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**Adapting to retention: A naturalistic study revealing the coping  
resources of nonpromoted students and their parents**

**Anderson, Robbie Jones, Ed.D.**

**East Tennessee State University, 1993**

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**ADAPTING TO RETENTION:  
A NATURALISTIC STUDY REVEALING THE  
COPING RESOURCES OF NONPROMOTED STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS**

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**A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the  
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis  
East Tennessee State University**

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**In Partial-Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education**

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**by  
Robbie Jones Anderson  
May 1993**

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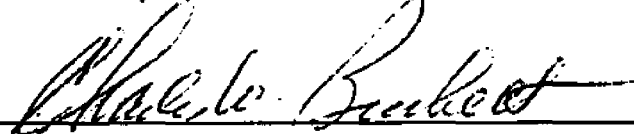
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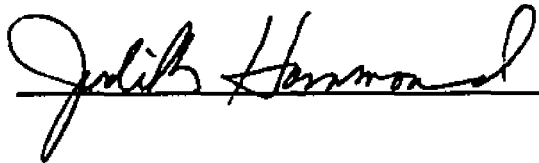
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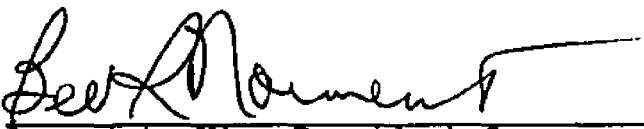
  
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Associate Vice-President for  
Research and Dean, School of  
Graduate Studies

## ABSTRACT

### ADAPTING TO RETENTION: A NATURALISTIC STUDY REVEALING THE COPING RESOURCES OF NONPROMOTED STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS

by

Robbie Jones Anderson

The purpose of this study was to uncover the feelings and reactions of students and their parents in regard to the nonpromotion experience. Families with children who had been retained at least once in grades one through eight were purposefully selected as units of study from one of four area school systems. A total of 52 family members from 22 family units participated in 46 separate, qualitative interviews. The information collected from the interviews was inductively analyzed.

Building upon Schlossberg's theory for human adaptation to transitions, seven factors or coping resources emerged from the data that affected the adaptation of a parent or a student to a grade level retention. These factors fell into one of three categories--the characteristics of the individual, the characteristics surrounding the transition (the retention), and the characteristics of the individual's environment. The analysis revealed the following seven coping resources: self-definition of an individual, previous experience with retention, retention philosophy of the individual, feelings of empowerment connected to the retention decision, retention rationale or reason for the retention, sense of belonging to the school community, and support systems available to the individual.

From the findings, the investigator reached the following conclusions: (1) regardless of their initial feelings toward a retention decision, most students, as well as other family members, eventually assimilated a nonpromotion experience; (2) the seven identified coping resources influenced the success of an individual's adaptation to a retention experience; (3) school personnel did little to initially prepare a child for a nonpromotion and generally offered little support to aid adaptation to the retention; (4) the relationships an educator developed with family members were essential in establishing a sense of trust and of cooperation between the home and the school; (5) school systems rarely provided parents of children in grades one through eight with the strategies necessary to academically aid a child within the home environment; (6) adherence to rigid, grade level curriculum placed undue stress on many students and their families, inadvertently reinforcing the acceptance of the practice of retention by parents and by students.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

This is to certify that the following study has been filed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of East Tennessee State University.

Title of Grant or Project The Effect of Nonpromotion on the Family and on the Home-School Relationship

Principal Investigator Robbie Jones Anderson

Department Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

Date Submitted December 16, 1991

Institutional Review Board, Chairman Anthony J. DeSua

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, Tom and Lois Jones, who encouraged me to reach for new educational goals, and to my husband and son, Cliff and Casey Anderson, who provided me with the love and the support needed to sustain me through this project.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to many individuals for the advice and support given to me during this project. I am especially grateful to Russell West, my committee chairman, for his encouragement in my use of a naturalistic design and for his unflagging optimism that my investigation would be completed in a timely manner. I am also thankful for the interest and suggestions of the remainder of my committee members--Charles Burkett, Donn Gresso, and Judith Hammond.

I appreciate the efforts of my peer debriefer, Ellen Stites, to keep me focused and on task. My auditor, Jerry Herman, has my thanks for cheerfully wading through the notes, audio tapes, and transcripts comprising my audit trail. As corny as it may sound, I cannot thank Louann Davenport enough for the conscientious manner in which she transcribed the audio tapes of my interviews (which were sometimes taped under less than ideal conditions).

In addition, I would like to extend my gratitude to those administrators and supervisors of the Bristol City Schools, the Elizabethton City Schools, the Unicoi County Schools, and the Washington County Schools for their help in identifying the families who participated in this study. And last, I want to thank the participants themselves for their candor and for the richness of their remarks.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of nonpromotion on the family of the retained student and on the home-school relationship. With an estimated 2 out of every 30 students being retained on an annual basis, administrators are faced with retention decisions on a fairly significant percentage of students in their schools (Shepard & Smith, 1990). In fact, decisions concerning nonpromotion are among the most important decisions a school administrator will ever make (Bucko, 1986).

In the United States, the nonpromotion of academically weak students is rooted in a tradition dating back to the 19th century graded school (Bucko, 1986; Cunningham & Owens, 1976). By the early 1900s, nearly one out of every two students was retained and as many as 70% were over-aged (Walker, 1984). The 20th century ushered in the progressive movement and retention rates dropped accordingly; by the 1930s, the combination of social promotion and tracking became the more accepted practice for working with weaker students (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983). The practice of retention continued to decline during the 1950s and 1960s although exact retention figures were impossible to calculate because many states did not require local systems to collect or to report data on nonpromotion of students (Bucko, 1986).

Despite overwhelming evidence that retention does not

improve student achievement (Holmes, 1983, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975), the trend towards minimum competency testing in the 1970s and the excellence in education movement of the 1980s has invigorated the practice of retention (Shepard & Smith, 1989; Toch, 1984). The current, annual retention rate in the United States is gauged to be approximately 6% with an estimated 50% of all entering students expected to experience nonpromotion at least one time before entering high school (Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Rather than being an isolated educational incident in the lives of a few students performing at the bottom rungs of the achievement ladder, nonpromotion is readily embraced by many educators and accepted by many parents as a viable solution for any student experiencing difficulties in school. The 1986 Gallup poll found 72% of the American public favoring rigid grade promotion standards (Gallup, 1986). Four years later 67% of the general public supported strict grade level examinations with a majority erroneously believing underachieving promoted students were more likely to drop out of school than repeaters (Elam, 1990).

Widely practiced, retention directly affects 2.4 million students per year at a price tag to taxpayers of \$10 billion (Shepard & Smith, 1990). Has retention reaped the returns in achievement that one would expect with such an expensive investment? Holmes' (1989) review of 63 studies on nonpromoted students answers that question with an unequivocal "no." The nonpromoted students in 54 of the studies failed to show any academic advantage in subsequent



school years when compared to a control group and, in fact, performed lower than the control students.

Holmes' review also investigated the emotional costs of retention. Nonpromotion appears to negatively affect social behavior, feelings toward school, and attendance. His conclusions lend support to the work of Byrnes and Yamamoto (1985) who documented the emotional turmoil retention causes in children. Another study revealed that retention is a more stressful and traumatic experience for children than teachers recognize (Smith & Shepard, 1988). Smith and Shepard probed kindergarten teacher's feelings about the practice of retention and found most teachers, even those who did not readily retain students, perceived only positives or advantages for students who had been retained. The parents in the study, however, were much more aware of the shame and confusion that, according to them, their children were experiencing.

Although a considerable body of research is available on the effect nonpromotion has on the achievement and the affect of children retained, very little research has been conducted on the effects retention has on the family. In 1988, Soto investigated the response of parents of kindergarten students who had been retained; the parents were generally supportive of the school's decision but still experienced a great deal of anger and embarrassment. Soto concluded families experiencing retention need more support than is typically offered by schools.

Conversely, support from the family is a critical element in school success. Researchers report positive

findings on widely varying types of parent involvement (Becher, 1984; Cotton & Savard, 1982; Henderson, 1981, 1987; Walberg, 1984). Several federally funded programs contain components designed to promote family involvement (Epstein, 1991), and many individual school systems are developing innovative parent-school partnerships (D'Angelo & Adler, 1991; Chrispeels & Meaney, 1985; Davies, 1991; Epstein, 1991; Warner, 1991).

Light, recognized for his development of Light's Retention Scale (1986), acknowledged the importance of the family unit in nonpromotion decisions. Light developed the scale for school officials' use with parents when discussing a student under consideration for retention. Building upon the work of Reinherz and Griffin, who in 1970 demonstrated the importance of parent involvement in school success, Light included parent-school participation as one of nineteen weighted items to be reviewed when making retention decisions (Light, 1986).

The retention scale also included another family variable, sibling relationships. Within the family setting, a large part of a child's self concept develops in response to the child's relationship to his/her siblings (Light, 1986). Light stated, "Grade retention may disrupt the established pattern of children's interaction in the family" (Light, 1986, p. 16).

## The Problem

### The Statement of the Problem

Scholars and researchers such as Byrnes and Yamamoto, Shepard and Smith, and Holmes have addressed the effects of retention on student achievement and student affect, but research on the effects of nonpromotion on the family is lacking. Although the family forges an important link in school success, researchers have not explored the effect retention has on the family unit and on the relationship between home and school.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to uncover the feelings and reactions of students and their parents in regard to the effect the nonpromotion experience has on the family unit and on the relationship between the home and the school. The review of literature pertaining to nonpromotion and to family relationships failed to provide any significant information in this area.

The complexity of the interrelationships necessitated the adoption of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using the qualitative interview guide approach (Patton, 1990), open-ended interviews were conducted with the members of families of students who had been retained at least once during their elementary school career. As "parent involvement remains primarily mother involvement in education" (Lareau, 1989, p. 95), the mother was the primary interview participant in this study. Additional interviews,

however, were conducted contingent upon the accessibility of other family members to the study.

### Significance of the Problem

Despite the research evidence to the contrary (Holmes, 1983, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975), retention continues to be an educational practice used with great frequency to "help" students who have fallen behind academically. Although Bucko (1986) asserted that nonpromotion decisions are among the most important decisions that a school administrator will ever make, teachers and administrators are either unaware of the negative effects on both student achievement and student affect or refuse to believe previous research findings.

In one recent study conducted in South Dakota in 1989, 100 elementary principals and their attitudes toward retention were surveyed. The researchers concluded the majority of the respondents believed nonpromotion resulted in academic benefits, a view clearly unsupported by research findings (Kiner & Vik, 1989).

A better understanding of how nonpromotion affects the student in relation to his/her family would, hopefully, enable administrators to realize the full significance of the retention experience and to develop appropriate district-wide promotion/retention policies (Bucko, 1986; Moran, 1989). As of 1983, fewer than half of all American school systems surveyed had a written retention policy (Rose et al., 1983).

Nonpromotion affects not only the student but also the

family and the relationship between the home and the school. The home-school relationship is crucial to the success of a good school program, and retention policies, therefore, should be written to include parental and student input (Riffel & Switzer, 1986).

### Definitions

#### Nonpromotion

The term nonpromotion is synonymous with the term retention and refers to the practice of requiring a student to repeat a grade level. Nonpromotion is recognized by other common terms and phrases including flunking, failing, and being held back (Light, 1986). The terms nonpromotion and retention will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

#### Qualitative Interviewing

According to Patton (1990), qualitative interviewing can take one of the following formats: "(1) the informal conversational interview, (2) the general interview guide approach, and (3) the standardized open-ended interview" (p. 280). Two interview types were used in this study. Initial interviews were conducted using an informal approach. As patterns begin to emerge from those initial interviews, an interview guide was developed. Patton described an interview guide as an interview outline.

The issues in the outline need not be taken in any particular order and the actual wording of questions

to elicit responses about those issues is not determined in advance. The interview guide simply serves as a basic checklist during the interview to make sure that all relevant topics are covered. (Patton, 1990, p. 280)

### Overview of the Study

Chapter I introduces the study and includes the following components: a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the problem, limitations, and definitions.

A review of the related literature concerning the effects of nonpromotion will be found in Chapter II. This chapter includes summaries of the recent research in the areas of retention and its effects on student achievement and student affect and a summary on the importance of parent involvement in school success. The final section of the literature review will examine the literature dealing with the impact of the retention experience on the family itself. Chapter II will close with a list of the initial research questions that were to be explored during the investigation.

Research participants were identified from four school systems located in Northeast Tennessee, and a brief description of the family values associated with this region will be provided in the introduction of Chapter III. As the investigator operated from a naturalistic paradigm, Chapter III will also describe the qualitative techniques that were used in the collection and inductive analysis of data.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with the mothers of children who had been retained; other family members accessible to the study were also interviewed.

Chapter IV contains a profile of participating families. In addition, a brief discussion of stress and adaptation theory is provided along with an overview of the investigator's framework for retention adaptation. This framework is comprised of seven factors or coping resources that emerged from an analysis of the data.

The seven coping resources relevant to a family member's adaptation to a nonpromotion experience are detailed further in Chapters V, VI, and VII. Chapter V discusses those characteristics of an individual relevant to retention adaptation--self-definition, previous retention experience, and retention philosophy. Chapter VI discusses those characteristics surrounding the nonpromotion experience which affect an individual's adaptation to nonpromotion; these coping resources include feelings of empowerment connected to the retention decision and the retention rationale. The last component of the retention adaptation framework is found in Chapter VII; this category contains those characteristics of the environment which affect the adaptation of a family member to nonpromotion. The two factors included in this component are the sense of belonging to the school community and the support systems available to the individual.

A summary of the investigation as well as conclusions and further discussion on the findings presented in Chapters IV through VII will be found in Chapter VIII, the final

chapter of this dissertation. This chapter will close with educational implications. Although nonpromotion is a topic that has been researched a great deal over the past decade, as the review of literature will reveal, very little qualitative data has been collected in this field. Even less research can be found to document the effects that nonpromotion has on the family and on the home-school relationship.



## CHAPTER 2

### Review of Related Literature

#### Introduction

The purpose of Chapter II is to review the related literature concerning the effects of nonpromotion on the family and on the home-school relationship. Nonpromotion is a widely practiced method for dealing with underachieving students (Shepard & Smith, 1989) and is firmly entrenched in educational tradition dating back to the rise of the graded school in the 1840s (Bucko, 1986; Cunningham & Owens, 1976).

Although widely practiced, the benefits of nonpromotion have been hotly debated over the past 80 years; the interest in retention has fueled hundreds of research studies (Bucko, 1986). Researchers have generally focused on two major areas of concern, the effect retention has on student achievement and the effect retention has on student affect (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

A large body of research is available to educators on the effect of retention on student achievement. In fact, at least three major meta-analyses have been conducted in the last 20 years and will be briefly explored in this chapter's review of retention literature (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Holmes, 1989; Jackson, 1975). Jackson described the studies he reviewed as being flawed, and consequently, his major conclusion was to note the need for future retention research to be better constructed. Holmes, however, found that the majority of the research studies showed few educational advantages for students who had experienced

nonpromotion. In fact, students who had been retained made less educational gains than similar students who were promoted.

The second area of nonpromotion widely researched was the effect that nonpromotion had on student affect (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1983, 1985; Chase, 1968; Finlayson, 1977; Smith & Shepard, 1988). Some researchers discovered retained students experienced much more trauma and shame from the experience than teachers surmised.

Although little research has been conducted on the effects of retention on the home-school relationship, available research clearly shows the family unit as an important variable in student success (Becher, 1984; Cotton & Savard, 1982; Henderson, 1981, 1987; Walberg, 1984). Based upon the relationship between family involvement and student success, systems throughout the nation are redoubling their efforts to include parents effectively in the daily life of their schools (D' Angelo & Adler, 1991; Chrispeels, 1991; Chrispeels & Meaney, 1985; Davies, 1991; Epstein, 1991; Warner, 1991). The link between student success and parent involvement is, in fact, so strong that the federal government has placed school systems receiving Chapter I monies under mandate to implement parent involvement policies and programs (Augustus F. Hawkins - Robert T. Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988).

Another related area, even less researched, is the effect of nonpromotion on the family. Soto's study in 1988 found that parents of retained students were generally in

agreement with the school's decision but felt confused and embarrassed. He ascertained parents to be in need of more support than schools normally provided families dealing with nonpromotion.

Light (1986) included two important family variables on Light's Retention Scale, parent involvement and sibling relationships. Parent support is critical for student success and should be considered in all retention decisions (Lieberman, 1980; Light, 1986; Stammer & Cooke, 1986). In addition, sibling relationships help to determine a child's self concept; nonpromotion can seriously disrupt these relationships (Lieberman, 1980; Light, 1986).

Past research on nonpromotion has concentrated on two areas of concern which will be reviewed in this chapter, student achievement and student affect. In addition, parent involvement as an important factor in school success will be discussed. Although little available research investigates the effects nonpromotion has on the link between the home and the school and on the family unit itself, the final sections of this chapter will explore the literature dealing with the complexities of these relationships and lead to the research questions that will guide this study.

#### Effects of Nonpromotion on Student Achievement

Nonpromotion is a common practice in American schools; over the past decades researchers have examined the effect of retention on student achievement in numerous studies (Rose et al., 1983).

In a review of past retention literature, Bocks (1977)

discovered as far back as 1911, Keyes had conducted a seven-year study of children who were retained in a district of about 5,000 students. Keyes concluded only 20% of the students fared any better after their nonpromotion while 40% of the students showed losses in achievement.

Bocks also cited two studies from the 1920s conducted by Buckingham and by McKinney that reinforced Keyes' findings. In 1926 Buckingham studied several thousand retainees and concluded only one third of the students showed increased academic achievement after their retention. Similarly, McKinney wrote a doctoral dissertation in 1928 examining the work of students who had been retained past the first grade. McKinney found only 35% had improved their school work after the retention; 12% achieved less, and the majority, 53%, remained unchanged in their work. Bocks concluded from his literature review nonpromotion is ineffective in increasing the academic achievement of students performing below grade level (Bocks, 1977).

Bossing and Brien's (1980) review of retention traced the theme of academic loss through two additional studies that were conducted in the 1930s and 1950s. A study directed by Arthur in 1936 examined the achievement of 60 children who had repeated first grade; the nonpromoted students were matched with students of the same ability level who were promoted. Arthur found the typical nonpromoted student needed two school years to learn what the typical promoted child had learned in one school year. In examining a study by Coffield and Blommers conducted in

1956, Bossing and Brien found further evidence an extra year does not increase the performance of slower achieving students.

Public education became more child-centered, and nonpromotion rates dropped throughout the nation between the 1930s until the 1960s. Social promotion coupled with ability grouping rose into prominence as the educationally correct procedure for dealing with lower achieving students (Rose et al., 1983).

The accountability movement of the 1970s, however, prodded many school systems to adopt promotion and graduation standards (O'Neal, 1984; Toch, 1984). By retaining students who failed to meet grade level standards, school boards conscientiously declared their systems to be committed to excellence in education (O'Neal, 1984). The educational basis for such an adoption was a belief all students could learn if enough time and effort were expended. Critics to this approach concluded those students who were retained might have achieved a great deal more if they had been promoted and allowed to work at their ability level in the next grade (Koons, 1977).

The reform movement of the 1980s reinforced the belief that strict grade level achievement of objectives was a prerequisite for promotion, and the implementation of exacting academic standards was one of five recommendations vital to the rebuilding of the nation's educational foundation (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). With the call for higher standards and professional accountability, retention rates climbed to about 6% (Norton,

1987; Shepard & Smith, 1989).

### Major Meta-Analyses of Retention Research

Retention rates remained around 6% during the past decade (Shepard & Smith, 1990) despite the findings of dozens of retention studies dating back to 1911 (Bossing & Brien, 1980; Rose et al., 1983). In an effort to systematically organize and better interpret for educators this multitude of retention studies, three major meta-analyses of research concerning the effects of nonpromotion on academic achievement were conducted during the 1970s and 1980s (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Holmes, 1989; Jackson, 1975).

Unlike narrative research review, meta-analysis is "the attitude of data analysis applied to quantitative summaries of individual experiments. . . . It is a perspective that uses many techniques of measurement and statistical analysis" in order to better understand multiple studies of the same problem (Glass, McGaw, & Smith, 1981, p. 21). Meta-analyses are often reported in terms of "effect size" with the results "in the form of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation" (Wolf, 1986, p. 24).

In 1975 Jackson completed the first meta-analysis conducted on retention research. After an extensive review of literature, Jackson closely examined 44 retention studies, eliminated those studies that were not relevant or used designs not replicated in other investigations, and divided the remaining studies into one of three types of research designs. Jackson calculated the statistical

relationship between students who were either retained or promoted and two major dependent variables, achievement and adjustment. Academic achievement was usually measured by achievement test scores or grades. Adjustment scores were usually derived from single response items on a list of traits.

Jackson decided most of the research designs he examined were faulty and biased. The first design compared retained students with those who were promoted; these studies skewed results in favor of promotion. Seventeen researchers had used this design, and 208 analyses were calculated. Setting a .05 level of confidence, Jackson concluded that 24 analyses resulted in achievement scores and 27 analyses resulted in adjustment scores favoring promotion; 45 analyses resulted in achievement scores and 40 analyses resulted in adjustment scores which favored promotion but were not statistically significant. Twenty-nine analyses resulted in achievement scores and 34 analyses resulted in adjustment scores not statistically significant but favoring nonpromotion. Only two analyses resulted in achievement scores and three analyses resulted in adjustment scores statistically significant and favoring nonpromotion. According to Jackson, the students who were promoted were academically stronger students than those retained or they would not have been promoted, and therefore, the promoted students were more likely to do better the following year regardless of the promotion/retention issue.

Jackson also found bias in studies using the second type of design. In this design, nonpromoted students'

progress a year after their nonpromotion was compared to their pre-retention achievement. This type of bias skewed results in the direction of retention. Twelve retention investigators had employed this design, and Jackson calculated 108 analyses. Statistically significant gains in retained students occurred in achievement in 69 analyses and in adjustment in 29 analyses; nonstatistically significant gains occurred four times in achievement and seven times in adjustment. These studies, however, made no attempt to account for the element of natural development of the children involved in the research. Jackson surmised these students might have made similar gains in achievement by virtue of the extra year in school without any direct relationship to the nonpromotion experience.

Ethical issues undoubtedly prevented more systems from employing a true experimental design in retention research (Rose et al., 1983), but Jackson did find three studies employing this type of design randomly assigning students to the promotion/nonpromotion experience. Out of the 40 analyses conducted on grade level subgroups within the three studies, one occurrence was statistically significant in the area of achievement for promoted students; 17 others favored promotion but were not statistically significant. There was a lack of any statistically significant results favoring retention, but 22 nonstatistically significant achievement outcomes were in the direction of retained students. While the random selection process provided the studies with a stronger research design, the studies were approximately 40 years old at the time of Jackson's analysis, and he



concluded their results could not be generalized to the current educational scene (Jackson, 1975).

Jackson found past research on the issue of promotion/nonpromotion flawed. However flawed, he still concluded the weight of the research could in no way support the educational practice of retention. "Those educators who retain pupils in grade do so without valid research evidence to indicate that such treatment will provide greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than will promotion to the next grade" (Jackson, 1975, p. 627).

Jackson's work was considered the most authoritative source on the subject of nonpromotion until Holmes and Matthews' meta-analysis in 1984 (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Holmes and Matthews reviewed the retention literature and selected 44 studies comparing promoted students with nonpromoted students; the studies contained data on 11,132 students. Studies included for analyses presented original research with enough data to tabulate effect size and compared retained with promoted students. These studies dated from 1929 to 1981 with the majority of the investigations occurring between 1960 and 1975 (Holmes & Matthews, 1984).

The total mean effect size was  $-.37$ . In other words, students who were retained scored, on the average, about one-third of a standard deviation less on several criterion variables when compared to students who were promoted. The probability of obtaining this effect size by chance was less than  $.001$ . Dependent variables included both academic as

well as affective outcomes.

An effect size of  $-.44$  was tabulated from the 31 studies that had investigated academic achievement. The mean academic performance of retained students was  $.44$  standard deviation less than the average performance of the promoted students; the probability of obtaining this effect size by chance was less than  $.001$ . Retained students had negative effect size values on all subareas calculated for academic achievement including reading, language arts, math, social studies, work study skills, and grade point average.

The retention experience also had a negative effect on several outcome measures of student affect. Twenty-one studies investigated the effect of retention on personal adjustment. The mean effect size was  $-.27$  for retained students with a  $.001$  probability of obtaining this effect size by chance. Nine of the studies investigated self-concept and produced an average effect size of  $-.19$  for students experiencing nonpromotion; the probability of this effect size was less than  $.05$ . Eight studies investigating student attitude toward school yielded an average effect size for retained students of  $-.16$  with a probability less than  $.001$ . After obtaining negative effect sizes on retained students for both academic and affective variables, Holmes and Matthews concluded the following:

Those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweighs positive outcomes. Because this cumulative research evidence consistently points to

negative effects of nonpromotion, the burden of proof legitimately falls on proponents of retention plans to show there is compelling logic indicating success of their plans when so many other plans have failed. (p.232)

Holmes updated his work in a meta-analysis published in 1989. In the most recent review, 63 studies were included; 44 of these studies had been included in the 1984 meta-analysis research. The three criteria for inclusion in the original review were retained. First, the included studies reported original retention research. Second, the studies generated enough data to allow an effect size to be computed, and third, the studies' design provided a control or comparison group.

As in the 1984 review, the updated meta-analysis revealed nonpromoted students scored lower on achievement outcomes than promoted students. The average nonpromoted student scored .15 standard deviation lower on various dependent variables than similar but promoted students. Alpha or probability measures were not recorded in the review. Because of the great variance in the numbers of effect sizes produced by individual studies, Holmes recalculated the effect size to weight the effect by the study and not by individual effect size. This procedure produced an overall effect size of  $-.26$ .

Holmes' investigation led him to subdivide the studies in a number of ways. Sixty-two percent of all calculated effect sizes dealt with academic achievement; 47 studies yielded a total of 536 effect sizes. The effect size

weighted individual effects was  $-.17$  for students who were retained. Recalculating the effect size to give equal weight to each investigation, the effect size was  $-.31$ .

Subdividing the academic data into several areas also yielded negative outcomes. Calculating the effect size by weighted by studies, the effect size for retained students was  $-.33$  in language arts,  $-.30$  in reading,  $-.25$  in mathematics, and  $-.37$  in social studies. In addition, the effect size for grade point average when weighted by study was  $-.78$  for retained students. In other words, retained students had a mean grade point average  $.78$  standard deviation units lower than students who had been promoted. Not only did retained students perform more poorly than promoted students on achievement tests, but students who repeated a grade level performed more poorly on classroom work than their promoted counterparts.

Examining effect sizes by grade level, Holmes found those children who repeated fourth and fifth grade had a stronger mean negative effect than those students who repeated kindergarten and first grade. The effect sizes for retained students, calculated by weighting the study were  $-.28$  for kindergarten,  $-.28$  for first grade,  $-.10$  for second grade,  $-.15$  for third grade,  $-.36$  for fourth grade, and  $-.38$  for fifth grade.

In examining effect sizes longitudinally, two basic research designs were evident. When retained students' achievement was compared with promoted students' achievement at the end of one school year, the promoted students outperformed the retained students by  $.45$  standard deviation

unit. The negative effect size grew until after four or more years the effect size was  $-.83$ . When comparisons were made between students at the end of the same grade level, the nonpromoted students scored higher (.25), but the gains were lost over a period of time. Three years after the retention all achievement gain had disappeared (.00).

Holmes also analyzed the data for several affective measures. Two hundred and thirty-four of the effect sizes that Holmes calculated were classified as personal adjustment variables. Personal adjustment was subdivided into "social adjustment, emotional adjustment, and behavior" (p. 22). Weighting for individual effects, the mean effect size for personal adjustment was not significantly different than zero. Effect sizes calculated by weighting for studies produced an effect size of  $-.21$  for personal adjustment,  $-.21$  for social adjustment,  $-.12$  for emotional adjustment, and  $-.23$  for behavioral adjustment.

School attitude did not vary significantly between promoted and nonpromoted students, but the effect size for school attendance was  $-.18$  indicating poorer attendance for retainees. Eleven studies measured self-concept with an average effect size of  $-.13$ ; however, personal adjustment scores were only slightly lower for retained students.

In a secondary analysis of the retention research, Holmes closely examined 9 out of the 63 studies where positive achievement gains by retained students were reported. All of the studies reporting gains took place in middle class, suburban school districts, and two

characteristics of the retainees in these studies clearly emerged. First, the nonpromoted students in these nine studies were more capable than the average retainee. These students had IQ scores of about 100 and were scoring less than .75 standard deviation below the average on achievement tests. Second, the retained students in these studies did not experience the same school program during their retained year that they had had the previous year. The nonpromoted students were given much remediation and extra help. In fact, the students' curriculum was determined by a written, individually prescribed educational program. Holmes concluded the educational gains of the retained students in those studies where the nonpromotion experience produced favorable results were probably tied to the increase in help and support rather than to the retention experience itself.

The 1989 meta-analysis of retention studies reviewed by Holmes reinforced the conclusions of the 1984 Holmes and Matthews study. Retention research reviewed and statistically analyzed by Holmes linked negative outcome measures to the strategy of nonpromotion. When retainees and promoted children were matched for ability, nonpromoted students had "an average negative effect of  $-.30$  standard deviations. The weight of empirical evidence argues against grade retention" (p. 28). Holmes concluded his meta-analysis by echoing his sentiments from 1984. Research did not support the practice of retention, and nonpromoted students were much more likely to be harmed than to benefit from the experience.

### Effects of Nonpromotion on Student Affect

Much of the research on retention deals with student achievement, but several researchers have also explored the relationship between nonpromotion and various aspects of student affect. A review of literature dealing with the effect of nonpromotion on student affect reveals mixed findings but tends to indicate school failure does indeed have an adverse effect on the well being of students (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1985; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Holmes, 1989).

As far back as 1969, Glasser recognized that "very few children come to school failures, none come labeled failures; it is school and school alone which pins the label of failure on children" (p. 26). How then does the experience of failure or nonpromotion affect a student? Some researchers would argue that the experience of retention does very little to change a student's self-concept or patterns of behavior.

In an effort to determine the effects of nonpromotion on student self-concept, Finlayson (1977) conducted a longitudinal study on first grade students in the Philadelphia area from October 1973 through May 1975. During that time period data were collected four times using the FACES Scale, a scale "developed by Jack R. Frymier at Ohio State University . . . that contains 18 questions about feelings toward family, school, friends, and self" (p. 205). Three groups of students of 25 students each were compared, students who had been retained, students who had been promoted, and students who were promoted but were considered "borderline". Although borderline and promoted

students initially scored higher on self-concept than nonpromoted students, by the fourth data point the scores of retained students were almost the same as those of the promoted students. Finlayson concluded from his study nonpromotion does not adversely affect student self-concept. In his interpretation, however, he neglected to take into account the significance of regression toward the mean "which may have been a factor, as the retained students had the lowest self-concepts at the beginning of the second year" (Niklason, 1984, p. 490).

Chase (1968) examined the social and emotional effects of retention drawing subjects from 10 schools in the Columbus, Ohio area. Teachers in grades one through three were asked to complete a questionnaire identifying the major reasons students in their classes the proceeding year had been retained. Subjects selected for the study were students who had been retained due to student immaturity as identified by the retaining teacher. Sixty-five students were selected for the study with the following grade level breakdown: 44 from the first grade, 15 from the second grade, and 6 from the third grade.

Basing conclusions on responses to parent and teacher questionnaires, Chase maintained students who had been retained generally were not harmed socially or emotionally by the experience. In the judgement of participating teachers who completed a second teacher questionnaire, all but 6% of the students adjusted to the nonpromotion with a minimum of emotional turmoil. Smith and Shepard (1988), however, found teachers often underestimated the



degree of emotional upheaval experienced by retained students.

Retention research studies have generally avoided securing information from retainees concerning their personal reactions to being nonpromoted, although the emotional experiences of retained students were vividly recorded by Byrnes and Yamamoto (1985) through interviews with 71 nonpromoted students. The interviews took place in a large southwestern city school district located on the Mexican border and involved 25 homerooms at four different school sites. The 71 students were all experiencing retention and were interviewed along with an equal number of age appropriate classmates and students who were at risk for retention but had not yet repeated a grade.

The students were encouraged to talk about many aspects of school before being asked specifically about nonpromotion. When asked if they knew of anyone who had ever been retained, many of the students, especially the girls, declined to offer themselves as an example. Forty-three percent of the girls, as opposed to 19% of the boys, denied the experience.

As the students described their feelings about retention, "of the 64 responses, 84% shared feelings centering around 'sad,' 'bad,' and 'upset'" (p. 210). Forty-seven percent of the students perceived their parents as "mad", and 28% of the students said their parents had been "sad" with nearly half of the students reporting they had been punished. Students also expressed their feelings about the worst part of repeating a grade. "The most common

negative response was 'being laughed at and teased' (22%). 'Not being with friends' (16%), 'being punished' (14%), 'being sad' (10%), 'getting bad grades' (18%), 'being embarrassed' (4%) were also mentioned" (p. 211).

In another study by Byrnes and Yamamoto (1983), the researchers described the characteristics of elementary students from two southwestern schools who were considered socially isolated. Data collected from sociometric questionnaires indicated socially isolated students were neither liked nor disliked by their classmates but were often ignored. Byrnes and Yamamoto discovered 35% of the students who were identified as "'invisible' children" (p. 15) in this study had been retained at some point during their school careers. In fact, the researchers found the higher the grade level the higher the percentage of "invisible" students had been retainees. "Seven out of 10 fifth- and sixth-grade target children had undergone this experience" (p. 20).

Studies proceeding the work of Byrnes and Yamamoto also found the effects of nonpromotion on student affect to be negative (Bedoian, 1954; Hartsig & Langenbach, 1952; Goodlad, 1954). Hartsig and Langenbach (1952) conducted three case studies on students who had been retained in school, one girl and two boys. Although five years later the girl who had repeated first grade appeared to have profited socially and academically by the retention, the two boys reaped no academic benefits and experienced great social difficulties. One boy lost all confidence in his

abilities and became very dependent on his younger brother; the other boy became very discouraged and lost interest in school. The researchers concluded two out of the three students suffered "social and emotional maladjustments" (p. 62) because of the retentions.

In a study on social acceptability, Bedoian (1954) gave a sociometric test to 743 students in 22 different classrooms. The mean raw scores from this instrument were collected and compared on three groups of participants, at-age students, overage students, and underage students. The younger students had significantly higher social acceptability scores. The overage students had social acceptability scores which were significantly lower than the at-age and underage students. In addition, the older students received social rejection scores that were significantly higher than the other two age groups. The students who were disliked the most or considered "rejectees" (p. 516) in 14 of the 22 classes were overage students.

Goodlad (1954) investigated the effect of retention of personal-social adjustment. Nonpromoted first graders were selected from six schools, and borderline students who were promoted on to second grade were selected from another five schools. The students from the two schools selected for the study were then matched for intelligence and achievement level. Three instruments were used to evaluate the students. The students were given the California Test of Personality as a self-rating scale. Sociometric questions were used as a peer-rating scale, and teachers

rated the students using the Haggerty-Olson-Wiskman Behavior Rating Schedules. Goodlad found significant differences both in the social adjustment and in the personal adjustment between students who had experienced nonpromotion and the students who had been promoted to the second grade. The retained students tended to be more gregarious than the promoted students but were rejected at a higher rate than the promoted students and experienced less bonding with classmates.

The weight of the body of retention research clearly documents the adverse effect of nonpromotion on student affect. The studies included in Holmes' two meta-analyses showed a decrease in school attendance, self-concept, and personal adjustment (Holmes & Matthew, 1984; Holmes, 1989). The most moving documentation, however, on the effects of retention on student affect can be found in Yamamoto's research on stress in children.

Yamamoto (1979) asked 367 fourth, fifth, and sixth graders from six metropolitan schools located in the Southwest to rate 20 potentially stressing life events on a scale from one to seven-one being least upsetting and seven being most upsetting. The possibility of "academic retainment" was rated by the students as more stressful than "wetting in class," "parental fights," and being "caught in theft." "Going blind" and "losing a parent" were the only two life events rated more stressful than nonpromotion (p. 582).

### The Home-School Relationship

The effect of the nonpromotion experience on student achievement and affect has been documented by research. Although the effect of retention on parent involvement in educational activities has not been investigated, research has focused on several facets of the home-school relationship. The push for parent-school involvement has accelerated along side the excellence in education movement of the 1980s. A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) called on parents to become actively involved in their children's education.

Several federally funded initiatives acknowledge the importance of the family in educational endeavors. Chapter I, FIRST (Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools and Teaching), Head Start, and Even Start are federally funded programs which contain components designed to promote family involvement efforts of school systems (Epstein, 1991). Systems across the nation are moving toward a committed parent-school partnership (D'Angelo & Adler, 1991; Chrispeels, 1991; Chrispeels & Meaney, 1985; Davies, 1991; Epstein, 1991; Warner, 1991).

In addition, investigations like the one conducted by Bloom (1985) provide compelling evidence of the influence of parents on the development of ability in children. "To excel, to do one's best, to work hard, and to spend one's time constructively were emphasized over and over again" (p. 510) in interviews with the parents of highly successful young adults. The parents in Bloom's study devoted enormous

amounts of time, energy, and resources to their children's talents.

A summary of the effective schools research, however, indicates very little emphasis on parent participation in the learning process (Purkey & Smith, 1983). Does parent involvement play a significant part in the success a child will or will not experience in today's schools? At least five major reviews of the parent involvement literature were conducted during the 1980s and provide educators with substantial support for the implementation of parent programs (Becher, 1984; Cotton & Savard, 1982; Henderson, 1981, 1987; Walberg, 1984). These reviews will be examined along with the research surrounding the effective schools literature.

#### Effective Schools Research

The effective schools research, a reaction to the 1966 research by Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Weinfeld, and York which identified family background as the main predictor of school success, set out to prove schools could have a major impact on students regardless of their socioeconomic status (Chrispeels & Meaney, 1985). Several leaders in the effective schools movement were able to identify a small number of schools successful at educating disadvantaged students to their fullest potential.

The outcome of this research was the development of several different lists of characteristics evident in effective schools; one of the most comprehensive lists was published by Chrispeels and Meaney (1985) based upon the

review of effective schools literature conducted by Purkey and Smith (1983). The chart in Chrispeels and Meaney summarized the characteristics found in nine major effective school investigations and exhibited a great deal of overlap in the characteristics from study to study. Only two of the nine studies listed in the chart, however, considered parent involvement an important factor in effective schools. One of the two studies, conducted by Armor, Conry-Oseguera, Cox, King, McDonnell, Pascal, Pauly, and Zellman in 1976, noted a high level of parent-teacher and parent-principal communication. Surprisingly, Brookover and Lezotte's 1979 study found less overall parent involvement but more initiated parent involvement.

In addition to Armor et al. and Brookover and Lezotte, Purkey and Smith (1983) found parent involvement to be important in studies by Levine and Stark in 1981, Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore in 1981, and the New York State Department of Education in 1974. Despite the uncertain role of parent involvement in effective schools research, Purkey and Smith concluded "that parent involvement is not sufficient, but that obtaining parental support is likely to influence student achievement positively" (p. 444).

The effective schools research, however, has been criticized for its research methodology (Cuban, 1983; Rowan, Bossert & Dwyer, 1983; Scott & Walberg, 1979). In addition, Edmonds (1979), whose list of effective school characteristics is probably the most widely cited, has been criticized for minimizing the influence of the home in successful student learning (Scott & Walberg, 1979). While

Edmonds acknowledged the influence of student background, he tended to discount the importance of the family in the school experience for fear school leaders would feel relieved of their responsibility to try to reach their poorest and most deprived students. Scott and Walberg argued,

We share Edmonds' interest in promoting more effective schools and his belief that the quality of teaching declines if educators assume that home background factors foredoom poor children to unsuccessful classroom performance. On the other hand, educators alone are insufficient to increase learning productivity dramatically, and they need the cooperation of parents and students themselves.

(p. 27)

While the research on effective schools has focused attention on the responsibility schools have for providing a challenging and quality education for all students, a large body of parent involvement literature provides support for the importance of parental influence in the learning experience.

### Parent Involvement

At least five major reviews of the parent involvement literature were conducted during the 1980s (Becher, 1984; Cotton & Savard, 1982; Henderson, 1981, 1987; Walberg, 1984). The major findings and conclusions of those reviews will be briefly discussed. Henderson (1981), commissioned by the National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCCE),



edited the first collection of research findings into an annotated bibliography. The publication contained descriptions on 35 research studies.

All of the studies reported positive findings on widely varying types of parent involvement. Early childhood programs usually revolved around the home; parent programs for school age children often involved parents in the classroom or parent education programs designed to teach parents how to supplement and reinforce classroom objectives. After compiling the research, Henderson determined "that families provide the most important learning environment of all. If parents are not encompassed in the learning process, schools--and school children--are being deprived of an essential source of support" (p. 7).

Henderson updated the bibliography for the NCCE with 18 additional studies (1987). Parent involvement programs, concluded Henderson, enable schools to "produce students who perform better than otherwise identical programs that do not involve parents as thoroughly, or that do not involve them at all" (p. 1). Research documented gains in student tests scores and grades, lasting academic improvement, and positive impact on student affect and behavior.

The report prepared by Cotton and Savard (1982) documented affective and academic improvements. Eighteen documents were reviewed by Cotton and Savard; 12 of the sources were primary and 6 were reviews. The majority of the research studies dealt with early childhood and elementary programs. Of the 17 studies dealing with parent involvement at the elementary level, 14 of the studies

clearly documented an increase in the level of achievement of students when compared to programs without such involvement. Cotton and Savard also found that the studies revealed a strong impact on student affect. "Chronically apathetic low achievers have been shown to demonstrate dramatic motivational and attitudinal improvements when their parents become involved in instructing them" (p. 6). The strongest impact on affect and academics was seen with special populations of students, Hispanics and low socio-economic blacks and whites, and learning disabled children.

Becher (1984) completed an extensive review of the parent involvement literature at the University of Illinois. Becher's review covered a wide array of parent related topics including parent involvement in achievement, intelligence, and social competence. Students scoring high on each of these variables tended to have parents with high expectations who thought of themselves as "teachers." Appropriate school behavior was consistently reinforced. Parent education programs concentrating on the improvement of intelligence in children have been the focus of numerous research studies.

In addition to raising cognitive functioning in children, parent education programs have also improved the teaching styles of parents and helped to make the home a more stimulating environment. Becher (1984) documented the characteristics of parent education programs that have been the most successful. The greatest cognitive gains in children result from parent education programs with certain characteristics including those that provide home visits

rather than workshops or classes, and emphasize parental teaching.

The fifth and perhaps the most ambitious of the reviews of parent involvement literature was conducted by Walberg (1984). With the aid of the National Institute of Education and the National Science Foundation, a team of investigators compiled the results of almost 3,000 studies. Walberg theorized nine factors (divided into three groups) "require optimization to increase affective, behavioral, and cognitive learning" (p. 20). The three main groups were student aptitude, the environment, and the classroom climate. The studies were analyzed; "quantitative syntheses of all available studies of productive factors were conducted" (p. 22).

Several environmental factors produced positive results on student learning including supervised homework and a reduction in the amount of time per week watching television. Graded homework had an effect size of .79, three times the effect size of socioeconomic status (.25). Television viewing in excess of 12 hours per week had a weak negative effect size. Moreover, Walberg concluded "school-parent programs to improve academic conditions in the home have an outstanding record of success in promoting achievement. What might be called 'the alterable curriculum of the home' is twice as predictive of academic learning as is family SES" (pp. 24-25). Conversation, encouragement, long range goal setting, and expressions of love and acceptance are all examples of what Walberg refers to as "alterable curriculum". When schools and families work

together in programs to significantly modify this curriculum of the home, the research shows the results can be astounding. Walberg reported

in 29 controlled studies of the past decade, 91 percent of the comparisons favored children in such programs over nonparticipant control groups. Although the average effect was twice that of SES, some programs had effects ten times as large; and the programs appear to benefit older as well as younger students. (p. 25)

#### Effects of Nonpromotion on the Family

If parent involvement is an important force in the development of a child's abilities and talents and the home-school relationship is an important link in the attainment of a child's educational goals, what effect does the experience of nonpromotion have on the family and on the home-school relationship? Very little research has been conducted in this area. This section will discuss Soto's (1988), Smith and Shepard's (1988), and Light's (1986) work.

Soto (1988) developed a questionnaire using the input of 47 early childhood educators from a southeastern state. The questionnaire was in the form of a "Likert-type" scale ranging from "1" (strongly disagree) to "6" (strongly agree). The questionnaire also contained three open-ended questions. The questionnaire was constructed around eight topics of parental perceptions regarding the kindergarten retention experience of a child in the family.

After building the questionnaire, the researcher had

difficulty in finding administrators who would participate in the study. After two years of searching for a sample, Soto asked all principals in the state with public kindergarten classes in their schools to contribute names of parents with children who had been required to repeat kindergarten. Two principals responded; 40 families were sent questionnaires. Only 10 questionnaires were returned. Soto felt the parents' responses were interesting but due to the small sample size, generalizations were difficult to make.

Despite the small sample of respondents, the families participating in the study were extremely diverse. Occupations ranged from migrant worker to physician. The ethnic background included "one white family, one Middle-eastern family, three Hispanic families, and five Blacks families" (Soto, 1988, pp. 7-8). Five of the children were male and five were female. Four out of the 10 families contained a parent who had experienced nonpromotion as a student.

Several of the answers to the questions indicated the child and the family had experienced a great deal of stress as a result of the experience, even though they believed the teachers had acted in the best interest of their child and their child would benefit from the extra year in kindergarten. Even when parents agreed with the retention decision, they still "feel angry, embarrassed, and overwhelmed. The parents stated that their family life had been affected and that the child experienced stress as a result of the retention" (p. 9).

Soto's finding closely parallel the findings of Smith and Shepard (1988). Smith and Shepard conducted a qualitative study in one school district; 40 out of 44 kindergarten teachers were interviewed regarding their views about retention decisions. In addition parents were interviewed. The researchers found teacher's beliefs about the retention experience often deviated greatly from the beliefs of parents.

Teacher's beliefs regarding retention varied widely among the 40 individuals who were interviewed. Regardless of their personal beliefs, however, most teachers agreed retention in kindergarten was an appropriate teaching strategy for dealing with students who were either immature or deficient in skills. Teachers failed to see any negative side effects to the retention experience and felt the extra year provided students with an opportunity to grow and to become leaders during their second year of kindergarten. Smith and Shepard found

the only qualification to this belief in the benefits and lack of problems teacher mentioned in connection with retention was the parents' cooperation with the decision. 'There is no stigma to retention as long as the parents are supportive of it. I've had great success once I've convinced the parents that they haven't failed in any way.' (p. 323)

During the investigation the researchers uncovered much more fear and uncertainty regarding nonpromotion than was ever admitted by the teachers. Many parents felt bullied into the decision. One parent shared, "We learned to live

with it. But I never, ever want to go through anything like that again" (p. 323). The researchers concluded teachers underestimated the degree of conflict with parents over the decision and the extent of frustration, shame, and confusion the children felt (as reported by parents). Unlike the teachers, parents were readily able to name the problems that their children experienced. For example, they mentioned physical size in relation to their grademates, derogatory comments on the part of family and neighbors, missing agemates who had been promoted, feelings of failure in spite of the parents' presenting the retention in a positive light, teasing by peers, boredom at having to repeat the same material, and being overconfident and careless about repeated material. (p. 323)

In building Light's Retention Scale (1986), Light realized the potential for nonpromotion to be a negative experience. Light's scale took into account 17 factors which included sex and age of the child being considered for nonpromotion, physical size, present grade placement, and previous grade retentions which should be weighed before a decision to retain the child is made. Two of the items were important family variables--parent involvement and sibling relationships.

Light recognized the importance of parent involvement in the success of any educational decision. In addition, he felt sibling relationships were often disrupted after one child has been retained. Light wrote

even in families relatively free from internal rivalry and competition, the balance is frequently upset if a child is retained and placed in the same grade as a younger sibling. As the grade level gap widens between siblings, the chance of family difficulties seems to lessen, but even when the grade level gap between siblings is two or three years, difficulties sometimes occur after retention, because established patterns of sibling interaction and relationship are disrupted. (p. 15)

Children learn a great deal from a sibling relationship including "patterns of honesty, loyalty, helpfulness, conflict, competition, or dominations" (p. 15).

The work Tesser did in 1985 on the Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model of Social Behavior reinforced Light's observations on sibling relationships. Tesser hypothesized that situations which are the most difficult for individuals to maintain a positive self-evaluation are those situations when someone close to an individual has excelled in an area that is considered relevant to that person's own life. The implications in a family are especially great if one child in a household is performing at a significantly lower academic level than his/her siblings (Light, 1986).

#### Summary

This chapter reviewed the related literature concerning the effects of nonpromotion on student achievement, on student affect, on the family, and on the home-school relationship. Nonpromotion is a widely practiced teaching



strategy for dealing with students who are experiencing difficulties in school. Decades of research have failed to provide substantial proof of the benefits of retention. In fact, students experiencing difficulties in school who are promoted tend to gain more in achievement when compared to similarly performing students who are retained; in Keyes' study of about 5,000 students, 40% of the retained students actually made losses in achievement (Bocks, 1977).

Three major meta-analyses of retention research have been conducted during the past 20 years (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Holmes, 1989; Jackson, 1975). Jackson found most the retention research lacking in methodology, but still concluded retention was a practice that could not be supported. Holmes concluded from his research retention was negative in its effect on students in both academics and affect. The research of Byrnes and Yamamoto (1985) also showed the negative effect of retention on student affect; students experience much more trauma from nonpromotion than teachers realize.

Although the effective schools literature failed to uncover parent involvement as an important characteristic in the learning experience, other research strongly ties the parent to school success. At least five major research reviews have been conducted in the last ten years which provide data on the benefits of parent involvement. In addition, several federal projects now have strong parent involvement components.

The research conducted on the effects of retention on the family and on the home-school relationship, however,

has been very slim. The little research available in this area suggests that nonpromotion can have an effect on the family and is capable of producing stress in family relationships. Further research in this area, therefore, is warranted.

The researcher designed an investigation on the effects retention has on the family and on the home-school relationship using naturalistic inquiry. The following section lists the research questions which served to guide the initial stages of this study; as the design of the study emerged, the researcher was prepared to alter or eliminate the original questions and add new questions if needed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). "In fact, the primary strength of the qualitative approach is this very flexibility, which allows, even encourages, exploration, discovery, and creativity" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 110). Chapter III will describe the qualitative methodology used in this study.

### Research Questions

Several questions were formulated based upon the review of literature. The questions that guided the initial stages of this study were in categories as follows:

#### Effect on Family

1. How do parents and students respond to nonpromotion?
2. How do parents perceive their child's response to

the nonpromotion?

3. How do parents perceive the response of other family members to the nonpromotion?

Effect on Home-School Relationship

1. How do parents first learn of their child's academic difficulties?

2. How do parents respond to their child's academic problems?

3. How do the parents view the school's response to the needs within their family?

4. How involved are parents with school activities after their child's nonpromotion?

## Chapter 3

### Methods

#### Introduction

The purpose of Chapter III is to discuss the methods and procedures which were used to conduct an investigation into the effects of nonpromotion on the family and on the home-school relationship. The investigation was conducted within the area comprising the First Tennessee Development District. The eight counties contained in this district were as follows: Carter, Greene, Hancock, Hawkins, Johnson, Sullivan, Unicoi, and Washington (First Tennessee Development District, 1991). Four school systems from this area were selected for this study.

Breathtakingly beautiful, the First Tennessee Development District is located in Northeast Tennessee and is surrounded by the Southern Appalachian Mountain system. As defined in the Appalachian Regional Development Act of 1965, Northeast Tennessee is considered a part of the geographical region known as Appalachia. Many values and beliefs associated with Appalachian culture, therefore, would be applicable to families residing in Northeast Tennessee.

Early studies of Appalachian culture focus more on the problems resulting from the belief systems of people living in this region rather than on the culture itself; other studies tend to define Appalachian values in terms of geographical isolation and regional economy (Bryant, 1981). Regardless of previous studies, all too often cultural

stereotypes leap to mind when thinking about the Appalachian culture.

It is practically impossible to separate stereotypes concerning Appalachian families and communities from historical actualities. There is little hard evidence to demonstrate that Appalachians are more lawless, violent or inbred than any other group of Americans, but nonetheless the familiar stereotypes, continue to color perceptions of social and cultural life in this region. (Blaustein, 1991)

In reviewing past discussions of Appalachian culture, Bryant (1981) discovered certain values ascribed to the region to surface repeatedly. Past writers often described a culture "sharply contrasting with that of middle America" (Bryant, 1981, p. 13). "Traditionalism," "individualism," "fatalism," and an emphasis on the family were traits Bryant found generally accepted as patterns of behavior intricately woven into the culture of this region.

Because this project was centered around interviews with mothers and other family members, information concerning the Appalachian family is pertinent. The strength of family ties is one characteristic of families often mentioned in Appalachian literature (Abbot, 1990; Bryant, 1981; Myers, 1991; Singleton, Ratliff, Carpenter, Davis, & Brunner, 1990; Stephenson, 1968). Stephenson's ethnography of an Appalachian community in particular details the importance of family in the rural south.

After conducting in depth interviews with members from several different families, Stephenson catalogued the family

typology and family structure of a small community called Shiloh. Finding no "typical" family in Shiloh, Stephenson developed a typology to explain family class and social standing in the community.

Families were classified by the type of work secured by the primary breadwinners. Families at the top of the social strata were economically secure from full-time white collar work. The middle social level consisted of those families dependent upon full-time blue collar work. Families with less reliable means of earning a living and families with intermittent work or unemployment were at the bottom end of the social scale. Stephenson chronicled the variation among the different family types in the ways the families dealt with neighbors, peer groups, religious commitment, and family relationships.

Families in Shiloh tended to vary in size in relationship to the family type. The lower the family was on the social scale the larger the family was in membership. The families with the least economic security tended to have the most children; these families were also more likely to have relatives outside the nuclear family living in the household.

Stephenson found family ties to be strong in Shiloh. Even if adult children were not living in close proximity to the parents, the family remained emotionally bound. "Families may be dispersed; but they gather still for church homecomings and family reunions" (Stephenson, 1968, p. 74). Health care workers have also observed the cohesiveness of Appalachian families and the frequency with which families

readily travel great distances to be with other family members who are sick or hospitalized (Singleton, et al., 1990).

Although a strong sense of family may well be a trait noted in the Shiloh study, the stereotype of the southern rural family headed by the male patriarch was not entirely born out by Stephenson's observations. A large number of households were headed by women, and women's influences were greatly felt throughout the community. Another Appalachian writer has noted "Appalachian families frequently consist of a strong, assertive female who takes care of the home and business" (Singleton, et al., 1990, p. 11). In those households headed by both a wife and a husband, Stephenson felt authority to be more equally divided between the man and the woman in families at the upper social level. The woman in the family is also the parent who tends to channel the most energy into the children's educational goals.

Although Appalachia may conjure up images of poverty and ignorance, personal experiences of individual Appalachians belie the myth of "L'il Abner" and often herald a fierce commitment to higher education (Singleton et al, 1990). Education is seen as a way out of poverty and an opportunity for a more comfortable life. Many parents want their children to have access to a college education.

### Design

#### Five Axioms of Naturalistic Inquiry

The investigator used naturalistic inquiry to

investigate the effects of nonpromotion on the family unit and on the home-school relationship within four school systems located in the First Tennessee Development District. "Because qualitative and quantitative methods involve differing strengths and weaknesses, they constitute alternative . . . strategies for research" (Patton, 1990, p. 14). The strengths of qualitative techniques are the collection of data rich in depth and detail. Qualitative methods were selected for this study in order to more fully understand the retention experience from the point of view of the family unit and of the individual students who were retained.

In their book Naturalistic Inquiry, Lincoln and Guba (1985) described five axioms or "basic beliefs" upon which the naturalistic paradigm is built. The first axiom deals with reality. In the traditional, scientific paradigm a single reality is accepted. No single reality, however, exists in the naturalistic paradigm; reality is multiple, constructed, and must be viewed holistically. "Naturalistic inquirers . . . focus upon the multiple realities that, like the layers of an onion, nest within or complement one another. Each layer provides a different perspective of reality, and none can be considered more 'true' than any other" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 57). Different people may interpret the same event in many different ways due to varying values and experiences.

The second axiom of naturalistic inquiry deals with the relationship between the investigator and the investigated. The two are inescapably intertwined and interactive. While



the researcher in the scientific paradigm continually struggles to prevent any human contamination to the data being collected, the investigator in the naturalistic paradigm accepts and even embraces the contact between investigator and participant. In this study, the researcher experienced a great deal of personal contact with the participants through the qualitative interview process (Patton, 1990).

The concept of generalization was discussed in axiom three. Generalization of research findings to a larger population, a major goal of the scientific paradigm, is not a goal of the research effort in naturalistic inquiry. Naturalistic inquiry strives to formulate hypotheses only for those cases which are under investigation. While the results from this study cannot be generalized to a larger population, the findings can be used to generate hypotheses about the participants. In addition, the data collected and inductively analyzed may serve to generate theory concerning the effects of the retention experience on the family and on the home-school relationship.

Lincoln and Guba dealt with the issue of cause and effect in the fourth axiom. Unlike the researcher operating from a scientific paradigm who attempts to explain all action through cause and effect, the naturalistic inquirer believes "all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 38). Although patterns may clearly emerge from the data collected and analyzed in this study, the researcher will not be able to identify any

construct and predictor variables.

The fifth and last axiom of the naturalistic paradigm is the issue of values in research. In the scientific paradigm all research must be free of values. Lincoln and Guba, however, believed all research is "value-bound." All inquiry is influenced by the values of the investigator; the research paradigm selected by the investigator; the interpretation of the data; the values found in the context of the investigation; and the resonance or dissonance of the values permeating the total study. This study was undoubtedly influenced by the background and values of the researcher as well as the the values and cultures of the families living in Northeast Tennessee.

Together the five axioms described by Guba and Lincoln create the foundation for an alternative to the positivistic research paradigm, naturalistic inquiry. In designing a research project an investigator must select a research paradigm from which to operate. Certain research questions are better investigated under the more conventional or scientific paradigm. Other research projects have a better paradigm "fit" with naturalistic inquiry.

#### The Selection of a Research Paradigm

Qualitative methodology is widely used and accepted in the field of research, and the use of qualitative methods no longer requires a lengthy defense (Wolcott, 1990). The investigator is responsible, however, for the selection of an appropriate research paradigm. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explored the fit between a research project and the

selection of an appropriate research method or paradigm and outlined at least five questions an investigator should answer before selecting a naturalistic paradigm and qualitative methodology. First, does the situation being studied have multiple realities? Second, how likely is the investigator to interact with the phenomenon being studied? Third, how important is the context of the phenomenon being studied? Fourth, is the phenomenon being studied explained by a simple cause and effect relationship or by several mutually shaping factors? Finally, a researcher should ask himself/herself how important values are to the outcome of the study.

In selecting a research paradigm for this study on nonpromotion and its effects on the family and on the home-school relationship, the investigator answered the questions put forth by Lincoln and Guba. Answers to the five questions revealed characteristics of this study that pointed the research project in the direction of naturalistic inquiry and qualitative methodology. The first characteristic, multiple realities, was certainly a consideration in this study. As reviewed in Chapter II, research has concentrated on the retention experience from the perspective of the school. The investigator intended to reveal the perspective of parents and other family members, including the retained student.

The second consideration in selecting a naturalistic paradigm was the amount of expected interaction between the investigator and the phenomenon being studied. In studying the experience of nonpromotion, the investigator intended to

conduct interviews with parents and with students. Direct contact during an open-ended interview process would result in a great deal of interaction between the investigator and the participants in the study, a characteristic common to naturalistic inquiry.

Context dependency was the third factor that made this study more suited for qualitative methodology. The data-rich information collected from the participants in Northeast Tennessee would be unlike information collected from parents and students located in other communities. In other words, the data would be tied directly to the context in which it was collected.

The fourth element in this investigation contributing to the study's fit with the naturalistic paradigm was the issue of cause and effect. In collecting data from parents and students, some of whom were several years removed from the retention experience, the investigator realized that many factors would have contributed to the feelings and viewpoints they shared at the time of the interviews. What was the retaining teacher's approach to the retention decision? Were the families directly involved in the decision? If not, how were the families and students informed of the decision? Did different schools in the region follow different retention practices? Was the school year following the retention experience a period of academic growth? These and innumerable other factors interacted over the intervening years to shape the viewpoints held by the families and the students participating in the study. To try to determine a single cause and effect relationship in

this study would not only be meaningless but would also be impossible.

The last issue aiding the investigator in the selection of the naturalistic paradigm and methodology for the proposed study was the issue of value. This study was to be value laden with the values of the parents, the students, and the investigator. Parent's values concerning education and parent involvement in the schools entered into the outcome of the study as did students' values regarding school, teachers, and parent relationships. In addition, the values the investigator held toward education and more specifically toward the teaching strategy of retention unquestionably would affect the collection and analysis of information.

The investigator answered Lincoln and Guba's questions concerning paradigm fit for a research study. Five characteristics of the study--multiple realities, interaction between investigator and participants, outcomes shaped by multiple factors, and value laden information lead the investigator to select a naturalistic research paradigm. Qualitative methodology, therefore, was employed to select participants, to determine sample size, and to collect and analyze information.

#### Research Participants

The families who were asked to participate in the proposed study had children currently enrolled in one of four school systems in the First Tennessee Development District. Two rural systems and two city systems were

deliberately chosen for this study in an effort to maximize the differences in the background of the participants. Although Appalachia is generally thought of as rural, urban life is also thriving in the region (Arnow, 1990; Polansky, Borgman, De Saix, 1972). In fact, the Tri-Cities Metropolitan Statistical Area which covers a large section of Northeast Tennessee and a portion of Southwest Virginia has a population of over 436,000 (First Tennessee Development District, 1991).

The two county school systems selected for this study were Unicoi County Schools and Washington County Schools. The two city school systems selected for this study were Elizabethton City Schools and Bristol City Schools. These four systems were selected for three reasons. First, the systems were located in four different counties to maximize diversity. Second, although professional ethics prevented the investigator from interviewing families of retained students in the system where the investigator was employed, the selected systems would enable the investigator to interview participants from systems in close proximity. Third, the purposeful sampling technique used in this study was dependent upon the trust and the willingness of the educators in the selected systems to make the initial interview contacts; the investigator was confident in the interest and cooperation of the school administrators in the four selected systems.

Administrators from the four systems suggested potential, information-rich research participants for this study. Because of the need to preserve the confidentiality

of the families within their respective systems, each system's administrators made the initial contact with prospective participants. Participants who agreed to an interview were then approached by the investigator.

The selected families all had a youth who had been retained at least one time in grades one through eight. The mothers in the families generally served as the primary interview participants. Other family members, including the students who were retained, were interviewed contingent upon their accessibility to the study.

The families with children who had been retained were selected as units of study by a qualitative technique Patton (1990) called purposeful sampling. While probability sampling is utilized in the scientific paradigm and derives its strength being statistically representative in order for generalization to occur, purposeful sampling aims at choosing information-rich cases. "Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling" (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

Because purposeful sampling is more likely to allow the multiple realities of a research study to emerge, Lincoln and Guba (1985) listed purposeful sampling as one of the 14 critical elements in naturalistic inquiry. Several types of purposeful sampling are found in naturalistic inquiry. One purposeful sampling process that deliberately selects extreme or unusual outcomes is extreme case (Patton, 1990). Extreme case sampling was the technique initially used in the selection of family units participating in this study.

The purpose of extreme case sampling is to find information-rich cases which will provide insight at both ends of a continuum. In identifying those students and families for which retention was a positive experience as well as those students and families for which retention was a negative experience, the investigator was better able to discover the feelings and reactions of students and their parents in regard to the effect of the nonpromotion experience on the family and on the home-school relationship. Additional insights the investigator hoped to uncover were those factors which made the retention experience either a successful teaching strategy or an ineffective teaching strategy.

#### Sample Size

"Qualitative research does not survey the terrain, it mines it" (McCracken, 1988, p. 17). By selecting those students and families who provided the most information-rich data, the investigator was able to create a clear and compelling picture of the retention experience. Because this study was a naturalistic investigation, the sample size was unknown at the time the data were being collected. Lincoln and Guba (1985) declared "there can be no a priori specification of the sample; it cannot be 'drawn' in advance" (p. 201).

In addition, Lincoln and Guba recommended units in the sample be selected "serially." The analysis process on the information collected from one student and family participating in this study was begun before the next



student and family were chosen. This technique enabled the investigator to select succeeding cases which more fully rounded out the information already collected. With each case chosen, the study became more and more focused. The investigator continued to select and analyze cases until redundancy was achieved. At the end of the data collection process, 22 family units had been selected.

Patton (1990) contributed to the discussion on sample size by noting "the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size" (p. 185). The cases in this study, therefore, were selected because of their potential to contribute valuable data to the study and not because of a need to reach a preconceived sample size.

#### Data Collection

Permission to conduct this study was secured from the Institutional Review Board of East Tennessee State University. The superintendents of the school systems in Bristol, Elizabethton, Unicoi County, and Washington County were contacted, and permission was obtained to communicate with the families of children who had experienced nonpromotion and were currently enrolled in their respective school systems (see Appendix A for the school system permission form sent to the four superintendents). All adult research participants were asked to sign a consent form; the parents of any children participating in the study

were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix B for a copy of the consent form).

Data were collected in this study through the technique Patton (1990) called qualitative interviewing. Patton stated,

The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind (for example, the interviewer's preconceived categories for organizing the world) but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed. We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe.

(p. 278)

The effects of nonpromotion on the family and on the home-school relationship is an example of "things" which could not be directly observed during the course of this study.

Several different styles of qualitative interviews have been used by naturalistic investigators (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McCracken, 1988; Patton, 1990). The style deemed most appropriate for this study was the general interview guide approach discussed by Patton (1990). The general interview guide approach outlines a list of topics to be investigated during the interview process. Order of the topics and exact wording of the questions are unimportant.

Although the exact wording and sequencing of the questions were not written out prior to the interviews, the interview guide allowed the investigator to collect data revolving around a common set of topics from each of the participants. The topics explored during the interview process emerged from the early, unstructured interviews

conducted with the mothers and other family members. By the fourth family unit, a written interview guide had been established (see Appendix C). The interview guide continued to be refined and revised throughout the course of the study (see Appendix D for the final interview guide). All interviews were audio taped on a microcassette recorder. In addition, the investigator took brief notes during and following the interviews. Successive cases were selected by extreme case, purposeful sampling until redundancy was achieved. Fifty-two family members from 22 families participated in 46 separate interviews.

#### Data Analysis

After a mother and other family members in a unit were interviewed and before the next unit was selected, the information collected was examined using a procedure called inductive analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). According to Patton (1990),

inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis. The analyst looks for natural variation in the data.

(p. 390)

Inductive analysis is a characteristic of natural inquiry which logically flows from the five axioms stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The use of inductive analysis enables the investigator to discover the different layers of reality inherent in the study, to clearly articulate his/her

relationship to the participants, to richly describe the setting of the study, to identify the interaction of mutually shaping influences, and to acknowledge the values permeating the entire investigation.

The process of data analysis transpired over several stages and included data reduction, unitization, categorization, and verification. It is important to note inductive analysis did not actually occur in neat, self-contained stages; as a process, inductive analysis continually moved back and forth among the different subprocesses. In fact, the whole process of inductive analysis was organic and was often intermingled with the process of data collection itself (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McCracken, 1988).

#### Data Reduction

The first step in the data analysis was data reduction. Notes taken by the investigator during and following the interviews were recorded in a journal. These notes consisted of observations as well as personal reflections.

All interviews were audio taped by the investigator and then transcribed by a professional typist. McCracken (1988) believed "investigators who transcribe their own interviews invite not only frustration but also a familiarity with the data that does not serve the later process of analysis" (p. 41-42). Before the taped interviews collected from a family unit were submitted to the typist, however, the investigator listened to each interview, making additional notes,

particularly in reference to the effectiveness of the interview questions and to the modification of the interview guide.

The transcriptions were accurate copies of the original interviews and included incorrect grammar, hesitations, and repetitions. All but the grossest extraneous noise and interruptions were included in the transcripts. Any direct quotations used in the remaining chapters were extracted from the original transcriptions.

### Unitization

After a copy of the interview transcriptions was made, the next step in inductive analysis was the subprocess of unitization, a type of coding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Lincoln and Guba described units

as single pieces of information that stand by themselves, that is, that are interpretable in the absence of any additional information. A unit may be a simple sentence or an extended paragraph, but, in either case, the test of its unitary character is that if any portion of the unit were to be removed, the remainder would be seriously compromised or rendered uninterpretable. (p. 203)

Coding was begun as the investigator read through each transcript, marking those sections of the transcripts that provided potential answers to the original research questions. Unitization was followed by the subprocess called categorization.

### Categorization

After the data collected from the interviews were unitized, the subprocess of categorization began. Categorization organized unitized data into categories. As described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), categorization involves sorting units into provisional categories on the basis of "look-alike" characteristics, which, in the spirit of the naturalistic paradigm, may initially be only tacitly understood. As these provisional categories begin to accumulate substantial numbers of unit cards, the analyst endeavors to write a propositional statement (a "rule") that can serve as the basis for inclusion/exclusion decisions. (p. 203)

The categorization of data enables the investigator to formulate grounded theory--"theory that emerges from close involvement and direct contact with the empirical world" (Patton, 1990, p. 153).

### Verification

Many researchers are still reluctant to accept the theory generated from inductive analysis. How can findings from a study using qualitative methodology be verified? Threats to the internal and external validity of nonexperimental studies have been discussed by Guba and Lincoln in great depth (1981; 1985). Because internal and external validity are concepts originating from the scientific paradigm, Lincoln and Guba questioned the necessity of trying to apply Campbell and Stanley's criteria to naturalistic studies. Guba and Lincoln (1985) preferred

to substitute the term "credibility" for "internal validity" and "transferability" for "external validity." Additional substitution of terms in the naturalistic paradigm include "dependability" for "reliability" and "confirmability" for "objectivity."

Credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested five techniques for establishing credibility or trustworthiness. The first technique was to increase the likelihood of generating credible findings. An investigator would probably produce more credible findings if he/she employed at least one of the following methods: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation. The second technique used to establish credibility was peer debriefing. Negative case analysis was the third technique, and referential adequacy was the fourth technique. The fifth technique was called member checks.

Due to cost and time constraints the only techniques for establishing credibility which were employed in this study were triangulation, referential adequacy, and peer debriefing. Triangulation attempts to validate information by providing supporting data from more than one data source. Although mothers of retained children provided the primary source data, whenever possible, the investigator validated the information gathered through interviewing mothers with information collected during interviews with other family members. Referential adequacy was established by audio taping all interviews. Peer debriefing served to ensure the honesty and accuracy of the investigator.

Peer Debriefing. In a naturalistic study, the honesty and accuracy of the investigator is maintained through peer debriefing. The debriefer helps the investigator to identify personal bias and better understand how that bias may affect the analysis of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The debriefer questions the procedures and methods of the investigator throughout each stage of the research study.

The peer debriefer assumes other roles in addition to maintaining the integrity of the investigator. As a peer, the debriefer respond to and challenges the ideas and working hypotheses of the investigator; the debriefer also "pushes" the investigator forward as the design of the study unfolds. The last role assumed by the debriefer is that of "counselor." The debriefer should be someone with whom the investigator can talk comfortably regarding feelings and concerns about the research project.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested the peer debriefer be selected using five criteria. The peer debriefer should be someone familiar with the topic of the study and with the methodology proposed. The peer debriefer should be within the same age range of the investigator, should not be an authority figure to the investigator, should be willing to take the role seriously, and should be willing to record his/her communication with the investigator throughout the course of the study.

The investigator selected Ellen Stites to serve as peer debriefer. At the time of the study, Stites had over 18 years of experience in public education, 17 of those years as an elementary classroom teacher. She was employed as an



elementary principal in a school located in the Northeast Tennessee area.

Due to her position as an administrator, Stites had a vested interest in research and policy development pertaining to the issue of retention. She was also enrolled in a doctoral program at East Tennessee State University and had expressed an interest in naturalistic inquiry. In addition, the researcher and Stites were within the same age range, held approximately the same total years of experience in education, and shared a collegial relationship. The investigator met with Stites five times during the study; notes were made detailing the discussion of each meeting and placed in the investigator's journal.

Transferability. Credibility is established more easily than the idea of transferability in naturalistic inquiry. Transferability is the term Lincoln and Guba (1985) preferred to use over the term external validity. Very different than external validity, transferability may be, in fact, impossible. Lincoln and Guba believed, The naturalist can only set out working hypotheses together with a description of the time and context in which they were found to hold. Whether they hold in some other context, or even in the same context at some other time, is an empirical issue, the resolution of which depends upon the degree of similarity between sending and receiving (or earlier and later) contexts. Thus, the naturalist cannot specify the external validity of an inquiry; he or she can provide only the

thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility. (p. 316)

The investigator of this study operated from a naturalistic paradigm, and therefore, was unable to explicitly state the external validity of the study.

Dependability and Confirmability. In dealing with the concept of reliability, Lincoln and Guba preferred to use the term dependability. Four techniques enable a qualitative researcher to deal with dependability. The first technique proposed by Guba and Lincoln is really more of an argument rather than a technique. The argument is as follows: there can be no validity without reliability/dependability; if the researcher has proven validity to everyone's satisfaction, then it is not necessary to prove reliability/dependability. A second technique uses "overlap methods" such as triangulation. "Stepwise replication" or the use of two independent inquiry teams is a third way to establish dependability. A fourth method for establishing dependability is called the inquiry audit.

The investigator in this study established dependability by using an inquiry audit. The auditor's first objective was to examine the process by which data were collected. If the process for collecting the data was acceptable to the auditor, the investigation was dependable. The second objective of the audit was to

closely inspect the data itself and all of the analyses derived from the data for accuracy. If realized, the second objective of the audit established confirmability or objectivity.

The Inquiry Audit. Lincoln and Guba (1985) supplied a description of an audit process developed by Halpern. In his doctoral dissertation written in 1983 at Indiana University, Halpern promoted the use of a list of items which should be included in an audit trail of a research study and a list of procedures which should be followed in conducting such an audit. Halpern devised the following six categories to include in an audit trail: raw data, procedures for data reduction and unitization, procedures for categorization, process notes, personal notes, and information regarding the development of a research instrument.

The material which the investigator released for an audit of this study included the taped interviews of all research participants, the transcriptions of all interviews, the investigator's journal, and the investigator's notes from the unitization and categorization process. The auditing process was conducted by Jerry Herman, a doctoral student completing a residential activity for the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis Department at East Tennessee State University during the 1992 fall semester. The auditing process proceeded after all data had been collected and analyzed. Halpern's procedures, as outlined in Appendix B of Lincoln and Guba's Naturalistic

Inquiry, provided the basis for the auditing process (see Appendix E for a copy of the memo from the investigator to the auditor outlining the audit agreement and Appendix F for a copy of the auditor's findings).

#### Summary

The study was conducted in four school systems located in Northeast Tennessee, two rural systems and two city systems. Due to the characteristics of the study, the investigator operated under a naturalistic paradigm and employed qualitative methodology. Participants were selected through a purposeful sampling technique Patton (1990) called extreme case; the mothers of students who had experienced nonpromotion at least once in grades one through eight were interviewed. Other family members available to the study were also interviewed. Sample units were drawn serially until redundancy was achieved. Data from the early interviews were used to build an interview guide, and information collected from the qualitative interviews was analyzed using a procedure called inductive analysis (Lincoln & Guba; Patton, 1990). Credibility or trustworthiness was achieved through triangulation, referential adequacy, and peer debriefing. Dependability and objectivity were ensured through the use of an inquiry audit.

## Chapter 4

### Adaptation to Retention

#### Introduction

The purpose of Chapter IV is to describe the families who participated in this investigation and to discuss the analysis of data. Families with children who had been retained at least once in grades one through eight were purposefully selected as units of study from one of four area school systems in Northeast Tennessee. Fifty-two family members from 22 families participated in 46 separate, qualitative interviews. The information collected was inductively analyzed.

The investigator collected data which uncovered the feelings and reactions of family members concerning the nonpromotion of at least one child within the family unit, including the effect of the retention on the home-school relationship. The more aware parents were of their child's academic struggles, the more likely they were to accept and even seek out retention as an acceptable educational strategy. For these families, the child's difficulties with school work--not the retention--served as the crisis situation. For families rejecting the retention and the retaining teacher's rationale for the nonpromotion, the retention experience itself became the crisis with which both the parents and the student had to deal. In each of the families interviewed, crisis or stress precipitated a period of transition.

Chapter IV contains a profile of participating families

as well as an overview of the process family members go through in their adaptation to the retention experience. Factors that affect the adaptation of a parent or a student to a grade level retention include the following: self-definition, retention philosophy, previous experience with retention, feelings of empowerment, retention rationale, a sense of belonging to a school community, and support systems. These factors or coping resources fall into one of three categories--characteristics of the individual, characteristics of the transition, and characteristics of the environment. Building upon Schlossberg's theory for human adaptation to transition, the investigator found the participants' adaptation to the retention experience varied widely, depending upon each individual's available coping resources.

#### Family Profiles

This section of Chapter IV opens with a compilation of data embracing educational and economic characteristics describing the 22 family units selected for this study. Following a brief overview of all 22 families, four of the families will be discussed in more detail to underscore the diversity of the participants. All of the families lived in Northeast Tennessee, and in all but one family, the parents had also been reared in this same region. Four of the families had children attending Bristol City Schools; five of the families had children attending Unicoi County Schools; six of the families had children attending Elizabethton City Schools; and seven of the families had

children attending Washington County Schools. Within the 22 families, a total of 27 children had been retained; three of the students had been retained twice. Two of the family units were African-American.

At the time of the interviews, 13 of the family units were intact with the biological mother and father married to one another. Five of the families were reconstructed families with step-parents actively involved in family life. Four of the families were headed by a single mother. The number of children per family unit ranged from one to eight.

Only two of the parents in the study had earned a college degree while thirteen parents had dropped out of junior high or high school. This fairly low level of educational attainment was reflected in the equally low economic earning power of the families studied; surprisingly, however, only one parent was unemployed at the time of the interviews. The majority of the families had parents who were employed in blue collar jobs. At least eight of the units were two income families. The father in one family was in retirement while another father was staying at home on a disability income.

#### Four Case Studies

Four of the 22 family units participating in this study will be profiled in more detail. These four families are presented for close-up profiles not only to highlight the diversity of individual family situations but also to illustrate the extremes in family response to the retention

experience itself. To ensure the confidentiality of the research participants, all name references in the close-up profiles will be pseudonyms.

The McKinneys. The McKinneys were an intact, middle class family with the biological mother living with the biological father and their child, Audrey. Suzanne Mckinney, the mother, was interviewed first; she agreed to participate in an interview that was conducted in the local school board office one afternoon after she had finished her work at a nearby factory. Ms. McKinney came to the interview neatly, but casually dressed in pants and a blue denim jacket. She was in her mid-thirties and wore her dark, slightly graying hair in a short, simple cut. She was pleasant, eager to participate in the study, and smiled throughout the encounter. She maintained good eye contact with the investigator and never lost her poise. Although her grammar was somewhat poor, she was very verbal and appeared eager to to convince the investigator that her daughter's retention in the second grade had been a good decision.

The McKinneys' one child, Audrey, was repeating the second grade. Although Audrey's preschool and kindergarten teachers counseled the parents regarding the extra help, Audrey would need to be successful in school, Ms. McKinney attributed many of Audrey's academic problems to family stress experienced when Audrey was in the first grade. During Audrey's first grade year, Mr. McKinney was in Chicago with a new job, and Ms. Mckinney was involved in an



accident which broke her leg and required two surgeries.

According to Ms. McKinney,

She [Audrey] just really had a hard struggle, mentally, going through all that in the first grade. She was passed from the first grade and went into the second grade. When she started in the second grade, she started off, and she hated it. She loved her teacher dearly. She hated it. She would hit the books. She would hit me. She just hated it. She was so frustrated. I didn't really see how far behind she had gotten in the first grade. I feel like that was where some of her problems were. She was so mentally sort of stressed out with the break . . . she just didn't get anything it seemed like in the first grade. She had trouble writing. She had trouble even coloring pictures. When it came to reading, cause they were reading--getting on up in reading in the second grade, she was behind and behind. The more she tried the further behind she seemed to get.

The parents and the school had conferenced about Audrey's difficulties at the end of first grade and considered a first grade retention. Due to the emotional stress Audrey was already dealing with in relation to her mother's hospitalizations, the school recommended placing her in the second grade and offered her support services. The school responded to Audrey's academic difficulties by providing Chapter I reading assistance and special education services in math. The parents requested services at the area mental health office. Audrey continued to be

frustrated.

Ms. McKinney described in earnest the tension and frustration of the whole family as the daughter struggled night after night with second grade homework. Ms. McKinney estimated that anywhere from two and one-half to three hours were spent each night in completing homework assignments. Remembering her own frustration and sense of failure in school, Ms. McKinney shared,

I didn't like school. Being out for 20 years, but I still didn't like it. Things were different back then, you know, totally different. I got a slow start. It seemed like when I started all the rest of the kids already knew their alphabet, but I didn't. I was behind. I was a very slow learner. To this day, I get upset with my husband when he says go look it up in the dictionary if I don't know how to spell something. I was one of those children that never did learn to spell with sounds--phonics, and if you can't sound it out, the dictionary will not do you a lot of good. I had a lot of trouble with sounds. Math I was good in, but I really struggled to get through school, and I did not like it. It made it hard socially as well as just grades. So I think that did play a lot on me thinking and looking at Audrey because in the things we dealt with in the second grade I could sit there when she would go to bed; I would tell my husband I see myself all over again in the actions, frustration that I had when I was a child. Like I say, I liked my teachers, but I didn't like school because I did have such a

struggle getting through it.

Ms. McKinney wished she had had the opportunity to "catch up" in school by being held back a year; therefore, she held back her daughter. Her husband supported the nonpromotion, but the major force behind the decision was the mother. School personnel involved in the conferencing process, according to Ms. McKinney, were divided in their recommendations, but the retaining teacher threw her support in with the mother, and the retention took place. In sharing the decision with Audrey, Ms. McKinney said, "We talked to her about it because we talk to Audrey about everything, and I think because of the positive attitude that we had about it, she had a positive attitude."

The second person to be interviewed in the McKinney family was, Audrey, the daughter who had been retained. Audrey was also interviewed at the school board office after school one day. She was a large girl for her age with short blond hair and blue eyes. Audrey came to the interview dressed in green slacks, a shirt, and a flowered sweater. A silver Hersey Kiss necklace hung from her neck. She chewed gum throughout the interview and talked easily about her work at school, her involvement in Brownies, and her struggle with the proceeding year's work at school and at home.

Audrey reported that she had often stayed up till "12:00" doing homework the first time she was in second grade, and that at one time or another "everyone" had had to help her with her homework including her mother, father, and both sets of grandparents. In talking about the previous

year's spelling homework, Audrey said,

Mommy last year would make me write them, and write them, and write them, and write them. She made me once twenty or thirty times 'cause it was harder last year, 'cause you had so much pressure on you trying to get, like making the honor rolls, but you couldn't. You just felt like you just had too much pressure.

At the time of the interview, Audrey was repeating the second grade. Although one could deduce from her answers that she had been retained, Audrey never once mentioned the words "retention" or "failure." She proudly relayed evidence of her current achievement and made it quite clear that she was now making the "B" honor roll each six weeks and reading in the top group in contrast to the low grades and bottom reading group she experienced her first year in second grade. Audrey wants to be a teacher.

Ben McKinney, Audrey's father, was interviewed at his place of business during one lunch hour. Mr. McKinney wore a white, long sleeved shirt open at the collar with dress slacks. On his left hand was a large, unusually textured gold wedding band. Mr. McKinney was a large man with dark, slightly graying hair. His eyes were framed by glasses, and a large mustache dominated his face. He tugged at this mustache often. Although his manner was friendly and open, Mr. McKinney spoke softly, and he sometimes spoke with his hand in front of his mouth so that he was often difficult to hear.

In talking about his own educational background, Mr. McKinney recounted his own retention experience in the sixth

grade (an experience he attributed more to his twin brother's educational failings and the subsequent desire to keep both brothers in the same grade rather than any difficulties of his own). He had gone on to graduate from college, succeeded in business, and felt the retention had not harmed him in anyway. He supported the decision to retain his daughter. He said he and his wife had realized that Audrey was going to have problems in school as early as preschool. Mr. McKinney felt that his wife and daughter have a very close relationship. Although Mr. McKinney stayed involved with Audrey's school progress, Ms. McKinney obviously bore the main burden of last year's homework problems, had the most contact with school officials, and made the decision for the retention.

Mr. McKinney, as well as his wife, worried somewhat about Audrey's size. Mr. McKinney admitted,

One of the things that I had a little concern with, and you've met her, and as far as an eight year old, she's a little large for age, really. She's a big girl, and that was, in my mind, one of the apprehensions I had about her staying in the same grade again. It was not much from the educational or the learning aspects of it but just from the sheer physical difference and size, but that has not, that was unfounded, my concern.

In spite, of concerns, both parents were optimistic about her academic future.

The family's relationship to the school community remained warm and trusting. Both parents were rooted in the community. The teachers and other school personnel were

well known. Describing his family's relationship to school personnel, Mr. McKinney said,

It is an unique situation with our relationship with . . . both the teachers and the people in the school that we have known for years, especially for me, that it has been a very close and a very loving and caring environment and very frank discussions. No one is pulling any punches, and this is the way it is. I think that the teachers as well as [Ms. McKinney] and myself have all one thing in interest, the best of her [Audrey] education.

Mr. McKinney trusted the school to do what's best for his daughter. The information from Mr. McKinney's interview triangulates well with the information secured from Ms. McKinney and their daughter.

The Ledwells. The Ledwells had experienced a great deal of stress outside the school setting throughout their children's school careers. The parents were divorced; the mother was planning to be remarried in the near future. Mr. Ledwell was an alcoholic that was currently residing in a mental hospital receiving treatment for schizophrenia.

The interview with the mother, Deloris Ledwell, had been originally scheduled to take place at the family's apartment. At the last minute, Ms. Ledwell, moved the site to a fast food restaurant. The meeting took place early one morning after Ms. Ledwell finished a third shift at an area industry. She was dressed casually in slacks with a pink shirt that buttoned up the front; she wore a lightweight

jacket. Although the weather had turned cold the night before, she had gone to work without her heavier coat. Ms. Ledwell had short, permed and highlighted hair and wore pink earrings that matched her shirt. She appeared to be fatigued by the end of the interview.

Ms. Ledwell resisted the prompting of the investigator to share her and her former husband's educational background. She had evidently agreed to the interview because she had a story to tell concerning her son's two retentions, and she was single-minded in purpose. She told her story in an emotionally charged voice; tears threatened to surface more than once during the interview.

The Ledwells had two children--a daughter who had graduated from high school the year before and Jonathan, a younger son who had been retained in the third grade and the fifth grade. Jonathan had evidently experienced academic difficulties early in school; Ms. Ledwell "started noticing early, like even first grade, he would either make an A or an F, nothing in between." His asthma and epilepsy medicine interfered with the learning process and caused him to be "hyper" and to have difficulty in concentrating. Ms. Ledwell, described Jonathan's problems with concentration by saying,

I guess, if the teacher would stand up and give an instruction to the class, his mind might be wandering and he didn't listen. So, they suggested to me if the teacher would take the time like in explaining an assignment to just walk off to his desk and say 'Do you understand this Jonathan?' or

'Jonathan, I said . . . ?,' and that always worked. It was just like you almost had to, you could not talk to him in a group of people, he was too busy with the group of people around him. You almost had to, you know, on a one-to-one tell him what you expected, and even be a little firm with him, not to the point of, you know, punishing him, spanking, or anything like that. I have even asked them to keep him at recess if he did not finish his work. To let me know on a regular basis and things like this. So, the first time he failed, I let it go.

In second grade, the school system provided psychological testing, but Jonathan did not qualify for any special service. There was, Ms. Ledwell complained, "nothing in our school system to help." The mother remembered the second grade teacher recommending retention in the third grade. The mother did not like the recommendation, but understood the teacher's rationale for the nonpromotion and accepted the decision.

The real educational crisis came in the spring of the fifth grade, when Ms. Ledwell received a registered letter informing her that Jonathan was going to be retained. The teacher indicated at a subsequent conference that Jonathan could pass to the next grade, but the teacher felt that Jonathan had not been trying hard enough, and she wanted "to teach him a lesson." The parent was distraught and tried to fight the decision by petitioning to the superintendent and by exploring private school placement. The superintendent supported the teacher's recommendation, and as the parent



did not have money to pay for private school tuition, Jonathan repeated the fifth grade in the same school system but at a different school. Because he was two years older than his classmates at the middle school, however, Jonathan skipped over eighth grade going straight from seventh into a special program for ninth grade at risk students.

Ms. Ledwell's outrage and anger over the injustice of the second retention were apparent. She described the embarrassment and awkwardness of extended family members at a cousin's eighth grade graduation--a graduation ceremony in which Jonathan should have been participating rather than viewing from the audience. Ms. Ledwell felt that "his image was low because he felt like he was letting everybody down."

Ms. Ledwell was eager for the investigator to talk to Jonathan. The interview with Jonathan took place in an empty classroom across the hall from the principal's office at the high school following the dismissal bell. Jonathan was of medium height and rather large for his height. He had brown hair, small eyes, and was sporting a thin growth of hair on his chin and cheeks. He wore a t-shirt. His hands were slightly grubby, and he wore a ring on each hand.

Jonathan had a sweet, but shy demeanor and displayed several nervous habits throughout the interview. He wrung his hands and "cracked" his knuckles. He also hung his head low whenever the interviewer strayed into sensitive topics--his feelings about the retention, his father. He occasionally "buried" his head in his hands. Once or twice he appeared close to tears.

Jonathan recalled information about his first retention

experience that was in conflict with his mother's memory. Jonathan remembered being retained in the third grade not the second. Jonathan "liked the teacher better" the second year he spent in third grade. He felt, "She paid more attention to us and help[ed] us out. She was real nice." In talking about the fifth grade teacher who had retained him, Jonathan said, "That's the one I didn't like at all. . . . She was always real loud. . . . She's just hateful or something."

He didn't feel that the fifth grade retention was "fair." When discussing his feelings, Jonathan reflected, "Well, I think if they thought I could pass, they should have just passed me so I could have gone 'cause I already been held back once, and you know, just like all my friends go up in front of me and ahead of me and stuff and everything like that. So it made me feel kinda of dumb."

Jonathan decided to attend a different school within the system for his second year in fifth grade because "it seemed like it was better."

When Jonathan was in the seventh grade the school system implemented a program for overaged students at risk for dropping out of school. School officials invited him to participate in this program which meant skipping the eighth grade and moving on to the ninth grade at the high school. According to Jonathan, currently in the ninth grade, the year has been difficult because "you gotta go from what you have learned from seventh and learn stuff that you yet don't know in the ninth." In addition, Jonathan's attendance at

school is rather poor. He is failing English. He feels like he has lost lots of friends due to his retentions.

Several places during the interview Jonathan became quite animated. When he discussed his pets, his desire to become a "vet" or to join the high school wrestling team, he would use more direct eye contact, drop his hands from his face, and speak less haltingly and more freely. Jonathan talked about his mother's remarriage in the near future and the whole family's upcoming move to a neighboring town.

The James Family. The James family was an example of a reconstructed family. The biological father had full time custody of two children from a previous marriage, a daughter and son. He and his second wife were also raising a two year old of their own. The son had been retained once in the second grade.

The first person in the family to be interviewed was the step-mother. Laura James owned a small business, and the interview was scheduled to take place at her shop early one morning. Ms. James forgot the interview and had to be called from a neighboring shop and reminded of the meeting. Arriving about 45 minutes late, she opened up her business. Surrounded by antiques and dried flower arrangements, the interview was recorded at an old fashioned ice cream table with a round wooden top and black, wrought iron legs situated in the front window of the shop.

Ms. James appeared to be in her late twenties and was very pretty. She wore her blond hair short, one length. Having just showered her hair was still damp and wavy and

pulled back from her face with a head band. She was fashionably dressed in light blue jeans and a royal purple double breasted jacket.

Apologetic for forgetting the interview, Ms. James explained that she was packing for her family's vacation to the beach and had decided not to open up the shop this morning and had just forgotten about the interview. She seemed very at ease and laughed and smiled throughout the interview. Born and raised in a nearby town, Ms. James had very little "East Tennessee" accent although her speech was dotted with several very colorful phrases.

Both parents had been fairly typical students who had graduated from a local high school and had some post secondary vocational training. Both parents also had a brother who had been retained and who had gone on to successfully complete an undergraduate degree. Although Ms. James was a step-mother to the two oldest children in the family, she had been the only mother they had ever known.

Adam's academic problems did not surface until the second grade. The parents were not aware of any problems until after Christmas of that school year. According to Ms. James,

I really feel like that the teacher as soon as she found out that I was the stepmother, she just zoomed in on that. This is the problem. And, uh, she was sending Adam . . . without our consent . . . to the school counselor or whatever that's called . . . I don't know, but, uh, he did go through a lot that year in, you know, after he started seeing a counselor and

all this stuff. I'd find him in his room crying. Uh, he didn't want to go to school. I mean, it was a battle every morning just trying to get him up and get him to school, and he was late most of the time because he just wouldn't get ready. He'd go get back in the bed. . . . I know everybody wants to blame the teacher, and I've tried real hard not to do that. But, uh, I think she made his life miserable.

Adam's school work suffered in the second grade. He did not complete the necessary work during the regular school day and was sent home with homework every night. Grades during the last three grading periods were D's and F's, but "his achievement test scores . . . were not bad like his grades were." In spite of the fact his second grade teacher "made his life miserable," Ms. James felt "Adam's" nonpromotion was justified and said, "He didn't do what he was suppose to do during the year so he couldn't have been learning. . . . I just don't think that he could have went on into the third grade and done the work."

Both parents helped Adam with his homework and volunteered with school activities. In fact, Ms. James commented, "Adam's always been really good at volunteering us for anything that's going on, and, 'Yeah, my momma will bake cupcakes. We won't bring a Pepsi.'" Despite their involvement in traditional parent involvement activities both in the home and at the school, the parents were at a loss for how to alleviate Adam's problems with school. Ms. James remembered,

I think , well my husband spanked him more that year.

We were so frustrated with him, sending him to school and not doing his work. His grades were bad. And, we've never been . . . we only spank if the kids absolutely, you know, it's talk, talk, talk, and if that doesn't seem to get through then they do get spankings. But, uh, that year when he would get his report card and the grades were bad then my husband would spank him.

We helped him with his homework every night. Uhh, and it was hard to get him to do it, and, you know, he has a desk in his room. We would sit him at the desk and come back to check on him, and he's not done, you know, two, two sentences or something, and you know, you get after him, and he's crying; we're upset. And, uh, you know, I've never really thought about it, you know, what an aggravating year it really was, but, uh, yeah, it was an every night thing, sitting down with the homework cause she would send home the work he hadn't done in the day. So, it wasn't like he actually had a lot of homework but he was doing his work that he was suppose to have done during the day, but he was just sitting there.

It came as no surprise, therefore, when the teacher requested a conference two six weeks before the end of school year and indicated Adam could be retained if his grades did not improve. Adam himself was present at the conference and blamed his step-mother for the subsequent retention. According to Ms. James, on the last day of

school,

Uhh, he, he lied to everybody (laughter) in his class, and he told them all that he passed. And, um he just brought his report card home and threw it down, and I said, 'Well, how do you feel?' And he said, 'Well, you failed me.' I said, 'I didn't fail you, you failed yourself 'cause you didn't do your work. . . . I didn't go sit in that classroom and not do your work.' And he said, 'But you told her to fail me.' I said, 'Adam, she gave me a choice. I can send you on to the third grade and then you'll fail next year or you can do it over this year.' So he said, 'Okay.'

Ms. James feels Adam adjusted well to the retention despite his initial resentment of the decision. He had a great teacher and a great year the second time through second grade. He "loved his teacher . . . and seemed real happy." He has made good grades each year following the retention.

Ms. James was unsure about whether or not she would let Adam be interviewed. Because his first year in the second grade had been rather traumatic, she was reluctant to have the retention discussed with him. She did, however, eventually agree to the interview with Adam with his father present.

The second interview took place at James' home one day after the family had come back from their vacation at the beach. A white church van was parked out in front of the wooden, A-frame house. The sidewalk led to a railed porch which ended in sliding glass doors. William James, Adam's

father, came to the door with Adam and Adam's two year old sister standing by his side. Mr. James was medium height, blond with his hair cut short in the front and longer in the back. He was very tanned and dressed in casual clothes. The two year old, Angelica, was very fair and blond. Her hair was pulled to the top of her head and secured with a clip in the shape of sun glasses. Adam was brown headed with big blue eyes; freckles were scattered across his face. He was dressed in surfer shorts and shirt.

Two couches faced each other on opposite walls of a small living room. The couches were separated by a large, square shaped coffee table. The room was carpeted, neat, and very tastefully decorated. The kitchen area was visible to the left of the room.

In a show of solidarity, the three family members squeezed together on the couch across from the interviewer. The father is able to stay at home with the children during the day as he is currently on a disability leave from his job. He opened the interview reminiscing about his school background but yielded the discussion to Adam to talk about his own experiences. Adam remembers liking kindergarten and having good grades in first grade. His memories of his retaining teacher, however, were not pleasant. According to Adam, "She was mean and hateful." When pressed for a specific example, Adam said, "Well, every time you'd, she'd give you assignments, she wouldn't tell you the directions and explain how to do it and lots of ways like that. . . . It was a bad year." He admits that he was retained because he "didn't make very good grade that year."



Adam had just completed the fourth grade, and in talking about school experiences following the year he was retained, Adam recalls making good grades. The second time through the second grade, he "made straight A's and B's", and he "didn't make below a C" this past year. In addition, Adam is good at sports and has played football, soccer, and baseball and "always wanted to be a dancer." His career goal is "to be a policeman or a fireman or something like that." When friends at school ask him about his retention he tells them, "I just didn't like my teacher."

When asked to remember the year Adam was retained, Mr. James said,

It wasn't until late in the year that I realized the he was having the problems that he was having. There was such a lack of communication between the teacher and family, uh, that we didn't realize that there was that great of a problem until it was practically too late to do anything about it. And then when we did get in touch with Ms. M [the teacher], she struck as being the type of person that, that, uh lacked patience that . . . needs to be a valuable part in teaching the small child. She was short and abrupt with the people in the class when we were there, and, uh, with the answers she gave us.

After all of Adam's difficulties surfaced in the second grade, Mr. James, like his wife, "felt that Adam would be better suited to stay in the second grade rather than go on and maybe get left behind in the third grade because of what he had lacked learning." Before reaching this decision,

however, Mr. James admitted,

At first I didn't like it because it, it, 'cause I remember when my brother was held back, and it was more or less a joke, and everyone made fun of him 'cause he held back a year, and it was first grade. And I thought well he's [Adam's] going to suffer a lot of ridicule.

Mr. James went on to say that his brother has gotten past the retention and is currently working on "his electrical engineer degree, and he is, he has really done quite well."

Mr. James felt strongly that "people need to be aware of from day one how their students or how their children are doing in class." He also believed that the school had not tried to help Adam with his problems. In describing the teacher's approach to Adam's academic difficulties and the parents' corresponding reaction to the situation, Mr. James said,

She would, about the last two six weeks we started get letters saying Adam wasn't doing very well. So we'd go down and we'd have these meeting with her. And, uh, by then Adam was so distraught with his teacher that there was no motivation for him to do anything. And we would try several different things. We'd ground him. We'd punish him. We'd spank him, and he still had no motivation. He had developed an attitude toward this lady because the way things were that he wasn't going to do anything like he was just lashing back. 'I'm not going to do this.' That type of attitude.

Adam's retention prompts Mr. James to offer some advice to public education. Schools, according to Mr.

James, should "be better screened on teachers. There's more to having a teaching degree that, uh, gives you the ability to teach people."

The Rices. The Rice family had five children in the family, three of which had been retained one time. The interviews were scheduled at the family's home, a modest, one story frame house closely wedged in between two other homes on a side street behind a shopping center. A porch was constructed to the left of the front door. The front and side of the house appeared to have been freshly painted beige with Williamsburg blue shutters, and indeed, Gary, the oldest son, was still painting the back of the house at the time of the interviews. Mr. Rice was finishing up the installation of a window in the bathroom located in an addition to the house.

The interview was conducted in a very neat, paneled living room. The floor was oak, and two blue throw rugs were the only floor coverings. The television set was a large, color console model hooked up to cable and was left on during the entire interview process. A flowered brocade couch sat along one wall with a coffee table placed in front. Ms. Rice sat in a purple satin chair as she was held a sleeping infant; she was baby-sitting for a woman who worked in an office up the hill. A family portrait hung on the wall above a matching love seat. The rest of the walls were liberally decorated with candles and artificial flowers.

Ms. Rice was youthful in appearance. She had red

shoulder length hair, freckles, and blue eyes. She had been painting and was dressed accordingly in a paint speckled blue t-shirt and shorts. Mr. Rice was a portly man with thinning black hair and a mustache. His eyes were dark, and he too, was dressed in work clothes. Rather than risk getting paint on the furniture in the living room, Mr. Rice brought a straight backed chair in from the kitchen.

The day was hot and humid, and the household was very active with lots of people coming in and out of the front door. The baby woke up and toddled around the room. The air conditioner, a window unit located in the adjacent room above the dining room table, loudly hummed and whirred.

Mr. and Ms. Rice spoke freely about their educational background and their four children. Both parents had attended the same school system that their children have attended. Ms. Rice had been retained once in the third grade. Both had dropped out of school in high school to marry one another. Of their five children, the oldest had dropped out of school after having been suspended for profanity, a charge Mr. Rice thought was very unfair because, "half the teachers at . . . High School do, too." The oldest son went on to get his GED and to complete a program from the vocational school. The second son will be a senior in high school and "has really done real well."

The three youngest children had all been retained once. In talking about the middle aged child, Thomas, Ms. Rice said,

We retained him in the first grade, but now the teacher was, I mean, she was excellent. She talked

with us. She asked us our opinion about. She told us what she had found out with Thomas, you know, his problem and everything, and we agreed with her. And it hasn't really affected him all, you know. He's going in as a freshman in high school.

Both parents, however, were adamantly opposed to the retention of David their next to the youngest child.

David did well in kindergarten and in first grade. In describing the time when the parents knew David was beginning to experience difficulty in school, Ms. Rice said, The beginning of the second grade we seen that, you know, he was having a little difficulty. Well, it was in November that he finally come out and told us that every time he looked at something it was jumping around on his paper. So I took him and had his eyes examined, and the uh, uh, eye doctor had to put bifocals on him. So once we did that he was doing fine, and then around December the teacher just up and said, 'Well, I'm going, I'm going to hold David back because I think it would really help him.'

The parents expressed three concerns about the retention. First of all, David was already a year older than his classmates because he had missed the cut off date for entering kindergarten by ten days. Second, the parents felt that David's problem had been solved by acquiring the glasses. Mr. Rice observed, "I agree he had a problem there, but, you know, it was just because he couldn't see, and I mean as soon as he got his glasses then he started picking right back up, and he was doing, he was doing

great." The third concern centered around the classroom teacher and her handling of the situation. Ms. Rice remembers,

She was really rude about the situation. I told her, she called me on the phone and I told her, I said, 'Well, his father doesn't really think, feels that he should be held back.' She said, 'Well, I don't care what he thinks. There's nothing you all can say about it or do.'

The parents appealed the decision to the principal.

The principal upheld the decision of the teacher saying that David, who had been receiving special education help in a resource room for part of the day, had been pulled out for his achievement testing. According to Ms. Rice, however, of the students who had been pulled out for testing, David was the only child retained. Ms. Rice noted that his scores were in the normal range, and his grades were always C's and above on his report card.

According to his parents, David's nonpromotion has affected him. Ms. Rice observed, "He's always bringing up the idea, you know. Somebody will say, 'Well what grade you in?' He'll say, 'I'm going in the fifth, but I'm really suppose to be in the sixth.' "

The same year David was retained their youngest child, a daughter named Sarah, was also retained. One of the reasons Sarah was retained was to keep her from being in the same grade as David. Ms. Rice felt Sarah didn't mind the retention. Mr. Rice thought the nonpromotion would help her. Sarah had always been "babyish." In addition, the

parents really appreciated the way the first grade teacher consulted with them several times and allowed them to be involved in the decision.

At that point in the interview, Mr. Rice left to pick up David from a summer enrichment nature program and then brought him back to the house to be interviewed. David was a nice looking boy with his mother's red hair peeking out from under a black, Harley Davidson cap. He wore a t-shirt and shorts; his appearance was stylish and neat in spite of the recent hike on a local mountain trail.

David remembered his retention year by saying, "Well, I had problems reading 'cause I, I didn't know how to. I had to have glasses. When I'd look something my eyes would go cross-eyed, and I couldn't read that well." He also remembered feeling "mad" at the teacher but could not give specific examples. The second time in second grade, he recalled, "I had a lot more fun, more, I had more friends in, in it, and I like the teacher better." He remembered special help in reading being discontinued during his third grade year.

Currently in the fifth grade, David said, " I'm really sick of that school. I'm, I can't wait till next year when I get out." David admitted to accumulating several tardies the previous year because, "I don't like school." He does like to ride motorcycles and play basketball. He doesn't like books. When the subject of his retention is brought up, David finds that he is still "mad" and notes, "I didn't think I needed to get held back. I didn't find a reason."

Two other interviews were conducted at a later time

with Sarah and Thomas. Sarah was blond with brown eyes, the youngest child of the family and very pretty. She had completed the third grade. Thinking back over her earliest school experiences, she recalls, "Well, . . . I didn't want to go to school. I kept on crying and everything 'cause I didn't want to go."

Sarah remembered feeling anger over her retention in the first grade and said, "I thought I was going to pass and, uh, and I wanted to pass and see who I got, and uh, um, that's all." She also remembered the feeling of not knowing anybody in her class the next year and has remained closest to her friends from her first, first grade class. Her grades are "fine."

Thomas is the middle child in the family. He has red hair like his brother David. Although Thomas is older than David, he is slimmer. His manner was polite, but very reserved. At age 15, Thomas was several years away from his first grade retention. Aware of the experience, he had little memory of any details. He did remember his mother telling him he would be retained and that he felt "bad" because he "thought everybody would laugh" at him; however, he was able to "keep up with the old friends, make new."

After the first six weeks of the new school year, Thomas felt he had adjusted to his nonpromotion, but remembered worrying the next year about whether or not he would pass. He recalled, "About three weeks before school's over I kept on asking my teachers if I was going to pass, and they never did tell me, and whenever the report card, I, I didn't know if I'd passed or not, and she said, and uh,



she told me I did."

Thomas, unlike his brother David, did not appear to dislike school or harbor feelings of anger. Recent grades were A's, B's, and C's and one F in social studies because he was "lazy." Goals he shared with the interviewer included finishing high school and going into law enforcement.

The four families profiled in this section were selected to illustrate the diversity in the family units which participated in this study. In addition to emphasizing the wide range of family situations, these profiles also highlighted the extremes in family response to the retention decision. What variables in a retention decision affect the way a parent or a student adapt to a grade level retention? The next section of Chapter IV will briefly review stress and adaptation literature and then discuss those factors that affect the adaptation of a family to a nonpromotion experience.

#### Adapting to Retention: A Process of Transition

The four families profiled in the previous section all experienced stress related to the nonpromotion of at least one child within the family unit. Members of the first three families described feelings of prolonged frustration surrounding the crisis of a child's academic difficulties. Members of the fourth family related feelings of bitterness and helplessness over the retention decision itself.

The stress related to nonpromotion and other academic difficulties described by these four families was

representative of the stress experienced by all of the families who participated in this study. Members of every single family in this study had dealt with at least one child's failure in the public schools; all of the families had experienced crisis. The idea of stress as a determinant in the lives of the participants, therefore, emerged from the earliest interviews.

Although the stress related to academic difficulties had been present at one time in all families, the information shared during the interviews revealed that many of the families had handled the stress in a positive manner. In fact, the number of the families who made comments about the positive effects of a retention on their child's academic career was large enough that the investigator had difficulty identifying the family units through extreme case sampling. The family units were serially selected, and in making contacts within a school system, the investigator would ask school administrators to help identify those families who, in their opinions, had responded to a retention decision in a negative manner as well as those families who had been positive about the decision. Several times, individuals who were identified by a school administrator as being unhappy or upset with a retention decision were, at the time of the interview, quite sure the experience had been beneficial. These same individuals did remember being upset at the time of the decision (and may have even taken steps to try to change the decision). At some time between the decision and the interview, however, they had concluded that the retention

had provided their child with an academic advantage.

Although the investigator was guided by the research questions found at the close of Chapter II during the initial stages of inductive analysis, the concepts of stress and adapting to that stress emerged as a more powerful force in shaping the remainder of the investigation. This next section of Chapter IV will define stress and crisis, outline the transition theory of Weiss (1976) and the adaptation theory of Schlossberg (1981, 1984, 1989), and use the data collected in the interviews with all 22 families participating in the study to define the factors that affect the adaptation of a parent or a student to a nonpromotion experience.

#### Stress and Crisis Defined

All of the families in the study experienced stress related to a child's nonpromotion. In addition, many of the families were under the influence of other life stressors such as divorce, illness, or relocation prior to the nonpromotion experience. One question that has been asked by many investigators is why, when faced with similar stressors, are some families able to better assimilate the experience (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983).

One of the earliest researchers to look at families under stress was Hill (1949). Hill gathered information through both a questionnaire and an extended interview from 135 Iowan families during World War II. These families underwent the stress of separation and reunion during a time of war. Hill found that those families who weathered the

crisis the least successfully were isolated and without community roots; a network of support for these families was noticeably absent.

Hill also noted the families in the study adjusted to the crisis of war separation and reunion in a variety of ways. If charted, however, all of the families' adaptation followed the course of a "roller coaster." According to Hill, "the component parts to the roller-coaster profile of adjustment to crisis were: crisis, disorganization, recovery, reorganization" (1949, p. 14).

Terms like stress and crisis can have a great many meanings. Lazarus (1969) discussed four major approaches to the understanding of stress. Stress can be viewed as an external force "which makes an unusual or extraordinary demand" (p. 176) on an individual while another view of stress places the emphasis on the way a person reacts to a force or a circumstance. A physiologist defines stress as the "disturbance of the structure or functioning of tissue systems as a result of noxious stimuli" (p. 169) in contrast to psychological stress, in which "some event threatens the individual because of the way it is interpreted" (p. 176). Humphrey, an editor of a series of works detailing stress in today's society, wrote "in essence, stress can be considered as any factor, acting internally or externally, that makes it difficult to adapt and that induces increased effort on the part of a person to maintain a state of equilibrium within himself and with his external environment" (1986, p. 2).

Like stress, the definition of crisis also evolves from

the concept of equilibrium. When a person's state of equilibrium is disturbed and

the usual problem-solving mechanisms do not work, tension arises and feelings of discomfort or strain occur. The individual experiences anxiety, fear, guilt or shame, a feeling of helplessness, some disorganization of function, and possibly other symptoms. Thus a crisis is essentially a disturbance of the equilibrium, an "upset in a steady state." (Moos & Tsu, 1976, p. 13)

#### Transition and Adaptation

Schlossberg traced the growth of transition theory from crisis theory. Rather than use the term crisis, however, Schlossberg (1984) preferred to use the term transition when discussing "any event or nonevent that results in change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles within the settings of self, work, family, health, and/or economics" (p. 43). Weiss used both the term crisis and transition when discussing three stages of stress (1976).

According to Weiss, individuals encounter three types of stressful situations or crises. Weiss used the term crisis to describe "a severely upsetting situation of limited duration in which an individual's resources must be hastily summoned to cope with threats to his or her emotional and social stability" (P. 214). During the crisis stage, an "individual can give attention to little else; the crisis must be managed, everything else must wait" (p. 214).

The crisis may end by the situation returning to the

pre-crisis existence, or change may occur. Weiss called this change "transition" or "transition state." This second stage "ends with the establishment of a new stable life organization accompanied by a new stable identity. The new life organization may be adequate to the individual's needs, or it may in some way remain insufficient" (p. 215) .

If the new life organization is insufficient and lacks in an area of a significant relationship, an individual leaves the transition state and moves into a "deficit" situation. In Weiss' transition theory, therefore, an individual moves from an anticipated loss or crisis to a change or transition to a new life organization which may or may not be a deficit situation.

Weiss discovered individuals who are in stages of transition often believe that their life situations are unique. This perception reinforces feelings of isolation. In addition, transition states often produce feelings of anger and guilt as well as obsession with the crisis that brought about the change.

Schlossberg developed a theoretical framework for use in counseling adults who are experiencing transition (1981, 1984, 1989). Schlossberg classified transitions into four types. Was the transition anticipated or unanticipated? Was the transition the result of a nonevent (an event with a high probability of occurrence that did not occur)? Is the occurrence chronic and pervasive? The type of transition as well as the context in which it occurs and the impact it has on the individual's life all contribute to shape the transition response.

An individual's response to transition is viewed by Schlossberg (1984) "as a process of continuing and changing reactions over time--for better or for worse--which are linked to the individual's continuous and changing appraisal of self-in-situation" (p. 56). An individual in transition "passes through a series of phases (or stages) of assimilation, a process of moving from total preoccupation with the transition to integration of the transition into his or her life" (p. 56). Schlossberg identifies three major stages in the transition process which are as follows:

the introduction, during which time the individual is pervaded by the transition; a middle period of disruption, in which the individual is a bit at sea as old norms and relationships are changing and new ones are in process; and a final period in which the individual integrates the transition. This integration can take several forms; renewal, acceptance, or deterioration (p. 61).

Transitions do not have closure. A transition is an ongoing process in which an individual may experience assimilation of a transition several times.

Schlossberg's framework provides a way to predict the ability of an individual to cope with a transition experience. An individual's "coping resources" are based upon a balance between the assets and the liabilities surrounding the situation. Schlossberg's model divides an individual's coping resources into three major divisions which are characteristics of the transition itself, the characteristics of the individual experiencing the change,

and the characteristics of the environment in which the transition has occurred.

The investigator was reminded of Schlossberg's concept of coping resources as several factors affecting the adaptation of a parent or a student to a grade level retention emerged during the data analysis of the interviews. Seven major factors were identified through the analysis process. These emergent factors included coping resources from all three divisions of Schlossberg's framework--the individual, the transition, and the environment. Characteristics of an individual relevant to the assimilation of a retention included the self-definition of an individual, previous experience with retention, and the retention philosophy of the individual. Characteristics surrounding the nonpromotion experience which contributed to the assimilation of the retention included the feelings of empowerment connected to the decision and the retention rationale. Characteristics of the environment which affected the adaptation to a nonpromotion included the sense of belonging to the school community and the support systems available to an individual.

Figure 1 lists the seven factors or coping resources that emerged from the analysis of data. Each factor is related to one of the three major categories. In addition, Figure 1 identifies the elements that emerged from the data that define the coping resources. Each of these coping resources will be discussed in detail in the three chapters that follow.



## Adaptation to Retention

Characteristics of the Individual	Characteristics of the Transition	Characteristics of the Environment
<p><b>Self-Definition</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grades</li> <li>• Special Classes</li> <li>• Ability Grouping</li> <li>• Physical size</li> <li>• Peer Acceptance</li> <li>• Insecurity</li> <li>• Openness</li> <li>• Parent self-definition</li> </ul> <p><b>Retention Philosophy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitudes over if and when retention should occur</li> <li>• Impact on child</li> </ul> <p><b>Previous Experience with Retention</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frame of Reference</li> </ul>	<p><b>Feelings of Empowerment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Input into the decision making process</li> </ul> <p><b>Retention Rationale</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal versus external cause</li> <li>• Acceptance or Rejection</li> </ul>	<p><b>Sense of Belonging to School Community</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification with the community surrounding the school</li> <li>• Relationships to school personnel</li> </ul> <p><b>Support Systems</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extracurricular Activities</li> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Family members</li> <li>• School Services</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.** The seven coping resources influencing an individual's adaptation to a retention experience.

## Chapter 5 Characteristics of an Individual

The purpose of Chapter V is to discuss one category of coping resources affecting the assimilation of the transition experience of retention, characteristics of an individual. The data collected from the interviews of family members yielded at least three such coping resources in this category appearing to be significant in the adaptation to retention. These factors include the self-definition of an individual, the retention philosophy of the individual, and the family's previous contact or experience with retention.

### Self-Definition

Self-definition will be the first characteristic of an individual to be explored. Self-definition or self-labeling is a collection of feelings which defines how an individual views himself or herself. Data collected from the interviews revealed both positive attitudes and negative attitudes as parents and children alike struggled with the adaptation to the nonpromotion decision. Parents' self-definition surfaced when talking about their own educational background or their feelings about the retention decision. Attitudes associated with self-definition in children who had been retained were most commonly revealed in discussions about achievement and feelings surrounding the retention experience.

Students who had been retained talked about achievement

in a number of ways. Memories of past report cards as well as current grades, special classes, and overall assessment of ability often reflected the ways children thought about themselves. Physical size, peer acceptance, insecurity, and openness about the retention experience as well as parent self-definition were additional elements that contributed to a student's self-definition.

### Grades

Several of the students were making what were considered poor grades prior to the retention. While some of the students remembered making grades they considered good on report cards prior to the retention many of the students, when asked about their grades the year they were retained, remembered bringing home failing grades. Comments of the students pertaining to their pre-retention achievement and grades follow.

Uh, it was real . . . it wasn't that good for me. I got F's and D's and stuff like that. I, uh . . .  
(pause) see, the work started getting hard, you know, and I didn't understand it, and I started getting temper tantrums or whatever they are.

Pretty bad 'cause I made F's last year because it was hard 'cause it was just getting out of the hang of first grade, I guess. Being it's hard in second grade.

That was the year I failed. . . . I couldn't get my homework in the same day 'cause it started getting

harder, and, um, then some tests were hard.

That was the year I fooled around. I could have passed, but I didn't. I remember that. I could have passed. . . . In sixth grade, I made C's and D's and F's.

The grades students brought home during the years proceeding a retention decision, therefore, reinforced feelings of low self esteem.

Many of the parents of the students who had been retained also remember poor grades in the school years prior to the retention. Some of their comments follow.

Those last three six weeks, I mean, it was nothing but D's and F's. I mean I would have been happy to see a C, but there was nothing but D's and F's.

Um, well, we lost a lot of sleep, and we shed a lot of tears because when those report cards came home that were straight F's . . . there were seemingly nothing we could do . . . to make him do better in school.

We would have conferences on and off . . . grades were just F's and a lot of D's and everything.

So, I mean, he just made straight F's and I showed my husband. I was bawling and everything, and he said, 'Well, why are you crying?' And I said, 'Well, he needs help.' I said, 'A child shouldn't make straight F's in every subject that he's taking.' Everything but social studies. He loves social studies. I don't know

why, but he's always done good in social studies. But, any other subjects he made straight F's.

She, in spelling she had like A's and B's, but her reading, you know, it was really low, D's and F's, and her English and math were real low.

Because of low grades on a report card, parents were often very aware of their child's academic struggles. Parents who were more aware of their child's academic struggles prior to a retention decision were much more accepting of the retention.

Failing grades often caused tension or stress within the family. Students were aware of this stress, and report card days were dreaded by parents and students alike. More than one student in the study would hide report cards or notes from teachers in an attempt to delay the inevitable unhappiness their failing grades would bring their parents. What follows are comments made by several parents who remembered what the end of the six weeks grading sessions were like before the nonpromotion of their children.

Usually I saw the report card first because I would be home, and sometimes it would be such as, his report cards weren't all that bad. If he had a bad grade, one bad grade, it would be 'Oh, I'm so sorry mom. I know I'm grounded. I promise I'll do better next time. I'll study every day.' Because he knew he could reach his mom easier, and he would be, 'Oh, I'm really scared when dad comes home.' He [the father] knew when report card day was; he would be, 'I want to see your

report card.' And a lot of the times he would blow up when he saw it and just sling and say, 'I don't care. I'm through.' It would start out like that. 'I don't care what you do. You can dig ditches all you like. You're not trying. I don't care. You're punished.' And then eventually it would come around to, 'I really do care, and I would like to help you.' But you go through all these emotional stages, you know, fear, disappointment, and then finally understanding. It's just a lot of different emotions to put a child through.

He hid his report card one time, and I knew something was going on because he was so nervous all the time . . . and he comes in and looks like a scared puppy or something. So I knew that there was something going on, and it got really bad him not wanting to go to school, and he had gotten his report, and he hid it. And, so every day he's going to school, and his teacher's on his back about bringing his report card in, and, and he told her, you know, every day, 'Well, my mom doesn't want to sign it. My mom don't know where it is.' And, uh, then finally she [the teacher] called me at home one night and said, you know, 'It's been two weeks and A. doesn't have his report card.' So the next morning when I go him off to school, I said, 'You need to get your report card, let's sign it, no matter what it says let's sign it and get back to school.'

He made terrible grades. Um, the teachers would send home notes. He wouldn't bring them home. Um, if he, you know, finally the the teacher would call, and 'Well, did you get this note?' And we'd punish him for not bringing home the notes, and I think if, if he knew that we would going to take away his birthday, he still wouldn't have brought the notes home. He was just that stubborn about it. He just wouldn't, and even knowing that we were going to find out and we would, he would be punished, he still wouldn't bring 'em home.

Low grades and the fear of the consequences of bringing home low grades often contributed to the stress level within the family unit. If the stress level within the family became great enough, family members were more open to any solution that would reduce the stress--even retention.

After a nonpromotion, many of the students experienced what they felt was an improvement in grades. Many of these students expressed pride in their post-retention accomplishments. Student comments follow.

I make the B Honor Roll. I've made it each six weeks, the B Honor Roll, and school is better.

I went to second grade again . . . and I started doing better. I started getting A's and B's and stuff like that.

Green ribbons are, uh, the things that, uh, if you lose, uh, if you, um, like make, um, one C on your report cards you don't get any green ribbons. . . . I'm

going to get it [a green ribbon] this year.

I didn't make below a C that whole year [this past year].

I went to seventh grade, and I got skipped to the eighth grade 'cause I made straight A's and B's the whole seventh grade year. So they went ahead and put me on into the ninth grade.

Many families experienced a reduction in the stress level the year following the nonpromotion as the retained student brought home improved grades on his/her report card. Improved grades, therefore, provided justification to family members that the retention had been beneficial.

### Special Classes

Grades were not the only variable in determining self identification. Students were also very much aware of special classes and whether or not they attended special classes such as Chapter I reading and math classes or special education resource room programs for students with a learning disability in reading or math. The students were generally very complimentary regarding their special teachers' classes. Students and parents, however, were quick to share the information of whether or not the special classes were continued after a nonpromotion. The following are a examples of such situations shared by parents.

We let her stay in resource the first six weeks and second six weeks maybe, but she was doing so well that



me and Mrs. R. talked. We both agreed she didn't really need to come up there, and she mentioned to me 'Mommy when can I just stay in my classroom because I'm missing some things done there that I want to do and be in.' We talked, me and Mrs. R.; I didn't say anything to her. I said we will just have to see. I went and saw the improvements and how she had done, and she [the teacher] agreed that she [the student] didn't need to be in the resource room. She is just in her class and has made the B honor roll all three six weeks, and for her it is heaven.

And like this year, I think she went to the resource class maybe the first six or eight weeks of the year, and she hasn't been in a while. . . . I talked to Ms. C., and she said that she [the student] was doing so well that she told her that she didn't need to come back unless there was something that she just needed, really needed help in and that they were still going to, uh, she was eligible through '95 I believe it was so that if she did need help in junior high.

That first year in the third grade, he had to go out of so many classes, you know, to Ms. C. [the resource room teacher] and speech. He didn't like it, you, that upset him 'cause he, he wasn't with his classmates, and this year in the third grade he did a whole lot better 'cause he did not have to go out of, you know, his classroom. . . . We had a meeting there before

school was out, you know. We told 'em that we'd like for him [the student] to try and stay in Ms. C. [the regular teacher's] room this time because that upset him and which they agreed, and, and it really paid off. It really did.

Special classes, therefore, were often discontinued in the years following a student's retention. For some students in the study (as well as their parents), the discontinuation of special classes provided them with tangible evidence that the retention was a good decision.

#### Ability Grouping

In addition to the elimination of special classes, students compared themselves with other students' achievement level in the classroom. The level of the reading group in which the student was instructed was of particular note. Unlike grade cards or special classes, reading groups were rarely mentioned by parents but were more often remembrances of the retained students. It mattered little what the reading group was called, students always seemed to know whether or not they were in the bottom group; their perception of their position was another contributing variable to their self identification. The following are examples of comments students made concerning reading instruction.

(Sigh) When I first came here, see there was two groups. There was one group ahead and one group below, and she, just as soon as I came here she [the teacher] stuck me in the group below. . . . I didn't like it! I

said it wasn't fair because, just because I just walked in the door and you're sticking me into a low group here, and she said, 'That's where you belong.' . . . And she kept on giving me easier work. She gave the people she didn't think was capable . . . easier work.

I remember reading . . . getting kicked out of the reading class. . . . Ms. J. [the teacher] said I didn't know how to read, and she kicked me out of it. She said I wasn't reading it right. . . . I sat in the room until that reading group got through reading, and then we had a different class.

The competition inherent in the ability grouping of students in the regular classroom contributed to the students' lowered self-esteem and often seemed unfair to the students assigned to the lower groups. One student participating in the study, however, related with delight her move to the top reading group the year following her retention.

We're a faster reading group. We're the Secret Agents. Secret Agents, Redskins, and Eagle's Nest. . . . The Secret Agents are the really best readers in my class and then the Eagles are the next, and then the Redskins are the little ones that need help on it.

For this student, obviously, one positive outcome of the retention experience was her rise to the top reading group.

In addition to self-identification through grades and other achievement comparisons with classmates, nonpromoted students defined themselves through variables that were affected by the retention. Although very few students

admitted to the retention directly affecting their lives, their physical size, peer acceptance, worry about future retentions, and overall avoidance in conversation of the retention experience were topics in the interviews where evidence of adaptation to the nonpromotion had taken place.

### Physical Size

For some students, their physical size in comparison to nonretained classmates was an issue with which to be dealt. In fact, several of the parents admitted that the physical size of their child was a factor that had been considered in the retention decision. In some family units, parents as well as students worried about the child being more physically mature than current classmates. What follows are some student and parent comments regarding the variable of student size.

One of the things that I had a little concern with, and you've met her, and as far as an eight year old, she's a little large for age, really. She's a big girl, and that was, in my mind, one of the apprehensions I had about her staying in the same grade again. It was not much from the educational or the learning aspects of it but just from the sheer physical difference and size, but that has not, that was unfounded, my concern.

Yeah, that's when I started really feeling older than they was. . . . Well, that's when I started growing a beard. . . . Yeah, and I was just bigger than most of them.

The other children are going to be two years behind. The other children are going to be two years younger than her. Okay, like, okay, now in second grade, she's developing as a little woman. She's having to wear bras. She's having to do things, you know, she's starting to develop. The other children are not. And, like the day of the program, they had to take a dress because I wasn't going to let her stay, and they had dress rehearsal. So she goes in the bathroom, and A. [the daughter] wears a bra, a training bra. The other children came in. Okay, one of the little girls know it because she was the neighbor child. So she had her to zip her dress up. Another little child came in the bathroom where they were and made fun of her, you know. 'You're wearing a bra. You've got boobies.' That hurt because she is more developed than them. . . . She's always been a head taller than the other children, so she kind of feels like, out of place, you know. Where last year she was kind of, she was a little bit bigger than they were but yet she kind of blended in, too.

So I went, before I went and talked to the teacher, I did all the worry I could do, and it, I believe it hurt more me more than it did T. [the son] 'cause I didn't know whether I was doing the right thing because T. is a big child. He's up to here to me. He weighed almost twelve pounds when he was born. He's always been big, and I think, sometimes I think that hurt him too

because they thought because he was so big that, you know, he should know more; he was older or whatever. Students who found themselves physically more mature than their classmates had to cope with their size and advanced development; their adaptation to the retention became more difficult. Students two years older than their classmates experienced the greatest difficulty in adaptation.

### Peer Acceptance

Worry about acceptance from peers was also a concern that had touched the lives of some of the students in the study. Although all of the students who participated in the study appeared to have a social network of friends at the time of the interviews, many of the students confessed to insecurities in the year following the retention. In fact, more than one of the students found acceptance with a fellow retaineer. The comments which follow are examples of students remembering their sense of loss over friendships and insecurities about making new friends.

Well, I felt sad because, um, left, I'd been left back and I wouldn't see my friends much and all.

I thought everyone would laugh.

I wouldn't get to see none of my friends, and I would have to make new ones. . . . The ones in the grade higher than me, some of 'em laughed. Several other kids in there wouldn't have nothing to do with me, and I had to be by myself most of the time till another

girl got put back in the first grade, I mean the second grade already, and she was one of my best friend.

I was upset. I was wanting to go to fourth grade. But, my third grade, my second third grade year . . . it was just sad because I couldn't go on with the rest of my friends.

It just made me upset 'cause, you know, there was all my, I had to come up here from Texas and make up, make all kinds of new friends, you know 'cause I didn't know nobody up here, and it was hard for me. And, um, and then they failed me back, and there went all my friends. . . They weren't in the same building as me anymore so I had to make all new friends over again. It hurt me, you know. I was sad, and, uh, I just had to start all over again.

When I come in the first day, it kind of scary 'cause everybody looks at me like, 'Who are you?' Like the last year, everybody when I came in, they all had friends from last year, and I'm like, 'Nobody's going to like me,' 'cause they were all playing with the other kids, and they wasn't really use to me yet. . . . Getting to know all the people is the hardest thing.

Many of the retained students initially felt insecure about their abilities to maintain old friendships and make new friends.

Insecurity

In addition to insecurity over the prospect of losing friends and making new friends, some students also expressed anxiety over the possibility of being retained again. Even though many of the students did well in the year following their nonpromotion, as measured by report card grades, some students worried about being held back; their sense of dread was especially strong on the last day of school when the end of the year report card was sent home. (On the back of most report cards is a section designating the teacher's recommendation for grade placement the following year.) The following comments typify this type of student worry.

Uh, at the about three weeks before school's over I kept on asking my teachers if I was going to pass, and they never did tell me, and whenever the report card, I, I didn't know if I'd passed or not, and she said, and uh, she told me I did.

And now he'll say, 'Grandmaw, you think I'll have to be in the second grade next year, too?' And says, 'Then A. [a cousin] will be in the fourth grade, and I'll just be in the second grade.' He talks about that wondering if he's going to pass this year.

And I'll say, 'You're really doing good though, and I don't see why, you know, you're not going to be able to go to second grade as long as you keep this up.' And he'll say, 'You mean I get to go to second grade next year?' And then I'll look at him and say, 'I don't see



why not. We'll just have to wait and see.'

Students struggling with feelings of low self-esteem seemed to worry the most about being retained a second time. Those students making the best grades the year following their retention worried the least about being retained an additional year.

### Openness

Despite what worries or anxieties the retained students had following their nonpromotion, few of the students had openly talked about their feelings connected with the retention or about the retention decision itself. In fact, many of the students admitted that the interviewer was the first person with whom they had freely discussed their experience since the decision. Several parents also agreed that the topic of the child's retention never surfaced in family discussions following the initial decision. Some examples of comments regarding this issue follow.

It was was that summer in, umm, the first year in second year that was the only year we, that was the only time we ever hardly talked about it. Yesterday, I said, was the first time ever since, umm, that that first time in the second grade summer we ever talked about it.

We just don't ever talk about it.

We never say anything about it. It was basically dropped the next year.

Well, I think there was more than him [that had been retained]. There was a lot of classmates. So it was just like, I guess, him just being in the same grade but with the same classmates, most of 'em, and he hasn't paid any attention. He's never even mentioned it even now that he's graduated. He still hasn't mentioned anything about it.

I never do talk about it.

In fact, so little was retention discussed in some of the families that one student didn't even know which grade level she had repeated until she had recently asked her mother. Another student was able to keep his retention a secret from his friends because even though he had been retained, he was the same age as the other students in his current class. According to him, "It [retention] hadn't really affected me 'cause nobody really never knew I stayed a year back."

When members of the family had adapted to the retention, they put aside the retention and went appeared to go with their lives. One student remembering past discussions with her parents about the retention shared, I did for a while [talk about the retention], and they [her parents] told me there was nothing they could do about it since it had already happened, and I just said, okay.

The same student remembered being in the eight grade when she finally felt her third grade retention no longer bothered her. By the eight grade, several of her friends

had also been retained, and she "knew how they felt."

The family units in the study where retention seemed to be the most freely discussed were those situations where individuals had not fully assimilated the nonpromotion. The comments that follow are an example of a parent whose child is still upset about a retention decision.

But now it's really affected R. [her son]. I mean, he's always bringing up the idea, you know. Somebody will say, 'Well what grade you in?' He'll say, 'I'm going in the fifth, but I'm really suppose to be in the sixth.' And you know, she [the teacher] tried to tell us it was the way we felt that made him feel the way he does about himself which we don't do that. We haven't done it with any of our kids, you know. We try to, uh, uh, encourage 'em and stuff. We've never looked down at 'em because of stuff like that, you know, and, but he's always doing that, you know, and it's really bothered him. And then he'll say, 'Well, I would have been in the sixth if that teacher hadn't held me back.'

Family members conversing about the retention decision on a regular basis at the time of the interviews were still trying to find ways to cope and to adapt to the experience.

All of these variables--grade cards, ability grouping within the classroom, special classes, physical size, peer acceptance, and willingness to talk about the retention appear to contribute to the self-definition of an individual student, one characteristic of an individual that influences how well a student assimilates the nonpromotion experience

as a life transition. Students who were secure in their abilities to succeed in school and to maintain their peer acceptance were the most likely to adapt to the experience. Parents of retained students also had to work toward assimilating the retention. A parent's self-definition surfaced during discussions regarding their own educational background or their feelings about the retention decision.

#### Parent Self-Definition

Very few of the parents participating in this investigation had any type of education beyond a high school degree. Thirteen of the parents had dropped out of junior high or high school. Six of the parents had experienced retention as a child themselves. Only one parent refused to discuss her own educational background. What follows are some comments which reveal some of the parents feelings about their educational abilities.

Well, uh, I didn't mind going to school. I like it. I studied hard, but it just didn't come out on my tests. So, and, uh, but I really liked going to school.

I enjoyed school. I played on the golf team and [was] basketball manager and football manager. I really enjoyed, but at one time I had difficulties going through and had a little trouble making there. But with some help I, I made it which my parents didn't have a lot of time to, to help me, and . . . I did repeat the sixth grade.

I went to too many different schools. . . . Uh, I started out here . . . and then I ended up in Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama and just went from one school to the next, and so I just really sort of fed up with school myself. And so I've really tried to, you know, push the children into, you know, not missing, to stay in one school so they can enjoy it, you know, 'cause I got to the point that I no sooner made friends than I lost friends, and it just got where I didn't care if I went or not. . . . See, in time I got to where I was a teenager, uh, there was other children at home that needed so much attention that, you know, I ended up quitting early and going to work for, you know, helping 'cause she [her mother] was divorced. And so, you know, that's why I've tried to stress, you know, a good education in my children because they're way ahead of my education, and they're just, you know, seventh/eighth grade. And so it really hurts, you know. So you've gotta have a good education.

I can't read. I'm a high school graduate and can't read.

I took one year of college through State. I did college the wrong way. I worked 40 hours and tried to go to school. . . . College is not for everybody, you know, so, I hope I remember that when my children get up to where they don't want to go to college. but,

uhh, I liked school as far as going to school. I just didn't, I wasn't a very good, studious person, I guess. . . . I remember that . . . when you got to third grade and you had multiplication, it became really tough on me. Math was one of my worst subjects. I just wasn't good in math. . . . And now looking back I wish I could have buckled down a little bit more and learned a little bit more because when my children get to the point where they are going to have to have help in math, mom's lost.

These comments reflect the insecurity many of the parents felt about their own educational background. These same individuals felt ill-equipped to help their children with school work. These insecurities were, in a way, used as a coping resource. If the parent assumed he/she was unable to help a child, the burden for the child's education was removed from the parent's shoulders and placed on the school.

In addition to a parent's educational background, another variable contributing to the self identification of a parent was a parent's feelings surrounding the retention experience itself. Looking back on the retention, most parents felt that the nonpromotion had been a good decision and that the retention had helped the child. Some of the parents, however, felt guilty about the retention, as if they were somehow responsible for the child's failure to do well in school. Some comments concerning parent guilt or responsibility for the retention follow.

When they first told me [about the retention], I was--

okay, I was a little upset because I thought what have I not done, you know. I've failed as a parent if my child's got to take first grade over again.

I felt pretty guilty. It was right around, uh, after me and my wife divorced. So, uh, I think that had an affect on him, too.

When he first went to school, he wanted to just play in kindergarten 'cause that's what mostly I had taught him. I didn't really sit down and work with him the way I should. So I, I really can't--I shouldn't put the blame on Ms. G. [the teacher]. Maybe it was more my fault as it was.

Well, if we had went on and waited, you know, and maybe had her maybe she wouldn't of even had this problem because when I had her I was so young, too, that I feel that, you know, if I had waited to later on and had my children when I was older I would of, maybe she wouldn't have been early. She wouldn't have been born with this [learning problem]. . . And, uh, guilt that, you know, my education is not good enough to sit down and help her 'cause I fell guilty when, you know, I can help her with just about anything except for this modern math.

Again, his brother, I cannot get his nose out of a book. B.'s [the retained child], I can't [get] his

nose in a book. So, it's possibility . . . being the first, I read to D. an awfully lot more than I did to B. With B. I didn't have as much time to read, and I just didn't take the time to read. It was more like I've been through this once, and uh, and that could be one of the reasons he just doesn't want to read. But, uh, we've tried.

Many of the parents in the study assumed at least a portion of the responsibility for their child's academic difficulties. They believed the child's teacher was doing all that could be done by the school and if any problems still existed, they were somehow liable for their child's deficits.

Not all parents, however, expressed guilt regarding the retention. What follows are two examples of parent comments denying any feelings of guilt.

I feel like that if I hadn't request that she be held back that she would have went on, and she would have been in worst trouble now than she would have, than she is now. I think would have hurt her more to go than to be held back that year. . . . I haven't felt any guilt. I feel like I did the best thing to help her.

You know, at the end of the fourth grade and then how he had started out at the, in the fifth grade, you know, I, to me there was no choice [about the retention]. There was no choice. I wish and if we could go back and do it again, I, we would have held



him back the first time in fourth. . . . I don't really feel guilty about it because I, and I guess I don't feel guilty about it because K. has done as well as he has since then.

The parents who felt the least guilt were better able to cope with the initial retention decision.

The self-definition of a parent, how a parent defines himself or herself within the context of the retention decision, is due in large part to two variables--their own educational background and their degree of guilt regarding the event. Like the self-definition of the retained student, which was revealed through comments regarding achievement levels, physical size of the student, special classes, and reticence regarding the experience itself, self-definition is just one factor making up the component of the adaptation framework. Two other factors comprising the coping resource of individual characteristics are retention philosophy and previous experience with retention.

#### Retention Philosophy

The second factor in an individual's characteristics influencing adaptation to a nonpromotion experience is the retention philosophy. The retention philosophy of individuals within a family where a retention had occurred was made up of their beliefs and attitudes regarding the educational use of nonpromotion. The following two issues surfaced during the interview process: if and when retention should occur and whether or not retention helps or hurts a child.

### Attitudes Over If and When

When, if ever, should retention occur? Surprisingly, no one participating in the study, regardless of personal feelings about the retention touching his/her own immediate family, felt the practice of grade level retention should be totally abandoned by the public schools. Retention was seen as a justifiable practice by the schools because of a lack of grade level knowledge or because of failing grades on a report card. What follows are several comments made by parents regarding a deficiency in knowledge.

I felt like then if they haven't learned it during this year, it's going to catch up with 'em eventually. You know, going on to the next grade if they have, it's, it's steps, you know. If they don't know their ABC's, they're not going to learn to read, you know. And uh, that's just one of those things that's, that would have to be done. I mean that's the way I felt with A. If he doesn't know it now, he's definitely not going to know it next year when it's one step harder. And, uh, I mean if there's nothing to build on.

I explained to him that I didn't feel that he had the, the knowledge to go on and that I felt that he could get stronger by repeating the grade.

I mean why send them to another grade when they don't know what they were doing in the grade before that? I didn't think we should push him on to the fourth grade when he wasn't ready 'cause that just, you know,

defeat the purpose, I think.

I don't begrudge N. being retained one bit because he wasn't ready. I mean he would just failed harder when he got up here if he'd went on in to second. I don't think he would have picked it up.

I mean we kind of felt that it was the best, but even though the teacher said, 'She could go; I think she could go, but I think she'll have trouble towards the end of the year.' I said, 'Well, if she's going to have trouble we just going ahead and stop it now.'

Parents felt very strongly that grade level material should be mastered before a student was allowed to pass along to the next grade level. By retaining a child, a parent was granting the child an additional year to get "caught up."

Passing grades were often equated with a mastery of knowledge; therefore, a second justification for retention was poor grades. As evidenced by some of the quotes above, parents often feel students are just not ready to go to the next level of learning. Sometimes, however, failing grades were attributed to a lack of effort on the part of the student. Parent comments regarding failing grades follow.

I think that's one problem with high schools, if they don't have the grades they still pass them, and I think that is wrong. When you, uh, graduate students that can't fill out a job application then I think that's the school's fault.

I think he's [the retained child] learning the consequences of not doing the work, and, uh, and he does work hard for his grades [now].

Well, I believe it [retention] is [justified] when children just don't want to do anything. They don't try. They don't even, don't care. I believe that's the way it should be, and when they make real, real bad grades on the grade card.

I don't begrudge it. Evidently, I wasn't doing the work so I paid my dues. . . . So it's just, I'm not trying to be hard, but he's got to realize, you know, do your decent on your grades and show your effort and then you get what you should get, that's the only way I know how to do it.

Parents believed that students who worked hard and were successful in their studies were rewarded with good report cards. Conversely, parents felt that placing students in the next grade level when they had not been successful in the current grade would send the wrong message to students. Good grades should not be given to students but should be earned.

Students, like their parents in the study, also felt retention was a justifiable educational practice. What follows are some of their comments describing situations when retention should occur.

Well, if he had bad grades, I'd say it's fine with me and all [to retain]. And then if he start, if he had

good grades I'd say well, um, let him go on to the next grade.

Like you might, like say that first year you go ahead and pass or something and next year you might go on to second grade and not know nothing at all and then they'd like wonder how you got to the second grade if you don't know nothing at all.

They [students] need it so they can have a better life to go on. . . . When they make poor grade they need [retention].

I think that if kids, if, if somebody didn't learn what they were suppose to learn in the eighth grade or whatever, they should be held back, you know, but it seems like they ought to help you out some, like they should have let me to to summer school like they told me that I had to to pass, but I didn't.

Well, this is the way I look at it, you know . . . I think every kid at the end of the year, every year, I think like they should put everything, everything together like what they've learned that whole year like in one big packet and let 'em study it, you know, a little bit or let 'em study it for two or three weeks, and then give 'em a test, and, you know, if they've learned enough or what they should've learned or if

see, uh, they've just been goofing off or something like that, I think they should be held back 'cause it ain't right for some students they hold back that know they can go on.

Like their parents, the students in the study believed in mastery of grade level material. They also believed that students needed to demonstrate their mastery of this material either through passing grades or through testing.

### Impact on Child

The second attitude making up the retention philosophy of the participants within the study was the belief of whether or not retention "helps" or "hurts" a student. A person's justification for nonpromotion tended to reflect their beliefs about the general use of the practice; an individual's attitude about the effect retention has on children, however, was more likely the result of how they believed the experience has either helped or hurt someone in their own family. Comments from parents follow.

I requested that she be held back because I thought it would benefit her more than to just be pushed along then not learn anything.

To me I think that, you know, if, if the teacher decides that and if they work together all during the year then the teacher still decides that then that the child should be retained because in the long run it would help the child. But if let your child just keep going on and on, and you know deep down in your heart

that they're not doing the work they should be doing that it's not, in the long run it's not going to help them 'cause when they get to high school if you don't know your elementary work then . . . when time comes to graduate you're child's not going to graduate. So if you care anything and you love your child, you're doing it for them. It's to help them.

I feel that, uh, she is right where she needs to be. Those two years has helped her to catch up, to say, the ninth grade. And, uh, it's still like a year behind that she has matured enough as far as school and herself where I think she's where she needs to be right now. I don't think it's [retention's] hurt her at all because she needed those extra years to mature to have time to grow up to those children 'cause she was just not ready. And, you know, it just wasn't me saying it, it was everybody saying it.

Although most parents felt retention had helped their child, there were a few parents who remembered that the retention had caused their child stress. One parent who believed retention had not helped her child shared the following comments.

I've seen how bad that's it has been on 'em so far, the year that they both were retained, it was hard on 'em, and I don't want to see 'em go through that again. . . . A. cried. A cried. She said, 'Well, there goes my friends. They're going on to another grade.' She had to make all new friends in the next grade, and, uh,

they laughed at her and made fun of her because she had failed. I really, I want my child to learn, but, uh-- no, I don't like for 'em to be retained.

The majority of the parent participants viewed retention as an educational practice that provided students with a better chance for future success in school. Those parents who did not view their child's retention in this manner had a more difficult time in adapting to the retention. Did students feel the same way? The following are comments made by students about retention and the effect retention has on children.

They [teachers at school] can sort of say this, this [retention] will just help you more if you stay back so you can learn all this over so you can be better at it and maybe even be smarter than the people that did pass so that you get that stuff that they taught you in your head.

In a way, I'm glad momma held me back 'cause, uh, I mean, I really didn't really done nothing really, and I'm glad she held me back 'cause I knew a lot more, and some of it in third grade was just reviews of second grade.

It wasn't a benefit that I lost a lot of my friends.  
. . . [Retention has given me] a better life. . . .  
Ummm, it's just got me interested, I never did even like racing 'till after retention. I started getting interested in sports and everything.



Very few students acknowledged that their retention experience had adversely affected their lives.

An individual's retention philosophy seems to be comprised of two main types of attitudes. The first attitude is defined by those circumstances under which nonpromotion is justified as an educational strategy. All individuals in the study felt that there were some circumstances in which retention was justified; this attitude was a general statement of belief and not necessarily an endorsement of the retention decision affecting their own lives. Acceptable reasons for retention centered around two areas, a student has either not acquired sufficient knowledge to move on to the next grade level or he/she has not made passing grades. Some parents felt that poor grades were a reflection of a student not trying hard enough to pass.

The second attitude making up an individual's retention philosophy deals with the issue of whether or not retention helps a student on a long term basis. Most parents felt that the retention decision made for their child was a benefit to the child. In the long run, the child would be better off in school by getting "caught up" on those skills for which he/she were deficient. Looking back on their retention, a majority of the students also felt the retention had aided their progress in school. The retention philosophy of the participants served as one coping resource aiding in their adaptation to retention. By justifying the continuation of retention as an educational practice, these individuals were also able to validate their own

nonpromotion experience.

#### Previous Experience with Retention

The third factor or characteristic of an individual is closely related to retention philosophy--previous experience with retention. Several family units participating in the study had family members who had been retained including parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, and cousins in addition to the retained child. Some individuals recalled the nonpromotion of peers.

#### Frame of Reference

These past retention decisions seemed to serve as a frame of reference for individuals adapting to a current retention decision and seemed to affect the way an individual viewed the more recent retention. What follows are comments concerning an individual's knowledge of a previous retention decision.

I can relate to the situation that A. is in because I, myself, repeated a grade when I was in school. This happened to be the sixth grade. My particular situation was somewhat different than A. I am an identical twin, and my identical twin brother was the one that had more of the deficiencies in learning than I did. At that time, this was in the late fifties, it was felt that it was best to keep us both together rather than splitting one up and retaining the other in the same grade. So, in that aspect I repeated the sixth grade probably more for the benefit of my twin

brother than myself. As far as any adverse affects on me or my social behavior, I'm not aware of any that it did as far as the relationships with other children in both grades. . . . He [my brother] had a very difficult time in reading comprehension, and this was, I think, probably the basis for that decision. Y'know, he has come out of it also. Him and myself, both, have finished up undergraduate bachelors' degrees, and I guess to, however you want to phrase it, have gone on with our lives, own children, families, and everything, and hasn't been any adverse affect on me in that respect.

As far as school goes, I mean, I remember I failed a grade, second grade. I remember the teacher's name, and I remember the school. Uhhh, overall, it was all pleasant experiences. I played basketball.

Well at first he resented it. He just, he kind of shied away from me for a while. And I talked to him, and his daddy talked to him. And the one thing that changed his mind--he looks up to my brother-in-law and my nephew real, you know, they're idols I guess. And after he found out that they failed a grade--I failed a grade, he was fine. After he found out that happened.

At first I didn't like it [my son's retention] because it, it, 'cause I remember when my brother was held back, and it was more or less a joke, and everyone made

fun of him 'cause he held back a year, and it was first grade. And I thought well he's going to suffer a lot of ridicule because of it. . . He [my brother] has really gone past that. He's going for his electrical engineer degree, and he is, he has really done quite well.

I had a brother that was retained in third grade. I don't know if it was teacher's problems or what, but I think Mother would have kept him back anyway if the teacher hadn't. So I can kind of draw on that experience with my own experience.

Individuals often used previous retention experiences for a frame of reference. Some individuals drew comfort from remembering a previous retention. If they could point to a relative who appeared to be successful in life, perhaps their child's retention would result in a positive outcome.

Not all previous experiences, however, were remembered without doubt. Additional parent comments follow.

Okay. He [her daddy] says, ummm, 'You will be a year older than them now which you're already a year older. Ummm, you will, ummm, the children will make fun of you.' You know, this was already implanted in her. Ummm, he failed and his brother failed, and it hurt his brother very much, too. See, even when they got in high school, he was still a year behind. So his brother [her uncle] talked to her and said, 'A., it will be okay. Everything will be all right. I failed. It will be okay'. . . . And he said, 'Everything will

be okay.' But yet he tells me, 'It's going to hurt her because it hurt me badly.' You know, he didn't tell this to A. And he said, 'It will hurt because the other children goes on and you're still stuck behind.' And he says, 'Later on, not while she's young in elementary, but when she gets in junior high and high school, it will hurt her more.'

Now the second grade, uh, I done good in it, but, uh, the fourth grade I think it was, I failed the fourth grade. But I felt like I could go to summer school, and they still held me back which I didn't like it. I remembered it. But I felt like that they cheated me out of moving on with my friends and stuff. And I didn't, like I said, I didn't like that. I felt resentment.

I was trying to think since we first talked, since we first met if I could remember anybody that had, had been retained and the attitude, ummm. I never, I can't remember a girl. It was always a guy, probably, um, at that point in time, somebody of like a lower income, not necessarily clean. I was trying to think of, I don't know the people by name, but that is the, uh, stereotype that I have in my mind. Uh, I know that that's far from the truth, but now that's the way it was or that's the way I remember when I was a little girl. And I think that's strange. You know, it's wild because that's not the case at all. But, I think

because they were different, and they weren't clean, it's like you didn't expect them to perform or maybe that's my point of view.

The adaptation of an individual to the transition of nonpromotion is partially molded by past exposure to retention. Contact with other relatives or peers who have been retained and have assimilated a retention provides an individual with a frame of reference that can serve as a coping resource.

#### Summary

Past experience with retention is just one characteristic or factor of an individual that influences the assimilation of a retention affecting an immediate family member. In addition to past experience with retention, two other factors comprise the characteristics of an individual that serve as coping resources for dealing with a grade level retention--self-definition and retention philosophy. In Chapter VI, the next category of coping resources will be discussed, the characteristics of the transition. Feelings of empowerment and retention rationale are the two factors or coping resources found in this category.

## Chapter 6

### Characteristics of the Transition

The purpose of Chapter VI is to discuss the second category of coping resources influencing an individual's adaptation to a retention experience, characteristics of the transition. The data collected from the interviews of family members revealed at least two such characteristics or factors appearing to be significant in the assimilation of a nonpromotion. These two factors are the family's feelings of empowerment or authority connected to the decision making process and the retention rationale or reason for the nonpromotion.

#### Feelings of Empowerment

Who makes the decision to retain a child? When retention is considered a viable option for dealing with students academically at risk, the decision to require a child to repeat a grade is usually made through one of the following ways: a teacher recommendation, a parent request, or a joint recommendation among parents and school officials. During the interviews, the participants revealed mixed opinions regarding who should make the final decision.

#### Input into the Decision

When asked who should make a retention decision, students and parents were divided in their responses. Students most often suggested the classroom teacher should be the final authority in the matter. Parents usually said

the decision should be a collaborative effort between the home and the school. What follows are comments suggesting a collaborative retention decision.

She [the second grade teacher] worked with me all through the year, helping me, and I would talk to her. We would have conferences on and off. A. grades were just F's and a lot of D's. . . . I told her all along I feel like A. needs to be held back. It would help her if she was, and so me and her, I think, was the two that was instrumental in holding her back.

And, um, but this year, we talked about after summer school, and the teacher talked to me, and I sat down and talked to Mr. C, his principal, and we decided that, um, it was really up to me to decide what I wanted to do. . . . [Mr. C] said, 'I really think J. should take first grade over. Not because he hasn't tried but because I can see an improvement in summer school and now.' But he says, 'J., I think, would be better if he was the big one in first grade instead of the little one in second.' And he said, 'I think it would be beneficial to him.' So then I just thought about it and decided that I think it would be best, too.

Kindergarten was fine. First grade was, I don't know, I think it was the first grade that he may have been retained in because they had talked to me. He was doing pretty good, and he wasn't do good. So the



teachers and things, you know, talked with me, and we met several times about him. And the teachers and myself we decided to, you know, keep him in the first grade.

The above comments are from parents who remembered the retention decision as having been made with both parent and teacher input being given equal weight.

Occasionally the parent initiated a child's nonpromotion. In these cases, the parent felt the child lacked the necessary skills or knowledge to proceed to the next grade level. Comments from two such situations follow.

Well, it was during the second grade, I believe it was. And I had had several meetings with her teacher because her grades were really low. And, the last meeting that I had with her she had already decided to go ahead and pass N. to the third grade, and I told her that, you know, why should she pass her when she was failing the second grade. If she couldn't do second grade work, I didn't think she would be able to third grade work. So I requested that she be held back because I thought it would benefit her more than to just be pushed along and then not learn anything.

After the first year in third grade, half way, I done made up my mind he was going to take the third grade over 'cause I was not going to send him on.

He did go to summer school, and, uh, so in the third grade they were going to pass him because of his size,

and I just went--I was determined if I had to fight to get him to fail then I would do it 'cause I knew he wasn't ready for the fourth grade. And, uh, so I went and talked to Mr. P. [the teacher] and everything, and he said, 'Yes, I will pass him.' And I said, 'Well, can you tell me why you are going to pass him?' He said, 'Because of his size.' I said, 'He may be big.' He's always been big, but I said, 'He you all are not helping him.' I said, 'You're hurting him.' I said, 'You're sending him on to each class. It's a struggle for him. It's a struggle for me.' And I said, 'I want it to stop. I want him to take the third grade over.' So he did, and it's been great this year.

Once parents were resolved that retention was the best answer to a child's academic difficulties, school personnel could do little to persuade them out of their decision.

While some parents felt frustration as they strove to convince teachers to retain their child, other parents expressed anger or dismay over being left out of the decision making process. Some parents fought to change a teacher's decision by meeting with a principal or even the superintendent. What follows are comments from parents who were not included in the retention decision made by the school.

I wasn't even asked if A. should fail or not. They just failed her.

I received a letter from the school board, a registered letter, telling me he was going to fail, and that

disturbed me. So, I went first to talk to the teacher. I tried to tell her you cannot teach a child a lesson [through retention]. This is no way to do it to fail a child. So, I went to the principal, and he stood by the teacher. He said he would not try to change her. He had to stand by her, back her up. So, then I went to the superintendent, and he said the same thing. Everybody was backing the teacher.

I wasn't part of the decision.

She [the teacher] was really rude about the situation. I told her, she called me on the phone, and I told her, I said, 'Well, his father doesn't really think, feels that he should be held back.' She said, 'Well, I don't care what he thinks. There's nothing you all can say about it or do.' I mean, you know, that's what she told me on the phone, and I brought the situation up in front of her, in front of . . . [the principal].

Parents who were eliminated from the retention decision process felt powerless and angry. These parents had a much more difficult time adapting to the retention when compared to those parents who were included in the decision making process. In fact, some of these parents were still struggling with the retention decision at the time of the interviews.

As indicated through the interviews, some parents did have an opportunity for input into the retention decision. Some of the parents worked in partnership with school

personnel to reach a decision; some parents felt they initiated the action through their own efforts. Other parents, however, felt their wishes or input concerning the retention decision were thwarted by school officials. The parents most frustrated by the decision were those parents who were not involved in the retention decision and who tried to fight the decision. Members in these family units tended to adapt less easily to the retention and tended to remain bitter at school officials long after the decision occurred. How involved parents saw themselves in the retention decision led to a degree of empowerment or control over the situation; empowerment served as a coping resource for the family.

#### Retention Rationale

The feeling of empowerment is one of two factors or characteristics of the transition component in the adaptation framework. The retention rationale or reason for the nonpromotion is the second characteristic of the transition component. Two issues dealing with the rationale for the nonpromotion surfaced during the interviews, whether or not the reason for the retention was an internal cause or an external cause and whether or not the reason for the retention was accepted or rejected.

#### Internal Versus External Cause

Several different reasons for retention were shared. Although the grades of the nonpromoted students were often low during the year the retention decision was made,

parents found failing grades more of an indication of an academic problem and not the actual reason for the retention. The reasons or rationale for retention that were revealed during the investigation could be divided into one of two main categories--internal causes and external causes. Internal causes were reasons originating within the student like an early birthdate, immaturity, low skill level, slower rate of learning, or health problem. In certain cases, parents might offer more than one reason for a child's difficulties. Parent comments describing internal reasons for their child's retention follow.

We talked with many different people, all the teachers and everything. I told them that I feel like A. has missed the basics in her education, the first grade. She missed it. She missed those things there, the basic adding, the basic sounds and things like that.

She just needed to get this basic stuff down better. . . . In my mind, I don't know if it has been totally resolved. There may have been some type of dyslexic characteristics in her action last year as far as reversing words and letters and things of this nature. The results from the tests that were done did not show anything like that, but I'm still having trouble in my own mind resolving that conclusion.

Well, I thought he was doing fine. He did good on his grades, but he was so much younger than everybody in his class they felt it would be better to hold him back

another year.

I believe J.'s [problem] was immaturity. I mean, he just wasn't ready as far as being older enough to go to school, emotionally, old enough to go to school, and I think we just really pushed him. . . . We had . . . tried to tell him, 'If you don't buckle down and you don't study a little bit harder and you don't get this getting mad at people, getting your temper in control a little then you're going to have to take summer school. . . . You're not learning your lessons that you need to [be] learning. You're not studying. You're not reading, and you're going to have to take summer school and there's nobody to blame but J. for it.'

But she was having a lot, a hard time. But now we knew about her being slow from the day she was born. She was a early baby. She did everything slow from the time of birth. She didn't walk till after she was thirteen months old. So we knew then that there was going to be some problems, and so we just went along with and, and worked with her throughout school.

I could see especially in the math part that he just was not grasping, and I cannot get him to read. So I knew he had problems in that, and so I guess all and all I just saw that he was not grasping it like he should. . . . I hate to compare the two children, but I find I do. And my other son, he is very fast to grasp

things. . . . B., I see, was a little learning disability as far as you have to teach him over and over the same thing. . . . He can do better when he wants to, and, and I don't really--I don't hold the school to blame at all. It's all B. It's all B.

She had epilepsy, and she, she's had it since she was three weeks old, and she had a lot of stomach problems, and she was in and out of the hospital so much. She missed a great deal of school, and she just totally lost it, and she couldn't keep up. And, uh, it was necessary, really, with her to keep her back.

Well, he, he did good in his work, but he just had that little touch of slowness, and he needed a little bit more attention. . . . He was not going to be ready for fourth grade. He was, he needed [an] extra year.

Parents who saw their child's difficulties as being an internal problem often felt retention was unavoidable. The problem was within the child and was not going to go away--regardless of whatever programs were offered by the school. Nonpromotion was inevitable.

Some parents felt that the reason for their child's nonpromotion was due to an external cause. External causes included reasons that were not directly connected to the child, but were connected to the school system. One example of an external cause would be inadequate instruction. Occasionally, an individual would cite an external cause in addition to an internal cause. Comments describing external

causes for retention follow.

Yeah, your first grade is your most important grade, and if the teacher don't see that you need help, you're not going to get the help. . . . She failed first grade, but her teacher did not help her.

He done a lot of things I thought would be early for his age, you know, and then when he got into school, I though he would just pick up and go on, but he didn't do that. He took uh, well, I don't--I think it's teachers. I mean, I'm sorry, but that's my feelings.

But seems like when, she [his teacher] made him nervous or, you know, pressuring him, and he didn't do as good for her seemed like.

I want my children to learn if they just had teachers that thought enough of the children to want them to learn, and my opinion, sorry again, but my opinion they do not have those kinds of teachers except that one.

He was in a combination, um, first year, fourth, and fifth, and he had been in that situation before. And he would, and his teacher confirmed this, she would work with the fourth grade and give them their work to do and then she would move on to the fifth grade and give them their work to do. Well, while she was over here with the fifth grade, he's watching and listening to what she's doing. I'd be the same way. It would be



hard for me to concentrate on my work, and it, he was in that type of situation in the fourth grade. And that, I think, was the problem. I think that was the problem, him being in that combination class.

First grade, I remember making A's and B's, but I was held back because I broke my leg. . . . It was too late in the year to get a tutor, and I couldn't go back to school because of the steps and stuff.

External blame for a retention removed the responsibility for the nonpromotion from the family and placed the responsibility on the school system. Parents who defined a retention rationale externally, drew strength from believing that success in school in might have occurred if only the right programs had been available to their child.

#### Acceptance or Rejection

In addition to the determinant of a retention, the second issue of the retention rationale factor was whether or not the individual agreed with the reason stated by the teacher. One parent in the study experienced great frustration because she said her daughter had "only came in with an F and a D one time," and she was not really sure why her child had been retained. More often, however, parents can express the reason for the retention and whether or not they agree with that reason. In this investigation, the majority of participants felt their child's retention rationale was valid. A few individuals, however, very strongly rejected the retention rationale proposed by the

school. Some of their comments follow.

So I went to talk to the teacher about it [the retention letter]. What is the problem? He has been making passing grades for the last two six weeks. He has really improved. He is working really hard, and do you think he needs to fail? I was told that yes he was failing to teach him a lesson--that he had goofed off most of the year and had not knuckled down and really tried hard. And she was going to prove to him that he could not straighten up the last few months of school and pass--that this was for his own good. It would teach him a lesson and be valuable to him. That just really flipped me out.

He didn't master a lot of 'em [basic skills on the state achievement test] like she [the teacher] thought he should, but I didn't think that the test should even -it says that the state don't require, that the test should have anything to do with your overall year. . . . Sometimes she would give it [a low grade] on reading or a part, and I wondered why because he could read so good to me and his daddy. . . . [After Christmas] we had a meeting, and it was, we was, you know, we was laughing and cutting up, you know, and then she comes, and she says, 'Well, I think we ought to hold T. back,' you know. It just floored me, you know, 'cause he had got most improved student in math, like I said, the first half of the year, and he'd gotten, he'd improved in his reading.

We went and got him glasses, and we checked back with the teacher, and she said, 'He's, he's doing great now.' . . . And his problem that he had, we took care of it. I agree he had a problem there, but, you know, it was just because he couldn't see, and I mean as soon as he got his glasses then he started picking right back up, and he was doing, he was doing great.

Unlike the participants who agreed with their child's retention rationale (and assigned the reason to either internal or external blame), some individuals totally rejected the retention rationale. These individuals retained the most intense feelings regarding the decision.

The degree to which family members accepted the retention rationale affected their adaptation to the nonpromotion. The experience was assimilated more easily and in an shorter period of time if an individual accepted the school system's reason for the nonpromotion. In the three examples given above, one parent had successfully fought the retention; the other two families were still bitter about the retention several years after the fact.

#### Summary

The issues of acceptance or rejection of the decision and the reason for the retention are issues surrounding the the factor called retention rationale. The retention rationale is one of two factors making up the characteristics surrounding the transition. Along with the factor called feelings of empowerment, these elements of the actual retention decision influence the way in which the

transition of nonpromotion affects an individual and his/her family. The final category of coping resources will be discussed in Chapter VII, characteristics of the environment. This category is comprised of two factors-- sense of belonging to a school community and support systems.

## Chapter 7 Characteristics of the Environment

The purpose of Chapter VII is to discuss the third category of coping resources available to individuals adapting to the experience of retention--characteristics of the environment. What social conditions or factors affect the ability of an individual to assimilate a nonpromotion? Two main factors emerged from the interview data to make up the coping resources component of characteristics of the environment, a sense of belonging to the school community and support systems.

### Sense of Belonging to the School Community

The climate of a school community radiates to its students and their parents a certain degree of warmth and sense of security and belonging. Students and parents who felt valued and comfortable at a school adapted to a retention experience with greater ease than individuals who felt out of place. Two major elements affected the degree to which an individual felt a part of a school family-- identification with the community surrounding the school and relationships with school personnel.

### Identification with the Community

Many of the individuals in the study identified quite easily with the community surrounding the school. The majority of families participating in the investigation had lived in their neighborhoods for many years and felt firmly

entrenched in the culture of the community. It was very common for extended family members such as cousins and grandparents to play an active role in the daily lives of the students at the time of the study. What follows are comments by two participants who both had lived in their respective communities for a number of years; these comments illustrate the extremes in feelings of identification with the community that existed among the respondents.

I know quite well and [am] very good friends with everybody from . . . [the superintendent] to all the way down. The school system, the principal, the teachers, all that . . . has been so supportive and so much help. . . . It is an unique situation with our relationship with both the teachers and the people in the school that we have known for years, especially for me, that it has been a very close and a very loving and caring environment.

The people in the E. are snobs. If you are not raised in E., they're snobs. If you're not raised and borned in there, you might as well forget it. . . . I felt like I was never accepted. Well, the girls are because they were raised and born there, school system wise, children wise, I'm saying, but, uhh, I never felt accepted, and I was a minister's daughter. So, see, I went up there when I was a sophomore in high school. So, I was never accepted. Well, now I was by people who came to church and things like that, but in a whole, to be accepted in E. you have to be born there.

Now, the people are wonderful. They're nice people, but there's always that. . . . That's like E. won't grow because the Chamber of Commerce is afraid someone might come with a little bit more money than they are (laughter). Seriously, you know, they won't [let] industries in because they're afraid somebody might come in and take over their town.

The first comment was expressed by a parent who felt very comfortable with his daughter's teacher and with the teacher's recommendation regarding the retention decision; he and his wife trusted the school system to provide their daughter with the best possible education. The second comment was from a parent who felt alienated from the community and from her child's retaining teacher. This individual had unsuccessfully challenged the decision and had gone on to move her child to a different school the following year.

Most of the participants in the study identified with the community surrounding their child's school more often than not. Four students in the study, however, had made moves from one community to another before the year of their retention, one across town and three from another state. Three of the four students were asked to repeat the grade level the year they attended their new school. The parents of the fourth student, who had made failing grades, wanted to retain him, but school officials recommended waiting a year. When he continued to make failing grades the following year, the parents insisted upon the retention. What follows is a comment by one of the participants who had

moved to her present community in Tennessee from outside the state in the years proceeding her son's retention.

I think that, um, I think we've got some really good schools and some really good teachers in U. Um, I appreciated their interest and concern for K., and um, I didn't go along with their picture analogy [from a projective test in a psychological examination] because it was almost--they were trying to, um, make it appear that our family was, um, in some sort of trouble and that was troubling K., and that was, you know, the last thing, um. The only thing that, um, I was real homesick for, for two years when we moved here. I mean I was so homesick I couldn't hardly stand it, and unless that was, you know, on K.'s mind somehow, I don't know, but that was the only, you know, problem within our family that, uh, that I, that we could think of, and we, you know, we even expressed this to the, uh, the school officials.

Having to adapt to a new community seemed to place an additional amount of stress on the family.

#### Relationships to School Personnel

Although a sense of belonging to a school community was influenced by the degree to which an individual felt a part of the larger community surrounding the school, the most important element in creating a sense of belonging to a school community was the type of relationship a person had with other people connected to the school. At least three of the students in the study transferred to a different



school in the system the year following the retention. One of the participants in the study compared and contrasted the climate between the two schools attended by her grandson-- the school he attended the year he was retained and the school he attended the year he repeated first grade. Her comments follow.

Nobody paid no attention to him, and I just felt like, uh, the State of Tennessee could have provided him a better education that year because he lost the whole [year] because the teacher said she didn't have time to pay attention to him. . . . He had no friends the whole year. So, I talked to his mother, and I told her that he just couldn't go on like that, you know, go there another year and be treated that way. So she let him stay with his daddy if I would take him to school. So we got him started here at F., and I think he's done real good here.

At A. they did not have any [resource program], and I just couldn't believe it. I said this big nice school, and you mean you can't do nothing for my grandson. He's just going have to sit in the back of the room all year, and she says, 'Well, I'm sorry.' She said, 'Some of the schools has, uh, has programs, but A. is a school that doesn't.' I don't know what the children does, you know, I guess they just do like N. But it's more, it's more of a school where there's, uh, more well-to-do people, I think, maybe. . . . [This year at F.] he was never left out. . . . [At A.] she fixed them

in a circle like here. And they were all up there, and N. would be back in the back of the room just his little desk back there by himself. And that would just break my heart. He would say, 'Momma, grandmaw, they don't like me. The children don't like me.' And he was left out, really.

Uh, well, he, he didn't like school. Oh, we had a time with him. I would have to, uh, I, they would say, you know, he was really sick. He would really vomit. He'd say, "Oh, I'm so sick at my stomach." And they would have him in the, uh, in the sickroom so much. And he would; he'd get so sick that he would vomit his food up.

[At A.] they didn't make any meetings. We didn't attend any meetings. They didn't talk to us. I never once talked to the principal. . . . Well, uh, [at F.] we attend all the PTA meetings, if there's any questions or anything, you can always come to the office and talk to Mr. C. [the principal] or the teachers.

Well, here at F., he just, N. just feels like, uh, that he's just really a part of F. because he can see the janitors, he knows them, everybody in the lunchroom, he knows them if he sees them out or anything. He knows their names. All the teachers and the kids, he just has all kinds of friends here. I think that's a big

difference. That makes N. feel like he's important or something to know everybody. [At] A., he didn't know anybody. He didn't know, I doubt if he even knowed the principal's name. But here, Mr. C., he knows him and holler at him anywhere he sees him. So I think that makes a different.

The grandmother in the above case, as well as her grandson, felt much more comfortable in the new school setting. She was in the second school more often, had more contact with the school personnel, and felt more confident in the educational program provided. Trust in school personnel and the quality of teachers and program were very important for other families as well. Another participant in the study who had moved to a city some distance away from her daughter's school, continued to drive her to that school even though it meant leaving the house at 5:45 every morning. Her decision to make the drive was based upon the act that "They have special tutoring. They have things for children who are slower."

More than one parent spoke about how school personnel had treated them or had made them feel. Students and parents alike shared memories of teachers who had shown an extraordinary amount of interest in their well being. Unpleasant memories of a particular teacher's attitude or behavior were also remembered, especially regarding the teacher during the year a child was retained. What follows are comments of parents regarding unpleasant parent/teacher encounters.

She [the first grade teacher] didn't like me at all

'cause I told her how it was. I told her how I felt, and she didn't like that. . . . Like two or three times I went over there to pick him up, and she was talking loudly to the kids, almost screaming at 'em. And I didn't say anything until she got--what did she do to T. that time, and I went over there and jumped her case about it. I was 'bout ready to floor her, excuse the expression, but she made me mad. . . . We sent over there to talk to him [the principal] about T. and the teacher, and he said if we didn't like the teacher to change school. . . . I didn't like that attitude.

But, uh, the first time I met this teacher, she, um, she told me, in a very joking way, she said, 'I'm sorry but I cannot call you Mrs. W. because you're younger than my children. Do you mind if I call you L.?' The day she told me she couldn't call me Mrs. W., I, I just laughed about it, but I guess in my mind it kept ringing as kind of a lack of respect that, that she could not respect me as A.'s mother. But, up until, up until last year on A.'s birthday I've always taken stuff to school for recess and things like that, and she had no problem with me, you know, doing anything like that. She was always so good to A. when I was around, but I, it, it didn't work 'cause I seen the way she treated the other kids. So I knew if I wasn't around that, you know it's, it's whichever mother was there.

It wasn't until late in the year that I realized that he was having the problems that he was having. There was such a lack of communication between the teacher and family, uh, that we didn't realize that there was that great of a problem until it was practically too late to do anything about it. And then when we did get in touch with Ms. M., she struck as being the type of person that, that, uh lacked patience. . . . She was short and abrupt with the people in the class when we were there, and uh, with the answers she gave us.

I don't think she had as much patience maybe with the children or with children that, maybe weren't slow, but just didn't do what they should have done or could have done and, you know, that type of thing. . . . Having to speak to her in the past, you know, when we would go for different, like the science fair and I would try to speak to her and maybe she just had her mind on other things, she just kind of brushed me aside like, too, like she just didn't have the patience.

Poor parent/teacher relationships prevented many parents from feeling fully accepted into a school community. Those parents who had successful parent/teacher relationships felt allied with school personnel; a strong parent/teacher relationship provided parents with a valuable coping resource in dealing with their child's retention decision or for that matter, with any school related decision. A parent who was comfortable with a child's teacher could approach that teacher for information or advice without feeling

he/she would be rebuffed for intruding into classroom concerns.

The majority of the parents recall most parent/teacher relationships in a positive light. Those relationships that stand out as exceptional to parents were those school personnel who were in close communication with parents. The following are comments reflecting positive parent/teacher relationships.

We retained him in the first grade, but now the teacher was, I mean, she was excellent. She talked with us. She asked us our opinion about--she told us what she had found out with P., you know, his problem and everything, and we agreed with her. And it hasn't really affect him at all, you know. He's going in as a freshman in high school.

F. to me, F. is a real good school. Anything, any kind of problem that they have with my kids they always call. If they can't get me, they, they get in touch with my mother, and if they can't get neither one of us then they try and handle it themselves, or they'll send us a note home. Then they pick a time when we can come and talk with them. They never went over our head. They never just, you know, took things, let things get out of control like, you know, spank the kids or anything without asking. They don't do things like that at F. They always come to you; and they ask you; and they talk with you; and they try to figure out ways to help the child. And I think they care a lot

at F. school.

Every teacher he had I though it was the best until he went to another grade, and a, teacher's just been more outstanding to me. I said, I said, 'How can it get any better?' I mean it's a good school. . . . School was outstanding with us . . . they talked to us any time we wanted to talk, and they made appointments up for us when we could, you know, go and talk to them.

She tried everything, and she would call me. Uh, she would say, 'Ms. H., I'm calling you not as a school teacher but as one Christian to another.' . . . She was real concerned. . . . She's the best.

Parents involved in positive parent/teacher encounters established a trusting relationship with school personnel. These parents tended to adapt to the retention decision more easily; they believed the school staff were acting in their child's best interests.

Parents and students both remember situations in which the student/teacher relationship was less than ideal. Often times, the retaining teacher was remembered as being the least favorite of a student's past teachers. What follows are comments regarding student/teacher relationships that are less than positive.

It started in kindergarten, and, 'cause, I 'member the first day he took his money in. Here he was, had his little hand held out with his money in it, and she wouldn't even look at him. She turned around and

looked at the other kids, and he had been standing there for a few minutes, 'bout five minutes, before she ever turned around and acknowledged the fact that he was there. And there wasn't anybody else around when he walked in, and that really, you know, started off wrong.

They did [retain me], let's see, third, Mrs. C. . . . I didn't like that teacher.

That's the one [teacher] I didn't like at all. My teacher's name was Mrs. S. at E. She was always real loud and, you know, talked real loud and stuff. I don't know, she's just hateful or something. She might not meant to be, but to me she seemed like she was. I just didn't get along with her pretty good either.

Mr. B., see, uh, I didn't like her that much. . . . She would, she would yell and stuff, you know. . . . Like if, uh, something like if the whole class, if it was one person, she would punish the whole class and then she would start yelling and, uh, sort of yelling at us.

See, Ms. M., she was always mean and hateful and stuff like that and just lots of things. . . . Well, every time you'd, she'd give you assignments, she wouldn't tell you the directions and explain how to do it and lots of ways like that.



I use to tell the children, you have the wrong last name. I mean there was children up there that they would treat real nice even though they didn't make good grades, they would get good grades. Sort of like a teacher's pet I guess is what you'd call it. And I, that's the way I felt. They treated other children better than they did my children. I know we don't have much. We're not rich, but my child is just as good as any other child that goes up there, and I expect my children to be taught up there with respect just like the others. It doesn't work that way I'm sorry to say.

I didn't like him. . . . He was always, he was always real grouchy, you know, and you know, all students are going to talk in class, right. And if we just said a word he'd make us get down on the floor and do push-ups, you know, and he'd stand there and he'd count 'em, you know, make sure we done, in front of the class, you know, dress or no dress, whatever.

Like poor parent/teacher relationships, a poor student/teacher relationship inhibited the adaptation process. Students and parents remained resentful and suspicious, wondering if the school had had their best interests at basis of the retention recommendation.

Although many of the difficult teacher/student relationships occurred during the year of the retaining teacher, at least three of the students in the study kept the retaining teacher the year following the nonpromotion decision because they wanted to stay in that teacher's

class. Most students, however, had teachers other than the retaining teacher which were remembered with the greatest fondness. What follows are comments by parents and students which give insight to positive student/teacher relationships.

We even, um, gotten tutoring for him in the, uh, that fifth grade year. In fact, (laughter) it was the teacher in the fourth grade that spent some time with him in the afternoon when he went to the fifth grade. She, and she volunteered to do it 'cause she loved him so good.

And my teacher's name is Mrs. C., and she is a very nice teacher, and she don't get mad like if we, like forget to do our papers. She don't get real mad, she just gets a little upset so she don't get really, really mad or anything. So, she's a really good teacher this year.

And then I went to Ms. T. I, I loved her half to death.

His first grade teacher he like her so well. On the last day of school, I mean he just cried and cried 'cause he, he was just crazy over her.

And I had a real nice teacher. Her name was Ms. M., and if you needed help with anything she would help you. If you had family problems, and she found out

about it, she helped. And it was really a good year. Positive student/teacher relationships following a retention were very important in a child's adaptation process. Those students who had a good relationship with their teacher the year they repeated a grade adapted to the retention more easily. These teachers offered support and acceptance, reaffirming a child's worth as a student.

Although parents spoke with great respect when recalling those teachers who had been influential in helping their students achieve academic goals, the students participating in the interviews remembered favorite teachers, not so much for what was learned that year in school, but for the kindness shown to them in the classroom. Interestingly enough, many of the teachers cited by students as being their favorite teacher, were teachers which were assigned to the students the year following the retention decision.

Relationships with school personnel along with a person's identification with the general community are elements found in an individual's overall sense of belonging to a school community. Having a good teacher relationship the year following a nonpromotion and having a feeling of being valued and of belonging to a school family are important coping resources for an individual assimilating a retention experience. Both these elements comprise one environmental factor in the adaptation framework for retention.

### Support Systems

The second factor found in characteristics of the environment was support systems. What coping resources are available to a family after the decision has been made to retain a child? The interviews revealed several support services which seemed important as resources to individuals adapting to the transition of retention. The investigator found the support systems that emerged from the data to be of primary aid to a student's assimilation of the retention experience more so than to other family members' adaptation. Four main support systems surfaced with regularity in the interviews and were extracurricular activities, friends, family members, and school services.

### Extracurricular Activities

Those students who had assimilated the retention experience the easiest seemed to be the most involved in extracurricular activities. These activities took several forms. Some of the more commonly recalled activities were highly organized; participation in sports and scouts were examples of two such activities. A few of the activities, however, were less supervised such as reading for pleasure or collecting miniature race cars. What follows are comments from participants describing some of the extracurricular activities of the students involved in this study.

My mommy is our [Brownie] troop leader. . . . There are different things we do. We can go, we are going camping. We're going to sleep away from home.

See, I always like to go back in my room, and I've got a bunch of city library books. I get them big ole thick books, and I sat down and start reading them. . . . Books like, umm, probably mostly books based on the movie or books wrote on somebody. . . . Like I got this book about Richard Petty, the race car driver, and it's a biography about him. . . . [I collect cars] and models.

He bowls every year. He's bowled since he was in the first grade. . . . These are the ones [bowling trophies] he got this year.

She is on the clogging team at school. She's, this is her third year on the clogging team. She's in, uh, the choral group at school. Right now, they're on the field day committee. So, she's doing great. And at church, she's in the youth group. They put on plays and go different places, and--She's real active.

A. plays baseball, football, soccer, and he takes gymnastics. And, um, and we, he, in the second grade that year [he was retained] he wasn't involved in really anything. He's been in special chorus every year except that year [he was retained], and he misses baseball games for special chorus which my husband hates. But it just means so much to him, and they audition for that. There's only, you know, two to four chosen out of each class.

They're both good ball players. T. was a real good football player. . . . He was the number one starter on their team. He made All-Conference this year. He made Player of the Week, Player of the Year, and uh, he's done great. And now T., I think he's going to follow in T.'s footprints with the sports. . . . They also realize when they get in junior high you have to keep those grades up to play football, to play sports. They both run track. . . . They play baseball.

They play golf. . . . And it's been really good for, for him [T.]. Somebody older like, but they do a lot of things together.

Whenever I was in sixth grade I was in, I was a cheerleader, and I was a majorette, and whenever, let's see I was in seventh grade I played volleyball, and then when I moved up here to the ninth grade, I was in ROTC. . . . I love to do stuff like that.

As evidenced from the numerous comments, extracurricular activities acted as one type of a support system for retained students. Although many students shared memories about their leisure activities during the years proceeding their retention, those students who were more involved in extracurricular activities after the retention appeared to be the most accepting of their retention experience. Extracurricular activities, particularly organized sports, provided many students with an opportunity to experience success. In addition, many of the organized

activities also provided students with a set of friendships outside the regular classroom. This additional base of friendships was an important advantage in retention adaptation; in fact, many nonpromoted students reported fearing the loss of friends from their grade level the year they were retained.

### Friends

Friends, therefore, emerged from the data as a second type of support system. Fear of a loss of friends, fear of not knowing anybody in their class the second time through a grade level, fear of ridicule and rejection were not uncommon thoughts expressed by the students in the study. Comments by the students regarding their fear were provided in the section of the paper dealing with the element of peer acceptance in self-identification. What has not been discussed is whether or not those fears were realized. What follows are comments regarding the friendship patterns of the retained students in this study.

Another thing, the children at that point [after the second retention], had started to get a lot younger than him in the class, so it's harder to have any real friends because his interests were some place else, two years ahead. . . . It was hard for him because his friends were older and doing things that he wasn't doing, going to another school, all these things. So, that affected him. He was trying to go to school and then go see friends, so that made it hard to have time for homework because he wanted to spend time with his

friends that wasn't in this class or in his school anymore. They weren't at school to communicate with it so he wanted to use after school for those friends. That left less time for homework. . . . They don't let go of that group of friends just because they are in a classroom with some more.

She made new friends, but she kept her old friends. She always has. So, she's never had any problems there.

See, there's this girl named Y. She, she was in second grade with me. She was in first grade when I was in second grade, but we were still friends, and then she was in second grade with me. She got held back, too, but she was in Ms. B.'s class instead of Ms. T.'s. . . .She is fourth grade now. We're still friends. We go to church together and stuff like that.

Well, it, um, he's got the same friends that he's had since first grade. Their--his close friends are people that live in the neighborhood. . . . All his friends have gone to the middle school, and he's still at the elementary school, but he seems to be just as close friends with 'em as ever. He's even got friends that goes to C. [a city school].

He has so many friends (laughter), that kid. He's, you know, it, it hasn't bothered him. . . . And, you know,



I guess it was because, you know, he's only a year behind the others. He still plays with 'em and stuff. They get out here and play basketball. None of 'em look down toward, you know.

I couldn't go to school, you know. I tried to go to school. I just figured maybe it was the school. So I was moved. I went and started going to C., and then I hated C. I did not like C. at all, you know. Nobody there liked me, and I didn't like nobody there, I guess. Now, I like my teachers. I loved my teachers, but I didn't have no friends, and there was people there that I knew, they just wasn't my friends, you know. So I quit.

The comments in the previous section reflect mixed support from friendships following a retention. Although some students experienced difficulty sustaining friendships, most students' fears of having no friends the year following a retention were unfounded. Most students not only made new friends, but managed to sustain friendships with their original grade level friends. Extracurricular activities provided students with important opportunities to maintain a broad network of friendships outside the regular school day.

As a support system, friendships could be invaluable. What follows are comments regarding the response of school peers to a fellow student's retention.

Sometimes, uh, sometimes the mean kids laugh at 'em and stuff, and other ones, uh, just sort of pamper 'em.  
. . . When they, they're really easy going on them,

and, where they pampered them, and they, some of them really care about his feelings and, um, everything, and um . . . they, uh, hang around them a lot and just show that, um, they're there if they, he needs them.

People had understood what had happened, and I was getting use to [the] fact that I was back in third grade so other than my cousin do one else did [make me feel bad].

They just, uh, act the same [when they find out I've been retained]. They don't act like they don't like me or anything. I mean they just comfort me, say I'll do better and stuff.

Well, me and my friends usually talk on the phone and stuff like that. Sometimes we help each other with our homework and stuff and to to the movies or something like that.

Students who had been retained coped more easily with their nonpromotion if they maintained the support and acceptance of their friends. Not all encounters with past friends, however, were positive. While most classmates of a retained student acted in a caring, supportive fashion, some students were cruel.

If they're really mean and all, they would laugh and sort of put him down and. . . It's like, um, you were, they say, um, 'You were held back, and we're not, ha, ha, ha.' And just different things like that.

Most people just put 'em [retained students] down by calling 'em names and stuff and by hearing things that someone saying that carry on to other people and then make them mad.

The ones in the grade higher than me, some of 'em laughed, several other kids in there wouldn't have nothing to do with me.

People would, like sit down and ask how old you were and if you told 'em you were 19 and they were 16 then they would probably make fun of you because of your age.

They just laughed, you know. They said, 'Ha, ha, you've been held back.' . . . I just say I can't help it.

It's just, you know, people say, 'Ha, you're dumb' and all this stuff, you know. But people that teased me about it and stuff though, they ain't even in school now, you know. They've done quit, and they won't go back. But, you know, it's just that it's up to you. If you want to stay in it and do it, you can do it.

While some retained students had to deal with unkind remarks from classmates, the majority of students did not report such encounters. Most students appeared to have a network of friendships and to be socially well adjusted. As the comments above suggest, however, some classmates were

cruel, and some retained students had had to learn to cope with unkind remarks. Most of the comments dealing with teasing classmates came from the older students in the study, those students who were currently in junior high or high school. In addition, those students who admitted to dealing with taunting remarks seemed to be less comfortable with their retention than the other students. Those students who felt supported and accepted by their friends had adapted to their nonpromotion experience much more easily than those students had faced ridicule or rejection.

#### Family Members

A third set of support systems for retained students came from family members. Parents and siblings as well as other extended family members provided coping resources for retained students. Grandparents were occasionally mentioned as homework helpers, and one student in the study actually confessed, "I shouldn't say this, but when I was little my grandmother use to do my homework." Another child spent the majority of his time living with his grandmother.

Sibling relationships were generally supportive. Although a few parents remembered having to caution siblings against teasing the retained child, most parents felt that siblings had sympathy for the retained child. One sibling interviewed in the study reported feelings of anger against the retaining teacher. A typical description of a sibling response came from one mother who assured the investigator that her children were close; she said, "It [her brother's retention] hurt her. It hurt her for him, . . . and she

would never make fun of him." One pair of siblings, however, who had both been retained taunted one another on a regular basis. The sister quipped, "Whenever . . . he says I failed first, and he's smarter than I was, I tell him he failed third, and I was smarter than he was."

Parents offered support to the academically struggling child in a number of ways. Many parents had read to their children and helped them with their homework. Some parents, in an attempt to solve their child's academic problems, had tried numerous discipline strategies. Moreover, almost all the parents interviewed in this study reported extensive communication with school personnel concerning the school related problems of their children. It is interesting to note, however, a great deal of the support stories recounted by parents during the interviews dealt with support the parents provided the student prior to the retention decision. The following comments are typical of this type of support.

Last year we worked more because we tried to work on reading words and the math facts and reading books and writing. We had to work on writing. We would try to let her do that, and I would say anywhere from maybe two hours a night at least. . . . I would say it was more like two and one-half to three maybe because I forgot about the spelling words.

Sometimes they would say, 'Maybe you could get something at home for him to do and do it this way or do it that way and everything.' So, I mean, we would

go to K-Mart; I would get the flash cards. We would make flash cards. Umm, I would get the little books that had--his missed his phonics somehow in kindergarten. He didn't get his phonics, and he didn't, he wasn't able to read well. So, uh, well, in the third grade that's when I told them I wanted him tested.

Um, well, a true disappointment. Um, I'm sure we showed a lot of disappointment, but those grades were there. And, um, I can, I can remember him just--I don't think he got very many spankings for it.

For many parents, the academic struggle prior to the retention motivated the parents to help the child through parent involvement activities. The more the parent was involved in a child's struggle to bring home passing grades, the more stress was placed on the family.

The majority of the parents reported a reduction in the stress level within the family following the retention. Along with a reduction in stress, went a corresponding drop in the number of hours spent nightly on homework. One parent commented, "This year I didn't try to sit down and help as much with his homework as he seemed to do fine with it and a lot better than he did last year. He knows the work now." Many parents did, however, continue to be involved in helping their child study. Although reduced in time when compared to the homework regime of the retention year, the following comment describes a pattern of nightly homework that involves parental support.

It varies so much, I mean, um, Thursday nights before, spelling tests, there's more time spent there. And, uh, we, uh, my husband and myself, all, all three of us really get involved in, in the homework. Uh, I quiz him. My husband quizzes him. And, uh, so he's, he's always been good on spelling tests. Uhh, math is his weakness, and he's had, he had a real hard time learning his multiplication tables. . . . We had to really go back, and, and I made him a chart, and we just kept quizzing him and quizzing.

In addition to a general reduction in the time parents spent with students on homework, the frequency of grade related punishment tended to drop if grades improved. The following comment was from a parent of a child whose grades did not, however, improve as dramatically as expected.

He started out doing really bad this year, and we don't usually punish him except for sending him to his room or taking a privilege away, and when he started doing the same thing the first semester this time we really laid into him, you might say. We, we did not spare the rod then.

Contact with school did not necessarily drop after a retention. Contact with school personnel, however, did seem to decrease as the children moved into junior high and high school. One exception to this trend is described in the comments which follow.

I won't wait until the six weeks rolls by before I find out how's he doing. I, in fact, since K. went through this [retention] I stay in touch with his teachers, not

on a weekly basis but like maybe into the third week of the six weeks. I either go by or I call. 'Are there any problems? Do I need to know anything?'

One type of parent support that was very much in evidence following some retentions was emotional support. Many of the parents provided the retained students in the study praise, encouragement, and love. What follows are comments describing this type of support.

She [my mother] helped my a lot, you know, and I'll always love her for that, you know. I probably would have never been able to make it through that, you know, 'cause I had to go to counseling whenever I was younger. . . . She helped me regain confidence, you know. I was, I was ready to give up, you know. I was ready just to give up, you know, like I didn't care anymore, and my mom helped me out, like, you know, I felt like I wasn't any good, you know, if they failed me. I felt like I wasn't any good, like I just wanted to quit.

Well, they [my parents] didn't want me to be failed but, I mean, those, Mr. W. done had his mind set. So, they just backed me up and everything and helped me with my work. . . . They helped me as much as they could.

I said, 'I wasn't a straight A student.' And I sat down and explained to him where, you know, I've got college people working for me, and I said, 'You might



not be the smartest person in the room.' I said, 'You get your common sense.' I said, 'Just get it and then work on the rest. Do what you can do.'

A. loves sports, and A. is average in sports. But as far as, he writes poetry. He draws. He writes songs. He is just, he's so talented. And in different fields other than sports, it, it really amazes me. . . . And so, you know, most fathers want them to be rough and tough and great baseball players and great football players and basketball and all this. I try to push this on him, but I found out in just the last year that I'm pushing the wrong way. That there's more to life than being great in sports. . . . He's highly motivated in these areas so that [these are] the areas that we need to go in rather than the areas I think he should go in.

My mom and grandmother . . . been pushing me forever and finally I graduated. . . . Every day I come home from school, they ask me do I have homework, ask me what I've been making on tests, ask me if I need go, if they need to go talk to any of my teachers, and then they wanted, wanted to know if I was wanting to go to college. So I need to take ACT, SAT tests and all that, and I figured they must be pretty interested in what I'm doing.

The emotional support of parents was often provided through "pep talks" as well as through interest in the child and

his/her school career. In addition, parental approval of a child appeared to be critical in the adaptation of a student to a retention experience. Receiving praise and acknowledgment from their parents for their accomplishments aided students in their coping process.

The support of parents as well as other family members was evident in the interview data. One group of relatives, however, served less as a coping resource and more as a stressor. This group of relatives consisted of cousins of the retained students who lived in the immediate area. Many of the students in the study came into close contact with cousins who were of a similar in age. These cousins often proved to be a source of stress. At times, the stress originated with the cousin who might tease the retained student. In some cases, the stress came from within the retained students who seemed to worry about comparisons between the cousins and themselves. The comments that follow reflect some of the stress experienced by the retained students who were forced to come to terms with a cousin who might be the same age and had not yet experienced retention.

He has a first cousin who is three months younger. They grew up together, a girl, but they were very close. They should have graduated eighth grade together. They did everything together. They did everything together, and when the whole family was at her graduation, it was her day so everybody was trying to make her happy and be proud of her. At the same time, here he sat, and he wanted to be happy for her,

but he felt left out. He knew he should have been there, so he was upset and sad, and I guess he felt a little sorry for himself, and we were all feeling sorry for him.

Well, he would say, 'I hope A. don't pass.' That's his little cousin. He'd say, 'I hope A. don't pass 'cause she'll be in the second grade, and I'll be in the first grade, and we won't, we won't get to go to school together. She'll be in the second grade, and I'll just be in the first grade.' And that, he talked about that mostly. She did pass. And, uh, he would talk about that mostly 'cause him and A. is real close, and he talked about that more than anything. He would, uh, that really hurt him 'cause A. was going on to the second grade, and he's going to stay in the first grade.

'Cause see, I, uh, have a cousin, his name is J., and he always makes fun of me, you know. And, uh, and, then in third grade--I didn't start feeling sad until he came up to me one day and said, 'Ha-ha, you second grader. I'm a third grader, ha-ha,' like that. And I started, I started getting mad. I was crying and everything. . . . Mom said just ignore him.

It had a lot of stress because my cousin was in fourth grade, and then I was. And then they put me back in third, and my cousin had made fun of me because I had

went back to third. And it made my parents real, real mad because he was making fun of me, and he had no right to. . . . They, mom and dad, had talked to his parents. And they finally had to calm him down about it, and then he quit.

The relationship between cousins appeared to be quite competitive. This relationship often provided the retained child with a great amount of stress.

Relatives, therefore, proved to be one critical element in the support systems available to nonpromoted students participating in the study. Although grandparents as well as siblings provided support to the retained student, parents, as would be expected, bore the major responsibility of helping students with homework, providing disciplinary action for poor school performance, and communicating with school personnel. Much of this type of involvement occurred prior to the actual retention experience. The key role played by parents after the retention decision was to provide emotional support through love and encouragement.

### School Services

The last element providing support to individuals in a family where a retention has occurred is made up of services provided by the school. School support, as relayed by the individuals participating in this study, was largely confined to educational services such as testing and special classes. Services mentioned by participants included psychological testing, Chapter I classes, special education programs, speech, summer school, and tutoring. In most

cases, the school had intervened in the retained child's educational program in some way prior to the retention. Occasionally these services were discontinued after the retention occurred. Those parents who agreed with the retention rationale for their child largely believed the school personnel had exhausted all available services and saw retention as the only educational option left. What follows are comments from one mother describing the process that the home and the school followed in working toward a solution to her son's academic difficulties.

When we moved to Tennessee, he was, um, in the fourth grade. . . . He had, uh, a real tough year. He, uh, he wasn't interested. He was, uh, he wouldn't, he didn't study. . . . Um, the teachers would send home notes. He wouldn't bring them home. . . . He just wouldn't, and even knowing that we were going to find out, and we would, he would be punished, he still wouldn't bring 'em home. . . . Well, when we'd get this report cards it was almost straight F's. We went, we were at the school every six weeks. . . . She [the teacher] would send a few papers home or she would call me, and uh, we would have conversations on the phone. She said, 'K. just doesn't pay attention.' . . . The first mention of it [retention] came toward the end of the school year when we knew he had done so poorly all year, and his daddy and I had already talked about it and thinking that we needed to do this, and they said, we talked with the principal, and we talked with his teacher, and we talked with the . . . district psychologist, . . .

[it was his] first year in a new school with new teachers and new friends, a new home and new everything to him that is might not be a good idea to retain him. . . . They determined K. didn't have a learning disability at all. . . . So we went ahead and let him go to the fifth grade. The first semester of the fifth grade was a disaster. He made straight F's. . . . It was worse than you can imagine. . . . Hindsight is crystal clear, but now we know we should have held him back with that first instinctive feeling. . . . We see that now because keeping him back in the fifth grade, oh, it helped him so much because he wasn't ashamed of it or anything like that.

The parents decided upon retention when no other solution seemed available to their son's problem. This particular family's case history was very similar many of the situations shared with the investigator. The retention experience itself often served as a coping strategy or support service provided to the family by the school system rather than as the stressor. Parents sometimes viewed the retention decision as the last service available to aid their child struggling with academic work. Those families who accepted retention as an offer of school support were more easily able to assimilate the nonpromotion experience.

The second type of support from the school was more affective in tone. What types of emotional support did the school offer a retained child to aid in the life transition brought about by a retention experience? As was mentioned during the section dealing with sense of belonging to a

school community, teacher relationships were important, especially during the year following the retention. Three of students repeated their grade level with the retaining teacher; this arrangement in all three cases was initiated by the family with full support from the retained student. A good teacher relationship following a retention enhanced self esteem. The participants remembered most of the teachers to which the students were assigned during the repeat year with fondness. Comments concerning positive teacher relationships have already been provided, but one more comment typical of the type of feelings shared with the investigator regarding the teacher the year after a nonpromotion will follow.

So the next year, when he repeated the fifth grade, it was the most wonderful school we have ever had with him. But, and I, I think that, uh, his teacher made all the difference, and I will praise her name to high heaven from here on out because she, she knew how to make K. feel good about himself. She, um, I'm going to get all teary eyed.

Other than providing the child with a good student/teacher relationship the year following the retention, very little evidence emerged from the data to show the existence of any type of effort from any of the school systems to help students deal more comfortably with this situation. One example, however, that did prove to be instrumental in a student's initial adaptation to the retention decision was the way in which a student learned of his/her retention. What follows are comments by students

describing the initial discovery of the retention decision.

At the end of the year. At the end of the year, the last day, Mrs. T. goes, 'Everybody who didn't, everybody can come get their math book.' And she said, 'The people that held back, she kept their math books,' and said, 'You all will probably be in my class next year so I better keep it.' (pause) So, then I didn't get the math book back from that year.

Mainly, she just came out and said it. . . . I believe she told it to me before she told my mom. . . . See, we get out at, um, 2:40. . . . So, she asked me to stay till 2:45 . . . and she told me about it [the retention]. She said that grades didn't actually matter. She said no grades mattered on this. She said it was mainly because I was too young, and I didn't, I don't even still now don't think that was right. . . . I just sort of listened to her and then walked off. . . . And I told her not to tell my mom that she told me first. That, just I told her to let--go ahead, let my mom tell it to me. . . . I would have like it to been gradually. I didn't want to hear all of this at once. So, I just told [her] to let my mom go ahead and say where we could sit down and talk about it. See, she didn't even talk about.

And then fourth grade--I was in it [fourth grade] for two weeks, and then the teacher had called my mom and told her they were going to put me back in third grade,



and they weren't suppose to tell me, but they told me anyway. And I went home crying. And they said it; I had to go back to third grade because my achievement test scores. They [the test scores] were on third grade level, so I really wasn't in fourth grade that year. . . . When they had told me, mom was very mad. She called up to the school and asked 'em why they told me when they said they wasn't going to tell me. . . . I was sitting in class, and then Ms. B. told me to come out in the hallway 'cause she needed to talk to me, and it was right before the bell was going to ring to go home, and she told me that I was going to go back to third grade. And I just got my stuff and walked out and went home. . . . It really hurt.

They sent it [the report card] to my house. They send the report cards out, you know. . . . It said that I failed. It said you failed math, and you'll be retained or something, retained back to the eighth grade or something, whatever they said. . . . You know it freaked me out 'cause I didn't know, I didn't know. I knowed math was hard, but I didn't know if I was going to fail it or not, you know, 'cause I done it. I've always done my homework and stuff like that, but I didn't know I was going to fail it, you know. I knew I made bad grades, but I didn't know I made 'em that bad. . . . We were having a garage sale, and I got the mail so I opened it up in front of her. I didn't think it was going to be bad, you know.

A surprising number of students had not anticipated their own nonpromotion. Students who first learned about their retention without any advance discussion or preparation were not only shocked but were also denied the initial support of their of their parents. Many of these students felt overwhelmed by a crisis which should have been shouldered by a parent. These students were at a greater disadvantage in adapting to their retention.

Although some students in the study had experienced shock or surprise at the retention decision, other students were prepared for the decision. Several of the parents in the study were careful to warn students of the potential for nonretention. Occasionally the student was actually included in the parent/teacher conferences concerning the retention. What follows are parent comments describing a student's awareness of nonpromotion.

I explained to him that I didn't feel that he had the, the knowledge to go on and that I felt that he could get stronger by repeating the grade. I also knew that he would be under a different teacher, and I wanted to see if possibly if that would make a difference, and he agreed with me on all the, all the points. I think, like I said, he knew in his heart. He knew all along. . . . We had discussed it. It wasn't something that was just pushed on him at the last minute. He kind of knew that it was coming, and I had told him that I would ask for him to retain him.

I went and talked to the teacher. . . . [Then] I said,

'T., we have made the decision that we're going to hold you back, and you're going to take third grade over again next year.' 'Did my teacher do this?' I said, 'No, your teacher didn't,' I said, 'I did.' I said, 'I went and talked to you teacher. He told you wasn't making real good grades.' And I said, I think the best thing for you is to hold you back.'

I talked to her then after I talked to her teacher and asked her, you know, if it would make her feel bad. She said, 'No, momma.' So, you know, I explained to her why she was being held back, and she didn't have any problems with it.

Those parents in the study who were aware of the potential for retention and who had been involved with school personnel in the retention decision often prepared their child for the experience. Knowledge of the retention, therefore, served as a coping resource. Students were able to begin to prepare themselves for the transition.

#### Summary

School services, family involvement, friendships, and extracurricular activities all worked together to provide a network of support available to individuals participating in this study. The interview data revealed support systems that primarily aided the retained child. Many of the support systems were in place prior to the retention decision. Those elements in the support systems critical to a student's adaptation to the retention experience after the

decision occurred included extracurricular activities and the emotional support of parents. In addition, the way in which a student learned of his/her impending retention was likely to affect the initial adaptation to the experience. All of these elements of support comprise one factor and along with the factor of belonging to the school community constitute the component of coping resources found in environmental characteristics.

## Chapter 8

### Summary, Conclusions and Discussion, and Implications

#### Summary

The purpose of Chapter VIII is to summarize this investigation and to provide conclusions and further discussion on the findings presented in Chapters IV through VII as well as implications for school systems beyond the scope of this study. The value of nonpromotion as an educational practice has been investigated many times; research has usually focused on two major areas of concern, effect on student achievement and on student affect. Although the existing body of research on retention does not support the continuation of this practice as an educational strategy to aid students experiencing academic difficulties, the practice, nevertheless, continues.

Research does exist, however, which points to the importance of parent involvement in a child's academic success. Because the link between the family and the home is critical to school success, the purpose of this study was to uncover the feelings and reactions of students and their parents to a grade level retention and to ascertain the effects of this retention on the family and on the home-school relationship.

#### Research Procedures

Data were collected from 22 family units. The family units were purposefully selected from one of four area school systems. Fifty-two family members participated in 46

separate, qualitative interviews that were organized around an interview guide.

The interviews were tape recorded, and the tapes were transcribed by a professional typist. The transcriptions were inductively analyzed. The process of data analysis included data reduction, unitization, categorization, and verification. Through the analysis of the interviews, the investigator uncovered the feelings and reactions of family members concerning the nonpromotion of at least one child within the family unit.

#### Limitations

Two limitations were relevant to the study. First, the qualitative nature of the research prevented the results from being generalized to a larger population. The findings from this study, however, have enabled the researcher to formulate hypotheses for those cases which were under investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, the inductive analysis may contribute to the generation of new theory regarding the effects of nonpromotion on the family and on the home-school relationship (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Second, the preponderance of parental information gathered from the participating families was from the viewpoint of mothers. Mothers, however, tend to be the most likely parent in home-school contact (Lareau, 1989) and would, therefore, be the parent most likely to provide information-rich data regarding the home-school relationship.

### Adaptation to Retention

The analysis of data revealed that the stress of a child's failure in school had generated a crisis in the lives of the participants. Most participants had adapted to the retention experience, some with more success than others. Modifying Schlossberg's framework on the coping resources available to an individual adapting to a transition, the investigator organized students' and parents' responses into seven factors falling into one of three categories. Characteristics of an individual relevant to the assimilation of a retention included the self-definition of an individual, previous experience with retention, and the retention philosophy of the individual. Characteristics surrounding the nonpromotion experience itself contributing to the assimilation of the retention included feelings of empowerment connected to the decision and the retention rationale. Characteristics of the environment which affected the adaptation to a nonpromotion included the sense of belonging to the school community and support systems available to the individual.

The more aware parents were of their child's academic struggles, the more likely they were to accept and even seek out retention as an acceptable educational strategy. For these families, the child's difficulties with school work--not the retention--served as the crisis situation. For families rejecting the retention and the retaining teacher's rationale for the nonpromotion, the retention experience itself became the crisis with which both the parents and the student had to deal.

Seven factors emerged from the interview data and served as coping resources available to individuals dealing with a time of transition in their lives. That transition was the educational practice of retention. Some of the individuals in the study had directly experienced the retention. Other participants were family members who were more or less indirectly affected by the retention decision.

One coping resource, retention philosophy, seemed to play a role in both parents' and students' adaptation to retention. By justifying the continuation of retention as an educational practice, the individuals in the study were able to validate their own nonpromotion experience. Validation of the retention experience helped to relieve parents (who had often participated in the retention decision) of feelings of guilt. Retained students who were able to affirm the positive outcome of their own nonpromotion were able to maintain a more positive self-image. Additionally, an admission of negative feelings regarding their own retention could seem like a betrayal of their parents--parents who may have told the students that their retention was for their own good.

Parents tended to have less of a transition to assimilate than the retained students. Two factors were key in the ability of a parent to assimilate a retention decision, empowerment and retention rationale. Parents who felt they were involved in the retention decision and who agreed with the reason for the retention adapted to the child's retention very easily. Some parents, however, did have to deal with feelings of guilt or failure as a parent.



Those parents burdened with guilt felt responsible for their child's academic problems; they believed that if only they had been better parents--more capable, more educated, more involved in their child's acquisition of knowledge--they could have prevented their child's learning difficulties.

The students in the study, therefore, were the members of the family who bore the brunt of the post-retention adaptation. Not all factors appeared to play an equally important role in every individual's ability to successfully assimilate the experience. Certain patterns, however, did emerge. Those individuals more successful in their adaptation tended to have a more positive self-definition. Essential elements in a student's self-image after a retention were improved grades and achievement. If a student saw evidence of increased achievement through better grades on a report card, participation in a higher reading group, or the discontinuance of a special education class, the child tended to mirror a retention philosophy similar to that of his/her parents. In other words, the retention experience might cause stress due to variables such as physical size or worry over peer acceptance, but if a student felt like he/she were academically achieving in a much improved way, the negatives associated with the retention were lessened. In the long run, these students felt the retention had helped them.

Of course those students who did not improve their academic performance following a retention merely compounded their already low self-image. Moreover, if students, like their parents, did not agree with the original retention

rationale, their adaptation to the retention was not very successful. These students continued to be bitter toward their school for a long time.

The availability of support services was another important factor in a student's ability to successfully assimilate a retention experience. Students who participated in extracurricular activities after a retention tended to adapt more easily to the nonpromotion. Success in nonacademic areas increased self-esteem and provided students with a strong friendship network.

Friends were also an important element in a student's adaptation to retention. Loss of friends was a real fear. Once students were confident that they would be accepted by other students and that they would still have friends after the retention the adaptation process was much easier. For some students, however, rejection by peers was seen as a real problem with which to deal. They felt they were teased by classmates.

Family members, particularly parents, were critical suppliers of support. Much of the support that came from parents was prior to the retention decision. After a retention decision, parents' involvement in homework and their contact with school was somewhat lessened. For many parents, the retention signaled the end of a crisis of academic failure for their child, especially if the child was seen as more academically successful following the retention. Those parents, however, who provided their children with significant amounts of emotional support following a nonpromotion most certainly aided in their

children's assimilation of the experience.

In looking at what support was provided by the schools, much of the support provided to an academically struggling child came prior to the retention. Many of the children had been in special classes. Teacher relationships, an element in the factor of belonging to a school community, was indirectly an additional support item. Many of the students reported positive feelings about the teacher following the retention; for them, school was made more enjoyable during the year of the repeated grade. Probably one of the most critical support services provided by the school was the sharing of the retention decision. Those students who were alerted to the decision and were prepared for the decision, tended to adapt more easily to the nonpromotion.

Seven factors emerged from the data--self-definition, previous experience with retention, retention philosophy, feelings of empowerment, retention rationale, a sense of belonging to the school community, and support services. Because of the qualitative design of the study, these findings cannot be generalized to other regions. It is the belief of the investigator, however, that many of these factors may transfer to other communities.

#### Conclusions and Discussion

This study was conducted to gain a better understanding of the effects of a retention experience on the family and on the home-school relationship. From the findings, the investigator reached the following conclusions for the participants in the study: (1) regardless of their initial

feelings toward a retention decision, most students, as well as other family members, eventually assimilated a nonpromotion experience; (2) seven factors or coping resources influenced the success of an individual's adaptation to a retention experience--self-definition, previous experience with retention, retention philosophy, feelings of empowerment, retention rationale, a sense of belonging to the school community, and support services; (3) school personnel did little to initially prepare a child for a nonpromotion and generally offered little support to aid a child's adaptation to the retention once the decision had been made; (4) the relationships an educator developed with both parents and students were essential in establishing a sense of trust and of cooperation between the home and the school; (5) school systems rarely provided parents of children in grades one through eight with the strategies necessary to academically aid a child within the home environment; (6) adherence to rigid, grade level curricula, especially in the primary grades, placed undue stress on many students and their families, setting the stage for school failure and inadvertently reinforcing the acceptance of the practice of retention by parents and by students.

The investigator initiated this research project expecting to have a personal bias greatly reinforced against the use of retention as an educational practice. This bias was an outgrowth of reading the retention literature over the past several years. Somewhere in the middle of the project, however, the investigator realized that the issue of retention was not as simple as had once been thought.

In fact, the whole project was not as simple as had once been thought. Although a great deal of literature discussing qualitative research methodology had been consumed by the investigator in an effort to learn all anyone ever wanted to know about naturalistic inquiry, no amount of reading about this type of research ever quite prepares one for the sheer magnitude of data, the pushed back deadlines, and the growing sense of helplessness as the research project takes on a life of its own. The concept of emergent design became all too clear.

The research project, however, was worth the effort. The opportunity to meet and to talk to families about retention--traditionally a taboo subject for many of the participants--was invaluable. The retention literature took on a whole new dimension; instead of looking at effect sizes, the investigator met real people and gained first hand knowledge of how retention had and had not affected their lives. The interviews also provided a priceless opportunity to better understand the struggle some families have in trying to help with their children's education. How many educators, unless they themselves have experienced it as a parent, are aware that the schedules of some families with primary age children revolve around a three hour homework regime every evening?

In addition, the importance of healthy parent/teacher and student/teacher relationships was dramatized in a way that will not be forgotten. The investigator was impressed by the strength of feelings, both positive and negative, that remained with individuals long after a school

relationship had ended. An individual's sense of fairness and trust of future school decisions were often impacted on a long term basis by one key relationship with school personnel.

One question often asked in the retention literature is why educators continue to retain students in light of the research showing little educational gain for those students who have been retained. The investigator found part of the answer to that question as the participants' beliefs about retention were revealed during the interview sessions. Even those participants who were bitter about a retention experience believed that retention was an acceptable and even a desirable educational practice. Those who felt bitterness toward the school system were not bitter about retention per se but were unhappy with a retention decision in one particular instance, rejecting the rationale for their retention as being faulty.

This finding mirrors the results of the 1986 Gallup poll in which 72% of the American public favored rigid grade promotion standards (Gallup, 1986). In addition, a 1990 poll found 67% of the general public supporting grade level testing with the majority of the public believing underachieving promoted students were more likely to drop out of school than repeaters (Elam, 1990). The vast majority of the research participants in this study also felt that retention had helped the academic career of a retained child. Several parents made comments to the investigator concerning the need to hold students back early in their school career rather than later on when not being

able to perform at grade level expectations would really harm students.

The investigator believes the persistence in viewing retention as an educational necessity stems from the fact that educators continue to place students in a rigid, grade level curriculum and continue to assess their progress by using developmentally inappropriate grading practices. When students are unsuccessful in this type of classroom setting, what other alternatives are available to parents desperate to see their child succeed? One parent recalled the oppression she and her husband had felt over their son's failing grades and told the investigator,

Well, we lost a lot of sleep, and we shed a lot of tears because when those report cards came home that were straight F's . . . there were seemingly nothing we could do . . . to make him do better in school.

Any parent who sees "straight F's" on a child's report card is going to consider retention a more viable option than sending him/her on to be equally unsuccessful in the next grade.

Parents in this study, therefore, not only supported the concept of retention, but expected nonpromotion to occur if a student was not performing up to grade level standards. Many parents questioned the value of sending students on to the next grade if they have not mastered the objectives of the current grade level. One parent said, "I think it gives a compliment to the school if you can retain a kid and show him that they really do care about that kid and want the best for him or her."

More than one of the family units involved in this study initiated the request for a retention. One mother was actually very angry that she had to ask the school to retain her child and that she was asked to sign a paper saying the retention had been her decision. She felt her son had been struggling in school for three years and the school should have taken the responsibility to help him by retaining him. She remembered,

I had to sign something. He [the teacher] said, 'I cannot go and tell the principal that I'm going to fail him myself.' He said, 'The parents have to tell me to do that.' And I don't understand that. I mean if, if the child needs to be held back why should the parent have to be the one to tell them to hold him back?

To end the use of nonpromotion in the public schools will, therefore, be a much more complicated task than merely passing a local policy prohibiting the practice. The question is no longer why are teachers retaining students in the face of overwhelming evidence that nonpromotion has very little, if any, long term positive effect on achievement, but becomes why do most families in this study believe that retention has helped their child. To many of these parents, the retention greatly reduced the stress in the family, and in their minds, their children made better achievement in school after the nonpromotion. They obviously have not read the retention literature.

In looking at the discussions on report card grades before and after a retention decision, some of the students felt successful in school after the nonpromotion. Several



of the students, however, appeared to be making approximately the same type of grades as they had prior to the retention. Four of the students had dropped out of school and were currently in an alternative school setting.

In spite of the research which has not shown any significant, long term academic benefits from retention, the data collected from this study seem to indicate retention does serve as a stress reducer for some families. When a parent of a child who is experiencing academic difficulties has tried every available intervention or strategy recommended by the school and still feels helpless in the face of his/her child's frustrations and failures, retention looks like a pretty good option. In some of the families in this study, the year after the nonpromotion was seen by the parents to be remarkably improved for the retained student--better grades, less homework hassles, and no crying over school. One parent "felt like there was just a load taken off his [retained son's] shoulders."

In light of the retention research, should an educator allow a parent who sees retention as a viable option make that decision? Can educators be so secure in their retention paradigm that a parent should be denied a request for a grade level retention? Perhaps for some students in some families, retention serves to ease a stressful situation in the home even though long term positive academic effects may not be realized.

#### Implications

Although the qualitative nature of the study prevents

the results from being generalized to a larger population, several implications do exist for school districts beyond those four systems that were engaged in the investigation. Regardless of an educator's professional position on retention, parents (who have at least as big a stake in their children's education as do professional educators) need to be viewed as partners in all important placement decisions. Educators must resist the urge to play the role of "Big Brother" and to imply to parents that schools know what's best for children without securing the input and feelings from parents. Those parents who maintained a trusting relationship with the school community after the retention decision felt like they been involved in the decision in some way.

Another implication for parent policy deals the issue of homework. Although most of the parents in the study were willing to offer support to their children by helping them with school related work, homework sessions often dissolved into a "battle of the wills" or a temper tantrum. Parents were sometimes bewildered by school assignments and felt inadequate when they were unable to explain directions or procedures; rather than serving as a positive link between the home and the school, parent supervised homework was frequently the source of great frustration in the family. In the absence of homework assignments, parents sometimes created their own assignments by asking students to complete pages from workbooks purchased at the local discount store. Students ended up spending a great deal of time in the evening working on paper and pencil tasks, the type of

assignments with which they had usually demonstrated difficulties during the regular school day. School officials should capitalize on parents' willingness to work with students within the home environment by providing parents with opportunities to develop the skills and strategies needed to be more effective resources in learning activities.

One implication for educators who will continue to use retention as an educational practice is to reexamine their school systems' retention policies to ensure that adequate support services are available for the nonpromoted students. Rather than leaving the student notification to chance or to the back of the report card, school officials and parents should work together to devise a plan to inform a student of a retention decision with a minimum of surprise and embarrassment. If possible, students should be included in some of the parent and teacher discussions; at the very least, students should be given a reasonable rationale for the decision. Once a retention decision has been made, educators need to work with parents to allay student fears and apprehensions.

Of course a bigger issue than retention itself is why schools place students and their families in situations where a young child feels like a failure in school. If educators want to eliminate the practice of retention, administrators will have to do more than write policy which limits its use. A much more fundamental change is required. With the adoption of more developmentally appropriate practices and curricula (Bredekamp, 1987),

educators could remove much unnecessary stress placed upon families and better meet the individual needs of students.

One approach that reduces stress and eliminates the competitive atmosphere of the traditional elementary classroom is the use of a nongraded organizational structure. In fact, educators have seen a resurgence in the interest of nongraded or mixed-age grouping as primary level teachers struggle with the issue of becoming more developmentally appropriate. Rather than forcing children, who come to school with their own developmental time table, into meeting rigid grade level requirements, teachers in a nongraded classroom recognize and celebrate the diversity inherent within any group of students. In writing about the nongraded classroom, Gaustad (1992) stated

children grow socially and emotionally as well as intellectually as they work together on cooperative projects, help classmates who are younger and less able, and rely on older and more advanced peers when they need assistance themselves. . . . Rather than passing or failing at the end of a year, children make continuous progress through curriculum at their own individual rates. The use of letter grades is often replaced by alternative types of assessment, such as collections of student work and descriptive reports.

(p. 1)

The nongraded classroom is just one example of an education initiative grounded in the belief that children can be taught without inadvertently creating "failures" in the process. Until educational leaders become more sensitive to

the developmental needs of students and respond accordingly with strategies like the nongraded classroom, public sentiment regarding the use of retention is not likely to change.

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## **APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A**

**SCHOOL SYSTEM PERMISSION FORM**

January 14, 1992

Mr. Ron Wilcox  
Unicoi County Schools  
600 North Elm Ave.  
Erwin, TN 37650

Dear Mr. Wilcox:

I am currently the Elementary Supervisor of the Johnson City Schools as well as a doctoral student at East Tennessee State University in the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis. I recently received approval from the Institutional Review Board to proceed with the research needed for my dissertation.

My research proposal centers around the issue of grade level retention. Although my review of literature revealed a large body of research on the effects of retention on academic achievement, very few researchers have investigated the effects retention has on the family and on the home-school relationship.

I would like to conduct open-ended interviews with family members, especially mothers, who have a child who has been retained at least one time in grades one through eight. Although mothers will be my primary interview participants, I will also attempt to interview other family members, including the children who have been retained.

The Unicoi County Schools is one of four school systems in Northeast Tennessee from which I would like to select families to interview. Due to the use of naturalistic inquiry as a research design, my sampling technique will be purposeful rather than probabilistic. In other words, I want to select family units which will provide my study with the most information-rich data available. I anticipate involving approximately three to five families from each of the four target school systems. Other systems in Northeast Tennessee in which information will be collected are Bristol City, Elizabethton City, and Washington County.

I am seeking your permission to communicate with families of children who have experienced nonpromotion and are currently enrolled in the Unicoi County Schools. I will then contact one or more of your system's supervisors/administrators and ask them to think of potential families that might provide valuable insight into the feelings and reactions of students and their parents in regard to the effect of nonpromotion. In order to preserve confidentiality, primary research participants would be initially approached by an administrator or supervisor from your school system who would briefly describe the objectives of this study. If the potential participant agrees to participate in the study, she will then be contacted by me, and an appointment for an interview would be scheduled. Written consent will be secured prior to the onset of all interviews. After



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a mother has been interviewed, she will be asked if other family members might be interviewed. Written consent will be secured for each additional family member interviewed.

Please complete the attached permission form and return it in the self-addressed, stamped envelope I have provided. If you have any questions, you may reach me at 926-1131. Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,

Robbie Anderson  
Elementary Supervisor  
Johnson City Schools  
P.O. Box 1517  
Johnson City, TN 37605

## SCHOOL SYSTEM PERMISSION FORM

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Robbie Anderson

TITLE OF PROJECT: The Effects of Nonpromotion on the Family  
and on the Home-School RelationshipPlease place a check by one of the following statements and  
return this form in the self-addressed, stamped envelope.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to allow Robbie Anderson to contact  
supervisors/administrators in the Unicoi County  
Schools in order to select potential interview  
participants for a dissertation study centering around  
the effects of retention on the family unit and on the  
home-school relationship.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to allow Robbie Anderson to contact  
supervisors/administrators in the Unicoi County  
Schools in order to select potential interview  
participants for a dissertation study centering around  
the effects of retention on the family unit and on the  
home-school relationship.

\_\_\_\_\_  
signature of superintendent\_\_\_\_\_  
date

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION!

**APPENDIX B**

**CONSENT FORM**

East Tennessee State University  
College of Education  
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Robbie J. Anderson

TITLE OF PROJECT: The Effects of Nonpromotion on the Family  
and on the Home-School Relationship

The purpose of this study is to uncover the feelings and reactions of students and their parents in regard to the effect the nonpromotion experience has on the family unit and on the home-school relationship. Each participant will be interviewed in depth regarding the experience of retention and how that experience may have affected the family and family involvement in the school and in other educational experiences.

Expected inconveniences and/or risks are minimal. You may feel some discomfort when thinking and talking about unpleasant topics. The interview will take approximately one to one and one half hours of your time. You may refuse to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. Participating in this study is strictly voluntary, and you may quit at any time. This study is not an experiment; no variables are being manipulated. All information which you provide will be kept strictly confidential.

---

I understand the procedures to be used in this study and the possible risks involved. I also understand that participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time by notifying Robbie Anderson whose phone number is 926-1131.

I understand that if there are any questions or research related problems at any time during this study, I may contact Robbie Anderson at 926-1131 or Russ West at 929-4415. I consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

\_\_\_\_\_  
signature of respondent

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

\_\_\_\_\_  
signature of parent/guardian  
(if applicable)

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

\_\_\_\_\_  
signature of investigator

**APPENDIX C**

**INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your own school experiences as you were growing up.
2. When did you first learn your child was going to have difficulties in school?
3. Tell me about your child's school experiences through the years (k, 1st, 2nd, etc.).
  - grade cards
  - punishment
  - homework
4. Tell me about your involvement with the school (k, 1st, 2nd, etc.).
5. Tell me about any support services that the school provided your child to help with those difficulties (testing, Chapter I, special education, tutoring, etc.)?
6. What type of help did you provide your child at home? Other family members?
7. Tell me about the retention experience itself?
  - How did you learn your child was going to be retained? When?
  - Describe your reaction.
  - How did your child learn? Describe his/her response.
  - Describe other family members' responses.
8. What types of support services did your child receive after the retention?
9. What types of support is the school currently providing your child?
10. Tell me about any effect your child's retention has had on you.
  - the child (homework, friends, extracurricular activities)
  - other family members.
11. What are your hopes for your child?
12. How would you respond to another retention? Child's response?

**APPENDIX D**

**FINAL INTERVIEW GUIDE**

## Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your own school experiences as you were growing up.
2. When did you first learn your child was going to have difficulties in school? In what ways do you identify with your child's difficulties?
3. Tell me about your child's school experiences through the years (k, 1st, 2nd, etc.).
  - grade cards
  - punishment
  - homework
4. Tell me about your involvement with the school (k, 1st, 2nd, etc.). How has your involvement changed since the retention?
5. Tell me about any support services that the school provided your child to help with those difficulties (testing, Chapter I, special education, tutoring, etc.)?
6. What type of help did you provide your child at home? other family members?
7. Tell me about the retention experience itself?
  - How did you learn your child was going to be retained? When?
  - What reasons for the retention were given?
  - How was the final decision made?
  - Describe your reaction (how did you feel?) Did you feel guilt?
  - How did your child learn? Describe his/her response.
  - Describe other family members' responses.
8. What types of support services did your child receive after the retention?
9. What types of support is the school currently providing your child?
10. Tell me about any effect your child's retention has had on
  - the child (homework, size, friends, extracurricular activities)
  - other family members.
11. Has your child's increased age caused in difficulties?
12. In what ways do you and your child continue to be reminded of the retention experience (do you ever talk about it?)?



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13. What are your hopes for your child?
14. Who should make the retention decision?
15. Under what circumstances should a child be retained?
16. How would you respond to another retention? child's response?
17. What advice would you give to parents who may have to go through a retention experience? to schools that may want to help families with this experience?

**APPENDIX E**  
**AUDIT AGREEMENT**

## M E M O R A N D U M

TO: Jerry Herman  
FROM: Robbie Anderson  
SUBJECT: Auditing Procedures for Research Project  
DATE: September 16, 1992

I am glad you agreed on September 8 to proceed with the auditing of the research I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation. Thank you for your commitment to this project. I hope that this activity proves to be a valuable learning experience for you as you complete the residency requirements for your doctorate degree at East Tennessee State University.

In reviewing available criteria on establishing trustworthiness, I have decided to modify Edward S. Halpern's (1983) procedures for auditing naturalistic studies which is found in Appendix B of Guba and Lincoln's Naturalistic Inquiry (1985). After you establish familiarity with the audit trail components, I feel the following questions should be addressed:

1. Can the audibility of the data be confirmed? In other words, are the data complete, comprehensive, and useful? Can linkages be established?
2. Can confirmability be established? Are findings grounded in the data collected? To what degree is researcher bias evident in the findings?
3. Can dependability be established? Did purposeful sampling occur? Can working hypotheses be identified? Were the methodological decisions which occurred during the course of the research sound?
4. Can the credibility of the research project be established? In addition to referential adequacy, does evidence of triangulation and peer debriefing exist?

The audit trail components which I will be entrusting to you include: audio cassettes of the interviews, computer disks containing the transcriptions, hard copies of the transcriptions, and my journal (which contains field notes, peer debriefing notes, permission forms, and personal notes on the progression of my analyses) as well as Chapter 4 of the dissertation.

Again, thank you for undertaking this project. Please do not hesitate to contact me over questions or concerns you might have regarding the audit process.

**APPENDIX F**  
**AUDIT FINDINGS**



November 23, 1992

Ms Robbie Anderson, COHORT I Doctoral Candidate  
East Tennessee State University  
Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis  
501 Warf-Pickel Hall  
Johnson City, TN 37614

RE: Dissertation Audit Report

Ms Anderson:

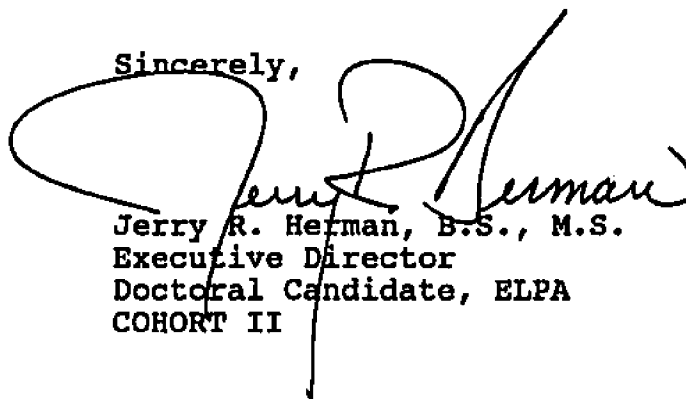
It is my pleasure to submit this auditor's letter of attestation for inclusion in your doctoral dissertation. Using criteria as set forth in your memorandum dtd September 16, 1992, auditing procedures have been based on a modification of Halpern's (1983) procedures for auditing naturalistic studies found in Appendix B of Guba and Lincoln's Naturalistic Inquiry (1985). The following statements represent the findings of the audit process:

1. The data were found to be complete and comprehensive in scope and the organization and assistance provided by you, the researcher, allowed the audit to proceed purposefully and with a minimum of confusion. The data were useful and linkages were easily recognizable. The auditability of the data is, hereby, confirmed.
2. Procedural information was gathered both from our audit discussions and a review of your field and debriefing notes and no evidence of researcher bias could be detected. A sampling of findings were successfully traced back to the raw data, and audit discussions, interview notes, and document entries show indications of attention to the possibility of alternative findings. Your findings are data based and are, hereby, confirmed.
3. Sampling procedures, establishment and modification of working hypotheses, and the flow of methodological decisions were identifiable, purposeful, and relevant for a naturalistic study. The process of inquiry is seen as sufficiently appropriate and thorough so as to firmly establish the dependability of the study.

4. Given the high level of sustained attention maintained in the study, the use of data triangulation, maintenance of a reflective journal and organized document notes and entries, systematic peer debriefing activity, and the integration of audit plans into the overall research design, credibility of the study is, hereby, confirmed.

I offer my personal and professional congratulations on the completion of your research. My observations and audit activity allow me to conclude that you have consistently maintained the highest possible standards of professional ethics and practice in your study and I am certain that your contribution to the body of retention research will be well received in the field.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jerry R. Herman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning and a long, thin tail extending downwards.

Jerry R. Herman, B.S., M.S.  
Executive Director  
Doctoral Candidate, ELPA  
COHORT II

## VITA

### ROBBIE JONES ANDERSON

- Personal Data:** Date of birth - October 4, 1952  
Place of birth - Gary, Indiana  
Marital status - married
- Education:** Merrillville High School,  
Merrillville, Indiana, June 1970  
Milligan College, May 1973, BS degree, cum  
laude  
East Tennessee State University, August  
1978, MA in special education  
East Tennessee State University, May 1993,  
Doctorate in Education in the department  
of Educational Leadership and Policy  
Analysis (expected)
- Professional Experience:** 1973-1974, Carter County Schools, regular  
classroom teacher  
1974-1982, Johnson City Schools, resource  
room teacher  
1981-1984, East Tennessee State University  
Horizons for Youth Summer Program for  
Gifted and Talented, teacher  
1982-1989, Johnson City Schools, Coordinator  
for Gifted and Talented Programs  
1989, spring term, East Tennessee State  
University, adjunct instructor ("The  
Special Education Consulting Teacher" -  
graduate level)  
1991, fall term, East Tennessee State  
University, internship (Educational  
Measurement - graduate level)  
1989-present, Johnson City Schools,  
Elementary Supervisor
- Leadership:** Milligan College Student Teacher of the Year  
Award  
Selected for PIVOT Program in 1982  
Outstanding Young Women of America Award,  
1982  
President of Johnson City Community Theatre,  
1983-84  
Johnson City PTA Council Legislative  
Chairperson, 1984-86  
Selected for Superintendent's Leadership  
Program, 1985-86  
Tennessee PTA Honorary Life Membership  
Award, 1986  
Tennessee Odyssey of the Mind State Board of  
Directors, 1986-89

Selected to attend Tennessee Symposium for  
 Talented and Gifted, 1988  
 Kingsport Arts in Education Planning  
 Committee, 1988  
 Johnson City Arts in Education Planning  
 Committee, 1989-1992  
 Johnson City Area Arts Council Board of  
 Directors, 1989-1993  
 Johnson City Schools Speakers Bureau, 1988-  
 present  
 Tennessee Odyssey of the Mind Eastern  
 Regional Tournament Director, 1989  
 EXCEL Board of Directors, 1989-1991  
 Early Learning Center Board of Directors,  
 1989-1991  
 Co-Chaired the Tennessee Association for the  
 Gifted State Conference, 1990  
 East Tennessee Branch of the Orton Society  
 Board of Directors, 1992  
 Appalachian Youth Conference Coordinator,  
 1992-1993

**Publications:** Tennessee Curriculum for the Gifted (elected  
 to the committee in 1987; project was  
 published and disseminated in 1991)

**Grants/Federal  
 Projects:** EXCEL Grant, 1987  
 Arts Builds Community Grant, 1989; 1990  
 D.A.R.E. Grant, 1992  
 Reading is Fundamental Grant, 1989-1993  
 Johnson City Schools Chapter I Project, 1989-  
 1993

**Presentations:** Tennessee Association for the Gifted  
 Conference, 1986; 1987; 1988; 1989; 1990  
 Upper East Tennessee Education Cooperative  
 Conference, 1985; 1986; 1988; 1989; 1990  
 Tennessee Association for Curriculum and  
 Development, 1992  
 East Tennessee State University Early  
 Childhood Conference, 1992  
 Mid-South Educational Research Association,  
 1992

**Professional  
 Memberships:** Delta Kappa Gamma  
 Phi Delta Kappa  
 Association for Supervision and Curriculum  
 Development  
 American Association of School  
 Administrators  
 Tennessee Supervisors Association  
 Tennessee Association for School  
 Supervision and Administration  
 Upper East Tennessee Supervisors Study



**Council**  
**Tennessee Association for the Gifted**  
**Orton Dyslexia Society**  
**Mid-South Educational Research Association**  
**American Educational Research Association**