Theoretical Framework for Grade-Level Retention Literature

The Role of a Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework guides research by directing the focus of the researcher. It defines what the researcher will look for and how data will be sorted. Making a theoretical framework explicit is important in research for two reasons: it gives the reader a frame to understand conclusions and it reduces the perception of bias. (Borgatti, 1999).

Describing the theoretical framework used in a piece of research helps the reader understand conclusions. In education research there are a wide variety of phenomena that can be measured (e.g. teacher retention, home language effects, suspension of African-American males, etc), and inside of each phenomena there are a wide variety of factors at play. In defining a theoretical framework the researcher makes clear that they will be looking at a defined series of factors, or will attempt to address a defined series of questions, this frames the issues for the reader.

Stating a theoretical framework explicitly can reduce the perception of bias by making clear to the reader the lens through which the researcher is looking at empirical data. For example, by stating explicitly that a Marxist theoretical framework is being used, a reader will not be surprised if a researcher draws conclusions about power relationships in society.

Grade-level retention is the focus of my study for this course. In the thirty or more articles I read I did not find any examples of authors stating that their research fell into a theoretical framework category (no Feminist, Resiliency, Marxist, Critical Race statements). I found this interesting since it is a field ripe with potential for examination of alternative voices. For example, there were no studies of student voice, elements of racial imbalance, or gender

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¹ Which preposition modifies ‘theoretical framework’? I chose ‘for’ because to my best understanding a theoretical framework is like a tool. You choose the right tool for the job, in this case looking at grade-level retention. The fact that I am not sure of the right preposition testifies to the ‘developing’ in my developing understanding of the meaning of a theoretical framework.¹

¹ The presence of a footnote about usage and theoretical frameworks is further testimony.
inequity, though the data screams for such an examination. Rather, the theoretical frameworks defined by the majority of researchers revolved around three areas of measurement.

**Theoretical Framework for Grade-Level Retention Literature**

The typical theoretical framework for grade-level retention research revolves around three areas: academic achievement, social outcomes, and dropping out of school. Additional topics that often appear in retention research include the financial cost of retention, quantifying the number of students retained, retention of at-risk groups, educator bias, and methodology (Roderick & Nagoaka, 2005; Range, 2011).

**Academic Achievement Outcomes of Retention**

Researchers generally classify academic achievement in two categories: short term and long term. The common finding has been that grade-level retention does not improve student academic achievement in ensuing years (Bowman, 2005; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Jimerson, 2001). There are, however, results that suggest that there are short-term academic benefits to retention (i.e. some progress is shown during the year following retention), but then the benefits disappear in the second and third years following retention (Jacob & Lefgren, 2002; Roderick & Nagoaka, 2005. Schwerdt & West, 2012).

**Social Outcomes of Retention**

Retained students complained of being teased by their peers, others would not admit to peers that they had been retained (Bowman, 2005). Retained students were reported to experience significantly more depressive symptoms than a comparable non-retained group (Ritzema & Shaw, 2012). When compared to low-performing, but promoted peers, retained students have shown increased aggression, lower self-esteem, and lower academic self-concept.

**Dropping Out of School**
While data is different when viewed through different lenses and as reported by different researchers, being held back a grade is universally seen as a strong predictor of dropping out of high school. One study reported that 78% of dropouts were retained at least once, others suggested that grade retention increases the risk of dropping out between 20-50%; retained students are 2 to 11 times more likely to drop out of high school (Jimerson, 2001). Students retained in middle or high school are more likely to drop out than their promoted peers (Bowman, 2005). Students who are over-age for their grade face an increased risk of dropping out (Roderick & Nagoaka, 2005). Grade retention in elementary grades is one of the strongest predictors to dropping out of high school (Range, 2011).

Possible Theoretical Frameworks for Future Research

Resiliency Theory posits that the human organism has an innate knack for survival, and thus people can develop astoundingly even in extremely trying circumstances (Benard, 2012). Current literature in grade-level retention points to the experience of flunking as being extremely trying psychologically and socially for children. How are children able to bounce back and thrive? What factors need to be present?

Critical Race Theory is a way of looking at race relations in a way that posits that racism is ingrained in the fabric of American Society. Grade-level retention statistics show a clear difference in numbers of students retained by race. Are the attitudes of educators towards students influenced by race when it comes to retention? Retention could be linked to referrals to special education and suspension as another route through which African-American males are excluded from success by established purveyors of social capital like schools.
Boys are retained at a higher rate than girls. The question of grade-level retention could be approached from a feminist\(^2\) perspective. Why are boys retained more often? How does that fact fit into the perception that primary schools aren’t designed to ‘fit’ boys as well as girls?

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the meaning and purpose of a theoretical framework\(^3\), explain the common theoretical framework for grade-level retention research, and propose possible theoretical frameworks for further research around grade-level retention. Exploring these issues sparks an interest to read further to see if there are studies done on retention from other perspectives, and if not, possibly to consider that as an option for my own research.

**References**


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\(^2\) ‘masculinist’?

\(^3\) As such, it is a salient example of writing as inquiry.


