

“MAKING THE DIFFICULT CHOICE”: UNDERSTANDING GEORGIA’S TEST-
BASED GRADE RETENTION POLICY IN READING

by

ANDREW PRESCOTT HUDDLESTON

(Under the Direction of Donna E. Alvermann)

ABSTRACT

In this multiple case study, the author analyzes participants’ responses to Georgia’s test-based grade retention policy in reading. Organized into a manuscript format, three articles comprise the body of this dissertation.

In the first manuscript, the author uses Maxwell’s method of literature reviews (as described in “Literature Reviews of, and for, Educational Research: A Commentary on Boote and Beile’s ‘Scholars Before Researchers’” in a 2006 issue of *Educational Researcher*), to make the following argument: although some studies have documented gains in academic achievement through test-based grade retention, there is increasing evidence that these gains have occurred by limiting the educational opportunities for the most vulnerable of students.

In the second manuscript, the author interviewed, observed, and collected documents regarding ten fifth graders (who were receiving intervention in reading), their parents, teachers, and administrators as they navigated Georgia’s test-based retention policy. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts of field, capital, and habitus (as described in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972/1977)), the author found that within the field of

test-based retention, the students and parents in the study brought cultural, social, and economic capital that received little value in school, and they readily accepted that the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) was trustworthy and retention was fair. However, believing that retaining students would ultimately reproduce the inequities the policy claimed to address, the teachers and administrators used an appeals procedure to ensure that retention was not based solely on test scores.

In the third manuscript, the author uses Bourdieu and Passeron's theoretical concept of reproduction (as described in *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1970/1990)) to analyze students' use of the "search and destroy" method of reading within Georgia's test-based grade retention policy. Under the policy, the students brought capital that received little attention, yet they readily accepted that testing was trustworthy, retention was helpful, and accountability was important. The students had little confidence in themselves as readers and felt that reading test passages was unnecessary or too difficult. Consequently, they read questions and skimmed passages for key words to find answers, with little success, thus reproducing their difficulties with reading.

INDEX WORDS: Bourdieu, Case study, Constant comparative method, Grade repetition, High-stakes testing, Literacy, Social promotion, Search and destroy method of reading, Test-based grade retention

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DEDICATION

For my former fifth-grade students at Wester Elementary School in Lubbock, Texas, who navigated with me through Texas' test-based grade retention policy in reading.

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In describing the teachers who made a difference in his life, child psychiatrist Robert Coles said:

I mention these teachers in my life because, in fact, they continue to be a great big part of it still. Their voices are in my head and are part of my voice, I am sure. Their thoughts and values inform what I consider and call my own thoughts and values. Their example—the things they did, the style of their teaching, the strategies they employed—continue to inform the way I work. . . .”¹

I am indebted to a long line of great teachers, from kindergarten through my doctoral work, who have made a difference in my life and whose voices have helped shape me into the person I have become. I would like to especially thank the professors, friends, and family members who have helped make this dissertation possible.

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¹ As cited in Woolfolk, A. E. (1998). *Educational psychology* (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon. (Original work published 1980) p. 4.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL DESTINIES

“... the School ... succeed(s) in convincing individuals that they have themselves chosen or won the destinies which social destiny has assigned to them in advance.”

Pierre Bourdieu¹

I vividly remember April 2006. It was my first year to teach fifth grade reading and language arts. I had previously taught sixth grade and had prepared my students each spring for the state accountability exam, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). However, this year was different. As fifth graders in Texas, my students were required to pass the TAKS in order to be promoted to the sixth grade. Texas had exceeded the testing requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) by passing the Student Success Initiative (http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index3.aspx?id=3230&menu_id3=793), requiring students in grades 3, 5, and 8 to pass the TAKS in reading and math for promotion. Students had three opportunities to pass the exam, and in April, we received the scores from the first administration. Five of my students, (all from low-income homes and Latino) had failed. As I reviewed their scores and attempted to prepare them for the next administration, what struck me most was not that they had failed, but the variety of social issues that prevented them from doing their best on the TAKS and that were not directly related to reading.

¹ Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (R. Nice, Trans. 2nd ed.). London, England: Sage. (Original work published 1970) p. 208.

Reading was difficult for Raúl, and he had been receiving extra tutoring throughout the year. Nonetheless, his greatest challenge to passing TAKS was his asthma. Raúl had anxiety-induced asthma, and the stress involved in the first administration of the reading TAKS had triggered his wheezing, thus hindering his concentration. Luckily for Raúl, he had two more opportunities to take the Reading TAKS before his retention was finalized. As Raúl and I prepared for the second exam, we worked with the nurse and his mother to develop a medical plan for the day of the test, certainly not a strategy I had learned about in my assessment and practicum course in college, but necessary for him nonetheless. Prior to the test I was to send Raúl to the nurse for a check-up. She would listen to his lungs, check his heart rate, and give him his medication. When he completed the test I would send him back for a post check-up.

All went as planned until Raúl began his test. As I monitored the students, I noticed that Raúl had a white-knuckle grip on a rosary in his left hand. The TAKS administration manual clearly stated that students were to have nothing on their desks except for their test materials and pencil. However, as a teacher, knowing about his struggles with test-anxiety, I knew much better than to ask him to put it away.

Raúl managed the test okay that day and actually ended up passing it. Nevertheless, through that experience, and many others like it, I found myself questioning the necessity and value of applying such high stakes to testing. As a teacher I believed that standardized testing, used with additional assessments, could provide useful information, but I worried about the pressure the high stakes placed on students and their families. I wanted to know more about these tests that were used to make such important decisions concerning my students. Where and when did they originate? How

did they come to yield such power in public school classrooms? When I moved to Georgia to begin my Ph.D. program, I soon learned that Georgia had a test-based retention policy quite similar to the one in Texas. Still searching for answers to the questions I had as a teacher, I felt that the Georgia legislation offered a unique opportunity to learn more about these policies and the ways in which they were playing out in the lives of administrators, teachers, students, and parents.

Background of the Problem: The Georgia Policy

In February 2001, Governor Roy Barnes urged the Georgia legislature to end social promotion in his State of the State Address (Barnes, 2001). Arguing that social promotion is unfair to both teachers and students, he asked that the legislature pass a bill that would require Georgia students to pass a criterion-based standardized test to be promoted to the next grade. Barnes argued that the test-based retention policy in Texas, passed by then Governor George W. Bush, offered an effective model for Georgia.

The Georgia legislature moved quickly. One month later, on March 21, 2001, it passed the Georgia Promotion, Placement, and Retention Law (Georgia State Board of Education, 2001) requiring that students in grades 3, 5, and 8 pass the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) to be promoted to the next grades. According to the law, third graders must pass the reading CRCT while fifth and eighth graders must pass both the reading and math CRCTs. The law took effect with third graders in 2003-2004 and was extended to fifth graders in 2004-2005 and eighth graders in 2005-2006.

Under the policy, students who have previously failed the CRCT or are identified as struggling by their teachers receive intensive intervention throughout the school year. Those who fail the first administration of the CRCT in April are offered accelerated and

differentiated intervention, in addition to regular classroom instruction, during the month of May or during summer school in June and are then required to take the CRCT a second time. Those who fail the second administration are automatically retained, although the law does allow the parents/guardians or teachers to appeal a retention. If a retention is appealed, a Grade Placement Committee (GPC) meeting is held consisting of the school principal or designee, content area teacher, parent/guardian, and other school staff who might provide useful information about the child's achievement. The GPC may then consider other indicators of the student's academic performance in addition to the CRCT. A vote is taken to determine if the retention will stand, and the student may only be "placed" (actual promotion requires a passing CRCT score) to the next grade if the GPC unanimously agrees. By placing a student in the next grade the GPC pledges that with additional intervention the child will be performing on grade level as measured by the CRCT by the end of the next academic year. Whether or not a child is placed or retained, a plan must be designed for additional assessment and intervention throughout the upcoming year.

Problem Statement

As I will show in Chapter 2, the vast majority of research on test-based retention has been large-scale, quantitative studies seeking to determine if these policies improve academic achievement on standardized tests (e.g., McCombs, Kirby, & Mariano, 2009; Roderick, Jacob, & Bryk, 2002; Winters & Greene, 2006). Only a few qualitative case studies (e.g., Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Booher-Jennings, 2005, 2008) have attempted to understand how these policies are being negotiated by students, teachers, and administrators. None have examined parents' experiences, and few studies of any type

have been conducted on the Georgia policy. No studies have followed students through the entire process of intervention, testing, additional intervention, testing a second time, and the GPC meeting, nor have any studies examined how decisions are made in the GPC meetings.

Not only is there a lack of research in this area, but it is an area that needs to be addressed. Some researchers have argued that large-scale, quantitative studies solely focusing on achievement gains as measured by test scores mask the social inequities that produce such scores and the role schools and examinations play in class selection and exclusion (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990). Others have documented the ways in which high-stakes testing contributes to an achievement ideology in which moral boundaries are created to distinguish those who deserve to pass through hard work and good behavior and those who appear to provide little effort (Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Booher-Jennings, 2008). Further exploration is needed to examine what these tests are concealing and to flesh out the processes in which these policies obscure the connections between achievement scores and class inequities.

Additionally, evidence in Georgia suggests that even though an apparently strict test-based retention policy has been enacted, the majority of students who fail the CRCT are “placed” in the next grade through the appeals process (Henry, Rickman, Fortner, & Henrick, 2005; Mordica, 2006; Pickel & Badertscher, 2010; Vogell & Perry, 2008). An examination of how this is happening can provide implications for administrators and teachers who worry about the negative consequences of retention. It can also provide information for policy makers about how such policies are actually playing out in schools.

Research Questions and Design

Through the following research, I sought to address these areas of need by providing case studies of fifth graders undergoing Georgia's test-based retention policy in reading at Plains Elementary School (all names are pseudonyms). It was a qualitative, multiple case study (Stake, 2006) that used constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006) of semi-structured life world interviews (Kvale, 2007), documents (McCulloch, 2004), and observations (Angrosino, 2008) to explore the experiences of ten students who have previously struggled with the reading CRCT. The study addressed the following research questions.

Overarching Question

How are students who struggle with the reading CRCT, parents, teachers, and administrators responding to Georgia's test-based retention policy?

Guiding Research Questions

- How do students, parents, teachers, and administrators express agency when responding to the policy?
- What tensions are expressed by students, parents, teachers, and administrators concerning the policy's underlying premises and requirements?
- What type of intervention is provided for these students? How is this intervention perceived by students, parents, teachers, and administrators?
- How are schools using the appeal option to seek promotion for students who have failed the reading CRCT twice?

Research Goals

The purpose of this study was to understand how students who struggle on the reading CRCT, their parents, teachers, and administrators are responding to test-based retention in Georgia. Drawing on Lather and St. Pierre's (as cited in Lather, 2007) purposes of qualitative research, my goal was not to emancipate my participants from an oppressive policy or transform their beliefs about testing (critical theory). Neither was it to deconstruct test-based retention (poststructuralism). Instead, my primary objective was the interpretive goal of understanding how this policy is working in Georgia. However, throughout the study I also realized that even interpretive research can have a critical edge (Howe, 1998). Although my primary goal was understanding, a secondary goal was to consider who stood to benefit from this policy. I did not draw on critical theory per se, but I found that my theoretical framework, Bourdieu's (1972/1977) concepts of field, capital, habitus, and reproduction, heightened my awareness of social inequities and issues facing the most vulnerable of students. Such understanding, with critique in mind, has helped me draw implications from my study concerning how merit promotion policies might be improved.

Bourdieu on Education and Testing

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1972/1977, 1982/1991, 2007) researched economic, social, and cultural class domination in various areas of social life. In Chapters 3 and 4, I will discuss his theoretical tools in greater detail, focusing especially on his concepts of field, capital, habitus, and reproduction. For now though, I would like to introduce these concepts by describing how Bourdieu, with the help of French sociologist Jean-Claude Passeron, theorized education in general and testing in particular.

In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) analyzed the French educational system that Bourdieu himself had completed. It consisted of the baccalauréat (both a high-school graduation and a university entrance exam) and the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* (a higher-track education for recruiting elite teachers in the national education system). In order to be selected to attend the *Ecole Normale*, students must pass a national examination called the *concours*, and to graduate, they must pass the written and oral *aggregation* (Kramsch, 2008). This degree allows graduates to teach at both the secondary and post-secondary levels.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) were well aware of the taken-for-granted notions concerning both education and schools in the 20th century. Much as they are today (e.g., NCLB), schools were seen as institutions for encouraging social mobility, and the U.S., in particular, was perceived as a country that provided a level playing field in which hard-working students of all backgrounds could obtain an education and experience success. A good example of this mentality can be seen in the development of the SAT (originally the Scholastic Aptitude Test). Henry Chauncey (the first president of Educational Testing Service) and James Bryant Conant (president of Harvard) were looking for a tool that could select an elite group of students not based on birth (aristocracy) but on merit (aptitude) (Lemann, 1999). The SAT, they believed, would identify our nation's most gifted students in spite of their race or class. No longer would colleges like Harvard only consist of students from wealthy backgrounds. Rather, the SAT would pinpoint the best and the brightest from all walks of life.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990), however, saw schooling and testing much differently. The U.S., they argued, was no more equitable than France or any of the

countries in Europe, and if anything, it was less so (Carles, 2001). Meritocracy was just a disguised form of aristocracy and was no different than the nobility titles of a feudal society. Examinations simply rewarded those whose upbringings had groomed them with the types of knowledge being tested. Schools, often unbeknownst to the teachers, parents, and students involved, “ensure the transmission of cultural capital across generations and stamp pre-existing differences in inherited cultural capital with a meritocratic seal of academic consecration by virtue of the special symbolic potency of the title (credential)” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990, p. ix).

Essentially, schools reward certain types of knowledge, resources, and ways of speaking more than others. Students whose family backgrounds provide them with these valued skills do well in school while the rest are often at a disadvantage. As an institution, schools provide a sense of legitimacy and fairness to the system. Students believe they will be rewarded for their hard work and are proud of the degrees they earn. All the while, however, the selection and exclusion that occurs by social class remains hidden. People accept the system (e.g., test-based retention policies) as being fair and just and thus support the rules that ensure the social inequities of society will be reproduced.

Examinations, Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) argued, are anything but neutral. Like schools, they reproduce the status quo, but they do so with such authority that they ultimately seal the deal. Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) criticized much of the research on schooling and examinations because they believed it often helped hide the inequities these structures reproduce. Although those who run the system argue that all have equal access to the educational system, those who succeed in education are not

equally distributed among class, and this is no accident. Students' whole life histories affect how they do in school, how they perform on exams, and the likelihood that they will stay in school. Research, Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) argued, must look beyond student outcomes to determine what the examinations (e.g., high-stakes tests) themselves are concealing.

For Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990), however, the examination does more than just reproduce class disparities. It makes such disparities look official and legitimate. Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) explained:

In ever more completely delegating the power of selection to the academic institution, the privileged classes are able to appear to be surrendering to a perfectly neutral authority the power of transmitting power from one generation to another, and thus to be renouncing the arbitrary privilege of the hereditary transmission of privileges. But through its formally irreproachable verdicts, which always objectively serve the dominant classes since they never sacrifice the technical interests of those classes except to the advantage of their social interests, the School is better able than ever, at all events in the only way conceivable in a society wedded to democratic ideologies, to contribute to the reproduction of the established order, since it succeeds better than ever in concealing the function it performs. (p. 167)

The examination is ultimately how the educational system gets away with it.

Examinations mask social exclusion as meritocracy and thus conceal the connections between the education system and the structure of class relations. It provides “objective”

evidence that those who fail are not cut out for academics and to those who pass, it gives proof of their merit and giftedness.

Testing allows the privileged classes to appear to be submitting to a neutral authority and thus to be renouncing the hereditary transmission of privilege. For a society based on democratic ideologies (such as France or the U.S.) this is the only option. Reproduction has to remain hidden to be accepted. So while everyone preaches social mobility and claims to be in favor of it, the system is in place to ensure those on top stay on top.

Subjectivity Statement

When I first began reading Bourdieu's (1972/1977, 1982/1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990) work I immediately saw its value. Bourdieu offered a framework that helped me better understand why many of my students struggled in school. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, my interest in test-based retention policies began when I was a teacher in Texas. Raúl was just one of five students who failed the first administration of the reading TAKS that year. Four others had failed as well, and all were experiencing various social issues that prohibited their success in school.

Hector had been abused by his father as a young boy. When in stressful situations, those memories surfaced. He explained that he had trouble focusing on his test because his mind would wonder to those memories. Maria's father was in jail. She told me that she was determined to pass the second administration because her grandmother had promised her that if she passed the reading TAKS they would go visit her father. Roberto explained that his mother left his family when he was a third grader. Often he stared off in class, and I had trouble keeping his attention or getting him to

participate. After he found out he failed the first administration of the TAKS, he told me that his mind kept thinking about his mother, making it difficult for him to focus. On the day of the second administration, he pulled out a photo of his mother during the test. Much as with Raul's rosary, I was not about to take the photo away. Lupe was previously a fifth grader at another school. She was retained because she failed the reading TAKS test all three administrations. Already she had failed it now a fourth time. She explained that she just really got nervous during the tests and that in the past she held a stress ball to squeeze. She asked if she could hold one on the next administration of the reading test.

In Texas, students in grades 5 and 8 must pass the reading and math TAKS in order to be promoted. Third grade was dropped from the law in 2009. The policy is quite similar to Georgia's with only a few exceptions. Georgia still designates third grade as a promotional gate. Students in Texas receive three opportunities to pass the TAKS rather than two, and only the parents have the authority to appeal retentions and initiate GPC meetings. The majority of students who failed all three administrations at my school were placed in the next grade through a parent appeal. However, it was never a given that a retention would be overruled. My district chose to send a sixth-grade teacher to vote on the GPC, and the sixth-grade teachers did not want us to promote students unlikely to pass in middle school. Consequently, I knew I had to get a student near passing to justify a placement.

As a fifth-grade teacher, I was amazed by the tireless effort and attention test-based retention required. I spent countless hours tutoring children to help them pass the test. I often worried about the decisions made in the GPC meetings, not knowing what decisions would best help these students long-term. Although I disagreed with social

promotion, I had several concerns with test-based retention as well. I worried about the unintended, negative consequences of retention and definitely objected to using only a standardized test to make such important decisions. I also felt that standardized tests were limited in the information they could provide about a child's reading. Although I did see some promise in providing intervention for struggling readers, I felt constrained by the scripted program my district required.

Certainly, my prior experiences and beliefs concerning test-based retention have influenced how I have seen and interpreted the data in this study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Such familiarity with test-based retention has likely helped me notice important aspects in the data that others less familiar with the topic might miss (Roulston, 2010). At the same time, too much familiarity has likely blinded me from important findings as well. Having little prior experience with the Georgia policy though has encouraged me to attune to surprises in the data and constantly search for alternative explanations (Maxwell, 2005).

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is written in manuscript format. Thus, unlike a traditional dissertation, Chapters 2 through 4 are written as stand-alone articles ready to be submitted to journals. Chapter 2 consists of a literature review article that will be submitted to *Educational Policy Analysis Archives* (<http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/>), an online policy journal sponsored by the Mary Lou Fulton Teacher's College at Arizona State University. Rather than being a comprehensive review of testing (Boote & Beile, 2005), it focuses on literature relevant (Maxwell, 2006) to high-stakes testing, teacher-based retention, and test-based retention to make the following argument: although some

studies have documented gains in academic achievement through test-based retention, there is increasing evidence that these gains have occurred by limiting the educational opportunities for the most vulnerable of students.

In Chapter 3, I draw on data collected from my dissertation to explain how the administrators, teachers, and students participating in my study were responding to Georgia's test-based retention policy at Plains Elementary. Specifically, I use Bourdieu's (1972/1977) concepts of field, capital, and habitus to show how the teachers and administrators worked within the legal limits of the policy to ensure that retention decisions would not be based on test scores alone. Educating parents and using the appeal option were key to this process. This article will be submitted to the *American Educational Research Journal*.

In Chapter 4, I use Bourdieu's (1972/1977) theoretical concept of reproduction to analyze how the students in my study responded to Georgia's test-based grade retention policy by using the "search and destroy" method of reading. Having little confidence in themselves as readers and believing that reading test passages was unnecessary or too difficult, the students read the questions and skimmed the passages for keywords to find the answers with little success. This article will be submitted to *The Reading Teacher*.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I describe recurring themes among each of the chapters and discuss the implications for policy makers, teachers, administrators, and researchers this dissertation provides. I conclude by discussing how a Bourdieusian lens might be used to bring about change in existing test-based retention policies.

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CHAPTER 2

ACHIEVEMENT AT WHOSE EXPENSE? A LITERATURE REVIEW OF
TEST-BASED GRADE RETENTION POLICIES IN U.S. SCHOOLS¹

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Abstract

The author uses Maxwell's method of literature reviews for educational research, to focus specifically on literature relevant to test-based grade retention policies to make the following argument: although some studies have documented gains in academic achievement through test-based grade retention, there is increasing evidence that these gains have occurred by limiting the educational opportunities for the most vulnerable of students. The author begins by briefly discussing research on high-stakes testing policies in general as well as related research on teacher-based retention. The author then reviews research on test-based retention policies in Chicago, Florida, New York City, Georgia, Texas, Wisconsin, and Louisiana. Short-term gains produced by test-based retention policies fade over time with students again falling behind but with a larger likelihood of dropping out of school. The author concludes by providing alternatives to test-based retention as well as suggestions for further research.

Keywords: grade repetition, high-stakes testing, literacy, social promotion, test-based grade retention

Test-based grade retention, as it is used today for large-scale accountability purposes, is rather new, dating back to the minimum-competency testing of the 1970s-1980s (Koretz, 2008). However, its roots go back over 100 years. Prior to the twentieth century, the primary form of assessment in U.S. schools was oral recitation. Instruction was highly individualized, and teachers took turns listening to students reading aloud or reciting information from memory they were expected to have mastered (Giordano, 2005).

In 1845, Horace Mann required that the Boston School Committee give written essay examinations in lieu of the oral exams to which students were accustomed (Rothman, 1995). Schools had drawn on the Prussian model of graded education to efficiently handle large numbers of students (Tyack, 1974), and Mann believed that regular written tests could be valuable instruments in comparing the quality of teaching among grades and schools (Caldwell & Courtis, 1925). Written exams (essay and short answer) were soon used for judging the effectiveness of teachers and programs (Resnick, 1982). However, with the implementation of grade-based instruction came the question of what to do with students who were falling behind (Shepard & Smith, 1989b). Should students advance to the next grade because of their age or because of the merit of their work, and who or what should make that decision?

By the 1870s, exam results were being printed in newspapers and had replaced teacher recommendations for determining promotions. However, such high-stakes use of written essays did not go uncriticized. Emerson E. White, a school superintendent and leader of the National Education Association in the late 1800s, passionately argued that written exams should not be used for comparing students and teachers, nor should they be

used alone in promotion and retention decisions. Such test-focused instruction, he argued, was detrimental to education:

They [written tests] have perverted the best efforts of teachers, and narrowed and grooved their instruction; they have occasioned and made well-nigh imperative the use of mechanical and rote methods of teaching; they have occasioned cramming and the most vicious habits of study; they have caused much of the overpressure charged upon schools, some of which is real; they have tempted both teachers and pupils to dishonesty; and last but not least, they have permitted a mechanical method of school supervision. . . . The coming ordeal fetters them more or less, whatever may be their resolutions, and many teachers submit to it without resistance; and this is sometimes true of teachers who have been specially trained in normal schools, and are conscious of the power to do much better work. They shut their eyes to the needs of the pupil and put their strength into what will 'count' in the examination. (E. E. White, 1886, pp. 199-201)

Two years later, Emerson E. White (1888) again expressed his disapproval of tying promotion to written exams and described his schools' plans to return to teacher recommendations based on daily work to make promotion and retention decisions.

Purpose

Test-based grade retention policies have elicited great debate, both in education circles and among the general public. Proponents of grade retention (e.g., Greene & Winters, 2006; Owen & Ranick, 1977) have argued that retention is necessary to ensure that students who are behind master the necessary skills needed to succeed in the next grade level. Opponents (e.g., Shepard & Smith, 1989b), however, have claimed that

retention unfairly targets marginalized students, rarely results in academic improvement, and increases the likelihood of dropping out of school. So what do research findings suggest about the impact of test-based retention policies, especially in terms of their effects on low-income and ethnic minority students?

Rather than providing a comprehensive review of testing in general (Boote & Beile, 2005), I draw on Maxwell's (2006) method of literature reviews for educational research, to focus specifically on literature relevant to high-stakes testing, teacher-based retention, and test-based retention. The purpose of this literature review, based on my findings, is to make the following argument: although some studies have documented gains in academic achievement through test-based grade retention, there is increasing evidence that these gains have occurred by limiting the educational opportunities for the most vulnerable of students.

I begin by discussing research on high-stakes testing policies in general. This includes research conducted on testing policies under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as well as research on minimum-competency and state testing policies prior to NCLB. Second, I briefly review research on teacher-based grade retention. Although the research findings on teacher-based versus test-based grade retention are similar, researchers (e.g., Allensworth & Nagaoka, 2010; Greene & Winters, 2007) have argued that the two are qualitatively different and merit their own individual study. Finally, I conclude by discussing the research specifically conducted on test-based grade retention policies.

Methods and Definitions

A variety of search methods were used to locate the sources for this review. I first searched for relevant books, articles, and research reports by using numerous databases such as Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), PsycINFO, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the GIL Universal Catalog of the University System of Georgia. I used search terms such as “standardized test*,” “high-stakes test*,” “grade repetition” and “social promotion.” I then reviewed the reference lists of each of those sources.

Throughout this review, I use terms such as social promotion, test-based retention, promotional gates, standardized testing, and high-stakes testing. For clarity, I provide the following descriptions. The U.S. Department of Education (1999) has defined social promotion as “allowing students who have failed to meet performance standards and academic requirements to pass on to the next grade with their peers instead of completing or satisfying requirements” (p. 5).

Numerous states and larger cities (e.g., Texas, Georgia, New York City, Chicago) have developed test-based grade retention policies in an effort to eliminate social promotion in schools (Marsh, Gershwin, Kirby, & Xia, 2009). These policies require that test scores be used, at least in part, to determine which students should be promoted and which should be retained. Rather than affecting all grades, these policies frequently contain promotional gates which are specific grades in which test-based retention policies apply. For example, in Georgia, the test-based retention policy applies in grades 3, 5, and 8 (Georgia State Board of Education, 2001).

Most often, the tests involved in these policies are standardized tests, usually criterion-referenced, that contain standardized procedures for administration, completion,

and scoring (Haney, 1984). What makes these tests “high-stakes” is that their results, in this case promotion or retention, are used to make important decisions that immediately and directly affect students (Madaus, 1988, p. 87).

Research on High-Stakes Testing

Over the past twenty years, a significant amount of research has been conducted on the impact of tests used for accountability purposes. This research has consisted of a mixture of large-scale quantitative studies, surveys, and case studies on testing policies both prior to and under NCLB. Of the research examining the effects on schools and classrooms, the findings have been mixed. Although testing policies have brought about some of the objectives policy makers had hoped, there is increasing evidence they have produced numerous unintended consequences as well. Moreover, there is little evidence suggesting that these policies have actually resulted in academic gains. Hout and Elliott (2011) recently conducted an extensive review of the research on high-stakes testing policies under NCLB. They found that small increases in test scores have occurred, but when similar low-stakes tests were given, the academic gains were effectively zero for most programs.

Beneficial Outcomes of High-Stakes Testing

Although recent testing policies appear to have done little to narrow the achievement gap, there is evidence that some of these programs have resulted in outcomes their supporters believed to be beneficial. A few researchers have found that high-stakes tests push teachers to focus on new elements of state curriculum and identify student needs. For example, Koretz, Stecher, Klein, and McCaffrey (1994) showed that teachers in Vermont spent more time teaching newer curriculum elements such as

problem-solving and mathematical representations to prepare their students for their state's portfolio-based, high-stakes assessment. Stecher (2002) noted that some teachers have found tests useful for identifying students' strengths and weaknesses and attaining additional resources for struggling students. School districts have revised curriculum and testing programs to match state curricula and provided after-school and Saturday-school tutoring for struggling students. Hamilton et al. (2007) found that in California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania, under NCLB, schools were aligning curriculum with state standards and assessments, using data for decision making, and providing extra support to low-performing students.

Researchers have also suggested that high-stakes tests do play a role in teacher motivation. Hamilton et al. (2007) found that teachers in California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania have been encouraged by high-stakes testing to improve their own practice. Finnigan and Gross (2007), for example, studied ten elementary schools in Chicago that had been placed on probation for low test scores to determine if accountability sanctions influenced teacher motivation. They found that indeed the teachers were motivated to work harder, try new teaching approaches, and participate in professional development. However, Finnigan and Gross (2007) also noted that the teachers appeared to be more motivated to raise test scores because of their professional status and individual goals for students than by external threats. Moreover, the longer schools remained on probation, the more likely teacher morale declined and reversed any gains made through increased effort.

Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing

Although some researchers, as shown above, have found positive effects of high-stakes testing, the research documenting unintended, negative effects is widespread. Stecher (2002) found that negative effects occurred in the following forms: negative curriculum reallocation, adapting teaching styles to test formats, negative coaching, and cheating. Additional negative effects cited in the literature include emotional stress, score inflation, the use of educational triage practices for increasing scores, and adverse impact for low-income and ethnic minority students.

Negative curriculum reallocation. Several studies (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2007; Hargrove et al., 2000; K. W. White & Rosenbaum, 2008) have documented that, under high-stakes testing, teachers provide more instruction towards those content areas and standards tested than those not tested. For example, M. L. Smith (1991) and M. L. Smith and Rottenberg (1991) showed that at two schools in Phoenix, testing limited the curriculum teachers taught and reduced their ability to veer from tested objectives. Consequently, testing reduced available instruction time for non-tested subjects. Likewise, Au (2007) found, in his metasynthesis of 49 qualitative research studies, that high-stakes tests encouraged what he called content control which involved actual narrowing of instructional content to tested subjects with non-tested subjects being left behind. Jones et al. (1999) surveyed teachers in North Carolina and found that untested subjects such as science and social studies were taught much less than the tested subjects of writing, math, and reading.

Adapting teaching styles to test formats. Studies have also indicated that teachers adjust their teaching and assessment styles to match those found on high-stakes

tests. In some cases this involved an increase in the use of multiple-choice questions (Hamilton et al., 2007; Smith, 1991; Smith & Rottenberg, 1991; K. W. White & Rosenbaum, 2008), and in other instances it meant much deeper pedagogical changes. For example, Au (2007) found that in addition to the content control mentioned above, high-stakes testing encouraged formal and pedagogic control. Formal control referred to how the structure of knowledge was changed to match test-based objectives. Knowledge was taught as isolated bits of information and was normally learned only in the context of the tests themselves. Pedagogic control referred to the changes in instruction that occurred from student-centered to teacher-centered to cover the tested material.

Negative coaching. Stecher (2002) identified negative coaching as teachers spending large amounts of time coaching students on test-taking strategies and practice passages in lieu of time spent teaching content. Several studies have documented the need teachers feel to teach to the test. Herman and Golan (1993) surveyed and interviewed teachers at 11 school districts in nine states. They found that teachers felt pressure to raise test scores, and administrators gave close attention to test preparation. Moreover, tests affected lesson planning and instruction and large amounts of time were spent in test preparation. Hillocks (2002) found increased teaching to the test among low socio-economic-status (SES) students. He conducted a case study, written with Vera Wallace, contrasting the differences between an affluent school and a poor school in Texas preparing students for TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills). Unlike teachers at the affluent school, who received progressive writing instruction through a National Writing Project, teachers at the low-SES school only received training on test

preparation, spent more time teaching to the test, and even postponed instruction in non-tested subjects.

Cheating. As the use of high-stakes tests has increased, so have the reports of cheating (Amrein-Beardsley, Berliner, & Rideau, 2010). Hoffman, Assaf, and Paris (2001) surveyed 200 Texas teachers about the TAAS test. They found that a small number of teachers admitted to cheating on the TAAS through pointing out mismarked items, providing instruction during the test, and directly pointing out correct answers. Blatant cheating was reported most commonly in the lowest performing schools.

Nichols and Berliner (2007) collected newspaper articles nationwide that documented various forms of cheating on high-stakes tests. Cheating conducted by teachers included viewing and sharing copies of the test prior to its administration, coaching students during the test, changing students' answers, and excluding low-performers from testing. Additionally, Nichols and Berliner (2007) found evidence of students cheating and even school districts and state departments of education cheating as well. Examples of district and state cheating included falsifying the number of high school dropouts and manipulating test scores.

Most recently, in one of the largest cheating scandals in U.S. history, 178 educators, including 38 principals, in the Atlanta Public Schools were found to have changed answers on Georgia's Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) (Wilson, Bowers, & Hyde, 2011). Cheating was confirmed in 44 of the 56 schools examined, and more than eighty educators confessed.

Emotional stress. Numerous studies have also documented the emotional stress caused by high-stakes testing on teachers and students (Hargrove et al., 2000). M. L.

Smith (1991) and M. L. Smith and Rottenberg (1991) showed that publication of test scores produced feelings of embarrassment and anger, and teachers vowed to do what was necessary to avoid such feelings in the future. They also found that teachers felt conflicted and alienated by the need to raise test scores and often questioned the validity of the test. Finally, teachers felt guilty about the emotional impact testing had on children. Herman and Golan (1993) showed that teachers at schools with increasing test scores felt more pressure to continue improving them while teachers at schools with decreasing scores felt that the decline was largely out of their control. Effects were stronger for low-SES schools.

Triplett and Barksdale (2005) documented test-related stress by examining student drawings. They studied third- through sixth-graders' perceptions of high-stakes testing by having 225 students draw a picture and write an explanation about their testing experience the day after the test. Triplett and Barksdale (2005) emphasized the substantial, negative themes of the drawings and provided suggestions for teachers in dealing with student stress. Finally, Sheldon and Biddle (1998) examined the effects of test-based stress on teachers and students by reviewing laboratory experiments in self-determination theory. They found that when high-stakes and accountability measures were applied to learning environments, teachers became controlling and unresponsive to individual students (Deci, Spiegel, Ryan, Koestner, & Kauffman, 1982). Moreover, students lost intrinsic interest in subjects, learned at a superficial level, and were discouraged from future learning (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987).

Score inflation. Koretz (2008) explained that test inflation occurs when scores increase because of cheating, teaching to the test, and negative curriculum reallocation

rather than actual gains in achievement. He documented score inflation in third grade at a large urban district from 1986 to 1991. When a new test (with only moderate stakes) was introduced in 1987, scores dropped the equivalent of one half-year from the previous year's scores (4.3 to 3.7). Scores on the new test gradually climbed each year and by 1990 reached 4.3, the score of the 1986 test. In 1990, the students were also given the first district test used in 1986 as well as the test that had been given the past four years. The scores on the 1986 test dropped to 3.6. Koretz (2008) argued that 3.6 most likely represented the students' actual performance while the higher gains were a result of score inflation due to teaching to the test.

Similarly, Amrein and Berliner (2002, 2003) examined the test scores of 18 states who, during the 1990s, required that students pass a high-stakes test to graduate from high school. They compared the high-stakes test scores to the SAT, ACT, AP (Advanced Placement), and NAEP scores for each state. It was assumed that since these tests assess similar knowledge, increases in the state tests would result in increases on the other tests as well. Amrein and Berliner (2002, 2003) found that although the high-stakes test scores increased in the 18 states, no apparent gains were made on the SAT, ACT, AP, or NAEP exams thus suggesting score inflation had occurred.

Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, and Stecher (2000) found evidence of score inflation in Texas. They compared TAAS scores to NAEP scores from 1994-1998 to investigate whether the large gains in reading and math on TAAS represented actual academic gains. They found that Texas students did improve significantly more on the fourth-grade NAEP math tests than did other states nationally. However, the size of the gains on NAEP was much smaller than those on TAAS and was not present on the eighth-grade

math test or reading tests. In terms of the achievement gap between whites and students of color, they found that NAEP showed the gap was large and increasing slightly, whereas TAAS showed a much smaller gap that was quickly decreasing.

Educational triage practices. Booher-Jennings (2005) examined elementary school teachers' responses to the Texas Accountability System. She found that teachers created the appearance of test score improvement by using a variety of "educational triage" practices (p. 232). These included focusing on bubble kids (those near passing) and excluding lowest performing students, focusing resources on those held accountable to the test, exempting students from testing through special education, and declaring DNQs (those not qualifying for special education) as unteachable. Such educational triage practices have been confirmed in quantitative studies as well in both Chicago and Texas (Neal & Schanzenbach, 2010; Reback, 2008)

Heilig and Darling-Hammond (2008) also found that the Texas high-stakes testing policies created incentives to "game the system" (p. 75). Heilig and Darling-Hammond (2008) followed a cohort of high school students in a large, urban district and found that 30% were retained in ninth grade and some were skipped past tenth grade to avoid the exit-level TAAS. Forty percent of the cohort withdrew or disappeared but the district only reported a 3.5% drop-out rate. Of those entering ninth grade in 1997, only 33% graduated from high school within five years. McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, and Heilig (2008) reported on the same data as Heilig and Darling-Hammond (2008). They explained that Texas schools were allowed to not count students as dropouts if they were pregnant, incarcerated, declared intent to take the GED (General Educational Development) test, or said they were transferring to another district. Thus, the district

was able to report a dropout rate of 2.8-3.4% when it was actually over 60%. Heilig and Darling-Hammond (2008) concluded that disaggregation of student scores by race does not lead to greater equity but instead increases the risk that poor, English language learners, African American, and Latino students will drop out of school.

Adverse impact. As evident from the previous examples above, a significant amount of research suggests that the negative, unintended consequences of high-stakes testing such as negative coaching, cheating, and emotional stress are most prevalent among schools with low-income and ethnic minority students (W.-P. Hong & Young, 2008). For example, Diamond and Spillane (2004) compared four schools under a high-stakes testing policy in Chicago. Two of the schools were on probation for producing low test scores and two were not. The two probation schools consisted largely of low-income and ethnic minority students.

Diamond and Spillane (2004) found that the probation schools increased instruction only in certain grades for specific students in certain subjects based on what tests were given and to whom, whereas the non-probation schools focused on subjects equally and emphasized improvement for all students in every grade. Probation schools adopted interventions only for specific sub categories of students to raise key test scores whereas non-probation schools adopted interventions for all students. Probation schools focused on strategic ways to raise overall test scores while non-probation schools used data to inform instruction.

Diamond and Spillane (2004) argued that a lack of resources and extra pressure placed on non-probation schools resulted in the difference. Such studies suggest that positive gains produced through high-stakes testing policies occur most often in White,

middle-class schools. However, those positive outcomes are overshadowed by the unintended, negative consequences that occur in low-income, ethnic minority schools.

Research on Teacher-Based Grade Retention

Teacher-based grade retention has been heavily studied over the last 60 years and has produced some of the most consistent, negative findings in research literature (House, 1989). Additionally, numerous meta-analyses (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001) and literature reviews (Shepard & Smith, 1989b; Xia & Kirby, 2009) have been published synthesizing this research. Below I draw on meta-analyses, literature reviews, and additional teacher-based retention studies to discuss the following recurring themes: tensions between research and practice, characteristics of retained students, retention and academic achievement, emotional effects, and dropping out of school.

Tensions Between Research and Practice

Researchers have noted that a tension exists between the research findings on grade retention and actual practice in public schools (Jimerson et al., 2006; Larsen & Akmal, 2007). Although the research literature consistently warns about the negative consequences associated with grade retention (e.g., Holmes, 1989, 2006; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001; Shepard & Smith, 1989b), it is still commonly used at a variety of grade levels in schools and has even increased in the last decade (Bulla & Gooden, 2003; Jimerson et al., 2006; Larsen & Akmal, 2007; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). The general public largely supports retention (Bulla & Gooden, 2003; Byrnes, 1989; Larsen & Akmal, 2007) and believes that social promotion, not retention, leads to high school dropouts (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Although both principals and teachers

believe that retention can be effective (Byrnes, 1989; Smith, 1989), most believe it is more helpful in the early grades than the latter (Bulla & Gooden, 2003; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). The research regarding the timing of grade retention has been mixed (Xia & Kirby, 2009). Although some studies have suggested that younger children experience fewer negative consequences from being retained (e.g., Ou & Reynolds, 2010), others have not (Allen, Chen, Willson, & Hughes, 2009; G. Hong & Yu, 2007; Shepard, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1989a).

Characteristics of Retained Students

As part of a longitudinal evaluation of New York City's test-based retention policy, the RAND Corporation conducted an extensive literature review, Xia and Kirby (2009), of the short- and long-term effects of retention on students' academic and nonacademic outcomes. Their literature review examined 91 studies on the effects of retention published between 1980 and 2008. Xia and Kirby (2009) examined the characteristics of children who are typically retained and found that retained students are normally male, ethnic minority, low SES, and among the youngest in their grade-level. Both African American and Latino students are more likely to be retained than White students. Retained students have more school transfers and are more likely to live in single-parent households. Parents of retained children typically have lower IQ scores, less education, lower-paying jobs, less appreciation for education, and less commitment to ensuring their children do well in school. They also are less involved in school and have lower expectations for their children's achievement in school than parents of promoted children. Retained children score lower on academic achievement tests and IQ tests. They tend to have more emotional and behavior problems, a lower self-concept,

and lower self-confidence. They are described by their teachers as more inattentive and have more absences and health problems.

Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education's civil rights office also found racial and ethnic disparities in student retentions (as cited in Adams, Robelen, & Shah, 2012). Using some of the first collected, national, school-by-school retention data, they found that 2.3% of students are annually retained in kindergarten through grade 12 with African American students being three times as likely to be retained and Latino students twice as likely to be retained as Caucasian students.

Retention and Academic Achievement

The majority of researchers have found little to no gains in academic achievement from grade retention. For example, Holmes and Matthews (1984) conducted a meta-analysis of 44 grade retention studies and found that promoted students achieved higher academically than retained students in language arts, reading, mathematics, work study skills, social studies, and grade-point averages. Holmes (1989) extended that meta-analysis to 63 retention studies and found negative effects occurring from retention in 54 of them. Retained students had lower achievement in language arts, reading, math, and social studies than students promoted. Of the nine studies that did show positive effects, retention policies also included early identification and special help for struggling students through individual education plans, continuous evaluation, and low student-teacher ratios. Shepard and Smith (1989b) reviewed several studies on the effects of grade retention in their book, *Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention*, and concluded that retention in grade does not benefit students academically and that retaining students in kindergarten, even in a transition program, does not boost academic

achievement or solve school readiness problems. Jimerson (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of 20 retention studies published between 1990 and 1999. Of the 20 studies examined, 16 concluded that grade retention was not an effective strategy for boosting academic achievement.

In their recent review of the literature, Xia and Kirby (2009) found that retention alone is ineffective for increasing academic achievement. Significant gains may be made during the retention year but improvements are usually not large enough to get retained students to the same level as promoted students. Xia and Kirby (2009) found that the vast majority of studies that showed immediate academic gains from retention also showed that those effects began to dissipate two to three years after the retention, completely disappearing after several years with the retained students falling behind again.

A couple of exceptions to this finding were Lorence and Dworkin's (2006) and Lorence, Dworkin, Toenjes, and Hill's (2002) studies that followed retained Texas third-grade students for six years and Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber's (1994) longitudinal study in Baltimore. These studies found that positive academic effects continued long-term but did decrease over time. In some of the studies where students showed gains (e.g., Lorence & Dworkin, 2006), intervention was also provided; however, researchers were unable to determine if the improvement was linked to retention or intervention.

In a recent meta-analysis of the grade retention literature, Allen, Chen, Willson, and Hughes (2009) examined 22 studies published between 1990 and 2007 using multilevel modeling. They found that quality of design was associated with less negative effects, challenging research that suggests retention has a negative effect on achievement

(e.g., G. Hong & Yu, 2007). Although they did not find negative effects from retention, they did not find positive effects from it either which, they concluded, offers no justification for the benefits of retention.

Emotional Effects

Grade retention has been thought to have negative emotional effects on students. Students have often described retention as harmful (Byrnes, 1989) and have listed it among their worst fears, equating it with losing a parent or going blind (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2004; Yamamoto & Byrnes, 1987). Holmes and Matthews (1984) found that retained students did not have as favorable of attitudes toward school as did promoted students and scored lower than promoted students on personal adjustment measures including three subareas: social adjustment, emotional adjustment, and behavior. Holmes (1989) also found that retained students scored lower on personal adjustment measures than promoted students though not statistically significant differences in the subcategories of social adjustment, emotional adjustment, and behavior. In a more recent review, however, Xia and Kirby (2009) found that the results of studies of the social, emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral effects on retained students when compared to promoted students were mixed with some studies showing positive outcomes and others insignificant or negative outcomes.

Dropping Out of School

Finally, numerous researchers have found that grade retention is associated with a higher likelihood of dropping out of school (Alexander et al., 1994; Xia & Kirby, 2009). Grissom and Shepard (1989) found that retention increases the likelihood of dropping out of school by 20-30%, even when controlling for achievement, SES, and gender.

Moreover, compared to promoted students, retained students are less likely to pursue postsecondary education (Ou & Reynolds, 2010) and more likely to get lower paying jobs (Xia & Kirby, 2009).

As with high-stakes testing, the research on teacher-based retention points to a similar conclusion. Although some evidence of academic gains has been shown to occur through teacher-based retentions, those gains ultimately come at the expense of the most vulnerable of students. Low-income, ethnic minority students are most often targeted for grade retention (Xia & Kirby, 2009). Even in the cases where these students do receive an academic boost from repeating a grade, those gains fade over time. The children eventually fall back behind and are at a much higher risk of dropping out of school.

Research on Test-Based Grade Retention Policies

The majority of researchers who have conducted studies on test-based retention policies have attempted to answer the question, Does it work? Do policies that combine retention with intervention improve student achievement and help struggling students catch-up academically with their similarly aged peers? Despite a significant amount of research finding negative consequences of teacher-based grade retention, the popularity of test-based retention policies has continued to grow. Moreover, researchers have argued that studies need to be conducted specifically on test-based grade retentions because they are qualitatively different from teacher-based retentions (Allensworth & Nagaoka, 2010; Greene & Winters, 2007). The different contexts in which the two occur provide a different basis for retention decisions as well as different experiences with retention.

Although the research on teacher-based retention is very one-sided in terms of the negative effects associated with it, the findings on test-based retention are more mixed and fewer in number. Below, I describe the research findings specifically conducted on test-based retention policies. However, I first briefly discuss the events that led to the recent push for the current test-based retention policies as well as provide a description of the policies that have been researched to date.

Historical Background

Although using a test to determine promotion or retention has existed for some time, it was not until the minimum competency movement of the late 1970s and the standards movement of the 1980s that the practice became more accepted. Decreasing SAT scores (Wirtz, 1977) and a perceived softening of grading and educational standards nationwide (Berliner & Biddle, 1995) fueled a growing concern that public schools were not making the grade. These fears culminated in the Reagan administration's publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) which called for additional testing designed to curb social promotion and increase student achievement.

Cities such as New York and Chicago (Millicent, 1997) and states like Florida (Morris, 2001) and Georgia (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1991) soon began test-based retention policies. However, many of these programs were cancelled by 1990 because of their high costs with few apparent gains (House, 1998, 2004). Despite these initial failures, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, their popularity was again increasing.

President Bill Clinton was largely responsible for regenerating interest in ending social promotion during the late 1990s. In 1996, at the National Education Summit in

Palisades, New York, Clinton urged governors to administer exams students must pass to be promoted (Cannon, 1996). In 1999, he again challenged the nation's governors: "Look dead in the eye some child who has been held back [and say], 'We'll be hurting you worse if we tell you you're learning something when you're not'" (as quoted in Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2000, p. 21). In 1999, Clinton issued a report (U.S. Department of Education, 1999) providing a guide for educators, state, and local leaders for ending social promotion. Chicago had again implemented a test-based retention policy in 1996, under the direction of Mayor Richard M. Daley, and Clinton showcased the Chicago policy as a model for what other cities and states could accomplish (Russo, 2005).

Overview of Researched Policies

Although an exact count is unavailable, several states (e.g., Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, Texas) and cities (e.g., Chicago, New York City) have enacted promotional gates in which students must pass a standardized test to be promoted to the next grade (Marsh et al., 2009). According to the Education Commission of the States, as of 2005, 12 states had established promotional gates in which students have to meet specific criteria, such as passing a state or local test, in certain grades to be promoted (Educational Commission of the States, 2005). Since then, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Tennessee have passed similar legislation (Educational Commission of the States, 2011). The bulk of the research on test-based retention policies has been conducted in Chicago (Roderick & Engel, 2001), Florida (Greene & Winters, 2007, 2009), and New York City (McCombs, Kirby, & Mariano, 2009). A much smaller amount of research has been conducted in Texas (Booher-Jennings, 2008), Georgia (Livingston & Livingston, 2002), Wisconsin (Brown, 2007), and Louisiana (Valencia &

Villarreal, 2005). Below, I provide a brief description of each policy that has been researched, as it is described in the literature, to provide a context for the research findings.

Chicago's test-based retention policy was among the first in recent years and has been the most widely researched. In 1996, the Chicago Public Schools declared an end to social promotion. Mayor Richard M. Daley, having been granted power to take over the Chicago Public Schools by the Illinois legislature, mandated that third, sixth, and eighth graders reach a cutoff score on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for promotion. As a result of this policy, Chicago initially retained between 7,000 and 10,000 students per year, roughly 20% of third graders and 10% of eighth graders (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005; Russo, 2005). The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) conducted an evaluation of the policy from 1996-2001 and has produced the majority of the research about it.

In 2003, Florida required third-grade students to score a Level-2 (of five levels) on the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in order to be promoted to fourth grade. Exceptions to the law include students with limited English proficiency or a severe disability, students who score above the 51st percentile on the Stanford-9, students who demonstrate proficiency through a performance portfolio, or students who have been retained twice.

In 2002, the New York state legislature granted Mayor Michael Bloomberg control of the New York City school system. He implemented the Children First Initiative which began various new programs including a test-based retention policy for grades 3, 5, 7, and 8. The policy began in grade 3 in 2003-2004 and extended to the later

grades each year thereafter. The law requires students to score a Level 2 or higher (out of four levels) on the New York State English language arts and mathematics tests in order to be promoted. Students at risk of failing are identified early in the year and are provided both in- and out-of-school intervention services including Saturday school and summer school. Students who fail the tests in the spring have a variety of ways to demonstrate proficiency: (a) a portfolio review of their spring work, (b) passing the summer standardized test, (c) a portfolio review of their summer work, (d) an appeals process. The New York City Department of Education asked the RAND Corporation to conduct a longitudinal study of the fifth-grade retention policy. The results of their study are reported in McCombs, Kirby, and Mariano (2009).

In February 2001, Georgia Governor Roy Barnes urged the legislature to end social promotion in his State of the State address (Barnes, 2001). On March 21, 2001, the Georgia legislature passed into law a bill that requires students in grades 3, 5, and 8 to pass the CRCT to be promoted to the next grades. Third graders must pass the reading CRCT while fifth and eighth graders must pass both the reading and math tests. The law took effect with third graders in 2003 and then was extended to fifth and eighth graders in 2004 and 2005. Students have two opportunities to pass the CRCT. If a child fails both administrations, he or she is automatically retained, but the child's parents may appeal through a Grade Placement Committee. The committee must unanimously agree for the child to be "placed" in the next grade. Unlike other states or cities with test-based retention policies, Georgia has had few statewide studies conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of its policy.

Proposed by then Governor George W. Bush and enacted in 1999 by the Texas legislature, the Student Success Initiative

(http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index3.aspx?id=3230&menu_id3=793%29) requires that Texas students pass the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in math and reading in grades 3, 5, and 8 to be promoted to the next grade. The policy began with third graders in 2002-2003, fifth graders in 2004-2005, and eighth graders in 2007-2008. Students receive three opportunities to pass the TAKS. As in Georgia, if a child fails all administrations, he or she automatically is retained, but the child's parents may appeal through a Grade Placement Committee. If the committee unanimously agrees, the child may be placed in the next grade. The law was amended in 2009 to apply only to grades 5 and 8.

In 1998, the Wisconsin state legislature passed the Wisconsin Act 237 which required all Wisconsin school districts beginning in 2002-2003 to retain students in grades 4 and 8 if they did not receive at least a basic score on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE) (Brown, 2007). The law was amended in 1999 to place retention decisions in the hands of local districts. School districts are to determine grade promotion in grades 4 and 8 by considering WKCE scores as well as other factors.

In 2000-2001, Louisiana implemented a policy requiring students in grades 4 and 8 to pass the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21st Century (LEAP 21) in language arts and math to be promoted to the next grade. This policy was suspended in 2009.

Although the policies in these cities and states are similar in requiring passing test scores for promotion, they do differ somewhat in their specific requirements for what

counts for promotion. For example, Texas (http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index3.aspx?id=3230&menu_id3=793), Georgia (Livingston & Livingston, 2002), Louisiana (Valencia & Villarreal, 2005) and Chicago (Russo, 2005) have all required a passing score on a single standardized test at certain gateway grades for promotion, whereas New York City (McCombs et al., 2009), Wisconsin (Brown, 2007) and Florida (Winters & Greene, 2006) have allowed for additional indicators such as an assessment portfolio or an alternative standardized test. Such variations in the policies may explain some of the different outcomes these studies have documented (Greene & Winters, 2007). Below I discuss the key findings of the studies conducted in Chicago, Florida, New York City, Georgia, Texas, Wisconsin, and Louisiana.

Academic Achievement

Several studies have reported positive outcomes, at least initially, from test-based retention policies, especially in terms of academic achievement as measured by standardized tests. For example, Roderick and Engel (2001) studied 102 low-achieving African American and Latino students in Chicago about their pretesting experiences and found that 53% reported that the threat of retention motivated them to work harder and pay greater attention in class. The high stakes also appeared to increase the support these students received from teachers and the time students spent studying outside of school.

Roderick, Jacob, and Bryk (2000, 2002) and Jacob (2005) found that the test scores in gateway grades in Chicago increased substantially when the high-stakes testing policies began, though the effects were larger for sixth and eighth grade than for third. Similarly, in Florida (Winters & Greene, 2006) and New York City (McCombs et al.,

2009), low-performing students who underwent the retention policy earned higher test scores than those who did not.

In Chicago (Roderick et al., 2002), Florida (Greene & Winters, 2006), and New York City (McCombs et al., 2009), students who were retained by these policies received an academic boost, at least short term. In Florida, students retained in 2003 made more progress in reading and especially math than similar students who were not retained (Winters & Greene, 2006), and in New York City, students who were retained in fifth grade scored considerably higher on seventh-grade assessments than comparable students who were not retained (McCombs et al., 2009). In New York City, the retained students' gains persisted two years out (McCombs et al., 2009), and in Florida, retained students' gains substantially increased the second year (Greene & Winters, 2007).

Research in Chicago, New York City, and Georgia also emphasized the effectiveness of the intervention provided through test-based retention policies. In Chicago, Roderick, Jacob, and Bryk (2004) and Jacob and Lefgren (2004) found that students made large academic gains in summer school and did so more quickly than they did during the regular school year. In New York City (McCombs et al., 2009), students who received intervention at the beginning of fifth grade scored higher on seventh-grade assessments than students who did not. In both New York City (McCombs et al., 2009) and Georgia (Henry, Rickman, Fortner, & Henrick, 2005), students who attended summer school scored higher on test retakes than those who did not.

Stone and Jacob (2005) found that the promotion policy was well-liked in Chicago schools by teachers, principals, and students. Teachers' time spent on test preparation did increase substantially once the policy was implemented but declined

somewhat in later years. Teachers provided more time on grade-level materials in reading and math skills relevant to the test, and struggling sixth and eighth graders received greater instructional support and reported being more academically engaged. Finally, McCombs et al. (2009) reported that retained students in New York City did not exhibit negative emotional effects. Student surveys showed that retention did not harm their confidence in reading or math and that they reported a greater sense of connectedness to school than at-risk promoted students and not-at risk students even three years later.

“Sacrificial Lambs”

Although the gains in academic achievement mentioned above look promising, several studies have suggested that these positive findings may have occurred at the expense of the most vulnerable of students. For example, Roderick and Engel (2001) found that 53% of low-achieving African American and Latino students in Chicago were working harder and paying greater attention in school; however, they also found that 34% still remained who were not motivated by the high-stakes test and consequently did poorly. Roderick and Engel (2001) noted that test-based retention policies may benefit certain students while making “sacrificial lambs” out of those unable or unwilling to pass the required exams (p. 221). In other words, the increased motivation the majority of students in Chicago experienced may have been produced by sacrificing the educational opportunities of those who failed.

Short-Term Academic Gains

A growing body of research has documented the harmful outcomes on the educational opportunities for those who are retained through test-based retention. For

example, researchers in Chicago and Florida have found that the short-term gains produced through test-based retention, fade over time (Dennis, Kroeger, Welsh, Brummer, & Baek, 2010; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). In Chicago, Roderick and Nagaoka (2005) found that the academic boost students received from retention dissipated two years out, and sixth graders actually declined in academic growth through retention. The results also revealed that retained students in Chicago were much more likely to be placed in special education and thus exempted from testing during their retained year. Teachers were given little guidance in working with retained students and thus usually gave them a second dose of the interventions from the previous year, a finding also documented by Stone and Engel (2007). Intervention provided during summer school was a scripted, test-preparation program that focused on skills needed for passing the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Roderick et al., 2004).

Increased Likelihood of Dropping Out

Allensworth (2005) linked retention in Chicago to dropout rates. She compared eighth-grade cohorts of students before and after implementation of the Chicago policy and showed that retention based on test scores did have a harmful effect on dropping out of school, though the relationship was smaller than seen with traditional teacher-based retention. Interestingly, Allensworth (2005) also found that district wide, small decreases of dropout rates among those not retained counterbalanced the higher number of dropouts among those retained so that the overall retention rate slightly decreased. This finding suggested that although the overall drop-out rate slightly decreased under the policy, it may have done so by increasing the drop-out rate of those who failed. Jacob and Lefgren (2009) also found a link between Chicago's test-based retention policy and high school

dropout rates. They compared eighth graders to sixth graders and found the eighth graders were more likely to dropout under the policy.

Promotes and Demotes: Moral Boundary Work

Anagnostopoulos (2006) examined Chicago's test-based retention policy at the high school level in which ninth graders who failed the standardized math and reading tests were demoted. Demoted ninth graders were required to attend a homeroom class designated for demoted students and enroll in remedial math and reading courses, though they still could take other tenth-grade courses. Anagnostopoulos (2006) found that high-school students and teachers used test-based retentions to create boundaries in distinguishing promoted students from demoted ones. Using a cultural sociological perspective, she showed that instead of encouraging teachers and ninth-grade students to achieve academically, the policy promoted a kind of moral boundary work in which teachers justified not providing demoted students, whom they considered undeserving, with enriching learning opportunities. Success or failure on the test provided fodder for identity constructions and social exclusion.

Adverse Impact

In addition to limiting educational opportunities for struggling students, some studies have suggested that test-based retention policies can have an adverse impact on certain student groups. For example, Greene and Winters (2009) found that Florida educators discriminated against African American and Latino students when promoting or retaining students in the Grade Placement Committee meetings. African American students were significantly more likely (about 4% more) to be retained, and Latino students were about 9% more likely to be retained than Caucasian students, even when

controlling for academic achievement. However, Greene and Winters (2009) also argued that it was not always a favor to be promoted through the appeals process by citing the short-term academic boost they found that students received from retention.

Livingston and Livingston (2002) conducted a study after the passing of the Georgia law but prior to its implementation. They examined CRCT scores from the State of Georgia's Office of Education Accountability and demographic data compiled by the University of Georgia Department of Housing and Consumer Economics for 39 southern counties with high numbers of African American and impoverished students. They found that the CRCT has an adverse impact on impoverished African American children. African American children are much more likely to fail the CRCT and consequently be retained. Livingston and Livingston (2002) argued that such failure will have an adverse impact on these students and increase their likelihood for dropping out of school.

Likewise, Valencia and Villarreal (2005) examined the initial TAKS scores for Texas third graders in 2003. Although they were unable to analyze the scores of the second and third retakes, based on the initial scores, they predicted that more ethnic minority students would fail and thus be retained, increasing their likelihood of dropping out.

Valencia and Villarreal (2005) compared retention rates for Louisiana students over a four-year period from 1997 to 2001. The state's test-based retention policy was implemented in 2000-2001, and students began taking the LEAP 21 for promotion in grades 4 and 8. They found that prior to the policy, 1 in 15 African American fourth graders was retained and 1 in 29 Caucasian fourth graders. After the policy was implemented, 1 in 4 African American fourth graders was retained and 1 in 13

Caucasians. An even more disproportionate number were retained in eighth grade. In eighth, 1 in 13 African Americans and 1 in 21 Caucasians were retained prior to the policy, and 1 in 3 African Americans and 1 in 10 Caucasians were retained afterwards. Valencia and Villarreal (2005) argued that such numbers provide evidence for the disproportionate, adverse impacts such policies have on African American students.

Masking Social Inequities

Finally, a few studies have suggested that test-based retention policies are ingraining in students the ideology that success on high-stakes tests are solely the result of effort while masking the connection between educational achievement and social inequities within the U.S. Drawing on Bourdieu (1982/1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990), Anagnostopoulos (2006) showed that at the high school level, Chicago's test-based retention policy enacted symbolic violence on demoted students by obscuring the connection between test scores and class inequities while imposing the belief that educational achievement is largely based on moral decisions such as good behavior in school, self-discipline, and perseverance.

Similarly, Booher-Jennings (2008) found that Texas teachers exposed students to the hidden curriculum of achievement ideology. Through their day-to-day words and actions, teachers communicated to students that success on the state test was based on hard work and individual effort. However, Booher-Jennings (2008) also noticed the teachers differed in the way this message was communicated to boys and girls. Boys who failed were blamed by the teachers for their poor behavior and bad attitudes. The girls, however, were said to just need more self-esteem to pass. Out of the 37 students Booher-Jennings (2008) interviewed, the vast majority believed that it was right to base

promotion on a standardized test. Most boys accepted the teachers' reasons for their failure, and girls who failed worked hard to show others they were not like the boys who just did not try. Only three students, all boys, questioned the fairness of test-based retention and expressed doubt that working hard in school would benefit their futures.

Discussion: Achievement at Whose Expense?

Based on the research literature, it is evident that some of the intended benefits of testing and retention have occurred. For example, high-stakes tests can improve alignment between curriculum and instruction (Hamilton et al., 2007; Koretz et al., 1994; Stecher, 2002). Testing has been shown to help teachers identify student needs and motivate teachers and students to work harder (Finnigan & Gross, 2007). In both teacher and test-based retention programs that incorporate intervention, students have shown to make short-term academic gains (Greene & Winters, 2007; Lorence et al., 2002; McCombs et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2002; Winters & Greene, 2006; Xia & Kirby, 2009). These programs appear to be popular and motivate the majority of at-risk students to work harder (Roderick & Engel, 2001; Stone & Jacob, 2005).

On the other hand, negative, unintended consequences often occur from the use of these policies and adversely affect the most vulnerable of students. High-stakes testing policies have consistently resulted in negative curriculum reallocation, adapting teaching styles to test formats, negative coaching, cheating, and educational triage practices (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; McNeil et al., 2008). All of these produce score inflation (Koretz, 2008) and appear to be most prevalent in probationary schools with large numbers of low-income, ethnic minority students (W.-P. Hong & Young, 2008).

In terms of the research on teacher-based grade retention, academic boosts produced from retention are normally short-lived with the retained students falling behind again in later years (Xia & Kirby, 2009). Those retained are often the most vulnerable students, and retention increases the likelihood that these students will later dropout of school (Xia & Kirby, 2009). Although assumed by teachers, administrators, and the public at large (Bulla & Gooden, 2003; Byrnes, 1989; Smith, 1989; Tomchin & Impara, 1992) to help struggling students, teacher-based retention greatly increases the likelihood that students will retreat from educational experiences.

With test-based retention policies, although the majority of students may be motivated to work harder, a significant number of struggling students appear unaffected by these policies (one-third in Chicago) (Roderick & Engel, 2001). In some cases, the retained year is not much different than students' initial year prior to the retention (Stone & Engel, 2007), and retained students are at an increased risk for dropping-out (Allensworth, 2005; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009). Like teacher-based retention, academic gains through test-based retention fade over the long run (Dennis et al., 2010). Gains in Chicago faded in the second year (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005).

As seen above, a growing amount of evidence suggests that what academic gains do occur from test-based grade retention policies are likely occurring at the expense of the most vulnerable of students. Linn (2000) has argued that for a politician only elected for a short-term, short-term gains may be all that is needed. In a case study on Wisconsin's test-based grade retention policy, Brown (2007) argued that Wisconsin policymakers implemented their policy "not to hold students back but rather to instill accountability into the educational system" (p. 4). Legislators were being pressed to raise

achievement statewide. They saw this type of policy as a means to boost achievement through increased accountability. Overall achievement and not the fate of those retained was their main concern. Retaining students was an unfortunate necessity to ensure that schools were keeping high standards and that the majority of students were being motivated to do better. Retention, Brown (2007) argued, was viewed simply as a byproduct (casualty) of improving academic performance and not as an intervention itself. The harmful effects of retention were not a problem for Wisconsin policy makers unless they affected large numbers of students. Such findings echo claims by proponents of test-based retention policies such as Russo (2005) who argued that "...student retention policies are not really about the students who are retained as much as they are about the way the rest of the school system operates when it knows there is not social promotion" (p. 47).

Implications for Policy Makers and Researchers

Several professional organizations have issued statements about the role of high-stakes tests in determining promotion and retention (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999; American Educational Researchers Association, 2000; Dennis et al., 2012; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003). These reports all have urged policy makers to abandon retention practices based on single, high-stakes test scores. Standardized tests, they argued, are only an estimate within a margin of error based on a small sample of questions in a certain area and should not be treated as an exact measure of student knowledge.

Penfield (2010) assessed test-based grade retention to see if it stands up to professional standards for fair and appropriate test use. Drawing on the National

Research Council's (Heubert & Hauser, 1999) standards for fair and appropriate test use, he found violations in terms of attribution of cause and effectiveness of treatment.

Penfield (2010) cited evidence that test scores for nondominant groups could be attributed to poor instruction or linguistic and cultural content of the assessment rather than obtained knowledge and skills. Second, Penfield (2010) cited research on retention that suggests that grade retention is a potentially harmful placement. If retention harms academic performance or increases the likelihood of dropping out, this could be a violation of fair and appropriate test use.

Such consistent ethical concerns by professional educational organizations, along with the growing research documenting the harmful effects of test-based retention policies provide ample evidence that policy makers should strongly consider ending these policies. However, the need to end test-based retention should not imply that social promotion is a beneficial alternative. Numerous researchers have argued that both retention and social promotion are failed strategies (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Owings & Kaplan, 2001).

Nevertheless, retention and social promotion are not the only options. Rather than retaining or socially promoting struggling students, researchers have suggested numerous alternatives that include ideas such as increasing skillful teaching through enhanced professional development (Darling-Hammond, 1998), using classroom assessments that better inform teaching, and more effectively implementing differentiated and small group instruction (Dennis et al., 2012). Two practical alternatives that schools could implement are reconceptualizing school organization and enacting promotion plus policies (Smith & Shepard, 1989).

Reconceptualizing school organization consists of allowing grade structures to be more flexible. Smith and Shepard (1989) described various approaches to this. One consists of having ungraded instruction in the primary grades. Another involves allowing a student who is behind in reading to go to a younger grade for instruction just in that subject. In schools where numerous students move among grades there are fewer stigmas involved. Other teachers have chosen to promote students who are still behind academically but work with the next grade's teacher to develop an individualized intervention plan for the child.

In promotion plus policies, teachers implement individualized interventions to help struggling students throughout the year in a variety of within-class, pull-out, after school, and summer school tutoring sessions. Students are then promoted to the next grade at the end of the year.

In terms of implications for researchers, the vast majority of studies on test-based retention have been large-scale, quantitative studies seeking to determine if these policies improve academic achievement on standardized tests (e.g., McCombs et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2002; Winters & Greene, 2006). Only a few qualitative case studies (e.g., Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Booher-Jennings, 2005, 2008) have attempted to understand how these policies are being negotiated by students, teachers, and administrators. Few studies have followed students throughout these policies to better learn how they are actually being implemented in schools.

The lack of research in this area is one that needs to be addressed. Some researchers have argued that large-scale, quantitative studies solely focusing on achievement gains as measured by test scores mask the social inequities that produce

such scores and the role schools and examinations play in class selection and exclusion (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990). Further exploration is needed to examine what these tests are concealing and to flesh out the processes in which these policies obscure the connection between achievement scores and class inequities.

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CHAPTER 3

“MAKING THE DIFFICULT CHOICE”: UNDERSTANDING GEORGIA’S TEST- BASED GRADE RETENTION POLICY IN READING¹

¹ Huddleston, A. P. To be submitted to *American Educational Research Journal*.

Abstract

The author uses Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus to analyze how students, parents, teachers, and administrators are responding to Georgia's test-based grade retention policy in reading. In this multiple case study, the author interviewed, observed, and collected documents regarding ten fifth graders, their parents, teachers, and administrators. Within the field of test-based retention, the students and parents brought cultural, social, and economic capital that received little value, and they readily accepted that the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) was trustworthy and retention was fair. However, believing that retaining students would ultimately reproduce the inequities the policy claimed to address, the teachers and administrators used an appeals procedure to ensure that retention was not based solely on test scores.

Keywords: Bourdieu, case study, constant comparative method, grade repetition, high-stakes testing, literacy, social promotion, test-based grade retention

In February 2001, Governor Roy Barnes urged the Georgia legislature to end social promotion in his State of the State Address (Barnes, 2001). Arguing that social promotion is unfair to both teachers and students, he asked that the legislature pass a bill that would require Georgia students to pass a criterion-based standardized test to be promoted to the next grade. Governor Barnes (2001) explained:

The time has come to end social promotion in our schools. Now, nobody wants to have to hold a child back in school. It is difficult for them to be separated from their peers. But if some children are still behind even after we have taken every step available to give them extra help . . . we owe it to them to *make this difficult choice* [emphasis added]. . . . But mostly, we should do it in fairness to those students who are passing through our system today without learning what they need to know. By promoting a child who is not really ready, we say, ‘It’s okay if you don’t learn.’ Well, I say, it is not okay. (§ 23-24)

Barnes argued that the test-based retention policy in Texas, passed by then Governor George W. Bush, offered an effective model for Georgia.

The Georgia legislature moved quickly. One month later, on March 21, 2001, it passed the Georgia Promotion, Placement, and Retention Law (Georgia State Board of Education, 2001), requiring that students in grades 3, 5, and 8 pass the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) to be promoted to the next grades. According to the law, third graders must pass the reading CRCT while fifth and eighth graders must pass both the reading and math CRCTs. The law took effect with third graders in 2003-2004 and was extended to fifth graders in 2004-2005 and eighth graders in 2005-2006.

Although the policy was expressly enacted to end social promotion in Georgia (Barnes, 2001), researchers have found that the majority of students (61-68% of third graders in 2003-2004) who fail the CRCT in gateway grades are “placed” in the next grade through an appeals procedure (Henry, Rickman, Fortner, & Henrick, 2005; Mordica, 2006). Research that examines how students, parents, teachers, and administrators are responding to such policies could provide needed information concerning how test-based retention is being implemented in schools.

Purpose

This qualitative, multiple case study (Stake, 2006) was designed to explore the experiences of ten case students, their parents, teacher, interventionists, and administrators as they navigated Georgia’s test-based grade retention policy in reading in the spring of 2011. All ten students were fifth graders who were identified by their teacher as receiving intervention in reading. The purpose of this study was two-fold: (a) to understand how students who have previously struggled on the reading CRCT, their parents, teachers, and administrators are responding to Georgia’s test-based grade retention policy and (b) to learn how Georgia’s test-based grade retention policy is being implemented in schools.

Literature Review

Although testing policies are frequently associated with No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002), the current push for test-based grade retention policies actually began in 1999 when President Bill Clinton’s administration issued a report (U.S. Department of Education, 1999) providing a guide for educators, state, and local leaders for ending social promotion. Social promotion, they argued, consists of

“allowing students who have failed to meet performance standards and academic requirements to pass on to the next grade with their peers instead of completing or satisfying requirements” (p. 5). Chicago had implemented a test-based retention policy in 1996, under the direction of Mayor Richard M. Daley, and Clinton showcased the Chicago policy as a model for what other cities and states could accomplish (Russo, 2005).

Unlike teacher-based retention, in which promotion and retention decisions are made by the classroom teacher, test-based retention policies establish promotional gates in which students have to meet specific criteria, such as passing a state or local test, in certain grades to be promoted. As of 2005, the Education Commission of the States, reported that 12 states had established such policies (Educational Commission of the States, 2005). Since then, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Tennessee have passed similar legislation (Educational Commission of the States, 2011).

The bulk of the research on test-based retention policies has been conducted in Chicago (Roderick & Engel, 2001), Florida (Greene & Winters, 2007, 2009), and New York City (McCombs, Kirby, & Mariano, 2009). A much smaller amount of research has been completed in Texas (Booher-Jennings, 2005, 2008), Georgia (Livingston & Livingston, 2002), Wisconsin (Brown, 2007), and Louisiana (Valencia & Villarreal, 2005). The majority of this research has consisted of large-scale quantitative studies attempting to determine if retention, combined with intervention improves student achievement and helps struggling students catch-up academically with their similarly aged peers. Interestingly, the results of test-based retention policies have been quite consistent with that of teacher-based retention (Xia & Kirby, 2009). Although some test-

based retention policies have shown to produce short-term academic gains (Greene & Winters, 2007; McCombs et al., 2009; Roderick, Jacob, & Bryk, 2002; Winters & Greene, 2006), these gains appear to fade over time (Dennis, Kroeger, Welsh, Brummer, & Baek, 2010; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005) with retained students again falling behind but with a much larger likelihood of later dropping-out of school (Allensworth, 2005; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009).

Only a handful of studies have examined how these policies are actually being implemented and how the participants involved in them are responding. For example, Booher-Jennings (2005), examined elementary school teachers' responses to test-based retention in Texas. She found that teachers created the appearance of test score improvement by using a variety of "educational triage" practices (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 232). These included focusing on "bubble kids" (those believed to be almost ready to pass the high-stakes test) while excluding lowest performing students, focusing resources on those held accountable to the test, exempting students from testing through special education, and declaring DNQs (those not qualifying for special education) as unteachable (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 241).

Another study that focused on student and teacher responses to test-based retention is Anagnostopoulos (2006). Anagnostopoulos (2006) examined Chicago's test-based retention policy at the high school level in which ninth graders who failed the standardized math and reading tests were demoted. Demoted ninth graders were required to attend a homeroom class designated for demoted students and enroll in remedial math and reading courses, although they still could take other tenth-grade courses. Anagnostopoulos (2006) found that high-school students and teachers used test-based

retentions to create boundaries in distinguishing promoted students from demoted ones. Using a cultural sociological perspective she showed that instead of encouraging teachers and ninth-grade students to achieve academically, the policy promoted a kind of moral boundary work in which teachers justified not providing demoted students, whom they considered undeserving, with enriching learning opportunities. Success or failure on the test provided fodder for identity constructions and social exclusion.

A few studies have suggested that test-based retention policies are ingraining in students the ideology that success on high-stakes tests are solely the result of effort while masking the connection between educational achievement and social inequities within the U.S. Drawing on Bourdieu (1982/1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990), Anagnostopoulos (2006) showed that at the high school level, Chicago's test-based retention policy enacted symbolic violence on demoted students by obscuring the connection between test scores and class inequities while imposing the belief that educational achievement is largely based on moral decisions such as good behavior in school, self-discipline, and perseverance.

Similarly, Booher-Jennings (2008) found that Texas teachers exposed students to the hidden curriculum of achievement ideology. Through their day-to-day words and actions, teachers communicated to students that success on the state test was based on hard work and individual effort. Out of the 37 students Booher-Jennings (2008) interviewed, the vast majority believed that it was right to base promotion on a standardized test. Only three students, all boys, questioned the fairness of test-based retention and expressed doubt that working hard in school would benefit their futures.

Although several of these policies contain an appeals process in which students who fail the test can be “placed” in the next grade (e.g., Texas, Florida, Georgia), this process has received little attention. One exception is Greene and Winters (2009) who found that Florida educators discriminated against African American and Latino students when placing or retaining students in the Grade Placement Committee (GPC) meeting. African American students were significantly more likely (about 4% more) to be retained, and Latino students were about 9% more likely to be retained than Caucasian students, even when controlling for academic achievement. Research that documents how decisions in these GPC meetings are made would be especially informative in states like Georgia in which the majority of students who fail the CRCT are “placed” in the next grade through an appeals process (Henry et al., 2005; Mordica, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu (1972/1977, 1982/1991, 2007) researched economic, social, and cultural class domination in various areas of social life. In so doing, he developed a set of “thinking tools” (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 157) to explain how class domination occurs. Among his most well-known theoretical concepts are field, capital, and habitus. Bourdieu (1972/1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) often used an analogy of a card game to explain field, capital, and habitus and the complex ways they interrelate. Just as every card game has rules that define how the game is played, what specific cards mean, and how the game is won, so do capital and habitus interact within social fields to determine human actions.

Fields, as Bourdieu (1982/1991; Grenfell & James, 1998) called them, are structured social spaces that have their own rules and means of domination that assign

value to the resources agents receive. Bourdieu studied a diverse number of social fields throughout his career, such as the artistic field, the university field, the field of elite schools, and the religious field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The field is essentially the game itself, a site of struggle, with its rules for allocating and accruing resources and ultimately determining winners and losers. Test-based retention policies, for example, are social fields in which various players (e.g., students, parents, educators, politicians) compete for what counts as learning and what determines promotion.

In life, agents (or players) are dealt a hand of cards. Likewise, within a specific field, individuals have a variety of resources or capital on which their social standing is largely based. Bourdieu (2007) distinguished between four different types of capital (or cards) agents possess within a field: economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital. Economic capital consists of material goods that are directly convertible into money. Social capital is the resources acquired through social networks and group memberships, and cultural capital consists of competencies, skills, and qualifications. Bourdieu (2007) described three different types of cultural capital: embodied capital (e.g., knowledge, skills, and linguistic practices), objectified capital (e.g., physical goods, texts, and material objects), and institutional capital (e.g., academic degrees, awards, and credentials).

Bourdieu (2007) argued that economic, social, and cultural capital all work together within certain fields to produce symbolic capital. Symbolic capital, for example, includes intangible but powerful resources such as honor, prestige, and attention. In test-based retention policies, the amounts and types of capital various players bring enables or prohibits their likelihood of accruing more capital within the field.

Bourdieu (1972/1977) defined habitus as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” and also “the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations” (p. 72). He maintained that although the family an individual is born into occurs by chance, the likelihood that that person will remain in the social class in which he or she is born does not. A system of social structures has been put in place by the dominant class to ensure that the benefits they have experienced will be inherited by their children. Once those structures are in place, Bourdieu (1972/1977) argued, all the dominant class must do is “let the system they dominate take its own course” (p. 190). For Bourdieu, the habitus represented the transfer of the objective structures of the field into the subjective structures of thought and action. Returning to the analogy of a card game, the habitus represents how individuals within a given field play the game. Fields have rules and requirements that humans often accept unknowingly. When these ingrained structures influence people’s decisions and actions, a doxic relationship, as Bourdieu (1972/1977) called it, exists.

For example, a doxic situation occurs when oppressed groups (e.g., struggling students) accept differences among social classes (e.g., academic achievement) as natural occurrences based on hard work or natural talents. Bourdieu (1972/1977) explained that doxic situations ultimately produce symbolic violence in which the oppressed accept their mistreatment as a natural part of the way things are and should be. In so doing, they unknowingly participate in their own oppression, ensuring that inequities will continue to be reproduced (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990).

However, Bourdieu (1972/1977) also argued that the social structures within society do not completely determine one’s outcome. Individuals do have some agency in

how they play their cards. Although the strategy-generating dispositions of individuals can match the structures of a given field (orthodoxy), they can also reject them (heterodoxy). Individuals do possess some generative capabilities for improving their social standings.

Bourdieu's (1972/1977) concepts of field, capital, and habitus provide a useful framework for understanding how students, parents, teachers, and administrators are responding to the test-based retention policy in Georgia. By analyzing the field of Georgia public schools at the fifth-grade level, in which passing for promotion is required and examining the habitus of the students, their parents, teachers, and administrators, I can better understand how the different individuals affected by this policy are responding (playing their cards).

In order to better understand how Georgia's test-based grade retention policy is being implemented, a Bourdieusian lens was used to generate the following questions that guided this study:

Overarching Question

How are students who struggle with the reading CRCT, parents, teachers, and administrators responding to Georgia's test-based retention policy?

Guiding Research Questions

- How do students, parents, teachers, and administrators express agency when responding to Georgia's test-based retention policy?
- What tensions are expressed by students, parents, teachers, and administrators concerning the policy's underlying premises and requirements?

- How are schools using the appeal option to seek promotion for students who have failed the reading CRCT twice?

Research Methods

This study was a qualitative, multiple case study (Stake, 2006) designed to explore the experiences of students who were identified by their teacher as receiving intervention in reading. Yin (2003) noted that case studies are the “preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (p. 1). Case studies allow researchers to better understand how participants within a case experience the world around them while also providing evidence of the larger phenomenon the case exemplifies (Cohen & Court, 2003; Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

Participant Selection

The participants consisted of ten fifth-grade students, their parents, classroom teacher, interventionists, and administrators at a semi-rural elementary school in Georgia. The school was recommended by an educational leadership professor who knew several area principals he thought might be open to participating in a research study. In addition to the willingness of the administrators to participate, I selected Plains Elementary (all names are pseudonyms) because it appeared to be in many ways a “typical case” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 75). For example, the demographic make-up of Plains is similar to that of Georgia elementary schools statewide (e.g., <http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/ReportingFW.aspx?PageReq=102&StateId=ALL&T=1>). At Plains, approximately 57% of the students receive free or reduced lunches, and the student body is 64% Caucasian, 16% Latino, 14% African American, 2% Asian, and 4%

multiracial. Nine percent of the students are English language learners. Although a semi-rural school, it is large, over 900 students, and does receive Title 1 funding. Plains also appeared typical in the sense that the principal explained up front that they did not normally retain students in the upper elementary grades and often placed students who failed the CRCT in the next grade through the appeals process. As mentioned previously, other studies have found this to be typical throughout Georgia (Henry et al., 2005; Mordica, 2006).

To select a teacher for the study, the principal recommended a fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Hunter, who taught reading under the test-based retention policy and was willing and interested in participating in the study. Mrs. Hunter taught in a departmentalized grade and thus taught reading to both her homeroom students and another teacher's students. To select students, I presented my study to all of Mrs. Hunter's students who she identified as receiving some type of intervention in reading. I presented my study to 16 students, and ten chose to participate. See Table 1 for a description of the student participants and the interventions they received.

In addition to the ten students, their parents, classroom teacher, and administrators (principal and assistant principal), numerous interventionists served as participants as well. Eleven interventionists worked with one or more of the student participants during at least part of the study. The interventionists consisted of two English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers, two paraprofessionals, and seven Early Intervention Program (EIP) teachers. In Georgia, students participate in EIP if they fail the fourth-grade CRCT or are identified as being at-risk for failing by their teachers through the use of a state-provided EIP rubric (Hooper, Mills, & Smith, 2010). The state provides

additional funding for certified EIP teachers to provide intervention. Students may qualify for intervention as an English Language Learner (ELL) and/or EIP student, along with any required Response to Intervention (RtI) Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions. Counting students, parents, teachers, interventionists, and administrators, this study contained a total of 34 participants.

Data Collection

I collected data in three forms: interviews, observations, and documents. In this study I conducted semi-structured life world interviews. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) defined these as interviews “with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomenon” (p. 3). The interview protocols (available upon request) consisted of guiding questions that were informed by a Bourdieusian lens, helping me focus specifically on concepts the participants appeared to take for granted. Although the questions served primarily as starting points in the interviews, they helped elicit answers that provided insights into the participants’ experiences with school, beliefs about testing, and responses to test-based retention.

The principal, Mrs. Mathews, was interviewed once at the beginning of the study, and the assistant principal, Mrs. Tate, was interviewed once at the end. Mrs. Hunter, the classroom teacher, was interviewed three times throughout the project. All of the students were interviewed twice, with exception of Alexandria and Hallie. Because they failed the first administration of the CRCT, Alexandria and Hallie completed a third joint interview with their parents after they received their scores from the second administration. The students’ parents were interviewed once, again with the exception of

Alexandria and Hallie's parents, who were interviewed a second time with their child after the second test administration. Although a large number of interventionists were involved in working with the students, many of them only worked with a few students for a limited amount of time. Therefore, I only interviewed those who spent the largest amount of time with the most students and thus conducted a single interview with one ESOL teacher (Mrs. Thomas), one EIP teacher (Mrs. Henderson), and one paraprofessional (Mrs. West). A total of 40 interviews were conducted. Adult interviews averaged around 60 minutes in length, and child interviews averaged 30 minutes in length. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

The students' regular reading instruction was observed once a week beginning in late February and continued through the end of school in May. The students were involved in up to seven small tutoring groups that met periodically and consisted of EIP, ESOL, and Tier 2 and 3 interventions. All seven intervention groups were observed once every two weeks. Students who failed the first administration of the reading CRCT participated in a ten-day Boot Camp. I observed six of the ten sessions. I observed the first administration of the reading CRCT by serving as a proctor. To qualify to be a proctor I had to attend a CRCT training meeting. Additionally, I observed test-prep parties hosted by the school and one GPC meeting held for Hallie near the end of the study. In total, I conducted over 51 hours of observations. Field notes were taken, when possible, of all observations on a laptop computer. When I was unable to take field notes (e.g., during the CRCT administration and test-prep parties) I then took written notes as soon after the observations as possible.

To supplement the interview and observation data, available documents were collected and analyzed (McCulloch, 2004). These consisted of CRCT score reports, student work from regular reading instruction and intervention, letters sent to parents by the school informing them about the test-based retention policy, and paperwork from Hallie's GPC meeting.

During the initial student interview, I administered one reading assessment: the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990). This assessment provided a "natural context" activity (Eder & Fingerson, 2002, p. 183) for the students to complete during the interview and gave me information about their attitudes towards reading. In addition to the assessment, students had the option of keeping a weekly journal. Several of the students chose to write and/or draw in their journals on a weekly basis, responding to questions I provided about their experiences preparing for the reading CRCT.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of various levels. First, I analyzed the data using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006). This consisted of initial coding of all interview transcripts, documents, and observational field notes. After the initial coding was completed, I read through the data a second time and applied focused coding. These codes consisted primarily of the most frequent and significant initial codes, those that effectively represented the richness of the data (Saldaña, 2009). Throughout the analysis, I compared data and codes and then defined and collapsed focused codes into categories (Charmaz, 2006). I analyzed the data as I collected it and compared new data to developing categories to help determine what additional data were needed. As a form of

member checking (Roulston, 2010), I shared some of the developing categories with my participants in the second and third interviews to further clarify my understanding and seek additional information. Once the data were collected, I wrote case summaries of the findings for each of the ten student participants (Stake, 1995). I then used matrices for cross-case comparisons in which key categories common among all the cases were compared (Stake, 1995).

Charmaz (2006) argued that grounded theory is abductive work. Researchers inductively form hypotheses from their data and then check them by reexamining the data. The constant comparative method provides a tool not just for comparing data to data, but comparing data to extant theories or “sensitizing concepts” (Patton, 1990, p. 216) to illuminate developing hypotheses. Drawing on Handsfield and Jimenez (2009) and J. Marsh (2006), a final level of analysis consisted of directly applying Bourdieu’s (1972/1977) theoretical concepts of field, capital, and habitus to theorize the categories developed through the constant comparative method. For example, Handsfield and Jimenez (2009) applied Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field, and practice as sensitizing concepts to their categories obtained using the constant comparative method because, they argued, “traditional coding procedures risk oversimplifying the complex dialectic between habitus and field” (p. 170). The Bourdieusian analysis consisted of three steps: (a) analyzing the field in relation to the field of power, (b) mapping the structure of relations among the agents within the field, and (c) analyzing the habitus of the agents (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Grenfell & James, 1998).

An example of this Bourdieusian analysis can be illustrated by the students’ and parents’ acceptance of the test-based retention policy. Through the constant comparative

method, I identified acceptance of testing as a recurring category. The students and their parents largely accepted that the policy was fair, testing was trustworthy, and retention helped students academically achieve. Analyzing this category from a Bourdieusian lens, I found that such notions were not based simply on a mistaken educational belief but on a deep-seeded ideology (House, 1989). Bourdieu (1972/1977) referred to such taken-for-granted ideologies as *doxa* and theorized that they occur when the structures of the field become ingrained in the minds of the participants.

Findings

The following findings are organized in relation to the Bourdieusian analysis mentioned above. I first describe the field of test-based grade retention in Georgia in relation to the larger field of power in which various agents compete for limited resources. Second, I map the structure of relations among the agents within the field, specifically noting the different capitals they bring. Third, I examine the *habitus* of the agents and discuss how the participants are responding to test-based retention at their school.

The Field of Test-Based Grade Retention in Georgia

In this study, I specifically examined the field of test-based grade retention in Georgia. However, the field of test-based grade retention in which Plains Elementary resides is a part of larger, overlapping fields. For example, the Georgia policy is just one of several test-based retention policies passed in the last few years in response to a larger push for ending social promotion at the federal level. Additionally, the field of test-based retention exists within the larger field of public education, which exists within the still larger field of power. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) defined the field of power as a

“field of struggles for power among the holders of different forms of power” (p. 76). It is a “space of play and competition” where social agents possess different amounts of capital (e.g., economic and cultural capital) and “confront one another in strategies aimed at preserving or transforming this balance of forces” (p. 76). The field of public education resides within the field of power and is therefore greatly influenced by political and economic systems of society (Grenfell & James, 1998). This relationship affects what is expected of public education, how it is organized, and the values it legitimizes. Below, I describe the field of test-based retention in which Plains Elementary resides. I specifically examine how the rules and characteristics of that field have been influenced at the federal, state, and local levels.

Federal influences. Retaining students in grade is a practice as old as the advent of graded schooling itself, dating back to the mid-1800s (Shepard & Smith, 1989; Tyack, 1974). Using tests to determine promotions and retentions is almost as equally old, with written essays being used to determine retentions as early as the late 1800s (White, 1888). Although using a test to determine promotion or retention has existed for some time, it was not until the minimum competency movement of the late 1970s and the standards movement of the 1980s that the practice became more accepted (Koretz, 2008). Decreasing SAT scores (Wirtz, 1977) and a perceived softening of grading and educational standards nationwide (Berliner & Biddle, 1995) fueled a growing concern that public schools were not making the grade. These fears culminated in the Reagan administration’s publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) which called for additional testing designed to curb social promotion and increase student achievement.

Cities such as New York and Chicago (Millicent, 1997) as well as states like Florida (Morris, 2001) and Georgia (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1991) soon began test-based retention policies. However, many of these programs were cancelled by 1990 because of their high costs with few apparent gains (House, 1998). Despite these initial failures, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, their popularity was again increasing. As previously mentioned, President Bill Clinton was largely responsible for regenerating interest in ending social promotion during the late 1990s. By requiring that students, at least in part, pass a standardized exam to be promoted to the next grade, these states and cities have created a field in which the competition for the institutional cultural capital conferred by being promoted to the next grade is given to those whose economic and cultural capital have groomed them to succeed on a middle-class curriculum assessed by traditional standardized tests.

State influences. Georgia Governor Barnes' proposal to end social promotion was a part of a larger education reform package, House Bill 656: The Education Reform Act of 2001 (Strickland, 2008). Three groups (the Legislative Black Caucus, the Georgia Parent Teacher Association, and the Georgia Association of Educators) lobbied the Georgia legislature to not base student retention on a single test score. Consequently, Governor Barnes and his staff appeased these groups by allowing students to have two opportunities to pass the test and also giving the teacher or parent the right to appeal any retention.

The law successfully passed with the following requirements. Students who have previously failed the CRCT or are identified as struggling by their teachers receive intensive intervention throughout the school year (Georgia State Board of Education,

2001). Those who fail the first administration of the CRCT in April are offered accelerated and differentiated intervention, in addition to regular classroom instruction, during the month of May or during summer school in June and are then required to take the CRCT a second time. Those who fail the second administration are automatically retained, although the law does allow the parents/guardians or teachers to appeal a retention.

If a retention is appealed, a GPC meeting is held consisting of the school principal or designee, content area teacher, parent/guardian, and other school staff who might provide useful information about the child's achievement. The GPC may then consider other indicators of the student's academic performance in addition to the CRCT. A vote is taken to determine if the retention will stand, and the student may only be "placed" (actual promotion requires a passing CRCT score) to the next grade if the GPC unanimously agrees. By placing a student in the next grade, the GPC pledges that with additional intervention the child will be performing on grade level as measured by the CRCT by the end of the next academic year. Whether or not a child is placed or retained, a plan must be designed for additional assessment and intervention throughout the upcoming year.

Local influences. In addition to being influenced by federal and state policies concerning test-based retention, a transition occurred at Plains a few years ago that affected how the teachers and administrators positioned themselves within the field of test-based retention. Several of the teachers at Plains mentioned that six years ago their school had undergone a drastic shift in philosophy towards retention. Mrs. Thomas (an ESOL teacher) said that when she was first hired at Plains they had a principal who

retained as many as 65 students per year. The principal at the time was even known for retaining students after school started if the current teachers did not think they were ready for that grade. Mrs. Thomas and most of the teachers were against such extreme use of retention, but felt they had little to say in the matter. However, Mrs. Thomas explained that things drastically began to change when they got a new, younger principal who was opposed to retention:

Yes, they would send them back, but she [the former principal] was gone by that point so that year I had, we had a brand new principal, and I remember during pre-planning she was like, “Guys look,” she showed us research about how retention doesn’t work, that they just “this is not helping, it just increases drop-out rate,” and so I think gradually there has been a mind shift here, but it has been hard because you have a lot of older teachers who firmly believe [in retention].

All of the principals at Plains since that time have been largely opposed to retention. The current administration has continued to discourage the retention of students. They have retained students, but only if they were younger students in kindergarten through second grade and only if they were considered to be developmentally behind and not just behind for language or disabilities reasons. To limit the number of students that are considered for retention each year, Mrs. Tate, the assistant principal, requires that students be receiving Tier 3 interventions throughout the year and that parents be notified mid-year that their child is at risk for being retained:

I will not retain a child if we have not done Tier 3 interventions on them [*sic*].

Will not, and so I tell the teachers every year, do not come to me at the end of the year and say I want to retain this child, and we don’t have Tier 3 interventions

because I do not feel that I can sit down with a parent and justify retaining a child when we haven't done everything we can possibly do for that kid this year.

If retention needs to be considered, Mrs. Tate likes to have the Tier 3 progress monitoring record that can show where students “flat-lined” in their academic progress. She also has parents and teachers who are considering retention complete the *Light's Retention Scale* (Light, 2006), a diagnostic assessment designed to identify which students might benefit from retention. These procedures help curb the retention of students who are in teachers' classrooms that still might support retention.

Mrs. Mathews, the principal, made it clear that she too does not support retention because of the research literature. She argued that retention is ultimately a school decision, even under the test-based retention policy in grades 3 and 5 in which parents play a part. “It's always ultimately a school decision....” Mrs. Mathews said. “However, our school philosophy and our county philosophy is always to involve the parent, and it should be input from both parent as well as child.” Mrs. Mathews explained that most parents rely on the school's opinion regarding retention. However, sometimes parents do argue that their child should be retained. If a parent demands it, the school will consider it; however, more often than not they educate the parents that promotion would likely be the best option.

On one occasion, Mrs. Mathews reported that she had a parent who wanted a child retained for non-academic reasons: “I have had one parent who asked for retention, and because her child was a behavior problem, and she thought by retaining the child, she would do better, and we just said that that was not an option.”

As shown above, the federal, state, and local influences all worked together to create the structures of the field of test-based retention in this study. However, as I will show, it was the capital the participants possessed within the field that enabled or prevented them from successfully competing for additional capital.

The Capital of the Participants

Below, I discuss the capital the students, parents, teachers, and administrators possessed in this study, especially focusing on the categories of educational background, language, and knowledge of the test-based retention policy. Unlike the teachers and administrators, the student participants and their parents brought little recognized capital with an exchange value capable of garnering success in the field of education (e.g., high reading scores, academic achievement, financial security, fluent English). However, such a lack of capital valued by the school should not be viewed as evidence for reinforcing “deficit” theories and negative stereotypes of low socio-economic-status families (Lareau, 2003, p. 11). Indeed, the students and their parents brought an array of knowledge, skills, and language (e.g., their first languages other than English); such capital just often went unrecognized at school.

Students. I selected the ten student participants in the study because they were receiving some type of intervention in reading. More often than not, the teacher selected these students for intervention because of their previous educational experiences, specifically their test scores. All ten had either failed the reading CRCT (received a scale score of less than 800) or had just barely passed in prior years. Three of the students had previously been retained: Aurianna, Hallie, and Alyssa. Aurianna was retained in kindergarten, Hallie was retained in second grade, and Alyssa was retained in fifth grade.

Alyssa had been retained through the test-based retention policy the previous year because she failed the math CRCT on both administrations. Thus, when she participated in the study, it was her second year in fifth grade. With a history of unsuccessful experiences in school, these students lacked the institutional cultural capital (credentials) and therefore symbolic capital (prestige) that would label them as being an asset to their school's scores. Rather, they were seen as a liability, students who would require extensive help and still might not pass.

The students represented a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds: three were Caucasian (two girls and one boy), two were African American girls, one was a biracial boy (African American/Latino), two were Latino girls, one was a Latino boy, and one a Romanian girl. Consequently, they brought a diverse range of linguistic capital. Michelle, Donovan, and Candace were all native Spanish speakers, and Alexandria was a native Romanian speaker. However, given the fact that Plains only offered an ESOL program, their expertise in their native language was not valued at school. Although all four of these students spoke fluent English, they were still perceived by their teachers as lacking the in-depth vocabulary and fluency of a native English speaker (embodied cultural capital) and therefore continued to receive ESOL services and special accommodations on the CRCT. Michelle, Donovan, Candace, and Alexandria all received read aloud accommodations in which they were allowed to have the test passages, questions, and answers read aloud to them.

Although all the students knew that they would have to pass the reading CRCT in order to go to the sixth grade, there was a good deal of confusion about how the policy worked based on pieces of information they had heard from teachers, parents, and

friends. Such a lack of knowledge (embodied cultural capital) resulted in several students (Hallie, Nathan, Michelle, Aurianna, Candace, and Donovan) thinking that if they failed they would have to attend summer school and retake the test in the summer. There was also a good deal of confusion about in which grades the test-based retention policy applied. For example, Alexandria thought the policy had applied in fourth grade as well and that she had even retested when she had failed:

Last year, since I didn't pass the second CRCT test, the Boot Camp CRCT test, they just let me go to fifth grade because they knowed [*sic*] that I'm not that much of a [*sic*] English person.

Similarly, Alyssa and Candace thought that they had to pass the CRCT every year to go to the next grade, and Kenyon thought it applied in fifth and up. There was also confusion about what score was needed to pass and how many opportunities they had to retake it.

Parents. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990), cultural capital is transmitted through the field to ensure that it is inherited by the children of those who possess it. Thus, the disparities between social classes are reproduced. This became apparent when examining the parents and their lack of institutional cultural capital (academic degrees) valued by the school. Six out of the ten student participants had at least one parent who had dropped out of high school. For example, Donovan's dad only went to first grade in Mexico. Alexandria's mother dropped out in tenth grade. Both of Hallie's parents graduated from high school, but only three students had parents who completed college degrees.

In terms of language proficiency (embodied cultural capital), both of Candace's and Donovan's parents spoke Spanish only. Michelle's father spoke only Spanish, but her mother spoke both Spanish and English. Alexandria's mother spoke both Romanian and English.

The vast majority of parents had heard about the test-based retention policy but did not know any specifics. Brittney's mother thought she had retested in fourth grade, and Kenyon's mother did not realize that he had been required to pass the CRCT in third: "I didn't know in third grade he had to pass. . . . I just know they told me he have [*sic*] to pass in order to go to sixth grade, but I don't know the policies or anything." Similarly, Michelle's mom did not remember Michelle going through the process in third grade. Alexandria's mother had heard about the policy but did not know what score was required to pass, what grades the policy applied to, or anything about the appeals process. Only Alyssa and Hallie's parents had a good understanding of the policy. Alyssa's mother knew about it because Alyssa was retained under the policy the previous year, and Hallie had to go through retesting and placement from third to fourth grade. Several of the parents expressed that they felt that their limited knowledge (embodied cultural capital) of the policy prohibited them from having a voice in how it was implemented.

Teachers/administrators. Unlike the parents in the study, the teachers and administrators had a great deal of valued institutional cultural capital. All of the teachers and administrators I interviewed had at least a master's degree, with the exception of Mrs. West, the part-time interventionist, who had just finished her bachelor's degree. Mrs. Mathews (the principal), Mrs. Thomas (the ESOL teacher), and Mrs. Henderson (an EIP teacher) all had completed Ed.S. degrees as well.

All of these teachers spoke English only, and English was their native language. All, with exception of Mrs. West, who had just begun her position, had significant teaching experience. Consequently, they knew very well the academic language of school, especially in regards to the tested standards and the ins and outs of the test-based retention policy. They also had a good understanding of the research on retention. Mrs. Mathews, Mrs. Tate, Mrs. Hunter, Mrs. Thomas, and Mrs. Henderson, all were able to cite research findings and statistics regarding retention. Such an in-depth knowledge (embodied cultural capital) of the test-based retention policy and the research regarding retention, as I will show below, provided them with a great deal of influence in how the policy was implemented.

Habitus: Responding to Test-Based Retention at Plains

Having examined the field of test-based retention in Georgia and the capital the various participants possess, I now describe how the participants at Plains Elementary School responded to the policy. I begin with what Bourdieu (1972/1977) called *doxa*, those taken-for-granted structures accepted by the participants of the field. Second, I chart the process by which the teachers and administrators at Plains rejected the *doxa* of testing (*heterodoxa*) and took steps to ensure that students who failed the CRCT were not retained.

Accepting the doxa of testing. As I mentioned in the methods section above, when I observed and interviewed the students and their parents, I noticed several deep-seeded ideologies concerning the fairness, trustworthiness, and necessity of test-based retention. The students and their parents largely accepted that the policy was fair, testing was trustworthy, and retention helped students academically achieve.

All ten student participants believed that it was appropriate to retain students for a variety of reasons. Those reasons largely centered around retaining students for struggling academically and exhibiting “bad behavior.” Several mentioned that students should be retained if they earned low grades, did not understand the content, or scored poorly on the CRCT. Likewise, they argued that students should be retained if they were not listening or concentrating in class. Moreover, “bad kids,” as they described them, should be retained. These were students who did not care about learning, did not cooperate with their teachers, talked back to teachers, called people names, or hurt others. As also documented by Anagnostopoulos (2006), the students in this study drew a sharp distinction between those who listened, worked hard, and thus should be promoted and other students who did not. For example, Alyssa said:

Smarter students deserve to pass because they pay attention, more attention, and the other students really don’t care what they get, and they just don’t understand how bad it is to be retained again and again and it be on your permanent record.

All but one of the students, Aurianna, believed the CRCT did a good job of showing how good or bad they were at reading. Aurianna just thought it only sometimes was a trustworthy indicator. A student who was good at reading, she said, could still fail. Almost all the students believed they were working harder in fifth grade because they had to pass the CRCT to be promoted. Only two students, Aurianna and Kenyon, felt that they worked equally hard their fifth- and fourth-grade years.

Like the students, all ten of the students’ parents believed that retention was a good idea and could be helpful. They explained that being behind academically was the main reason for justifying retaining children. Donovan’s mother thought retentions

should occur less often in the upper grades. The rest of the parents felt they were equally appropriate for any grade. All but one of the parents believed that the CRCT was a trustworthy indicator of their child's reading ability. The one, Hallie's dad, argued that the CRCT does not really show what kids know because it only tests some of the standards the students learned. However, all felt that having students read passages and answer multiple-choice questions was a valid way to assess reading. Most of the parents felt the test was successful in getting their children to work harder, especially as the test drew closer. However, the majority of the parents felt they did not have a say in how the test-based retention policy was implemented.

In addition to accepting the doxa of testing, two of the students repeatedly expressed their acceptance of the doxa of inadequacy. On numerous occasions, both Kenyon and Hallie expressed their belief that practicing for the CRCT was hopeless. They were going to fail:

Kenyon - I'm not going to college. I'm going to fail. My brother calls me retarded.

Mrs. West - No you're not.

Kenyon - Yes I am.

Mrs. West - Guys you are not dumb. You are ready. [Talking to Kenyon and Hallie].

Hallie - I'm dumb.

Kenyon - I'm dumb too.

Mrs. West - Guys, none of you are dumb. You are all capable when you apply yourself.

Although Kenyon managed to pass the first administration of the reading CRCT, Hallie did not and was required to retake the test. What little confidence she had in herself was shattered when she received the news of her score.

I'll miss too many questions [on the retake] to pass it. To fail it or whatever. I ain't going to pass it because I'm not good at reading. I can't. I've never passed. I mean when I was doing the CRCT, I have had to do it every year of my schooling. Like I done [*sic*] it first all the way to fifth, every year, the CRCT.

Rejecting the doxa of testing. Despite readily accepting a great deal of the doxa of testing (e.g., “Certain students should be retained.” “The CRCT is trustworthy.” “I’m working harder because of test-based retention.”), there was one area of the testing policy that both the students and their parents wished could be changed: basing retention on just one test score. Several of the students and their parents mentioned that they felt it was unfair to base promotion/retention on a single test. However, they still reported that they felt the policy was fair overall and that they would do little to change it if given the opportunity. This finding is especially interesting in that they appeared to reject the use of just one test, but continued to support the testing policy itself. Perhaps the fact that the use of single assessments is highly critiqued publicly in education debates (Heubert & Hauser, 1999) led the parents and students to question its use but failed to encourage more in-depth questioning of other assumptions in which testing policies are grounded.

By far, the greatest critique of the test-based retention policy came from the teachers, administrators, and interventionists. They appeared to see the test-based retention policy quite differently from the students and parents. As mentioned earlier, they were very skeptical about retention. They were also less confident in the

trustworthiness of the CRCT. Several doubted its validity because of the low cut scores necessary for passing (usually around 50%), the read aloud accommodations ESOL students received, and the amount of test-prep that occurred. None of the teachers I interviewed felt that the students were working harder their fifth grade year because of the policy. Like many of the parents and students, they believed that multiple indicators should be used to make retention decisions.

However, the most striking difference was the way the teachers and administrators used the GPC and the appeals option to influence how the policy was administered. The GPC and the appeals option provided an avenue for the teachers and administrators at Plains to educate parents about the harmful, unintended consequences of retention and help them make a decision they believed would most help their students.

Educating parents. Educating parents became an important role for the teachers and administrators at Plains. Mrs. Mathews, the principal, saw promotion and retention as being primarily a school decision, but worked to educate the parents, sometimes just about the test policy itself:

I remember I got a call . . . and I had one parent who said . . . , “I got a letter that said he didn’t pass the PTCT.” I remember thinking, “That parent knows there’s a test, has no clue about the name”, but he was functioning on the level that he knew how, so that committee we had to do a lot of explaining to that parent about the importance of the skills . . .

Other times a parent might be in disagreement with the school about a child, and they would work to bring the parent around so that they were in full agreement with the committee:

For example, let's say a mom . . . will be in agreement, a dad will be in disagreement. . . . We'll hold another meeting where dad can come and be present. . . . We'll make every effort so that when the committee leaves the members are all in accordance with the decision.

The administrators at Plains made every effort they could to meet with parents and hold GPC meetings and specifically inform parents about the emotional consequences of retention. Mrs. Mathews even mentioned citing research about the most severe stressors for young children and how children list fear of retention among their top fears such as moving and loss of a parent.

Ultimately, Mrs. Mathews reminded teachers and parents who were considering retention that what was in the students' best interests was what they should first and foremost keep in mind:

I think when I don't know what to do, . . . I just have to reflect. I say to myself, "What's the best thing for the child?" . . . That's the question I ask myself when I have maybe an upset parent or upset teacher, I have to say to my-- I'll sometimes look at the staff and staff member and I'll say, "What's the best thing for the child?" And I think that's what we have to ask when we're thinking about retention.

Mrs. Mathews also argued that students are different and have various needs. To have just one policy that treats all students the same, retaining those who are different, fails to recognize this.

Appealing retentions. Figure 1 shows a Promotion and Placement Timeline, a diagram I created illustrating the official process that Georgia school districts are to

follow when implementing the test-based retention policy according to state guidelines. Through my observations at Plains, I found that they followed each of these steps very closely. However, I also found that additional steps were taken once the scores from the second administration were given, to prepare parents for appealing the retention.

The policy states that when a student fails the second administration of the CRCT, he or she is to be retained (Georgia State Board of Education, 2001). However, it does allow for the retention to be appealed by either the child's teacher or parent. As required by law, a letter is sent by first class mail to the parents informing them that their child failed the second administration of the CRCT. They are then given two choices: (a) they may check that they are in agreement with the retention or (b) they may check that they would like to schedule a GPC meeting with the principal and their child's teacher to discuss retention/promotion. By completing the form and requesting the meeting, they are appealing the retention.

Mrs. Tate, the assistant principal, was responsible for sending out these letters and scheduling any GPC meetings. Although she carefully followed the legal requirements of the policy, she chose to add an additional step; she called the teacher and parents of those being recommended for retention by phone. Mrs. Tate mentioned making these calls for three reasons. First, she likes to give parents the opportunity to tell their children the news rather than risk the chance of the child reading the letter first:

Now I always call. I'm not required to. . . . All I'm required to do is send out the letter. My fear is for that letter to go home, and these babies staying home over the summer are getting the letter, and they read it. . . . So what I usually do is I, the day the letters go out, I call all the parents that day.

Calling the parents before the letter arrives also gives her a chance to more personally notify them, answer questions, and put their minds at ease about the retention issue.

I tell them their scores. Tell them about the letter. Tell them the date I've scheduled the meeting, if that works for them or if it doesn't, because there's a part where they have to bring it back to me by a certain date or whatever, and so I always tell them you don't have to bring it back to me as long as you're here on that day. So I make the phone call.

Second, she calls the teacher and parents prior to sending the letters to take the initiative for making sure the appeal happens. She calls the teacher first and gets a sense of the child's strengths and weaknesses:

I call the teacher, and I'm like, "What are you thinking? What kind of grades were they? What were their end-of-the-year grades, and do you think they're strong enough to go?" and that kind of stuff. Yeah, we have this conversation like way before the parents.

It also gives Mrs. Tate an opportunity to schedule a time for the appeals meeting with the teacher. When Mrs. Tate calls the parent, she does so with the teacher's backing and possible dates both she and the teacher can meet. She then is able to get a sense of what the parent is thinking:

And that's another good reason to even call the parents because I get the feel for what the parents are even wanting, and really what they want to hear is you know I'll say this is a committee decision. We're going to decide whether to retain or promote them, and at that point they'll usually go well I really want him promoted, I just don't think this is what's going to be best for him, and usually

even at that point in the phone I'm like well I just got off the phone with Mrs. XXXX (the teacher), and she feels the same way so I don't want you to feel stressed about this meeting. I think we're all on the same page. We just want to look at the grades and what he has done all year and make sure he's got everything he needs to go to middle school, and we take good notes for the middle school. And then usually once I say that they feel so much better.

Thus, when the parent does receive the letter with the option to appeal, the decision to appeal has already been made, the meeting has been scheduled, and the likelihood of placing the student in the next grade has already been discussed. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1972/1977) analogy of a card game, the school has "tipped their hand" and "stacked the deck" in favor of placing the students in the next grade.

The Cases of Hallie and Alyssa

Of my ten participants only one (Hallie) failed both administrations of the reading CRCT. Hallie scored a 781 on the first reading test and a 793 on the second. An 800 was needed for passing. Hallie had expressed confidence in passing the first administration of the reading CRCT when I first interviewed her, although she would sometimes get frustrated and say she was dumb in class. However, after she got the scores back on the second administration, she was much more worried.

I usually don't pass reading. I can't remember one year that I passed reading. I mean, but they're saying that if I keep on going to Boot Camp that supposedly I'll pass, but I'm terrible at reading. But if my dad has a talk with the teachers and stuff, and he can talk to them, then I'll pass. Like because we'll get promoted. Because that's what my dad has to do every year because I don't pass the reading.

Hallie believed that her dad could have a meeting and get her to “pass,” but still, she was nervous because she thought you could only be “placed” so many times. Hallie’s dad received the call from Mrs. Tate just prior to her sending the letter. She let him know her score had improved, but she had just failed by a couple of questions. He would need to attend the meeting, however, to see about having her placed in the next grade. By the time she called Hallie’s dad, Mrs. Tate had already talked with Mrs. Hunter, determined that a placement would be the best move, and had scheduled a possible date for the meeting.

At the GPC, Mrs. Tate, Mrs. Hunter, and Hallie’s father all discussed how she passed math and made progress in reading but had failed the ELA, social studies, and science tests, likely, they said, because there was a good deal of reading involved. Hallie’s father was eager to agree for a placement because Hallie had only failed the reading test by a couple of questions. They created an intervention plan that would follow Hallie into middle school. Hallie was brought by her mother at the end of the meeting. Her father said she had been up early, was worried, and eager to find out the news. She arrived wearing a t-shirt with the name of the middle school she would be attending. She was relieved to hear she was being placed. Both her mother and father said they had not seen her put forth much effort all year until the results came back from the first administration. When she realized she had failed it, she spent the remaining two weeks prior to the retest eagerly reading everything she could find, including items on the refrigerator and recipe cards. She hoped she would pass the second administration but was fairly certain she would not.

Although Mrs. Mathews, the principal, said she often finds that when they educate parents about retention, most parents are eager to have their children placed, Alyssa's mother was an exception. Alyssa had failed the math CRCT twice the year before. Alyssa's mother was described by Alyssa's teacher and the administrators as being a very good, supportive mother. Her mother had an associate's degree in early childhood and worked for the Girls Scouts. She had numerous foster children, including Alyssa, whom she had adopted. She also strongly believed in retention. When Alyssa failed the math CRCT last year, she agreed to attend the GPC meeting but argued that Alyssa would benefit from retention.

I was concerned before we even got the test scores back that we may [*sic*] need to look at, and you know at first they tried to talk me out of it until I just said you know, and I had another teacher that thought it may [*sic*] be good for her as well. They were worried about her self-esteem, like you know getting left behind, and everybody is [*sic*] going to go, "Oh, Alyssa failed a grade," but that didn't happen at all.

Before being retained, Alyssa's mother said Alyssa was very shy and would not participate in class. Retention, she argued, helped her with her self-esteem and motivation.

I had a meeting, and we decided. It was basically my decision to keep her back because she had so many, had so much trouble last year, and she was socially just not there either, and I was like, and I'm glad I did because last year she wouldn't have talked to anyone. This year she was on the news show. She's all over the place, so it's made an incredible difference in her self-esteem and her motivation,

and you know we just handled it. I just said, “You know, you can go in there, and you can show everybody you know the ropes, you know everything, and you can just dazzle everybody this year.” So she really took that to heart.

Alyssa’s mother elicited Alyssa’s support, and Alyssa also thought that retention was a good thing.

But, my mom asked me before the meeting. She said, “Do you need to stay back?” And I said, “Yes, because of math.” And so it kind of worked out for me because they said I needed to stay back, so . . . She leaved [*sic*] it up to me to decide, and I wanted to stay back ‘cause of math.

Alyssa’s mother had the capital (knowledge and respect) required to make her argument convincing enough to have her child retained despite the school’s efforts to push for a placement in sixth grade. Although Alyssa and her mother believed the retention greatly helped her, the teachers and administrators remain unconvinced. After working with her the second year in fifth grade, Mrs. Hunter was still not sure the retention had benefited her in any way.

Discussion

Although some of the students and their parents questioned the fairness of basing promotion on a single test, they readily accepted that the policy should exist. The CRCT, they argued, was a valid indicator of reading ability, and students who failed the test should be retained. Retention, they believed, would help these students catch up academically. Moreover, none of the parents or students questioned the even deeper assumption that elementary school should be organized by grade-level achievement. The teachers, however, were much more skeptical about the system. They were less confident

about the trustworthiness of the CRCT and felt the test-based retention policy did little to motivate students to work harder. Most strikingly, they largely opposed retention and possessed the necessary capital to educate parents through the appeals process to ensure that students did not risk the harmful effects of retention.

The case of Alyssa was certainly an exception in that her mother had enough valued capital (e.g., Caucasian, fluent in English, middle class, college educated, perceived by the school as a loving and responsible mother) to sway the GPC to retain Alyssa, even when the teachers and administrators felt it was not in her best interest. In an ironic twist of events, Alyssa's mother possessed the capital to have a powerful influence among the school faculty. However, rather than using her capital to challenge the policy, she used it to ensure that Alyssa was retained. Both Alyssa and her mother had accepted the doxa of test-based retention. Although they believed Alyssa greatly benefited from the retention, researchers have suggested that any gains will likely fade over time, and Alyssa may later be at greater risk of dropping out of school (Allensworth, 2005; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005).

How is it though that the teachers and administrators at Plains Elementary were so easily able to override legislation that was expressly designed to end social promotion in Georgia? Certainly the teachers at Plains were encouraged to not retain students by the principal and assistant principal who were in turn encouraged by the upper administrators of their district. However, although the policy itself (Georgia State Board of Education, 2001) along with the political rhetoric leading up to its passage (Barnes, 2001) appear to mandate the end of social promotion, a closer analysis of the policy makes that objective less clear, especially given the fact that the state is well aware through their own reports

that most students are being placed in the next grade and not being retained (Henry et al., 2005; Mordica, 2006).

In his analysis of the House Bill 656, Strickland (2008) argued that ending social promotion provided conservative support for an education bill that would have likely gone unnoticed otherwise. In an interview with Governor Barnes, Strickland (2008) quoted Barnes himself as saying that he was less interested in increasing the number of students being retained and was more interested in creating a year-round atmosphere through summer interventions under the policy. Similarly, in an interview with *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, State Superintendent Kathy Cox, who had worked on the bill as a state representative, defended schools' use of the appeals process, arguing that the bill was originally designed to target struggling students and provide them with intervention rather than to retain mass numbers of them (Vogell & Perry, 2008).

Several researchers have argued that retention policies, by and large, often sound tougher than they really are (Ellwein & Glass, 1989). Smith and Shepard (1989), for example, explained:

Since a true merit-based promotion system is economically impossible, retentions in practice are largely symbolic. Superintendents and policy-makers advocate promotion based on mastery of grade-level skills and, by doing, project a tough public image and increase the support of a community worried about declines in achievement and loss of international economic superiority. (p. 222)

Similarly, Brown (2007) found retentions to be largely symbolic in his analysis of the test-based grade retention policy in Wisconsin. He argued that Wisconsin policymakers implemented their policy “not to hold students back but rather to instill accountability

into the educational system” (p. 4). Legislators were being pressed to raise achievement statewide. They saw this type of policy as a means to boost achievement through increased accountability. Overall achievement and not the fate of those retained was their main concern. Retaining students was an unfortunate necessity to ensure that schools were keeping high standards and that the majority of students were motivated to do better.

Smith and Shepard (1989), however, have also argued that although retention policies can serve as a survival mechanism for schools, they do so at the expense of the vulnerable students who are retained:

Viewed another way, from the perspective of social structures, retentions can be seen as mechanisms by which the school maintains its existing structure while warding off attacks from outside. Five to 10 percent of the lowest achieving students in a grade are retained, and thus the school appears to be meritocratic. . . .

The cost is borne by the student (who pays with psychological hurt and an unproductive year) rather than by the school or the teacher. (p. 222)

In Bourdieusian terms, the policy makers respond (habitus) by doing what they must to survive (Kramsch, 2008). In order to maintain support from voters, public school officials must keep an appearance of rigorous, meritocratic promotion standards.

However, at the same time they can only maintain such standards with the given capital they possess. Just as with high numbers of social promotions, massive retention is economically unsustainable and politically unattractive as well. Consequently, policy makers naturally respond by implementing what appear to be rigorous policies to end social promotion while quietly “placing” large numbers of students in the next grade

behind the scenes. Unfortunately, a few students are actually retained through these policies, placing them at risk of the negative outcomes of retention.

Limitations

Case studies have often been critiqued for their limitations in making explicit, statistical generalizations. Nonetheless, they can be useful in making naturalistic generalizations (Stake, 1995), in which readers vicariously connect the findings to similar experiences they have had in the schools in which they have worked. However, the fact that Plains appears in many ways to be a “typical case” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 75) provides for both theoretical and logical generalizations as well (Luker, 2008). Demographically, Plains is a very typical Georgia school, but it is also typical in the fact that the teachers and administrators place most students who fail both administrations of the CRCT through the appeals process. What we do not know is how typical their reasons are for justifying placements.

A second limitation of this study is that it is impossible as a researcher to get inside participants’ minds to actually know how they are accepting or rejecting the doxa of the field. Therefore, a Bourdieusian analysis that attempts to identify what participants are taking for granted is difficult. Yet, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argued that by observing participants’ dispositions (behaviors) researchers gain insight into a middle ground in which social laws and individual minds meet. Such dispositions allow researchers to infer the habitus of the participants.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study provide important implications for both policy makers and educators. Although policy makers are receiving political pressure to ensure high

promotion standards, to many of the teachers in this study, the policy was largely interpreted as an empty threat. Although students and parents believed they were working harder because of the policy, most knew little about the policy, and those who knew about it were confused about in which grades and subjects it applied. Moreover, the teachers believed they saw little increased effort as a result of the policy. Although Mrs. Mathews, the principal, acknowledged that her school had greatly increased their intervention efforts in response to the policy, there was little fear that any students would actually be retained through it. On numerous occasions Mrs. Hunter explained to her students that if they failed both administrations, their parents could meet with the school and have them placed in the next grade. It did not mean they would actually be retained. Such open acknowledgment that the policy sounds much tougher than it actually is suggests that many of its objectives could be achieved by alternative policies that do not place the most vulnerable students at risk for retention.

For teachers and administrators who are concerned about the adverse consequences of test-based retention policies, this study provides some hope. Although test-based retention policies vary from state to state, most contain some type of an appeals procedure to prevent mass numbers of students from being retained (J. A. Marsh, Gershwin, Kirby, & Xia, 2009). The teachers and administrators at Plains provide a model of how such policies can legally and ethically be altered so that in practice they serve more like promotion plus policies in which students receive ongoing, intensive intervention but are ultimately promoted (Smith & Shepard, 1989).

Despite the hope offered in this study, however, there is evidence that suggests various reasons to be concerned as well. The teachers and administrators explained that

the CRCT has a low cut score that is required for passing. (Students are only required to get about half of the questions correct.) Consequently, the teachers and administrators worried that even those who pass will likely still be well below grade level, even with continued intervention. Thus, even though the faculty at Plains strategically takes steps to ensure students do not experience the negative consequences of retention, they still fear that these students will likely remain at high risk for dropping out of school.

Although this study does offer some hope, it also serves as a reminder of the continued work that must be done to help make schools instruments of social change and not just sites of social reproduction (Kramsch, 2008). A Bourdieusian analysis provides the tools to both educate others about the negative consequences of retention and to transform oppressive structures into more equitable approaches for educating the most vulnerable of students. A greater effort should be made to educate a general public who largely still believes that retaining students prevents dropping out of school. Moreover, various models for reconceptualizing school organization exist. Some call for ungraded instruction in the primary grades while others provide more flexible grade instruction in which students go to a younger grade just for specialized instruction in the subjects in which they are behind (Smith & Shepard, 1989). Such possibilities offer promising alternatives to the taken-for-granted notion of age/grade-based promotion.

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Table 1

Student Participant Characteristics and Received Interventions

Student	Gender	Ethnicity	Family Income	Reading Interventions	Language Spoken at Home
Alyssa	female	Caucasian	\$25,500-\$46,999	none for reading	English
Aurianna	female	African American	less than \$25,500	RtI Tier 2, EIP	English
Brittney	female	African American	\$25,500-\$46,999	RtI Tier 2, EIP	English
Candace	female	Latino	less than \$25,500	ESOL, RtI Tier 3	Spanish
Donovan	male	Latino	less than \$25,500	ESOL, RtI Tier 3	Spanish
Kenyon	male	biracial (African American and Latino)	\$25,500-\$46,999	RtI Tier 3, EIP	English
Hallie	female	Caucasian	\$25,500-\$46,999	RtI Tier 2, EIP	English
Alexandria	female	Romanian	less than \$25,500	ESOL, RtI Tier 3, EIP	Romanian
Nathan	male	Caucasian	less than \$25,500	none for reading	English
Michelle	female	Latino	\$25,500-\$46,999	ESOL, RtI Tier 3	Spanish

Note. Although Alyssa and Nathan were not receiving interventions for reading, I included them in my study because Mrs. Hunter identified them as students she was closely monitoring and was considering placing in intervention for reading.

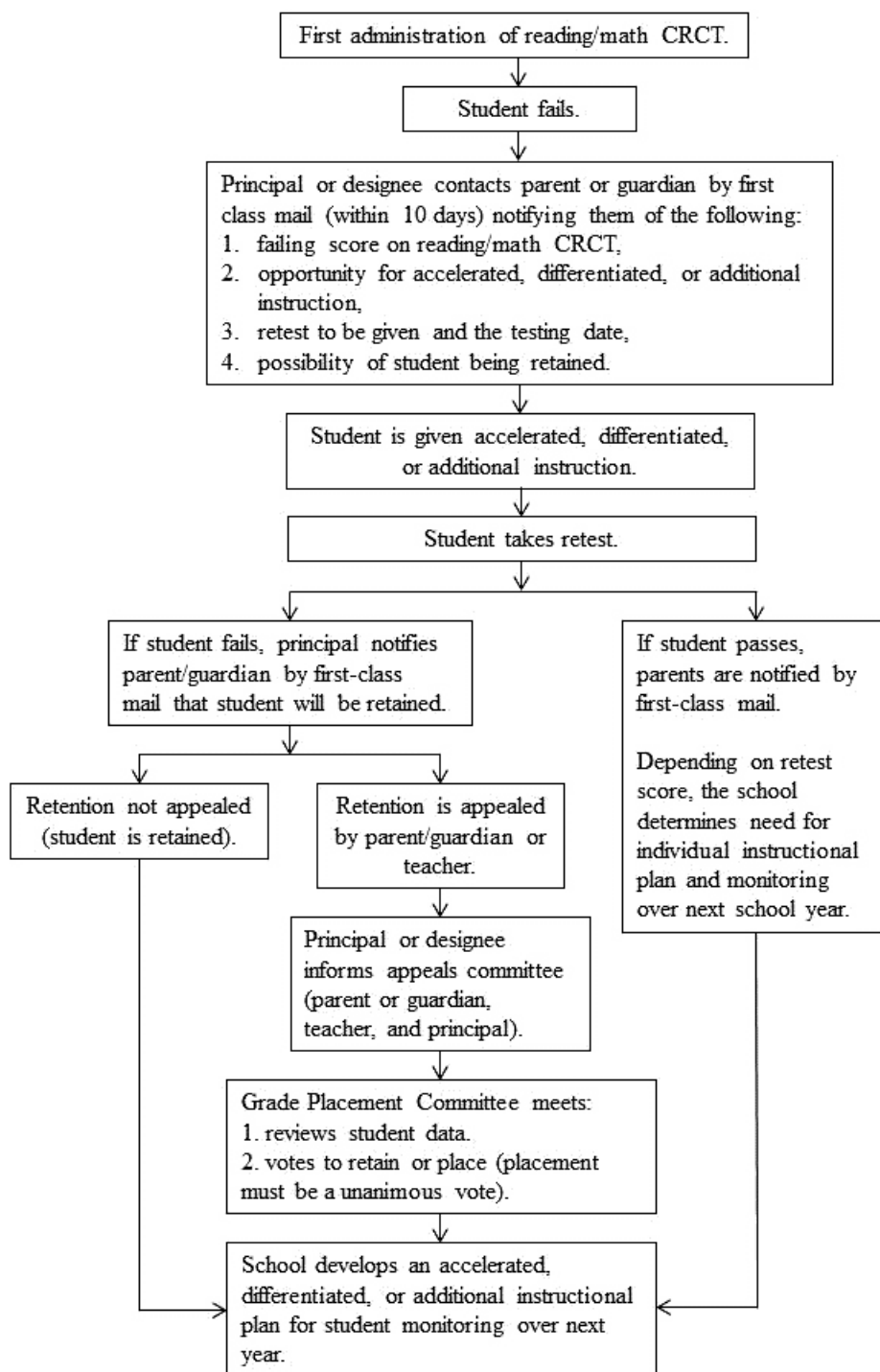


Figure 1. Promotion and Placement Timeline. I created this document based on information from the Georgia Department of Education website: (<http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Policy/Pages/Promotion-and-Retention.aspx>).

CHAPTER 4

“I SKIM THROUGH AND FIND THE ANSWERS”: A BOURDIEUSIAN ANALYSIS
OF THE “SEARCH AND DESTROY” METHOD OF READING¹

¹ Huddleston, A. P. To be submitted to *The Reading Teacher*.

Abstract

The author uses Bourdieu and Passeron's theoretical concept of reproduction to analyze students' use of the "search and destroy" method of reading within Georgia's test-based grade retention policy. In this multiple case study, the author interviewed, observed, and collected documents regarding ten fifth graders who were receiving intervention in reading. Under the policy, the students brought capital that received little attention in school, yet they readily accepted that testing was trustworthy, retention was helpful, and accountability was important. The students had little confidence in themselves as readers and felt that reading test passages was unnecessary and difficult. Consequently, they read questions and skimmed passages for key words to find answers, with little success, thus reproducing their difficulties with reading. The author suggests engaging students in discussions about what it means to read and how to select types of reading (e.g., careful, normal, rapid, skimming) that most effectively meet one's purposes.

Keywords: Bourdieu, case study, constant comparative method, high-stakes testing, literacy, search and destroy method of reading, test-based grade retention

Hallie - I can't read. I can, but my head aches. So what I do on the CRCT is I just find the questions and skim through and find the answers. I don't read the whole thing.

Hallie was a fifth grader in a semi-rural elementary school in Georgia and was thus required to pass the reading Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) in order to be promoted to sixth grade. In 2001, the Georgia legislature passed the Georgia Promotion, Placement, and Retention Law (Georgia State Board of Education, 2001), requiring that students in grades 3, 5, and 8 pass the CRCT for promotion.

Hallie had a long history of struggling with the reading CRCT. Although the test is only required for promotion in grades 3, 5, and 8, Hallie and her peers took it, as mandated by state law, every year since first grade, and most years she failed it. Because of her difficulties with reading, her approach to taking the CRCT was one that reading teachers and researchers have often referred to as the "search and destroy" method of reading (Sheridan-Thomas, 2008).

Hallie felt that a careful and thorough reading of test passages was beyond her capability. Consequently, she strategically identified questions, searched for answers, and withdrew from passages with as little reading as possible.

Purpose

This analysis is part of a larger multiple case study (Stake, 2006) designed to explore the experiences of ten case students, their parents, teacher, interventionists, and administrators as they navigated Georgia's test-based grade retention policy in reading in spring 2011. Like Hallie, all of the student participants were fifth graders who acknowledged having used search and destroy at least part of the time. Drawing on

Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970/1990) theoretical concept of reproduction in education, the purpose of this article is to explain how and why the students responded to test-based retention by using the search and destroy method of reading.

Literature Review

Although test-based grade retention policies are often advertised as a means for ending social promotion and preventing high-school dropouts (e.g., Barnes, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1999), researchers have shown that these policies reproduce many of the negative consequences they are designed to prevent. Test-based grade retention policies have, at best, produced only short-term academic gains. These short-term gains have occurred when retention is accompanied with intervention (Roderick, Jacob, & Bryk, 2002); however, such academic gains fade over time (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005) with retained students again falling behind and with a much larger likelihood of later dropping-out of school (Allensworth, 2005).

The term search and destroy is defined as the process of obtaining key words from questions and scanning passages to match those key words to answers (Sheridan-Thomas, 2008). Despite the frequent use of the term, the practice itself has yet to be fully investigated. Most researchers have only documented the shortcomings of students' use of the strategy. Nicholson (1984), for example, showed that although search and destroy worked well for those students who knew what they were looking for, it was less fruitful for those who were just picking out pieces without checking for accuracy. Similarly, Greaney (2004) found that the search and destroy method accounted for over 38% of the errors fourth through sixth graders made on the New Zealand Progressive Achievement

Test. Researchers have yet to explore the reasons students offer for using the strategy nor have they theorized about its implications.

Although the apparent pitfalls associated with the search and destroy method are well-documented, researchers going back to Yoakam (1928) have acknowledged that different purposes call for different types of reading (e.g., careful reading, normal reading, rapid reading, and skimming). The term selective reading has been used to designate the need to teach students how to recognize the most important parts of texts that require more attention and how to recognize other aspects that require less (Cunningham & Shablak, 1975). Other researchers have written about flexible reading, the need for readers to adjust their reading speed to suit different purposes (Nacke, 1970), and have developed strategies for teaching students these skills (Schachter, 1978). However, despite the encouragement to teach students multiple approaches to reading, reading in school has largely become synonymous with careful reading.

Theoretical Framework

Teachers have often recognized that students with certain backgrounds tend to flourish in school while others do not. Researchers have frequently attributed such achievement gaps to opportunity gaps or unequal childhoods that occur among class lines in the U.S. (Lareau, 2003). French sociologists Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) researched economic, social, and cultural class domination and, in so doing, developed a theory of reproduction in education that explains how social class inequities play out in terms of academic achievement in schools.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) explained that reproduction occurs in relationship with the theoretical concepts of field, capital, and habitus. Individuals are

socialized by a variety of “institutional arrangements” (fields) (Lareau, 2003, p. 275). This socialization greatly influences what individuals recognize as feeling comfortable and natural and thus largely dictates how they respond (habitus) in specific situations. These background experiences also provide individuals with specific amounts and types of resources (capital) they then use to compete for additional capital within the field.

According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990), education is a field that consists of its own rules for allocating and accruing resources (e.g., grades, promotions, diplomas) that ultimately determine winners and losers. Schools reward certain types of knowledge, resources, and ways of speaking more than others. Students whose family backgrounds provide them with these skills do well in school while the rest often do not.

For Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990), it is not that students from non-dominant families lack knowledge, skills, and language. In fact, such students often bring a rich variety of resources to the classroom. However, what they do lack are resources that are valued within an educational system that is built upon middle-class principles such as “standard” English.

Educational testing, Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) argued, plays a key role in making sure the rules of the field remain intact. Tests provide “objective” evidence that those who fail are not cut out for academics and to those who pass, they give proof of their merit and giftedness. Reproduction, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) called it, occurs when nondominant groups respond by accepting their failure as a natural (taken-for-granted) part of the way life is and retreat from school experiences. In so doing, they unknowingly participate in their own oppression, what Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) called misrecognition, ensuring that inequities will continue.

Although reluctant readers exist among all social classes, Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970/1990) theory of reproduction is useful for explaining why students who struggle with high-stakes reading tests (especially low-socio-economic students) resort to strategies like search and destroy to complete reading tasks. Test-based retention policies function as their own social fields, within education at large, creating rules for determining promotions and retentions and thus winners and losers. Students bring a variety of capital to these policies as readers that may or may not help them on the test. How the students respond (*habitus*) to the reading tests under this policy is the focus of this study.

Methods of Inquiry

As mentioned above, this analysis was part of a larger multiple case study. In the following sections, I discuss the methods I used for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.

Participant Selection

The participants in this study consisted primarily of ten fifth-grade case students, although their parents, classroom teacher, interventionists, and administrators participated in the study as well. Mrs. Hunter (all names are pseudonyms), a fifth grade reading teacher, identified 16 of her students who were receiving intervention in reading. I presented my study to all 16 students, and ten chose to participate.

Data Collection

I collected data in three forms: interviews, observations, and documents. First, I conducted interviews with both the adults and students (a total of 40 in all), with adult interviews averaging 60 minutes in length, and child interviews averaging 30 minutes in

length. I interviewed all of the participants multiple times with exception of the administrators who were only interviewed once. I digitally recorded and transcribed all interviews.

The interview protocols (available upon request) consisted of guiding questions that were informed by a Bourdieusian lens, helping me focus specifically on concepts the participants appeared to take for granted regarding their experiences with school, beliefs about testing, and responses to test-based retention.

In addition, I observed the students' regular reading instruction once a week beginning in late February and continuing through the end of school in May. The students participated in various small tutoring groups that met periodically and consisted of Early Intervention Program (EIP) (a state-funded intervention program), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and Response to Intervention (RtI) Tier 2 and 3 interventions. These I observed once every two weeks. Additionally, I observed the first administration of the reading CRCT by serving as a proctor. In total, I conducted over 51 hours of observations. I took field notes, when possible, of all observations.

Finally, I collected documents as well (McCulloch, 2004). These consisted of CRCT score reports, student work from regular reading instruction and intervention, letters sent to parents by the school informing them about the test-based retention policy, and student journals I initiated regarding testing.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of various levels. First, I analyzed the data using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006). This consisted of coding the data to

identify recurring themes. These themes were then defined and collapsed into more focused categories, such as using the search and destroy method of reading.

One of the hallmarks of the constant comparative method is to analyze data as it is collected and use that information to help determine what additional data is needed. When I identified the search and destroy method as a recurring category in Hallie's interviews, I began asking other students about it as well. I also began watching for evidence of skimming during the observations I conducted, keeping track of how quickly the participants finished practice passages, how frequently they flipped back and forth from the questions to the answers, and the number of questions they missed.

Finally, I selected from my participants, both students who appeared to be reading the passages in their entirety as well as those who appeared to be skimming to tell me everything they could remember about the passages after the tutoring sessions. Such triangulating of data (Roulston, 2010) provided deeper insights into how the students were reading test preparation passages.

The constant comparative method provides a tool not just for comparing data to data, but comparing data to extant theories or "sensitizing concepts" (Patton, 1990, p. 216) to illuminate developing hypotheses. Drawing on Handsfield and Jimenez (2009) and Marsh (2006), a final level of analysis consisted of directly applying Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970/1990) concept of reproduction to theorize the categories developed through the constant comparative method. This analysis consisted of three steps: (a) analyzing the field of test-based grade retention in Georgia, (b) mapping the various capital that the student participants brought to their testing experiences, and (c) analyzing

the responses (habitus) of the students to the reading tests under the test-based retention policy (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

As I will show, when I applied a Bourdieusian lens to the categories generated through the constant comparative method, I found that the participants' struggles with reading provided them with little valued capital to compete within Georgia's test-based retention policy. When they realized that a careful and thorough reading of the test passages was beyond their capabilities, they responded in a way that felt quite natural and comfortable to them; they avoided reading by using the search and destroy method.

Findings

The following findings are organized in relation to the analysis mentioned above. I begin by briefly describing the field of test-based retention, examining how its underlying rules have appeared to influence the taken-for-granted assumptions of my participants. Second, I discuss the capital of the students and their families, focusing specifically on the mismatch between the resources they possessed and that which their school valued. Third, I examine the ways the student participants responded to test-based retention (habitus) by using the search and destroy method of reading. I conclude by sharing, in detail, two case students who chose to use the search and destroy method because of the difficulties they had with reading.

The Field of Test-Based Retention

According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990), social fields are institutional arrangements with specific rules regarding how participants compete for and acquire capital. Born out of the concerns expressed in Reagan's *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and

propelled by Clinton's call for ending social promotion (U.S. Department of Education, 1999), test-based retention policies are social fields that dictate how educational advancement should occur. The Georgia policy is just one of over a dozen test-based retention policies recently passed (Educational Commission of the States, 2005).

The rules of the field of test-based retention permeate the thinking of the individuals within them in such a way that the privileging of the educational backgrounds of certain students at the expense of others appears meritocratic and just. This became clear with many of the students and parents in my study. The students and their parents accepted many of the taken-for-granted assumptions regarding test-based retention, assuming that it was quite natural. They largely believed that basing retention on test results was fair and that students needed tough accountability in order to take school seriously. All the parents and students assumed that grade retention was helpful academically for students. They also felt that the CRCT did a good job of assessing a thorough reading of passages. All of these were taken-for-granted assumptions inherent within the Georgia test-based retention policy itself.

The Capital of the Students and Their Families

According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990), participants draw on the capital they possess within the educational system to compete for and obtain additional resources. Below, I show how the students and their families lacked much of the capital often attributed with success in school. However, such a lack of valued capital should not be seen as evidence for reinforcing "deficit" theories of low socio-economic-status students (Lareau, 2003, p. 11). All of the participants brought a variety of rich capital to

the field of test-based retention (e.g., first languages other than English); however, it became clear that certain resources were valued within the policy more than others.

The ten student participants in this study were selected because they were receiving intervention in reading. All ten had either failed the reading CRCT (received a scale score of less than 800) or had barely passed it in prior years. Three of the students had previously been retained: Aurianna, Hallie, and Alyssa.

Mrs. Hunter, their reading teacher, identified most of the student participants to be reading at the third grade level, with exception of Donovan who was reading at the first to second grade level and Nathan and Alyssa who were reading at the fourth and fifth grade levels respectively. With a history of unsuccessful experiences in school, these students lacked the credentials and therefore prestige that would label them as being an asset to their school's scores. Rather, they were seen as a liability, students who would require extensive help and still might not pass.

Further, the students represented a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds: three were Caucasian (two girls and one boy), two were African American girls, one was a biracial boy (African American/Latino), two were Latino girls, one was a Latino boy, and one a Romanian girl. Consequently, they brought a diverse range of linguistic capital. Michelle, Donovan, and Candace were all native Spanish speakers, and Alexandria was a native Romanian speaker. However, given the fact that their school only offered an ESOL program, their expertise in their native language was not valued. Rather, they were perceived by the school as lacking the in-depth vocabulary and fluency of a native English speaker and therefore continued to receive ESOL services and special accommodations on the CRCT. Michelle, Donovan, Candace, and Alexandria all

received read aloud accommodations in which they were allowed to have the test passages, questions, and answers read aloud to them.

Likewise, the students' parents lacked a good deal of economic and institutional capital. Five of the ten students' parents reported a total annual household income of less than \$25,000. Six out of the ten student participants had at least one parent who had dropped out of high school. Only three students had parents who completed college degrees.

Responding to Test-Based Retention: Search and Destroy

Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) explained that when the rules of the system influence the thinking of the participants (*habitus*), they begin to see the system itself as a just and meritocratic means of sorting those who are gifted from those who are not. When students realize that the resources they bring to school are not valued, they often assume that school is not for them.

The participants in this study largely responded to test-based retention by using the search and destroy method of reading. All ten student participants admitted to using search and destroy at least part of the time, although they just referred to it as skimming, and the ways they used it varied to some degree. However, by accepting the taken-for-granted assumptions of test-based retention, two recurring themes emerged explaining why the students often avoided reading: reading was unnecessary and reading was difficult. For some of the students, despite the policy's aims, reading was sometimes regarded as unnecessary, and they managed to achieve their goals by strategically avoiding careful reading. More often than not, however, the students found reading to be difficult and their inability to master test passages resulted in despair.

Reading was unnecessary. Both Michelle and Kenyon quickly caught on that although the actual reading CRCT was highly important, the plethora of practice passages they completed in tutoring was much less important. Because of its importance, Michelle and Kenyon chose to read everything on the CRCT but only skimmed on the practice passages. Kenyon explained: “It’s like, it [reading everything] helps you. That [the CRCT] is like for a grade, so you can get on to sixth grade and the one that we do with Mrs. West [an interventionist] is like I don’t know if it’s happening for a grade.” For Michelle and Kenyon, reading practice passages in their entirety was deemed unnecessary because they believed they were unimportant.

Similarly, Alexandria had learned that some types of questions on the CRCT passages made reading unnecessary. Although most of the questions on the CRCT practice passages appeared to be text dependent, some were not and simply referred students to a particular sentence to identify a literary device. Alexandria discovered that rather than reading the entire passage, all she really needed to read were the sentences referred to in the questions. One particular passage I observed her complete had questions that listed four different sentences, one of which contained a simile. After the tutoring session, I asked Alexandria to tell me what she remembered about the passage: “Well, I haven’t read it yet, but . . . well what I really did is I read the questions and looked at the numbered sentences, the sentence numbers, and I eliminated the ones that wasn’t [*sic*] a simile.” Although the instructions asked students to read the passage, the content of the passage itself was completely irrelevant to answering the questions.

These two examples above illustrate how a policy that was explicitly designed to encourage in-depth reading (Barnes, 2001), in some instances, actually discouraged it.

Although the students readily accepted the importance and fairness of the CRCT, they also learned that careful reading was not always necessary for doing well.

Reading was difficult. For the majority of the students, however, the decision to use the search and destroy method on a regular basis was made out of sheer necessity. Reading was difficult for them and consequently, was something they would much rather avoid than fully embrace. For example, Aurianna said that she honestly tried to read as little as possible because “sometimes when I read, when I read the passage, sometimes I don’t wanna [*sic*] read all of it, I don’t feel like reading all of it.” Thus, she developed a system to answer test questions by reading as little as possible. She read the questions first and then skimmed through to try to find the answers. If she felt like she did not have a clue about the answers she read further to try to get a better understanding of what the passage was about.

For Candace, the length of the passages was the determining factor in whether or not she skimmed or carefully read them: “Like if the paragraph’s [*sic*] long, I will just scan, but if it’s short, I will just read it all. It’s kind of faster. You just see the word, clue a word, then you stop there and you read there.” Candace was intimidated by longer passages and sought a way to avoid reading them, answering the questions more quickly.

The students’ difficulty with and avoidance of reading was evident in the tutoring sessions they attended as well, especially those which focused heavily on test preparation. The following selected quotes illustrate how the students’ difficulties with reading often resulted in off-task behaviors designed to avoid reading. All of these statements came from one forty-minute tutoring session with Mrs. West, the

interventionist assigned to test preparation duties. Like several of the tutoring sessions, the off-task behavior culminated in despair:

Hallie - I forgot to bring mine [practice passage].

Hallie - Can we read aloud?

Brittney - I don't understand number 30.

Brittney - Are you paid to help us?

Brittney - Will we still be coming here after the CRCT?

Kenyon - Can I go to the restroom?

Hallie - Can I get a drink of water for my throat?

Kenyon - I really need to go to the bathroom.

Kenyon - I'm not going to college. I'm going to fail. My brother calls me retarded.

Hallie - I'm dumb.

Kenyon - I'm dumb too.

As I observed the session, I noticed that the students were writing down answers quickly, yet there was little evidence of any careful reading. The students read the questions first and then constantly flipped back and forth from the questions to the passage. Any type of distraction got everyone off task.

As I illustrated in the examples above, several of the students used the search and destroy method because reading was difficult for them, and thus, they wanted to avoid it as much as possible. When they realized they did not have the necessary skills to pass, rather than question the fairness of the system, they accepted that they were just "dumb" and would "never go to college."

The Cases of Donovan and Hallie

Two case students, Donovan and Hallie, especially exemplified the use of the search and destroy method as a result of finding reading to be difficult. Donovan greatly struggled with basic reading skills and was identified by his teacher as reading on the first to second grade level. He chose to read the questions first and then skimmed for key words when he felt that a passage would be too difficult for him to read. He even developed a special strategy he used to determine if a passage would be too difficult: “A lot of kids have followed this rule that if the first sentence, if you can’t read five words in the first sentence, the book is too hard, the book or passage is too hard for you.” Therefore, Donovan strategically used search and destroy to help him answer questions for a passage that was far above his reading level. Interestingly, Donovan had strong listening comprehension skills and passed the reading CRCT every year because he received read aloud accommodations as an ESOL student. Unfortunately, such high scores masked the fact that he continued to have great difficulty with basic reading skills.

As mentioned above, Hallie avoided reading because of the headaches she said she got when she read. If it were not for the headaches, she explained, she would probably enjoy reading much more but as it is, she claimed, “I’m horrible at reading.” However, her teachers and parents did not appear overly concerned about Hallie’s headache problem. They considered it to be just another excuse Hallie had come up with for not wanting to read. Similarly, her parents explained that the headache complaints usually came, “anytime there is work in front of her.”

Because of her “headaches,” Hallie rarely read anything all the way through. On both practice passages and the actual CRCT she skimmed. “I didn’t read the whole

passage on anything. I mean I read the questions, skimmed through, find it [*sic*], and then answered it.” The reading CRCT was divided into two sections. On the first section, Hallie reported that she read the questions and then quickly skimmed for key words and answered the questions. I observed that she was the first one done in the class and had to wait until everyone else had finished the first section before she began the second. While waiting she put her head down, fell asleep, and began snoring. It caused such a distraction that her teacher had to wake her up

On the second section of the reading CRCT, Hallie quickly bubbled in her answer sheet without appearing to look at the passages or questions at all. She then erased all of her answers. Her teacher approached her and asked what she was doing. Hallie told her, “I guessed on it because I was tired and then I decided I would go back.” Her teacher documented Hallie’s actions as a possible testing irregularity. Hallie later explained to me that she had not even read the questions on the second section and just randomly guessed her answers. Before turning the test in, however, she decided she would likely fail if she did not read anything and decided to erase her answers and try again. She then reported that she read the questions and skimmed the passages to find the answers.

Hallie failed the first administration of the reading CRCT and, according to the test-based retention policy, received additional intervention and then retook the tests. I was unable to help proctor the second administration of the CRCT, but Hallie later told me she skimmed all of the passages looking for key words except for the last one, which was short, so she decided to read all of it. Hallie ended up failing both administrations of the CRCT. However, the Georgia policy does allow for parents and teachers to appeal retentions through a Grade Placement Committee meeting. Because the school and her

parents worried that retention might do more harm than good, Hallie was placed in the sixth grade with the understanding that she would continue to receive intervention in reading.

Discussion

A Bourdieusian analysis of testing pinpoints the great paradox of education: it can be either a tool for “social change” or a tool for “social reproduction” (Kramsch, 2008, p. 45). Although proponents of test-based grade retention policies profess that they provide accountability and support to help struggling students gain needed literacy skills, the evidence collected on these ten participants suggests this is not always the case.

In order to be good-standing members in the field, they had to pass a standardized reading test for promotion. Although some of the students chose not to read when they felt it was unnecessary, the majority used the search and destroy method because of their struggles with reading. For these students, demanding grade level reading tests for promotion when they were reading well below grade level created a barrier for social advancement.

Donovan, for example, quickly determined from the first sentence alone that fifth grade passages were much too difficult for him. Hallie, as well as several of the other students simply avoided reading. They accepted the taken-for-granted assumptions that reading was not for them. It was boring, too long, and too difficult. Consequently, they initiated the search and destroy method to read as little school material as possible. A careful and thorough reading, they believed, was not an option. Unfortunately, by not getting practice reading connected text (e.g., avoiding reading) they increased the

likelihood that their struggles with reading would continue (reproduction) (Allington, 2001; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990).

It is interesting to note, however, that despite the barriers these students faced, almost all eventually passed the reading CRCT. Only Hallie failed both administrations. Although in many ways this was a victory for the school and students, the students' teacher, Mrs. Hunter, and several of the interventionists worried that such scores masked the fact that many of these students were still far behind in reading. The teachers expressed concerns about the passing scores for two reasons. First, four of the ten participants (Donovan, Alexandria, Michelle, and Candace) all received read aloud accommodations. Such accommodations lessened the need for search and destroy on the actual CRCT and, from the teachers' perspectives, gave these students a distinct advantage. Second, the cut score on the CRCT, they explained, only required around 50% for passing. Consequently, they feared that even with intervention these students would still be far behind in sixth grade.

Implications for Teachers

As a teacher, one's first instinct might be to try to devise ways to ensure that students stop using the search and destroy method and instead read assignments carefully. However, for students who have developed a strong aversion to reading, forcing them to read something they are uninterested in might do more harm than good.

French literature professor Pierre Bayard, not to be confused with French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, encountered a similar situation when he realized that his own children were becoming disenchanted with reading because of the book reports they were required to write for school (Holdengräber, 2007). In response, he wrote the book

How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read (Bayard, 2007) in which he deconstructed the notion of what it does or does not mean to read. It is not criminal to skim a book, he argued, but schools infuse in children the taken-for-granted assumption (habitus) that good reading means reading every word. He hoped to encourage children to reconsider the world of books by understanding that there are multiple ways to access them.

Perhaps rather than trying to stop students from using the search and destroy method, a better approach might be to help children understand when it is an effective choice and when it is not. Teachers should become more aware of how their students are or are not reading. (Interestingly, the teachers in this study, although they worked hard to help their students, were largely unaware of how their students were reading test passages.) Teachers should engage students in discussions about what it means to read and how effective readers choose to read in different ways (e.g., careful, normal, rapid, skimming) for different purposes.

If nothing else, a Bourdieusian analysis reminds us of what is at stake for students who feel they have little valued capital to compete for resources in the educational system. For students who struggle with reading, the challenge is even more severe. Because they struggle with reading, they avoid it and thus increase the likelihood that their difficulties with it will continue. Perhaps challenging the taken-for-granted notions about reading (Bayard, 2007) could offer struggling readers an avenue to reconsider what it means to read and how one approaches texts.

Pause and Ponder

1. What does it mean to read?
2. How do your various purposes for reading affect the types of reading you do?

3. How do your students read the assignments you give them?
4. How might a Bourdieusian analysis help you understand your students' actions?

Take Action

1. Find out how your students are reading the assignments you give them.
2. Engage your students in questions about what it means to read.
3. Read and discuss as a class *Charlie Joe Jackson's Guide to Not Reading* (Greenwald, 2011), a children's story about a boy who, in an attempt to avoid reading, develops some sophisticated reading strategies.
4. Help your students learn to select types of reading that most effectively meet their purposes?

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: BOURDIEU AND THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE

“To change the world, one has to change the ways of making the world. . . .” Pierre Bourdieu¹

For six years I taught fifth and sixth grade in Lubbock, Texas. Early in the fall I often had the opportunity to go to a Texas Tech University football game. I had previously earned a master’s degree from Texas Tech and had attended several games, but one September I noticed something as a teacher that I had never recognized as a student. It was a hot Saturday, and everyone had worn their red t-shirts. About half-way through the game, the fans began to do “the wave” in which they successively stood and raised their arms, creating a wave-like spectacle rippling around the stadium. On this particular day, the event drew my attention to the student body, hundreds of middle-class students standing and raising their white arms into the air.

It occurred to me on that Saturday that these college students looked nothing like the students I taught on a daily basis. Only about a third of my students were White, and only about a fourth of them were middle class. I silently wondered if, in a crowd like that, I would ever see the faces of my own students. I left the game that afternoon realizing that unless something drastically changed, it would be unlikely for many of my students to ever attend college.

¹ Bourdieu, P. (1990). *In other words: Essays towards a reflexive sociology* (M. Adamson, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1987) p. 137.

Texas had no “Hope” scholarship. For many of my students, the high cost of college tuition, which had recently been deregulated by the state, made college attendance unlikely. There was financial aid available, but it was often reserved for those with financial need who also showed significant academic aptitude as measured by tests such as the SAT and ACT, tests which have been shown to have adverse impact on ethnic minority students (Haney, 1993). Moreover, many of my students’ parents had never gone to college. Higher education was not part of their everyday vocabulary, and they knew little about how to groom their children for college, get them accepted, and help them qualify for scholarships.

As I referenced in Chapter 1, Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) argued that such inequities in educational settings are no accident. The great paradox of schooling is that although it has the potential to be used as a force for social change, it often becomes an instrument for social reproduction (Kramsch, 2008). Schools reward students who bring specific types of cultural capital to the classroom and often exclude those who do not. This system works at an unconscious level so that such inequities often go unrecognized and the general public assumes that the selection and exclusion that occurs in academic settings is based on actual merit. The school “succeed(s) in convincing individuals that they have themselves chosen or won the destinies which social destiny has assigned to them in advance” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990, p. 208). If, however, we begin to recognize that such inequities exist and choose to do nothing about them, the selection and exclusion becomes intentional.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the vast majority of research on test-based retention has been large-scale, quantitative studies seeking to determine if these policies improve

academic achievement on standardized tests (e.g., McCombs, Kirby, & Mariano, 2009; Roderick, Jacob, & Bryk, 2002; Winters & Greene, 2006). Very few researchers (e.g., Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Booher-Jennings, 2005, 2008) have attempted to understand how these policies are being negotiated by students, teachers, and administrators. In this concluding chapter I discuss the contributions this dissertation makes to test-based retention literature by addressing the recurring themes of misrecognition and reproduction generated in Chapters 2 through 4. Second, I describe the implications this dissertation provides for policy makers, education researchers, and educators. Finally, I revisit Bourdieu (1972/1977) and consider the possibilities his theoretical concepts provide for creating change in educational institutions.

Recurring Themes: Misrecognition and Reproduction

As I review the findings from Chapters 2 through 4 and consider the contributions they make to the test-based retention literature, two related themes repeatedly appear: misrecognition and reproduction. Bourdieu (1972/1977) explained that misrecognition occurs when the objective, external structures of a field match the subjective, internal structures of the habitus. When arbitrary practices are taken for granted, they go unrecognized and are assumed to be an engrained, natural part of the world. Without being recognized and questioned, misrecognition ensures that such taken-for-granted structures will be reproduced.

Politicians regularly advertise test-based retention policies as mechanisms for preventing students from falling behind in school and eventually dropping out (Barnes, 2001; Cannon, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). By retaining students in grade who are academically behind, they argue, educators ensure that students master the

necessary skills needed to succeed in the next grade level. However, as I showed in Chapters 2 through 4, things are often not what they appear under these policies and reproduction ultimately continues to occur.

A good example of this can be illustrated by the literature I reviewed in Chapter 2. Proponents of test-based retention often cite evidence of academic gains to justify their use, and indeed, there is evidence that they produce short-term gains (Greene & Winters, 2007; Lorence, Dworkin, Toenjes, & Hill, 2002; McCombs et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2002; Winters & Greene, 2006; Xia & Kirby, 2009). However, upon closer examination, the perceived positive impact fades. High-stakes testing policies have consistently resulted in negative curriculum reallocation, adapting teaching styles to test formats, negative coaching, cheating, and educational triage practices (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heilig, 2008), all producing score inflation (Koretz, 2008) and occurring most prevalently in probationary schools with large numbers of low-income, ethnic minority students (Hong & Young, 2008).

Although the test-based retention policies motivate some students to work harder in school, this encouragement appears to occur at the expense of the most vulnerable of students who remain unaffected by these policies (one-third in Chicago) (Roderick & Engel, 2001). Any academic gains that occur from retention are short-term (Dennis, Kroeger, Welsh, Brummer, & Baek, 2010; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005) and fade over the long run with students experiencing an increased likelihood of dropping out of school (Allensworth, 2005; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009). In many cases, the retained year is not

much different than the students' initial year prior to the retention with retained students receiving a second dose of the previous year's instruction (Stone & Engel, 2007).

Low-income and ethnic minority students have been shown to be adversely impacted by test-based retention policies and are currently more likely to be retained than middle-income, non-minority students (Greene & Winters, 2009; Livingston & Livingston, 2002; Valencia & Villarreal, 2005). Moreover, researchers have found that test-based retention policies obscure the connection between test scores and class inequities while imposing the belief that educational achievement is largely based on moral decisions such as good behavior in school, self-discipline, and perseverance (Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Booher-Jennings, 2008). Such findings provide compelling evidence that a policy, which at first glance appears to make educational opportunities more equitable, in fact reproduces the selection and exclusion of the most vulnerable of students.

In Chapter 3, misrecognition and reproduction are again recurring themes. The students and their parents in the study believed that test-based retention was fair, testing was trustworthy, and retention helped students academically achieve, all ideologies that have been contested by research (Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005; Shepard & Smith, 1989; Valencia & Villarreal, 2005; Xia & Kirby, 2009). The students and their parents readily accepted that the policy should exist. The CRCT, they argued, was a valid indicator of reading ability, and students who failed the test should be retained. Retention, they believed, would help struggling students catch up academically. Moreover, none of the parents or students questioned the even deeper assumption that elementary school should be organized by grade-level achievement.

In many ways, the policy makers, Governor Barnes and his staff, appeared to have bought-in to many of the same taken-for-granted notions. When promoting the policy before the Georgia legislature, Barnes argued that “. . . we owe it to them [the students] to make this difficult choice. . . . By promoting a child who is not really ready, we say, ‘It’s okay if you don’t learn’” (Barnes, 2001). Retaining students who are behind, he argued, would prevent them from getting discouraged and dropping out of school (Strickland, 2008).

In an effort to limit reproduction, the teachers were highly skeptical about the policy and carefully took steps to educate parents through the appeals process to ensure that students did not risk the harmful effects of retention. Yet, several of the teachers ultimately felt that reproduction was inevitable. Despite their efforts to thwart the adverse consequences of the policy, they still feared that those students who were placed in the next grade would continue to be far behind, even with intervention, and ultimately be at high risk of dropping out of school.

As I discussed in Chapter 3, in the context of this study, it appeared that the teachers and administrators at Plains were able to easily circumvent the policy, perhaps because it was less about retaining students and more about creating a rigorous educational image that would encourage academic achievement through the threat of retention (Brown, 2007; Strickland, 2008). Even if this was the case, a small number of students, likely those most vulnerable (Xia & Kirby, 2009), were retained through the policy and risked the negative consequences of having to repeat a grade.

Finally, the themes of misrecognition and reproduction again appeared in Chapter 4. When the Clinton administration released their report (U.S. Department of Education,

1999) encouraging schools to end social promotion, they expressed concern about students graduating from high school being unable to read, write, or do basic arithmetic. Test-based retention policies, they argued, would ensure that students not advance to the next grade level unless they had the skills they needed. Georgia's Governor Barnes and his staff echoed similar concerns when promoting their policy (Barnes, 2001). In the same manner, the parents of the student participants in my study assumed that the CRCT provided trustworthy information about how well their children were doing in reading and that it assessed children's careful reading of the passages. The teachers also assumed that the students were engaged in careful reading on the test and the practice passages.

However, upon closer examination, many of these taken-for-granted perceptions became more suspect. The students reported that they often found the CRCT passages to be unnecessary or too difficult to read. Consequently, they used the search and destroy method to complete the test and practice passages. Although the test-based retention policy was designed to ensure that students received the skills they needed, many of the participants found it to be inaccessible and resorted to reading the questions and scanning for key words to answer questions about passages they felt were too difficult for them. Designed, as it was, to increase students' abilities to read rigorous connected texts, the test-based retention policy in fact created avoidance of reading, thus increasing the likelihood that the student participants' struggles with reading would continue (Allington, 2001; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990).

As I mentioned in Chapter 4, most of the students ended up passing the reading CRCT, either with the help provided by receiving the read aloud accommodations (e.g., the ESOL students) or due to the low cut score required for passing (e.g., around 50%).

Although in many ways this was a victory for the school and students, the students' teacher, Mrs. Hunter, and several of the interventionists worried that such scores masked the fact that many of these students were still far behind in reading. Consequently, they feared that even with intervention these students would still greatly struggle in sixth grade.

Implications for Policy Makers, Educators, and Researchers

This dissertation provides several important implications for policy makers, researchers, and educators. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, several educational organizations have urged policy makers to abandon retention practices based on single, high-stakes test scores (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999; American Educational Researchers Association, 2000; Dennis et al., 2012; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; Penfield, 2010). Standardized tests, they argued, are only an estimate within a margin of error based on a small sample of questions in a certain area and should not be treated as an exact measure of student knowledge. Such consistent ethical concerns expressed by professional educational organizations, along with the growing research documenting the harmful effects of test-based retention policies, provide ample evidence that policy makers should strongly consider ending these policies.

Although policy makers are receiving political pressure to ensure high promotion standards, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, many of the teachers in this study interpreted the policy largely as an empty threat. There was little fear, at least among the teachers, that any students would actually be retained through the policy. On numerous occasions, Mrs. Hunter, the students' reading teacher, explained to her students that if they failed

both administrations, their parents could meet with the school and have them placed in the next grade. It did not mean they would actually be retained. Such open acknowledgment that the policy sounds much tougher than it actually is suggests that many of its objectives could be achieved by alternative policies that do not place the most vulnerable students at risk for retention.

Although space prohibited me from mentioning it in Chapter 4, the findings from that chapter provide important implications for policy makers as they consider developing assessments for the Common Core Standards. It is largely assumed that standardized tests assess careful reading (Nacke, 1970). The students' use of the search and destroy method on practice and test passages suggests that such tests might be assessing something quite different (e.g., scanning for key words). Policy makers should consider what it is they want to assess and closely examine how reading tests attempt to assess it.

In terms of implications for researchers, this dissertation has made a much needed contribution to the few qualitative case studies (e.g., Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Booher-Jennings, 2005, 2008) that have attempted to understand how test-based retention policies are being negotiated by students, teachers, and administrators. However, continued work needs to be done. Further research conducted in other schools and with other policies would provide additional information to determine how unique the Georgia policy and the responses of the participants at Plains Elementary are in comparison to other schools affected by these issues. It would also provide further information regarding what these standardized tests are concealing and help flesh out the processes in which these policies

obscure the connection between achievement scores and class inequities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990).

Another important area of work for researchers is to find ways to better communicate research findings to the general public. Despite several decades of research documenting the negative consequences of retention, the general public largely still believes that retaining students will help prevent them from later dropping out of school (Byrnes, 1989). House (1989) proposed a unique way of convincing teachers who support retention of its harmful effects. He suggested that the best way to change teachers' deeply-engrained beliefs is to engage them in teacher action research in which they follow former students who they have retained and examine the consequences. Such research would provide teachers with a first-hand look at the future progress (or lack thereof) of these students, providing insights to which they would normally not have access.

Research should also be conducted to examine the processes by which test-based retention policies might be changed. The policy in Texas provides such an example. In 2009, the Texas policy was amended so that it only applied to grades 5 and 8 and not grade 3. Research that documented how and why this change occurred could provide important implications for researchers and policy makers who are interested in changing the current test-based retention policies in their states.

For teachers and administrators who are concerned about the adverse consequences of test-based retention policies, the findings in Chapter 3 do offer some hope. Although test-based retention policies vary from state to state, most contain some type of an appeals procedure to prevent mass numbers of students from being retained

(Marsh, Gershwin, Kirby, & Xia, 2009). The teachers and administrators at Plains provide a model of how such policies can legally and ethically be altered so that in practice they serve more like promotion plus policies in which students receive ongoing, intensive intervention but are ultimately promoted (Smith & Shepard, 1989). At the same time, the teachers worried that even when struggling students were placed in the next grade they would likely continue to struggle. Students need as much extra help as they can get.

However, the quality of the tutoring matters. The findings in Chapter 4 suggest that if students are confronted with texts that are too difficult for them or that they find uninteresting, they will likely develop a means to get around careful reading, such as using the search and destroy method. Rather than attempting to eliminate students' use of the search and destroy method, teachers might work to help children understand when it is an effective choice and when it is not. Teachers could become more aware of how their students are or are not reading and engage students in discussions about what it means to read and how effective readers choose to read in different ways for different purposes. Teachers could also help children recognize the strengths (capital) they bring to the reading process.

Bourdieu and the Possibility of Change

The fact that a policy explicitly designed to reduce reproduction of educational inequities in school is actually failing to curb it, raises the question of whether or not social change is possible. To make matters more difficult, many of the taken-for-granted assumptions concerning how failing schools and students should be helped (e.g., grade retention, increased accountability, high-stakes testing) are based on deep-seeded

ideologies (House, 1989) that are unlikely to go away on their own. Bourdieu's (1972/1977) theoretical concepts (e.g., field, capital, and habitus) provide powerful tools for explaining how and why reproduction in social fields such as education occur, but are they able to provide insights into how such structures might be changed?

One of the most often made critiques of Bourdieu's work is that it is deterministic and fatalistic (Bourdieu, 1987/1990), that he is unable to provide any hope because he himself does not believe change is possible. However, Bourdieu and those closest to him repeatedly denied this claim, arguing that such interpretations were misreadings of his work (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu (1987/1990) argued that although it infrequently occurs, change is possible. The possibility for change exists within his theoretical concept of habitus: "To change the world, one has to change the ways of making the world, that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced." (Bourdieu, 1987/1990, p. 137).

Bourdieu (1987/1990) believed that his theoretical concepts of field, capital, and habitus provided a means of transcending recurring debates in sociology, such as objectivity versus subjectivity and determinism versus free will. Bourdieu (1987/1990) argued that the focus of sociology should not be restricted to social laws (structure) or the individual mind (agency) but should instead examine the dispositions of participants. People's dispositions, he argued, provide insights in to how they are accepting the structures of the field (doxa) or are rejecting them (heterodoxa) (Bourdieu, 1972/1977).

Bourdieu often found that people, especially oppressed groups, readily accept the structures of the field without question (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), but this does not mean that change is impossible. The possibility for change lies in the fact that many of

the social structures themselves are purely arbitrary (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990) in the sense that they “cannot be deduced from any universal principle, whether physical, biological or spiritual” (p. 8). Arbitrary social structures can be changed, and the process of change itself begins with recognition.

In a chapter entitled “Description and Prescription: The Conditions of Possibility and the Limits of Political Effectiveness,” Bourdieu (1982/1991) gave one of his clearest explanations of how dominated groups can change oppressive structures. Certainly this is no easy task, and Bourdieu (1982/1991) made it explicit that the pressure put on dominated groups exerts a force that makes political action extremely difficult. However, he still acknowledged that it is possible for agents to act upon the world by “acting on their knowledge of this world” (p. 127). The process begins by agents recognizing the doxic relationship between dominant and nondominant groups and denouncing adherence to the taken-for-granted order that ensures the reproduction of oppressive relationships. Because these structures are not immutable conditions inherent in the natural world, they can be changed by transforming how this world is represented. Bourdieu (1982/1991) explained, “Many ‘intellectual debates’ are less unrealistic than they seem if one is aware of the degree to which one can modify social reality by modifying the agents’ representation of it” (p. 128).

However, Bourdieu also warned that such changes are unlikely to occur without a fight. The dominant group will actively resist changes and fight to maintain a continuation of the doxic relationship. For Bourdieu, the possibility of change exists in the capacity for reflexivity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Just as researchers are to some degree capable of objectifying themselves, becoming aware of their assumptions,

prejudices, and places within social fields (Kramsch, 2008), so the people they study can become aware of taken-for-granted doxa through research findings and consider new ways of “making the world” (Bourdieu, 1987/1990, p. 137).

So what might change from a Bourdieusian perspective look like? Bourdieu himself offered a good example. Although Bourdieu saw himself first and foremost as a sociologist and was cautious about political involvement, later in his life he was much more politically active and became a well-known public intellectual in France. Bourdieu felt that “those lucky enough to have spent their lives, as he had, in studying the social world, could not be neutral or indifferent to struggle” (Johnson, 2002).

In the documentary *Sociology is a Martial Art*, Carles (2001) followed Bourdieu as he attended political rallies and fought against globalization. In the film, Bourdieu argued that sociology is a martial art: “It can come in handy . . .” [but] “like all martial arts [it is] to be used in self-defense and any foul play is strictly forbidden” (Carles, 2001). In public meetings Bourdieu educated his audiences about their own oppression and how by accepting the taken-for-granted structures of the various fields in which they lived their lives they were implicit in their own oppression. But Bourdieu did not stop there. He also explained:

It’s pessimistic to conclude there’s nothing we can do. I don’t think that’s true.

It’s not true and, what’s more . . . —this is a classic—the most bogus structures of manipulation, structures of supervision, can be diverted, turned around. . . . One must do what little one can to change things. . . . We all have very little scope for freedom, so everyone must do the little he can do to escape the laws, the necessities, the determinisms. (Carles, 2001)

At the end of his life, a few months before his death, Bourdieu wrote an self-analysis of his own life. In it, he again emphasized his hope that his life's work would provide a means for people to improve their lives:

And nothing would make me happier than having made it possible for some of my readers to recognize their own experiences, difficulties, questionings, sufferings, and so on, in mine, and to draw from that realistic identification . . . some means of doing what they do, and living what they live, a little bit better. (Bourdieu, 2004/2008, p. 113)

Such a Bourdieusian stance provides a model for promoting change of oppressive policies such as test-based retention.

Researchers must first educate the general public about the negative consequences of these policies. Such education could occur through a variety of venues such as town meetings, newspaper feature stories, op-ed pieces, magazine articles, and YouTube videos. Any outlet that is easily accessible to the general public could be effective.

Administrators and teachers play an especially important role in educating parents. As I discussed in Chapter 3, the administrators and teachers at Plains Elementary firmly opposed retention and worked hard to educate parents as their children participated in the test-based retention policy. However, although the administrators and teachers at Plains opposed retention, many others still support it (Bulla & Gooden, 2003; Byrnes, 1989; Smith, 1989; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Researchers have an important role to play in educating administrators and teachers through graduate course work, staff development, and practitioner journals.

Finally, researchers should not only provide education about the negative consequences of retention. They should educate the general public that retention and social promotion are not the only options as well. As I discussed in Chapter 2, both retention and social promotion are failed strategies (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Owings & Kaplan, 2001). Alternatives such as reconceptualizing school organization and promotion plus policies provide better options that are actually attainable.

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