both economically and ethnically (School District data, 2016). Based on information from the literature review about the demographics of students who were retained or socially promoted, the population of students in the study district allowed for a sample population that was more diverse than surrounding districts. Additionally, the study district was a public school

district where leaders practiced social promotion from middle school into high school, which presented the opportunity to study this practice.

Like numerous districts around the country, the study district recorded and stored student data on a student information system (SIS). This web-based software application not only had the primary function of storing student data for the long term and communicating current information to students as well as parents; it also had the function of producing a wide range of district reports. The SIS used by the study district was Follett Aspen. The scope and ability of the data available on the SIS were evolving as the designers included various upgrades and additional information. As support for teachers, the role of peer coach involved keeping apprised of these changes as well as the process for generating queries and reports; no additional training was required to access the information. Though the data were available to any employee of the study district, permission was requested and granted by the superintendent of the study district to access the data stored on Aspen for the purpose of this study (Appendix B).

Research Sample

The research sample was an inclusive sample of convenience. The archival data housed in the SIS from the study district were the basis for obtaining the research sample. The research sample was determined from the entire population of students spanning five consecutive years. This sample included all students in the study district database who earned a D+ or below as their final course grade for one or more core courses in eighth grade during the designated time span. The study district used a top numerical value of 69 for D+. Core courses were identified as English, math, science, and social studies.

Data

Data were collected through web-based queries from the study district SIS, Follett Aspen. Any printouts to cross reference the data were stored in a locked file cabinet, and shredded after the completion of the study. The data collected were digitally recorded and archived on a spreadsheet stored on a personal computer that was password protected and a personally owned backup drive. Students were identified on the spreadsheet by name to be able to cross reference and gather data from multiple components of the SIS. Names were kept confidential in this file on the password-protected computer. Information such as local identifiers and contact information was not collected or recorded. The following data were collected from the archival system:

- students who earned a 69/D+ or below for one or more of the four core courses in eighth grade,
- core course students earned a grade of 69/D+ or below,
- credits earned during the students' first year to determine if these students earned enough credits to be considered sophomores for the ensuing school year,
- the pattern of core course level enrollment and completion,
- student status (i.e., graduation, dropout, or inactive),
- type of diploma earned (i.e., standard, core, adult education, or General Educational Development),
- length of time from the first year to graduation,
- post-graduate path,
- attendance, and
- demographical data including:

  - gender and
  - race/ethnicity.

In addition to the above data, information available to the public regarding the student population for the study district was collected from the State Department of Education:

- district data spanning fiscal school years 2012 to 2016:
  - graduation rates,
  - student status (graduation/dropout),
  - type of diploma earned (standard, core, adult education, General Educational Development), and
  - post-graduation paths.
- District demographic data spanning fiscal years 2008 to 2016:
  - gender,
  - race/ethnicity, and
  - socioeconomic status (SES).

Data Collection Methods

Initially, five separate queries of data representing five school years were run. The parameters initiated for the search were based on the required age at the time of enrollment into kindergarten beginning with the 1998 enrollment year. The parameters of the first cohort included all students with birth dates on or after October 1, 1993, and on or before September 30, 1994. These queries produced over 2000 initial individuals. This number was narrowed to include only the sample population. The query results directly linked to individual student profiles, which included grades earned for each school year. This allowed the identification of the study population. The queries based on the date of birth were repeated to include the four

subsequent school years. The information from these student profiles was narrowed and established the research sample to include all students who earned a grade of 69/D+ or below in one or more core courses, ultimately identifying the entire study population.

First, students who had left the study district prior to eighth grade were eliminated from the results. Second, the sample was narrowed further, by identifying only those students who earned a 69 or below (D+ to an F) in one or more of the core courses during eighth grade (i.e., English, math, science, or social studies). Using the profiles online to gather the data required for the study, these students were followed through their time in the study district. The students were not followed after graduating or leaving the study district. The collection of data did not include any personal contact with the subjects. The necessary information to conduct this study was documented on a spreadsheet saved on a password-protected personal computer and a personally-owned backup drive. Subject anonymity was a priority during data collection. No contact information that could be traced back to an individual was taken from this digital search and included in the collected data.

Using date of birth as a parameter to determine the research sample allowed for an all-inclusive sample of students from the district database. This method also determined whether students were considered *below model grade for age* (BMG) by the time they reached eighth grade. There was the possibility that students might have been retained during the early elementary years, or they were transferred from a district that retained students. BMG was a variable that was noted, though the reasons for students to be determined BMG were inconclusive given the available data.

To ensure that the data for the first and subsequent cohorts were complete, three additional queries using age were run. These queries included students with birth dates on or

after October 1, 1990 through September 30, 1993. Students in these queries that were in eighth grade during 2008 to 2012 and earned a grade of 69/D+ or below for one or more core courses became part of the sample population. This was to ensure that students who were designated as BMG were included in the sample population.

Demographic and supporting data not included in the student profile such as race/ethnicity, diploma type, post-graduate path, and graduation date were documented from a file generated by a query on the study population. Again, no identifying information that could be directly traced back to an individual student was taken from the query.

Analysis

Once the data had been collected, descriptive statistics were organized and documented. This included the data to answer the three research questions:

1. Which course enrollment paths do students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade follow at the high school level?
2. What percentage of students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade earn enough core course credits in their first year of high school to be promoted to the sophomore level for their second year?
3. How long does it take students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade to meet graduation requirements compared to the traditional four-year (eight-semester) time schedule?

Supporting data, such as student attendance, type of diploma, and student demographics were noted to give a complete picture of the study population. Additionally, the number and percentage of students in the study district from the study population who dropped out were calculated for the five cohorts individually as well as for the entire sample population.

Participant Rights

The consideration of the rights of the individuals whose archived data was being collected was of paramount concern. The required paperwork to conduct this study was submitted to the University of New England Institutional Review Board (IRB), and a letter of exemption was received for the work to proceed (see Appendix A). It was important and a responsibility that in using the archival data students' rights to privacy were maintained as outlined under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). In this case, parents were not involved because parental rights transfer to the student upon majority, and the students in question passed that age. To maintain student privacy and have the permission to waive the need for individual consent forms, the confidentiality standard of FERPA needed to be met. This standard prohibits the release of information that would allow a person in the school community to positively identify a student (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Though the risk involving a breach of privacy cannot be entirely safeguarded, the data collection method outlined previously supported that the risk to individuals was minimal. The reporting of the results of this study also maintained privacy, as the results were not reported individually, but as groups of students. Additionally, the size of the study district aided in assuring individual privacy rights were maintained.

Limitations

A limiting factor in this research was that the study district employed me at the time of the study. This potentially created a conflict of interest as well as other ethical and political considerations (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). Meeting with the district's superintendent and assistant superintendent of data and accountability was important to facilitate open

communication. Both these individuals supported the efforts of this study and had offered to continue to do so through the completion of this dissertation.

As stated in Chapter 1, another limiting factor was the accuracy and precision of the individuals inputting the initial information into the system. The information was only as good as what had been included in the archival data (Creswell, 2012). The lack of information related to teacher course recommendations and final student course selections impacted the results of this study. This connection was not addressed in Chapter 4 because the data were not available to analyze. The ability to access all the students in the database that met the initial criteria for the study population and not miss information was also a potential limiting factor affecting the accuracy of the results. In other words, human error needed to be considered. Additionally, students who met the initial criteria of being socially promoted from middle school, and left the study district before graduating or officially dropping out were not followed. These data were identified but potentially limited this study by impacting the results. Though the data collected were cross-referenced, there was no guarantee that the data were complete.

Finally, the study design had limitations. This study was descriptive, and a characteristic of this type of archival research is that it describes what has been garnered. The data collected did not support making inferences or deeper connections to individuals. An initial hypothesis was not formed. Reiterating from Chapter 1, a descriptive study identifies what is happening in a setting during a specified period (Jackson, 2012).

Summary

A study of a district's current practice of social promotion from eighth grade to high school aided in providing information that could be used as policies and practice change.

The setting for this study was a small urban public school district in the Northeastern part of the United States. The study district had a student population of over 11,000 students pre-K to twelfth grade. Having obtained the permission of the superintendent, data were collected from the SIS of the district.

The analysis of data for this descriptive study was organized and examined to discern the answers to the research questions. Precautions were implemented during the data collection and analysis to reduce the risk of violating individual privacy rights under FERPA and to protect anonymity. Additionally, various limiting factors to this study were addressed, including the scope of the study involving a singular small, urban, public school district and the parameters of a descriptive study.

Chapter 4 describes the analysis method used in this study. The data leading up to the identification of the study population are displayed and discussed. Data concerning the study district give a background to the study population and allow for comparison of the study district and the study population. This information was extended with six case explorations of students who followed different course paths.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this cross-sectional, descriptive study was to use archival data to investigate the path of core course enrollment and completion of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school in a small, urban, public school district during the 2008 to 2012 school years. Chapter 4 explains the analysis method used for this study with the goal to answer the research questions and capture the academic characteristics of this group of students during their high school careers. Data on the study population are presented in relation to the entire study district enrollment during the cohort years; then the background data of the study district are shown as a precursor to the display of the data collected concerning the study population. Complementing these data are six case explorations giving individual perspectives on the variations of student course paths. A summary of the results completes this chapter.

Analysis Method

After obtaining and organizing the data into aggregated and disaggregated tables, the information was reviewed. A descriptive analysis of the data ensued. Publicly accessible data from the State Department of Education provided a background on the study district not only during the years the study population was enrolled in eighth grade but also the four-year span at the end of which these students were originally expected to graduate. This background information set the stage for the presentation of the study population data. The identification of the study population and the subsequent collection of data were obtained through the student information system (SIS) of the study district, Follett Aspen. The data were organized to provide a structured format to answer the following research questions:

1. Which course enrollment paths do students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade follow at the high school level?
2. What percentage of students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade earn enough core course credits in their first year of high school to be promoted to the sophomore level for their second year?
3. How long does it take students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade to meet graduation requirements compared to the traditional four-year (eight-semester) time period?

Presentation of Results

The results are divided into three sections. The first section is the identification of the study population from the total eighth-grade enrollment spanning fiscal year 2008 to fiscal year 2012. The second section contains the background data on the district. Collecting and analyzing data describing the entire population of the study district provides a perspective to the data collected about the study population, as well as identifies trends in the overall population. These data include the racial/ethnic background of students from the study district as well as the socioeconomic status (SES) of the population. The study population data follow the study district data, giving insight into the academic characteristics of a specific population within the district.

Study Population Identification

The detailed process of identifying the study population was addressed under Methodology in Chapter 3. A brief overview follows. The first groupings of students were based on birthdates according to the kindergarten enrollment cutoff dates of the study district. Reports were generated from queries of all students meeting the birth date parameters. Students listed as having kindergarten to eighth grade as the highest grades attained were removed from the

population because they would not be followed into high school. Additionally, students who were documented as leaving the district in high school were also removed. From the remaining lists, students who earned a 69 or below in one or more core courses were identified from their individual transcripts (Table 1). The students who had an enrollment status of inactive and had not earned a diploma or equivalent were identified and removed. These removed students were included in the percentage of students who were academically unsuccessful, yet, not included in the study population. The path of each of these students was unknown. Given the limited information from the SIS on these students, any identification of a path would be subjective and not valid to be included in this study. The remaining students became the study population.

Table 1

Study District: Students with Grades 69 or Below in Eighth Grade 2008-2012

Cohort year	Eighth-grade class enrollment	Grades of 69 or below		Inactive and no diploma	Study population	
	n	*n*	%	*n*	*n*	%
2008	1000	291	29.1	49	242	24.2
2009	927	224	24.2	39	185	20.0
2010	809	183	22.6	43	140	17.3
2011	877	261	29.8	44	217	24.7
2012	850	278	32.7	64	214	25.2

Once the study population was identified, the next step was to move the students from the birth cohorts into their respective years in eighth grade. At this time, students were identified as *below model age for grade* (BMG) if they were moved from a birth cohort that made them older than their peers in eighth grade. Determining why students from the study population might be BMG was not conclusive because the cause could not be determined from the data available.

These students are identified in Table 2. Nonexclusive reasons to be BMG might include delayed enrollment in kindergarten by a parent (redshirting), registration in the district from districts with different enrollment requirements, entrance testing when prior documentation was not available, or retention whether in-district or out-of-district prior to eighth grade.

Table 2

Study Population: Students BMG 2008-2012

Cohort Year	Study population	BMG	
	n	*n*	%
2008	242	43	17.8
2009	185	23	12.4
2010	140	16	11.4
2011	217	22	10.1
2012	214	42	19.6
	998	146	14.6

Note. BMG identifies students who are below the model grade for their age.

Background Data

Background data include the racial/ethnic data and the SES of students in the study district. Data on the racial/ethnic background of students in the study district are included in Table 3. The information covers the school years from the second eighth-grade cohort to the last projected graduation date of the final cohort. Racial/ethnic data were not available for the first cohort year of 2008. The data on the SES of students in the study district are presented in Table 4.

Study district: Racial/ethnic data. Racial/ethnic data of the study district clarify the data collected on the study population. Five racial/ethnic categories are listed in Table 3. These include *Black, Hispanic, White, multiracial, and other*. Students identified as Asian, Pacific

Islander, Native American, or American Eskimo were grouped together under the category of *other* for two reasons. The first was to provide continuity of the information between the study district and the study population data tables. The second reason was that the total population of these students is small and the individual groups are smaller. Separating this group into individual categories for the study population data could lead to the potential identification of individual students. Combining these small populations into one group did not negatively impact the results of the study.

Three items in Table 3 were addressed. First, the total enrollment of the study district decreased by more than 1000 students over the eight years under study. The decrease in enrollment was not reflective of the 1.7% increase of the city population within that period (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Additionally, the distribution of the racial/ethnic population of the study district changed over those years. This encompasses the two additional items to be addressed. The population of White students decreased by 12% (n = 2112) over the eight years and the percentage of minority students increased. Specifically, the Hispanic population increased by 8.1% (n = 774), the population of students identified as multiracial increased by 2.7% (n = 306), and those students who fell under the category of *other* increased by 1.6% (n = 100). The minority student population was increasing in the study district while the majority population of White students was decreasing. Variables that influenced this change in student populations could include the closing of a district alternative school in 2010, and the opening of a public charter school in 2007 that expanded over the years to include sixth through twelfth grade (Academy of Science and Design, 2017). Additionally, a local private school expanded during the years under study, while two kindergarten through eighth grade public charter schools were approved by the state. Local parochial schools have been established since

the early 20th century, and have been a choice for Catholic and non-Catholic residents during the 21st century.

Table 3

Study District Kindergarten Through Twelfth Grade: Racial/Ethnic Demographics 2008-2016

School year	District population	Black		Hispanic		Multiracial		White		Other	
	n	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
2008	No data available										
2009	12,346	479	3.9	1810	14.7	0	0	9199	74.5	858	6.9
2010	12,385	475	3.8	1950	15.8	45	0.4	9008	72.7	907	7.3
2011	12,163	445	3.7	2089	17.2	127	1.0	8572	70.5	930	7.6
2012	11,894	457	3.8	2134	18.0	199	1.7	8174	68.7	930	7.8
2013	11,698	450	3.8	2307	19.7	189	1.6	7842	67.1	910	7.8
2014	11,669	431	3.7	2413	20.7	230	2.0	7671	65.7	924	7.9
2015	11,488	422	3.7	2483	21.6	267	2.3	7347	64.0	969	8.4
2016	11,340	406	3.6	2584	22.8	306	2.7	7087	62.5	957	8.4

Note. Data compiled from the State DOE (n.d.). Data collection and reports. Retrieved from https://www.education.nh.gov/data/

Study district: SES. The SES of students enrolled in districts is determined through their participation in the National School Lunch Program. This is a federally-assisted meal program for low-income families that has been available since 1946 (USDA, 2016). Enrollment data for participation in the program was not archived by the study district, so individual information on the SES of the students in the study population was unavailable. The study district and state data give a perspective on the SES of the student population and are displayed in Table 4.

A number of items stand out from the data in Table 4. Using participation in the National School Lunch Program as a measure of low-SES, the number of students in the study district

identified as low-SES increased by 11.9% from 2008 to 2016. It is also noted that the middle school percentages indicating low-SES in the study district are higher than the overall district percentages by 2% to 3.6% during the 2008 to 2012 school years. These are the school years that encompassed the time the study population was in eighth grade. As the students of the study population moved to the high school, the percentage of students at or below the poverty level at the high school level continued to increase. This change in demographic might have been influenced by the closing of the alternative school. Evidence to support this claim is that the middle school section of the alternative school had percentages identifying low-SES between 86.1% and 91.7% before it was closed (State DOE, n.d.). These students were placed in a program housed in one of the high schools and, at that time, were included in the SES data of the study district. Additionally, based on the data available, unknown variables influenced the rise in the participation of the National School Lunch Program.

The state information is included to give a perspective on the SES of the study district in comparison to state data. The state percentages are lower than the data from the study district. Though the state percentages of students of low SES increased over the nine years researched, the percentage increase in the study district was greater overall. The district increase for grades 9-12 surpassed the state increase for grades 9-12 by 5.7% for a difference of 15.8% by the 2016 school year. Though SES is not available for the study population, the district percentages reveal a pattern of increasing poverty of students within the boundaries of this study.

Table 4

Study District and State: Free and Reduced Lunch Enrollment 2008-2016 (%)

School year	District grades 1-12	District grades 1-8	State average grades 1-8	District grades 9-12	State average grades 9-12
2008	30.6	32.7	21.8	25.3	15.2
2009	31.7	34.4	23.2	26.5	16.5
2010	36.3	38.4	26.3	32.2	19.7
2011	38.3	41.0	27.7	35.7	22.0
2012	40.4	44.0	28.7	37.8	23.1
2013	41.0	44.4	29.3	38.9	23.5
2014	42.2	45.8	30.4	39.3	24.2
2015	42.6	44.9	31.1	39.0	24.8
2016	42.5	44.6	30.3	39.6	23.9

Note. Data compiled from the State DOE (n.d.). Data collection and reports. Retrieved from https://www.education.nh.gov/data/

Study Population Data

The data displayed for the study population has the end goal to answer the research questions of this study. Prefacing the data that directly pertain to the research questions is the racial/ethnic demographics of the study population (Table 5). Using the data from Table 3, a comparison of the racial/ethnic demographics of the study district is discussed. A further categorization of the racial/ethnic background of students based on their enrollment status/diploma type is also addressed (Table 6). The academic course path of students in the study district is presented in multiple data tables. This information includes both population (*n*) and percentages based on the population (Tables 7 and 8). Additionally, the data document academic paths of students from the study population from their first year of high school through their college or career post-graduate paths (Tables 9 and 10). The post-graduate path of students

from the study district in Table 11 is compared to the post-graduate path of the study population. Rounding out this information on academic path are data addressing the population (*n*) and percentage of students who earned enough core course credits in their first year of high school to be promoted from first year students to sophomores (Tables 12 and 13), and based on a traditional four-year/eight-semester period, the amount of time students needed to meet graduation requirements (Tables 14 and 15).

Racial/ethnic data. The racial/ethnic makeup of the study population is presented in Table 5. A first review identified that all five categories; *Black, Hispanic, Multiracial, White, and other*; mirror the increases and decrease of racial/ethnic percentages of the study district (Table 3). The percentages of the four categories of minority students increased over nine years while the percentage of White students decreased.

It is noted that in 2010, the percentage of Black students in the study population decreased while the percentage of students identified as Hispanic increased. This year was also the cohort year that not only had the smallest study population but also based on the enrollment of eighth-grade students had the lowest percentage of students who were academically unsuccessful (Table 1). As the overall population of students began to increase again, the percentage of students identified in the study population also increased. Smaller enrollments might lead to smaller class sizes, more individualized attention, and opportunities to build connections with students. This, in turn, would lead to more students being academically successful. An unknown factor is whether the number of teachers in the individual schools remained constant allowing for the smaller class sizes.

The increase in multiracial students, both from the study district and the study population, could be attributed to not only an increased multiracial demographic but also a change in how

individual students personally choose to or are able to identify themselves. In the past, multiracial students might have identified with a single racial background such as Black or Hispanic. Over time, students might identify with their combined backgrounds.

Table 5

Study Population: Racial/Ethnic Demographics 2008-2012

School year	Study population	Black		Hispanic		Multiracial		White		Other	
	n	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
2008	242	11	4.5	55	22.7	4	1.7	172	71.1	0	0
2009	185	10	5.4	31	16.8	1	0.5	140	75.7	3	1.6
2010	140	1	0.7	33	23.6	0	0	101	72.1	5	3.6
2011	217	14	6.5	53	24.4	4	1.8	142	65.5	4	1.8
2012	214	16	7.5	63	29.4	5	2.3	126	58.9	4	1.9

Demarcation of enrollment status. The 2008 cohort was used to gather supplementary data on the study population. Based on their enrollment status/diploma type, students were classified by the racial/ethnic backgrounds used in Table 5. White students were the majority in the study district, and Hispanic students were the next largest racial/ethnic group (Table 5). In Table 6, White students were the majority in all five categories of diploma types. The percentages of White students earning a standard or core diploma were lower at 68.9% and 60% than the percentages of White students earning an adult education diploma, General Educational Development certificate, or becoming a dropout. Hispanic students were more inclined to follow the path of a traditional graduation ceremony and graduate with a standard or core diploma instead of pursuing one of the other alternatives at 25.5% and 30%. In comparison, 64.5% of White students ($n = 111$, $\sum = 172$) earned a standard diploma while 74.6% of Hispanic students

(n = 41, ∑ = 55) and 63.6% of Black students (n = 7, ∑ = 11) earned a standard diploma. The percentage of Black students earning a core diploma was 27.3% (n = 3, ∑ = 11). This is compared to the percentage of Hispanic students at 16.4% (n = 9, ∑ = 55), and the percentage of White students at 10.5% (n = 18, ∑ = 172) earning a core diploma.

Table 6

Cohort 2008: Racial/ethnic Demarcation of Enrollment Status

Diploma type	Population	Black		Hispanic		Multiracial		White		Other	
	n	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Dropout	23	1	4.3	1	4.3	2	8.7	19	82.7	0	0
Standard	161	7	4.4	41	25.5	2	1.2	111	68.9	0	0
Core	30	3	10.0	9	30.0	0	0	18	60.0	0	0
Adult Education	23	0	0	3	13.0	0	0	20	87.0	0	0
GED	5	0	0	1	20.0	0	0	4	80.0	0	0
Total	242	11		55		4		172		0	

Academic course path. Using the first and largest cohort, data representing the academic path of the study population were collected and displayed by population (n) in Table 7 and in percentages in Table 8. The students were categorized by the enrollment status of dropout or one of the four diploma types they may have earned. Two-thirds of students (n = 161) in this representation of the study population (n = 242) earned a standard diploma with a total of 90.5% earning a diploma in some form or a certificate of high school equivalency (i.e., General Educational Development). The percentage of students from the study population cohort who dropped out before completing high school was 9.5%.

Four categories represented the academic path of the students while in high school. The first included a count of the students who as first-year students earned a 69 or below in one or

more core courses. This is not an indicator of whether the students earned credit for the course, but does indicate students who continued to perform academically low. Students earned academic credit for numerical grades of 60/D− and above. Over three-quarters of the students (*n* = 186) in the study population cohort earned grades of 69 or below.

The second indicator was whether the student was placed out-of-district for any portion of his or her high school career. This indicated an alternative academic path. Though no data were available to explain out-of-district placement, the time ranged from a semester to multiple semesters before returning to the general population. Students who were placed out-of-district and went on to earn a diploma constituted 65.2 % of the out-of-district population (*n* = 23).

Advanced coursework included high school level courses above the graduation requirements. Examples included algebra II, pre-calculus, chemistry, and physics. A majority of the study population cohort took advantage of advanced coursework (55.8%). There were various paths students pursued when enrolling in advanced courses. Some enrolled in one course during high school, while others chose to pursue multiple advanced courses. The advanced course most often chosen was algebra II (*n* = 100). Chemistry was second with 82 students enrolling. On further investigation, these two courses were prerequisites to technical courses such as cosmetology and health sciences.

Above these advanced courses, nine students enrolled in one or more Advanced Placement (AP) courses. The College Board designs and regulates these courses. Completion of the course allows students to sit for AP exams in the subject area and, if they are successful, may gain college credit. The study district offers a wide variety of these AP courses. The most commonly selected AP course for students in the study population cohort was AP Psychology (*n*

= 5). AP English (*n* = 3), AP Environmental Science (*n* = 2), AP Physics (*n* = 1), AP Biology (*n* = 1), AP Music (*n* = 1), and AP Art (*n* = 1) were also student choices.

Table 7

Cohort 2008: Academic Course Path (n)

Diploma type	Population	Grades of 69 or below	Out-of-district placement	Advanced coursework	AP courses
Dropout	23	21	8	1	0
Standard	161	114	4	116	8
Core	30	26	6	9	0
Adult Education	23	20	3	9	1
GED	5	5	2	0	0
Total	242	186	23	135	9

Table 8

Cohort 2008: Academic Course Path (%)

Diploma type	Population	Grades of 69 or below	Out-of-district placement	Advanced coursework	AP courses
Dropout	9.5	8.7	3.3	0.5	0.0
Standard	66.5	47.1	1.7	47.9	3.3
Core	12.4	10.7	2.5	3.7	0.0
Adult Education	9.5	8.3	1.2	3.7	0.4
GED	2.1	2.1	0.8	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	76.9	9.5	55.8	3.7

Post-graduate path. Completing the picture of the academic path of students in the study population are the data displaying their post-graduation path after high school. Table 9 includes

the population (*n*) while Table 10 is the post-graduate path data in percentages. This information is only for the students from the study population who earned a diploma or GED (*n* = 912). The two major paths that students in the study population took after high school were entering one- to three-year programs (41.4%) or directly entering into employment (29.9%). The one- to three-year programs included apprentice or training programs, associate programs, and technical colleges. Entering a four-year college was a path for 119 students (12.8%). These colleges included in-state and out-of-state institutions.

Table 9

Study Population: Post-Graduate Path (n)

Cohort year	Population	Four-year college	One- to three-year/technical college	Armed services	Employed	Unemployed	Unknown
2008	219	31	95	18	55	9	11
2009	171	20	60	17	62	4	8
2010	123	13	45	10	41	3	11
2011	198	23	92	10	56	2	15
2012	201	32	91	7	53	3	15
All years	912	119	383	62	267	21	60

Table 10

Study Population: Post-Graduate Path (%)

Cohort year	Population (*n*)	Four-year college	One- to three-year/technical college	Armed services	Employed	Unemployed	Unknown
2008	219	14.2	43.4	8.2	25.1	4.1	5.0
2009	171	11.7	35.1	9.9	36.3	2.3	4.7
2010	123	10.6	36.6	8.1	33.3	2.5	8.9
2011	198	11.6	46.5	5.1	28.3	1.0	7.5
2012	201	15.9	45.3	3.5	26.4	1.5	7.4
All years	912	12.8	41.4	6.9	29.9	2.3	6.7

Study district: Post-graduate path. The data on the post-graduate path of the study district included the five years that the study population was expected to graduate (Table 11). While the primary post-graduate choice of the study population was a one- to three-year program/technical college, the primary path of students from the study district was enrolling in a four-year college (45.4%). These colleges included state, private, and out-of-state institutions. In comparison, 29.5% of students from the study district who finished high school enrolled in a one- to three-year program/technical college (Table 11). The study district and the study population had students join the armed services. The percentages of the study population were higher than the study district; yet, the gap began to close for the 2015 graduation year/2011 cohort. In both cases, the percentage of students joining the armed services decreased to come within 1% of each other. The most notable change was the decrease in the percentage of the study population joining the armed services (Table 10).

Table 11

Study District: Post-Graduate Path 2012 to 2016 (%)

School year	Four-year college	One- to three-year/ technical college	Armed services	Employed	Unemployed	Unknown
2012	46.1	31.4	4.5	14.0	2.1	1.9
2013	46.3	26.5	6.3	17.2	1.8	1.9
2014	44.1	27.7	3.7	16.3	1.6	6.6
2015	43.9	31.5	4.1	17.2	0.7	2.6
2016	46.6	30.6	2.6	17.0	0.8	2.4
Average	45.4	29.5	4.3	16.3	1.4	3.1

Credits earned the first year. Students were able to earn up to eight credits during each year of high school. Students were given multiple opportunities to complete or recover academic credits. To be promoted from the first year to the second year, six credits were needed. Students who failed two 1-credit courses could still be promoted to the level of sophomore. Summer school was available for those who needed to recover credits or needed the continuity of summer instruction. Table 12 shows the population (*n*) of the students in the study group who earned enough credits to be promoted as well as those who did not earn enough credits to be considered a sophomore. Table 13 gives these data in percentages. Utilizing the entire study population, 74.6% of the students earned enough core credits to be promoted to the level of sophomore. Using the data from Table 1, the average percentage of students in the study population who failed one or more core courses in eighth grade came to 22.3% of the entire enrollment. A majority of these students went on to be promoted after their first year of high school, but 25.4% of them were retained.

Referring to Tables 7 and 8 and the academic course path of students in this research, the percentage of students who earned grades of 69 or below should be reiterated. Though 62.4% of the 2008 cohort earned enough credits to be promoted to the next grade level, 76.9% of the same students earned a 69 or below in one or more of the core courses. In the study district, a passing grade was 60/D− or above. The measure of academic success is a numerical grade based on individual teachers and their choice of what they include in the grading average.

Table 12

Study Population: Credits Earned Freshmen Year (n)

Cohort year	Study population	Promoted to sophomore	Retained as first-year students
2008	242	151	91
2009	185	142	43
2010	140	102	38
2011	217	166	51
2012	214	181	33
Total	998	742	256

Table 13

Study Population: Credits Earned First Year (%)

Cohort year	Study population (*n*)	Promoted to sophomore	Retained as first-year students
2008	242	62.4	37.6
2009	185	76.8	23.2
2010	140	72.9	27.1
2011	217	76.5	23.5
2012	214	84.6	15.4
All years	998	74.6	25.4

Semesters to graduate. Tables 14 and 15 display the data on the time students in the study population took to complete graduation requirements. These Tables also include the population (*n*) and percentages of students in the study district who dropped out. The majority of students in the study population graduated or earned a GED in eight semesters (78.6%) while a small minority dropped out of high school (8.6%). The students who met the requirements in eight months graduated with their peers. Applying the trends from Table 8 for the 2008 cohort, 66.5% of students earned a standard diploma (27 credits) while an additional 12.4% earned a core diploma (20 credits). In separate graduation ceremonies, 9.5% earned an adult education diploma (20 credits), and 2% earned a GED. These percentages also included students who met the requirements in less than or more than eight semesters. Those students who took less than eight semesters to meet the minimum requirements used the path of adult education or a GED. Those who took more than eight semesters not only used the path of adult education or a GED, but also a standard or core diploma.

Table 14

Study Population: Dropouts and Semesters to Graduation/GED (n)

Cohort year	Study population	Dropped out	Graduated/GED less than eight semesters	Graduated/GED in eight semesters	Graduated/GED more than eight semesters
2008	242	23	7	184	28
2009	185	14	5	149	17
2010	140	17	4	106	13
2011	217	19	13	163	22
2012	214	13	13	182	6
Total	998	86	42	784	86

Table 15

Study Population: Dropouts and Semesters to Graduation/GED (%)

Cohort year	Study population (*n*)	Dropped out	Graduated/GED less than eight semesters	Graduated/GED in eight semesters	Graduated/GED more than eight semesters
2008	242	9.5	2.9	76.0	11.6
2009	185	7.6	2.7	80.5	9.2
2010	140	12.1	2.9	75.7	9.3
2011	217	8.8	6.0	75.1	10.1
2012	214	6.1	6.1	85.1	2.8
All years	998	8.6	4.2	78.6	8.6

Case explorations. The data collected from this study portray trends and a general analysis of the path of core course enrollment and completion of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school. These students are individuals with numerous variables that influence their choices and decisions. The students have an innate common goal of moving from the stage of adolescence to the next stage of young adulthood. These adolescents meet this goal in diverse ways. The profiles of six students from the study population who experienced different high school outcomes personify the trends of this study.

Student 1. This student dropped out of high school. He was a White, male student who was one year older than his peers (BMG). The student lived with his mother and stepfather. He earned 69 or below in all four of his core courses during eighth grade. This student was enrolled in a general eighth-grade math course and entered his first year of high school enrolled in pre-algebra. During middle school, he scored proficient on state standardized reading and math tests; yet, his writing score was substantially below proficient. This student earned 69 or below in all four core courses as a first-year student. He did not earn enough credits during his first year of

high school to be promoted to the level of sophomore. He was absent 62 days, which is over one-third of his first high school year. The student was tardy an additional 10 days that first year. This student accrued 19 more absent days before dropping out during his second year in high school.

Student 2. This student earned a standard diploma. She was a White female who was the same age as her peers and lived with her mother and father. She earned a grade below 69 in algebra I during eighth grade. This student retook algebra I as a first-year high school student and earned a final grade of 90. During middle school, she not only scored proficient in math and writing on state standardized tests; she also scored proficient with distinction in reading. This student earned 87 or above in her core courses as a first-year student, and took advanced courses above the general graduation requirements in algebra II and chemistry. She earned enough credits her first year to be promoted to sophomore. She was absent a total of nine times over four years and was not tardy. This student graduated in eight semesters with an unweighted grade point average of 3.7 and a weighted grade point average of 4.4. She continued on to enroll in a four-year college.

Student 3. This student earned a standard diploma. He was a Hispanic male who was the same age as his peers and lived with his mother and father. This student moved to a different middle school within the study district during eighth grade, with no change in his academic performance. He earned a 69 or below in all four of his core courses during eighth grade. This student was enrolled in a general math course in eighth grade and entered his first year of high school enrolled in pre-algebra. He finished algebra I as an online course during his senior year. In middle school, he scored proficient on state standardized tests in math and reading but scored below proficient in writing. According to the scores, he demonstrated strength in reading

informational text. This student earned 69 or below in English, math, and science as a first-year student. He did not earn enough credits during his first year to be promoted to sophomore, and he did not enroll in advanced courses beyond the general graduation requirement. He was increasingly absent and tardy as his high school years progressed. For each of his first two years of high school, he was absent/tardy 11 times, while he was absent/tardy 32 times as a junior and absent/tardy 101 times as a senior. This student graduated in eight semesters with an unweighted grade point average of 2.2 and a weighted grade point average of 1.8. He continued on to a community technical college.

Student 4. This student earned a core diploma. He was a Hispanic male who was one year older than his peers (BMG), and he lived with his mother. He earned 69 or below in math, science, and social studies during eighth grade. This student was enrolled in a general math course in eighth grade and entered his first year of high school enrolled in pre-algebra. During middle school, he scored proficient on the state standardized math test, and below proficient on the standardized reading test. The student scored substantially below proficient on the state standardized writing test. He earned 69 or below in all of his core courses as a first-year student, and did not enroll in advanced courses above the general graduation requirement. He did not earn enough credits during his first year to be promoted to sophomore, but he did attend summer school to regain course credits. His days absent and tardy increased each year as he progressed through high school to reach 33 days absent and 35 days tardy during the 180 days of his senior year. This student graduated in eight semesters without a recorded GPA. He was employed after graduation.

Student 5. This student earned a high school equivalency certificate (GED). He was a White male who was the same age as his peers. There was no parent data available. This student

earned 69 or below in all four core courses during eighth grade. He was enrolled in a general math course during eighth grade and began his first year of high school enrolled in algebra I. During middle school, he scored proficient on the state standardized tests in math, reading, and writing. This student scored 69 or below in all four of his core courses during his first year and did not earn enough credits to be promoted to sophomore. He was absent 21 days as a first-year student. As a second-year student, he was absent 19 times. As a third-year student, he was not only absent 70 times, but also tardy 32 times. He earned his GED at the end of his junior year. There was no recorded grade point average, and his post-high-school path was marked as unaccounted.

Student 6. This student earned an adult education diploma. He was a White male who was the same age as his peers and lived with his mother and father. This student earned 69 or below in all four of his core courses during eighth grade. He was enrolled in a general math course during eighth grade and began his first year of high school enrolled in algebra I. During middle school, he scored proficient on the state standardized tests in math and reading, with strength in informational text. He scored substantially below proficient in writing. He scored 69 or lower in English, math, and social studies during his first year. The student earned enough credits during his first year to pass to the sophomore level and took algebra II as an advanced course above the general graduation requirements. Though he peaked with 22 days absent and 11 days tardy during his junior year, he was absent 8 days and tardy 11 days during his senior year. He graduated in eight semesters with an unweighted GPA of 2.0. After graduation from the Adult Learning Center, he went on to enroll in a community technical college.

These six students left high school, becoming young adults who went on to higher education, employment, or unknown directions. The students in the case explorations are

representative of the study population and the diverse paths those students took. Each case told an individual story that included a variety of academic needs and outcomes. Overall, the examples revealed that being academically unsuccessful in middle school did not necessarily influence a student's ability to complete high school.

Summary

The purpose of this cross-sectional, descriptive study was to use archival data to investigate the path of core course enrollment and completion of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school in a small, urban, public school district during the 2008 to 2012 school years. The data collected from the SIS of the study district and public records from the State Department of Education focused on the following research questions:

1. Which course enrollment paths do students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade follow at the high school level?
2. What percentage of students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade earn enough core course credits in their first year of high school to be promoted to the sophomore level for their second year?
3. How long does it take students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade to meet graduation requirements compared to the traditional four-year (eight-semester) period?

The study population was determined from the entire eighth-grade enrollment from 2008 to 2012 (n = 998). Though 27.7% of students over the five years earned a 69 or below in one or more core courses in eighth grade, 22.4% of the students made up the study population. Students who could not be followed with the available data were not included in the study population.

The racial/ethnic demographic of the study district was changing. As the population of students identified as White decreased, the population of students identified as minority increased. Specifically, the enrollment of Hispanic students grew. Additionally, the overall district population of students decreased. The SES of students in the district also changed. Analyzing the nine years that the students in the study population were in the study district, participation in the National School Lunch Program increased. The percentage reached over 40% during the time the study population was followed. These students in the study district were at or below the poverty level.

The racial/ethnic makeup of the study population was similar to the study district data (Table 3). The majority of students from both Table 3 and Table 5 were identified as White (Table 3, μ = 68.2%; Table 5, μ = 68.7%). The next largest identification was Hispanic students (Table 3, μ = 18.8%; Table 5, μ = 23.4%). It was noted that there was a higher percentage of Black and Hispanic students in the study population than the percentage in the study district data.

As the majority of students were White, this population of students was the largest percentage of students who dropped out or earned any type of diploma. Based on diploma type, the percentages of White students who earned a standard or core diploma were smaller than percentages of White students in the other categories. The percentages of Hispanic students who earned a standard or core diploma were larger percentages than the other diploma types. Comparing racial/ethnic background, the percentage of Hispanic (74.6%) students earning a standard diploma was greater than the percentage of White (64.5%) students who earned a standard diploma, while there was less than a 1% difference in percentage between Black and White students earning a standard diploma.

Based on the data from the 2008 cohort, the majority of students pursued an academic course path that included studying in the district at one of two available high schools. Though they continued to earn grades of 69 and below at the high school level, the students went on to enroll in courses beyond the graduation requirement such as algebra II and chemistry. They graduated with their peers with a standard diploma (27 credits). Based on the entire study population, students either enrolled in a one- to three-year program/technical college or proceeded directly into the workforce after graduation.

The majority, 74.6%, of the students in the study population earned enough credits during their first year in high school to be promoted to the level of sophomore (Table 13). Returning to the academic course path of the 2008 cohort, 76.9% of students continued to earn grades of 69 or below in first-year courses (Table 8). As six of eight credits were necessary to be promoted, a student could fail up to two credits worth of courses as first-year students and still be promoted. Additionally, students could earn grades of 60 to 69/D- to D+ and obtain the credit for the course. Grading practices were individual to the teacher. The difference between a 59, where a student does not earn course credit and a 60, which is the lowest grade possible to earn course credit, was minimal and did not give an accurate picture of student success.

The course path noted that the majority of students in the study population graduated with their peers. The data represent that 78.6% of the students in the study population completed the requirements to graduate in eight semesters (Table 15). The overall percentage of students who dropped out was 8.6% (n = 998).

Though students earned 69 or below in one or more core courses in eighth grade, the majority of these students went on to study within the study district at one of the high schools. They earned enough credits during their first year to be promoted to the level of sophomore, and

took courses above the general graduation requirements. These students continued their studies, graduated in the expected eight semesters with their peers, and earned a standard diploma. Though a variety of post-graduate paths were available, most of the students in the study population went on to a one- to three-year program/technical college or were employed right out of high school. Above these findings, underlying trends surfaced during the organization and analysis of the collected data that gave further insight into the study population. Chapter 5 covers the interpretation of these findings, as well as recommendations for action and further study.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The debate in education regarding retention and social promotion as viable alternatives to place academically low performing students originated in the late 19th century at the inception of the American public educational system. This debate continues in the 21st century at not only the expense of teachers, parents, taxpayers, employers, and society as a whole but also the most important stakeholder in this struggle—students.

Retention was viewed as a way to hold students accountable for poor behavior and low academic performance, despite the fact that adolescents do not inherently possess the ability to respond as expected (Anagnostopoulos, 2006). Additionally, retention was known for negative behavioral and academic outcomes (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Frederick & Hauser, 2008; Frey, 2005; Martin, 2011; Muschkin et al., 2014; Reschly & Christensen, 2013). Social promotion was regarded as a better alternative to retention because of increased graduation rates, theoretically fewer negative outcomes, and lower financial costs (Frederick & Hauser, 2008; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Martin, 2011; Reschly & Christensen, 2013). Alternatives to retention and social promotion have been proposed. These alternatives are not compatible with the current structure of public education. As a result, some scholars have called for an overhaul of the current educational system to implement research-based alternatives that would resolve the debate between retention and social promotion (Lynch, 2013). For restructuring to occur, current practice should be investigated to improve the public educational system (Lynch, 2014).

The purpose of this cross-sectional, descriptive study was to use archival data to investigate the path of core course enrollment and completion of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school in a small, urban, public school district during the

2008 to 2012 school years. As policies in the study district were scheduled for review and change, this study evaluated the academic impact of the current practice of social promotion and whether it was a socially-just practice that served the needs of students.

Archival data from the student information system (SIS) of the study district were used to identify eighth-grade students, over a five-year period, who earned a 69/D+ or below in one or more core courses in English, math, science, and social studies. This group was narrowed to students who could be followed with the available data in the SIS through to the end of their high school career (n = 998). This chapter extends the results by interpreting the findings of the study, identifying implications for the use of the information, as well as recommendations for actions and further study.

Interpretation of Findings

A myriad of data was collected from the SIS of the study district. The pertinent results were organized into data tables in Chapter 4 for ease of analysis. The interpretations of these findings are presented as a debriefing of that analysis. This first includes the racial/ethnic makeup of the study population discussed in relation to past literature. Next, the information that answers the research questions, and supplemental findings that resulted from the study are discussed. Discrepancies in these findings and the limitations of the data are also examined.

Racial/Ethnic Data

In comparison to the racial/ethnic groupings of the study district (Table 3), the study population presented with a higher population of Black, Hispanic, and multiracial students (Table 5). This supported the findings that students who were retained/socially promoted were more likely to be a minority and/or of low socioeconomic status (SES) (Warren & Saliba, 2012).

Research Questions

Guided by the overarching theory of social justice, the investigation into the path of core course enrollment and completion of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school addressed the following research questions:

1. Which course enrollment paths do students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade follow at the high school level?
2. What percentage of students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade earn enough core course credits in their first year of high school to be promoted to the sophomore level for their second year?
3. How long does it take students in the study district who are socially promoted from eighth grade to meet graduation requirements compared to the traditional four-year (eight-semester) period?

The interpretations of the resulting data regarding the research questions are discussed.

Question 1. The course enrollment paths that students in the study district who were socially promoted from eighth grade followed in high school were investigated using the 2008 cohort (n = 242). These students took a variety of paths and were given diverse choices in their course selections. It was noted that during their first year, 76.9% of the students in the 2008 cohort continued to earn grades of 69/D+ or below. The majority of students stayed within the study district through high school and pursued advanced coursework above the basic graduation requirements, such as algebra II and chemistry. Reflective of the 2008 cohort, 41.4% of the entire study population (2008-2012) moved on to a one- to three-year technical program/community college, and 29.9% were recorded as being employed (n = 998). A total of 91.4% of students in the study district successfully completed high school. The study suggests

that academic choice at the high school level may have a positive influence on the academic path of students. Giving students a variety of educational options may be a component to their academic success. This should include not only a diverse selection of scheduled course offerings but also extended learning opportunities and independent studies.

Bokhorst et al. (2010) noted that students believed they earned more support from their peers than from parents or teachers during their high school careers. In this study, data on the teacher influence either from direct conversations or recorded teacher recommendations were not available. Teacher recommendations for placing students in leveled courses for the next fall is a task completed each spring.

Flashman (2014) supported Bokhorst et al. (2010) by stating that peers influenced the academic results of students. The majority of students from the 2008 cohort continued to be academically unsuccessful, though they earned enough credits to be promoted. Grouping students homogeneously by ability was not reflective of the world in which these students lived. They encountered and worked with people of diverse backgrounds and abilities. A majority of students were not in the group of students who were calculating their grade point average to .001. Many students were not motivated by grades, which is a positive, as grades do not necessarily reflect learning. From an adult perspective, these students appeared to see school as an inconvenience in their day. If peers influence the academic success of students, then grouping low-performing students with peers who are academically unsuccessful is not conducive to educational equity or the academic success of students.

Grading practices. While identifying the study population, thousands of transcripts were examined. Any meaning behind the grades became lost. Assessments and reports should exemplify what students know and what they are able to do. The patterns of grades of individual

students at times were erratic. There was no continuity among courses or grade levels. According to a letter/numerical grade, students were being identified as academically successful or unsuccessful. There was no indication of what they did or did not do to earn the grade. Grading practices were as individual as the teacher. Teachers incorporated assorted items such as behavior, homework, extra credit, and penalties into the grade of a student. Grading practices are a controversial subject; yet, a vision to gain consistency and a focus on what students know and are able to do is an optimal direction to meet the needs of students and achieve equity in instructional practices. The vision in the study district was to move toward competency/standards-based grading.

If competency/standards-based grading fails in schools, it will be from a failed implementation from miscommunications that created misunderstandings in educators, parents, and students. Treating standards the same way as a list of graded assignments disengages students and teachers from the underlying goal of expanding the knowledge and skills that students need to acquire to be college and career ready.

Grades based on percentages do not accurately measure knowledge and skill. What is the difference in the academic performances of a student earning a 59 and not gaining credit for a course and the student who earned a 60 and gained course credit? Would the difference be passing in a few vocabulary assignments? Possibly the student was not disruptive in class? Was extra credit earned? Carifio and Carey (2010) concluded that lowering standards to allow more students to be academically successful was not the answer. Increased graduation rates do not equate to a quality education, but with political and economic influences on public education to produce more graduates, the quality of the education is in question. Students need the skills and knowledge to prepare them for an evolving society. The majority of students in this study who

were promoted from eighth grade appeared to be marking time through Carnegie units and slipping through courses with minimal success. Though the students have an ultimate goal to graduate from high school, the diploma needs to assure educational institutions and employers that these individuals are college and career ready. The student goal needs to include feeling prepared for his or her future and not completing a list of courses with minimal success.

Question 2. The percentage of students in the study district who were socially promoted from eighth grade who earned enough core course credits in their first year of high school to be promoted to the sophomore level in their second year was investigated. Utilizing the entire study population (n = 998), 74.6% of the students earned enough credits to be promoted from first-year students to the level of second-year students (Table 13). This finding gave the appearance that social promotion from middle school met the needs of students. Supporting information gave a different view.

The results did show that once in high school, a majority of students earned grades that met the first year requirements allowing them to progress to the next academic level. They were now closer to the goal of graduation. On closer examination, many of these students continued to perform at academically low levels during the first year of high school. Using the 2008 cohort to delve into the equity and quality of the education these students received, it was noted that 76.9% of students continued to earn grades that were 69/D+ or below (Table 8). Students could not only earn course credit for scores of 60/D− or above; they also could earn a minimum of six credits from the eight credits available during their first year in order to be promoted.

Though a majority of students in the study population earned enough course credits to be promoted to the sophomore level, students in the population continued to perform academically low. Jimerson et al. (2006) and Martin (2011) stated that students who had low academic

performance were not of low-ability. Instead, the issues stemmed from a lack of motivation and behavioral problems. These are also the years in which peer relationships have a greater influence on students than parents and teachers (Bokhorst et al., 2010). The lack of motivation and behavior problems begin at the onset of middle school and continue to increase through adolescence (Oelsner et al., 2011). Raising student expectations is a possible solution. Yet, educators need to understand that raising student expectations is not a matter of increasing percentages on the grading scale or the credits required to be promoted or graduate. This would lower graduation rates while the needs of the academically low-performing students would continue to be ignored. Student learning and meeting the needs of students goes beyond letter grades whether the students perform academically low or high. Raising student expectations includes opening the lines of communication between educators and their students, and establishing common ground from which to build relationships (Clark et al., 2016; Riesch, 2010).

Question 3. The time it took students in the study district who were socially promoted from eighth grade to meet graduation requirements compared to the traditional four-year (eight-semester) period was investigated. The number of students in the study population who graduated or earned a GED in eight semesters was 78.6% (Table 15). The percentage of students who took more than eight semesters to graduate was 8.6%. The percentage of students who graduated early was 4.2%. The percentage of those who did not graduate was calculated to be 8.6% (Table 15). This rate is lower than national and study district dropout rates. This population of students was identified as academically at risk; yet, over 90% of these students successfully graduated from high school with over 82% of the students graduating within the traditional eight semesters.

Nationally, since 2011, the graduation gap between White students and minority students has become smaller. According to DePaoli, Balfanz, Bridgeland, Atwell, and Ingram (2017), greater variations among some states that have not been as successful in closing that gap continue. Referring back to the *demarcation of enrollment status*, a standard diploma was the path for a majority of students who were Black, Hispanic, or White. While the percentages of Black and White students were similar, the percentage of Hispanic students earning a standard diploma surpassed those calculations by more than 10%. Except for one or two individuals, all of these students with a standard diploma graduated in eight semesters. The graduation gap for Hispanic students in the study population and, to a lesser extent, Black students, had been closed.

Changing demographics. The data collected showed the change in the demographics and enrollment of students in the study district. The overall population had decreased by more than 1000 students over the years under study. The minority student population was increasing while the population of White students was decreasing. The student population was becoming more diverse.

Additionally, the number of students identified as low SES was increasing. The academic gap between low-income and mid- to upper-income students continued to exist. Based on SES, only nine states had differences in graduation rates of less than 10%. Eighteen states surpassed 10%, while almost half of states had a SES achievement gap of 15% or more (DePaoli et al., 2017). These rates were based on the adjusted cohort graduation rate, a formula from the U.S. Department of Education that is a more accurate representation of the group of students who are expected to graduate in eight semesters (State DOE, n.d.). Knowing the student demographics and realizing the student population is changing is important when planning to meet the academic and social needs of students.

Keeping all students on track for an expected graduation date is important. The data showed that students in the study population who dropped out were more likely to have performed low academically as first-year students and left school during tenth grade. Alternative graduation paths were available to all students in the study district. Though the majority earned the standard diploma and graduated in eight semesters, 12.8% of the study population was able to graduate through alternative paths. These programs were supportive and provided alternatives that assured individual students were able to graduate on time. These programs met state standards and were regularly evaluated. They should assure that at completion students are either career ready or prepared to enroll in a technical/community college.

Discrepancies in the Findings

Two notable discrepancies were presented in this study. The first was connected with class size. The other discrepancy stemmed from a closer analysis into the racial/ethnic demarcation of student enrollment status.

Class size. In Table 1, the eighth-grade class enrollments are listed for the five years used to identify the study population. The 2010 cohort stood out as the year with the smallest class enrollment and the smallest percentage of students identified as earning grades of 69 or below in one or more core courses. Blatchford, Bassett, and Brown (2011) found that smaller class sizes led to a rise in individual attention from teachers, while a larger class size increased off-task student behaviors and decreased student engagement. They noted that specifically academically low-performing students at the secondary level would benefit from decreased class sizes and more individualized attention. Supporting data such as changes or stability of teacher populations based on actual class size and not student/teacher ratios were not collected for the 2010 cohort,

nor was a statistical analysis conducted to identify a correlation between the data sets. Yet, the data further raise questions about variables that influence student academic performance.

Core diplomas. In the study district, a core diploma was earned by completing the required courses for graduation and a total of 20 credits. The core diploma was 12 credits less than what was available in 8 semesters, and 7 credits less than the standard diploma. Though the population of Black students in the 2008 cohort was small (n = 11), 27.3% of these students earned a core diploma. This percentage was 10.9% higher than Hispanic students and 16.8% higher than White students earning a core diploma. The small population size is a leading factor, but the results raise questions about equity and the second largest minority population in the study district.

Limitations

The available data in the SIS of the study district was a limitation of the study. The information gathered from the archival data was dependent on the accuracy and precision of the individuals inputting the original information into the system. Furthermore, the information not archived also limited the scope of the investigation. Teacher course recommendations were not part of the information recorded. This prohibited a comparison between teacher recommendations and the final course selection by students.

The ability to access all the students in the database who met the initial criteria for the study population was a potential limitation affecting the accuracy of the results. Attention was employed in using birthdates to identify members of the cohorts. The scope of the queries was even extended to include students outside the parameters of the cohort years. This allowed students who would be identified as *below model age for grade* (BMG) to be included in the study population. Though care was taken to identify all students, there was a possibility that

students were unintentionally missed. Additionally, students originally identified as being socially promoted from middle school who left the study district before graduating or officially dropping out were not followed.

The grading system used in the study district during the period under study resulted in a limitation. The percentage grade not only lacked information to gauge college and career readiness; it also was not a consistent metric across teachers or courses to allow a complete analysis of whether student needs were being met.

Finally, this study was descriptive, and a characteristic of this type of archival research was that it described what had been garnered. A descriptive study portrays a given population during a specific time and place (Jackson, 2012). The data collected did not result in making a connection through causations or correlations.

Implications

Individuals and groups from single schools to larger governing bodies may use the evidence from this study to support building programs and installing substantial supports that go beyond increasing graduation rates. A clear vision encompassing and directed toward equitable and socially-just educational opportunities for all students should not only be established and communicated throughout the halls of public institutions, but also the community at large.

Literature supported that knowledge of adolescent development and behavior, positive student/teacher relationships, positive peer relationships, school bonding, and small class populations improved the academic outcome of students (Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Blatchford et al., 2011; Kiefer et al, 21015; Martin, 2011; Oelsner et al., 2011; & Ojanen et al., 2010). The traditional educational system resulted in using retention and social promotion as the only solutions for placing low-performing students. Neither of the latter options equitably met the

academic or social needs of students. This study showed that though students graduated, a majority of them continued to perform academically low after being socially promoted. Social promotion without a change in practice is not the answer. The literature supported that retention increased the chances of students dropping out. Retention is not the answer. The traditional educational system, which was established in the United States well over 100 years ago, warrants a critical review. Parents of means chose private and charter schools for innovative practices, smaller class sizes, and individual attention, from which their children benefit. Public schools need the financial and public support to promote the same opportunities.

Recommendations for Action

In the long term, major changes should be implemented in the structure of public education to prepare students for their future. Changes in practices that would be sustained take time. Immediate, short-term changes could be phased in. It would be cavalier to recommend various new programs that might support secondary education students. Districts employ dedicated social workers, school psychologists, guidance councilors, case managers, and others to develop research-based programs to meet the needs of students. These professionals work hard to support their students. The support staff should continue with the strategies and programs that are in place while ensuring that faculty members connected with the students being served are included in discussions and planning. This would promote a holistic approach to meeting the needs of students.

In a conversation with a small team of middle school teachers, they voiced the frustration that they were unable to bring their current students to the level of performance that their students of the past had attained. At one point, a teacher said educators needed to teach students in a different way. I agreed. The teachers needed support from colleagues, administration, and

the public to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of their students. The question was how to support teachers to equitably meet the needs of their students in the confines of the current educational system? Based on the results of this study, the review of current literature, and the current student populations, I proposed the following recommendations for action.

The first recommendation is directed toward middle school and improving school bonding. According to Armstrong (2006), the middle school model is an established research-based culture that promotes positive relationships and was designed with the emotional, social, and physical developmental needs of adolescents in mind. Additionally, failure to reap the desired results from this environment could be traced back to incomplete implementations of the program. I would recommend creating an educational environment where students build strong, positive relationships with adults and peers. This would begin the transition to middle school with teaming core course teachers. These teachers would be given the flexibility of placing their students into groups instead of being assigned their courses based on student ability. Knowing when their students were “on team” would allow teachers to work together to design lessons and provide individualized student support. English, social studies, math, and science would no longer be sequestered to individual classrooms. The main delivery of instruction would be inquiry-based, cross-curricular teaching and learning with competency/standards-based grading. An open mindset based on exploration and growth would be promoted, not a closed mindset based on attaining a percentage or letter grade (Dweck, 2006).

A recommendation to coincide with the implementation of a supportive educational approach is to base the number of teachers employed on actual class/team sizes, not teacher/student ratios. Teacher/student ratios include special education courses that rightfully have a few students, while regular class sizes are large. On paper, the numbers average to

acceptable levels, but in reality, at no fault of the teacher, off-task behaviors and lack of student engagement increase in the regular classroom. Unlike rote memorization, preferred inquiry-based learning requires smaller groups of students, which means more teachers are needed. Teaching to the masses does not work with adolescents. Individualized instruction for adolescents may aid in building positive relationships and improving academic performance.

Another recommendation is that the transition to high school begins during the first year of middle school, not during the spring of eighth grade. Students should be aware of opportunities in the upper grades, and what knowledge and skills will be needed to take advantage of those opportunities. Middle school students should be included in planning their paths and establishing goals to meet academic standards that would allow them to be successful in high school. Giving students ownership and purpose, middle school would no longer be a place where disengaged students mark time in individual classrooms waiting for the day to end.

Recommendations for action would not be complete without involving the community as a major stakeholder. Public education routinely comes under fire from misunderstandings and misconceptions held by politicians, media, and the general population. Too often, the community wants to keep public education static because in that form it is familiar. If they endured it, then children of today can conform and do the same. Another recommendation would be proactively educating community stakeholders, and keeping them involved and apprised of the positive changes benefiting students and their community.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study began with a genuine desire to know what happened to students who were not academically successful in eighth grade as they moved on to high school. Three research questions were developed to guide this investigation. The cycle of inquiry to answer these

questions from the collected data naturally came back to ask more questions that, in turn, will promote further study. A qualitative study involving interviews or surveys of students and stakeholders involved with academically low-performing students in middle school and high school would bring the information from this study to a deeper level of understanding. Additionally, quantitative and qualitative studies of class size versus student achievement, cultural affinity to traditional and non-traditional course paths, grading practices, educational interventions, relationship building programs that are based on the academic and/or social needs of adolescents, and studies involving the transition years from elementary to middle school, and middle to high school would be viable options to extend this topic.

Conclusion

Through a cross-sectional descriptive study, a picture of the core course enrollment and completion of middle school students socially promoted from eighth grade to high school in a small urban school district was presented. This study established a baseline for further investigation after district policies and practices concerning social promotion change, as well as displayed information that could influence educational programs and student support. The students of the study population had a variety of educational opportunities and paths that they could pursue. These paths allowed them to earn course credit and meet graduation requirements. The majority of the students were promoted to the sophomore level after their first year, took advanced courses, graduated in eight semesters, and pursued a one- to three-year technical/community college program or were employed after graduation. This was a positive outcome for a population of students who performed academically low in middle school; yet, an inescapable portion of this picture is a majority of these students continued to perform academically low their first year of high school.

The importance of relationships on the academic success of adolescents has been discussed. The academic and social needs of adolescent students cannot be mass-produced or met in large courses. Teacher instruction should be individual to the child, but teachers are unable to meet the individual needs of students when large class sizes are the norm. Each student craves acceptance from others while trying to establish individuality and independence. They need to know that teachers care about their well-being and want them to become independent and break away. However, before they go out that door, educators need to know that students have a solid foundation to build their future for what lies ahead. The measure of success needs to go deeper than a diploma.

Before, those who would not conform to the educational system would drop out and still be productive members of society. That is no longer the case. The world is changing, and educational practices should change to meet student needs. Today, students need a different educational structure to become productive members of society.

Partisan political influences from non-educators that negatively impact students need to be quelled. Education needs to be in the hands of educators with a focus on the academic growth of the individual student. The public pays for what education does or does not do to meet the needs of students. They either pay directly, monetarily in the immediate or they pay both monetarily and as a society in the future. The impact of the cost is more than financial.

This study depicts a positive outcome for students who are socially promoted, but the practices of retention and social promotion do not meet the academic needs of students. The words of Paulo Freire (1970/2015) ring true. Established educational practices of teachers filling students with knowledge like filling empty vessels prohibited critical thinking, decreased creativity, and led to oppression. This form of education is not equitable or socially just. The

education of the past is no longer good enough for our students. Archaic grading practices need to be replaced. Traditional classroom instruction needs to change. Classroom populations need to decrease. As Lynch (2013) stated, an overhaul of the public education system is needed. All students should be given an equitable opportunity to be academically successful and gain the knowledge and skills needed to prepare them to be college and career ready. The reality is that some students might not be reached; they will be lost. Stakeholders cannot begin the vision with that realization. In doing so, they are too quick to judge and allow students to be unsuccessful. This clouds the vision. They need to be able to look back and know that an equitable and socially-just education was provided to all students. They cannot intentionally let students slip into the abyss.

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APPENDIX A.

IRB EXEMPTION

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

Institutional Review Board
Olgun Guvench, Chair

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207)602-2244 T
(207)602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

To:	Lisa Janosik
Cc:	Michelle Collay
From:	Olgun Guvench
Date:	December 7, 2016
Project # & Title:	120716-007, Public Education Fuels the Debate: Academic Outcomes of Students Socially Promoted from 8th Grade to High School (Initial)

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has reviewed the above captioned project, and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.101(b)(4).

Additional IRB review and approval is not required for this protocol as submitted. If you wish to change your protocol at any time, you must first submit the changes for review.

Please contact Olgun Guvench at (207) 221-4171 or oguvench@une.edu with any questions.

Sincerely,

Olgun Guvench, M.D., Ph.D.
IRB Chair

IRB#: 120716-007
Submission Date: 12/5/16
Status: Exempt, 45 CFR 46.101(b)(4)
Status Date: 12/7/16

APPENDIX B.

SITE PERMISSION

Dr. Connie Brown
Interim Superintendent

Michael Fredericksen
Interim Assistant Superintendent

Nashua School District
EDUCATE. INSPIRE. EMPOWER.

Daniel Donovan
Chief Operating Officer

Roland Boucher
Interim Assistant Superintendent

University of New England IRB
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, Maine 04005
(207) 283-0171

November 29, 2016

Dear University of New England IRB:

Based on a meeting with Lisa Janosik held on September 27, 2016, I give permission for her to conduct a study within the Nashua School District entitled *Academic Outcomes of Students Socially Promoted from 8th Grade to High School*. As part of this study, I authorize the researcher to collect, analyze, and use Nashua District archival data from the Student Information System, Follett Aspen.

We understand that the Nashua District's responsibilities, which have been met, will only include making the archival data available to Lisa Janosik. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

This authorization covers the time period of December 1, 2016 to August 31, 2017.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential, and conform to the criteria for acceptance or exemption from the University Of New England's Institutional Review Board.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting.

Sincerely,

Cornelia Brown, PhD
Interim Superintendent of Schools

141 Ledge Street, Nashua, New Hampshire 03060
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