Should 'failing' students repeat a grade? Retrospective response from Finland

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Introduction

Educational excellence in a school or a nation is not only about statistical averages of student achievement. It also entails the idea that all or most of the students regardless of their abilities, family backgrounds, mother tongue or other characteristics, should enjoy learning and succeed in school. But since we are all different, school systems find meeting this ideal difficult. Students who need more time to learn or have special needs related to learning are often moved to special class or asked to repeat a grade instead of being helped to progress with their peers. We answer the question in the title of this essay by using Finland as an example of an education system that has moved from remedying learning problems, i.e. using grade retention as a cure, to preventing learning difficulties, i.e. relying on early intervention and individualised support to all students. This essay provides therefore historical perspective to the evolution of policies regarding educational failure in general and grade repetition in particular.

Education policies since the 1970s in Finland – a nation often regarded as an international model due to its equitable and system-wide high academic performances – have been particularly crafted to reduce educational failure of students and promote success of all schools (Sahlberg, 2007). This has led to high completion and low grade repetition rates that characterize the Finnish education system today. Indeed, fewer than two percent of students who leave the compulsory nine-grade comprehensive school today at the age of 16 have repeated a grade at some point of schooling. Grade repetition is at similar level in other Nordic countries but much higher elsewhere in Europe; in France 40%, Belgium, in the Netherlands and Spain one third and in Germany and Switzerland one quarter of students are grade repeaters.

Repeating a grade as a consequence of inadequate academic or behavioural progress was a common treat of 'failing' students in Finnish schools until the early 1970s. Introduction of the new comprehensive school in 1972 that replaced old parallel grammar and civic schools challenged the educational value and moral purpose of grade repetition. Evidence from systematic follow-up studies and inspections at that time suggested that students normally benefit only a little, if at all, from repeating the same grade. Therefore, the number of students who were not able to progress from one grade to next in the comprehensive school gradually decreased.

Grade repetition in parallel school system before 1972

In Finland, as described by Aho and colleagues (2006), prior to 1972 education was divided after fourth grade of elementary school into two parallel tracks. Grammar school that required the passing of an admission test provided a pathway to academic further studies, whereas the other track led to civic school and often ended the students' educational path after the eighth grade. Grammar school had two stages: the middle school comprised grades one to five and the gymnasium (or general upper secondary school) grades six to eight. Gymnasium was optional and included a common national matriculation examination at the completion.

Grade repetition was not rare in elementary schools but it was an integral part of school pedagogy of grammar school. In some cases a student repeated the third grade of elementary school in order to improve knowledge and skills required in the grammar school admission test at the end of the fourth grade. At the time of introduction of the new nine-year school approximately 12% of students in each grammar school grade did not progress from their grade. Grade repetition at that time was not evenly distributed between schools or grades. For example, in Finnish gymnasiums, on average, every sixth student had to repeat a grade every year. Although available statistics do not allow any detailed conclusions about how many Finnish students those days repeated one or more grades during their school life, we can estimate that up to half of those graduating from eight-grade of grammar school repeated one or more grades at some point of their schooling. Furthermore, significant number of students in gymnasiums dropped out of school before completion – often after not being able to progress from one grade to the next. The most demanding subjects and reasons for repeating a grade at that time were mathematics and the Swedish language (as a second national language), although some students had to repeat a grade due to behavioural or attitude problems.

The main excuse for grade repetition was that young people mature and nurture at a different pace. This was particularly related to mathematical thinking. The justification was that repeating a grade provides individuals time to catch up with their peers psychologically and socially. Grade repetition was also a common mean to help teachers deal with a variety of learning abilities and personalities in their classrooms. Rather interestingly, some teachers used repetition as a source of extrinsic motivation. Especially boys, they thought, would concentrate better and put more effort in schooling due to fear of failing to pass the grade. An extreme consequence of not being successful in passing through grades in the grammar school was to be returned to civic school. In the gymnasium grade repetition was mostly used to minimise the number of failed students in the national matriculation examination. Grade repetition in the gymnasium was sometimes requested by students and often recommended by teachers as a practical means to have more time to prepare properly for the school-leaving examination.

Problems of grade repetition and new comprehensive school policies

The new comprehensive school that was introduced in 1972 was built on the social value of equity and was driven by the idea that all students are able to achieve common academic and social goals through individualised, choice-based educational streams in the upper grades of comprehensive school. In the old school system grade repetition was a method of differentiation for teachers. Problems related to this were well known at the birth of the new school in early 1970s. The impact of being sent back to the same grade with younger peers was often demoralising and rarely made the expected academic improvements among students (see Jimerson, 2001). After all, repeating an entire grade was an inefficient way of fixing learning because it did not focus on those parts of the curriculum where students needed targeted help. Studying for a second time those subjects that a stu-

dent had already successfully completed was rarely stimulating for students or their teachers. Students were sent to the same class again without a plan to specify the areas of improvement, let alone the methods of achieving most effectively the required levels of knowledge and skills.

In the early days of comprehensive school reform grade repetition was seen as an inadequate and wrong strategy for fixing individual learning or social deficiencies. In the elementary school, grade repeaters who had difficulties in one or two subjects were often labelled as 'failing' students who also had behavioural and personality problems. This educational stigma normally had a dramatic negative impact on students' self esteem and thereby their motivation and effort to learn. It also lowered teachers' expectations regarding these students' abilities to learn. Grade repetition created a vicious circle that for many young people cast a negative shadow right into adulthood. Educational failure in school is linked to an individual's social role in society and is characterised by unfavourable attitudes to learning and further education. Leaving this role behind was possible only for young people with strong identities and high social capital in the form of friends, teachers and parents. Finnish experience shows that grade repetition, in most cases, led to increased social inequality rather than helping students to overcome academic and social problems.

Sending students back to the same grade also created the possibility that teachers could abuse their authority. Student assessment in Finland has always relied on teacher's judgement because external student assessments have not been part of schooling in Finland. It was not rare that a student's personality became a reason for using grade repetition as a stick to change his or her behaviour and character. Students with a higher socio-economic background were less likely to be required to repeat a grade. International evidence cited by Brophy (2006), for example, also suggests that school-imposed grade repetition that is based on teachers' authority is harmful to students and does not benefit non-repeaters.

Individualised learning and special education

The comprehensive nine-year basic school that merged the former grammar school and civic school changed grade repetition policies and practices. After nine years of comprehensive basic school a student can choose between general or vocational upper secondary school, or they can opt to leave formal education system, although 95 % of graduates continue studies after completing compulsory basic school. Since 1985 the comprehensive school curriculum has been unified without tracking or streaming students into ability groups or educational tracks. However, the new comprehensive school did not completely remove the problem of repeating grades but the number of students who repeated grades in comprehensive school decreased significantly. In the upper secondary school approximately 15% of students repeated a grade at least once, although this number began to decrease from the beginning of the 1980s (Virtanen, 2002).

In Finland, the new comprehensive school was not only about changing content of teaching and restructuring education in an alternative way. It was, first and foremost, changing the entire philosophy of public education (Välijärvi et al., 2007). Individualised learning and differentiation

became basic principles in organising schooling for students across the society. Assumption that all students can achieve common educational goals if learning is organised according to each student's characteristics and needs became another foundation. Retention and ability grouping was clearly against these ideals. Different students have to learn to work and study together in same class. Diversity of students' personalities, abilities and orientations has to be taken into account in crafting learning environments and choosing pedagogical methods in schools. This turned out to be one of the most demanding professional challenges to teachers. Even today, schools are searching optimal educational and economic solution for the increasing diversity.

Minimizing grade repetition has been possible primarily because special education has become integral part of each and every school in Finland. Every child has right to get individualised support provided by trained professionals as part normal schooling. This special support to individual learning is arranged in many different ways today. In brief, special education in Finland is increasingly organised in within general mainstream schooling. In autumn 2007, approximately half of the students transferred to special education had been fully or partially integrated into general schools while the other half studied in special classes of normal schools or in special schools. In 2006 approximately one third of students in comprehensive school were transferred to special education or received part-time special education which is significantly more than in OECD countries on average (Statistics Finland, 2008). Special education has a key part to play in improving equity and combating educational failure in Finnish schools.

Upper secondary schools – both general and vocational – operate using modular curriculum units rather than grades. Thus, grade repetition in its conventional form has vanished from Finnish upper secondary schools. Students build their own learning schedules from a menu of courses offered in their school or by other education institutions. Studying in upper secondary school is therefore flexible and selected courses can be completed at a different pace depending on students' abilities and life situations. Rather than repeating an entire grade, a student only repeats those courses that were not passed satisfactorily. Most of the students complete upper secondary school in the prescribed time that is three years, although some progress faster and some need more time than others. This non-graded structure has also abolished classes where the same group of students move from one lesson to another and from one grade to the next. As a consequence of this modular structure and intensified counselling in schools, only 4% drop out during general upper secondary school, of whom half move to vocational education institutions.

Conclusion

Finnish experience suggests that grade repetition is not the best way to prevent students from 'failing' or fixing other individual problems in schools. Moreover, retention is expensive for both individuals and society and it often creates more problems than it solves. In Finland, education policies give a centre role to lifelong learning. School is a place where knowledge, skills and atti-

tudes for further learning are created – or demolished. Since all students are different, they should also be supported in school differently.

Finland has chosen the policy of automatic promotion combined with principles of early intervention. Such an attention to dynamic inequalities in all schools, as Grubb (2007) points out, is what distinguishes Finland from many other countries. This requires systematic counselling and career guidance as young people start to think about their educational pathways. In Finland, the nine-year comprehensive school offers students an option that is called the 'tenth grade' if they need more time to learn or make up their minds. This additional year after compulsory school serves some 3% of the age cohort annually and it aims at strengthening knowledge and skills that students need in the upper secondary school. Or, for some young people, it is simply a time-out to decide what would be the best way forward after basic school. Well-informed decisions about further studies or career prospects can save students from unpleasant surprises and prevent drop-out or repetition of grades or courses.

The global education reform movement has heightened the role of testing and competition in the world of schools. As a consequence, failure is determined by test scores and 'failing' schools and students are thus easy to identify. At the same time the number of 'failing' schools and students is increase. In many education systems, however, it is the system that is responsible for making students and schools to fail due to race for higher standards and lack of individualised support mechanisms. Surprisingly, education reforms only rarely concretely address issues of educational failure. Moreover, the cost of this old-fashioned pedagogic remedy is often ignored. Grade repetition, as reported in Brophy (2006) may be justified as a solution to help a student to succeed better in some specific situations, for example in case of serious illness. But it is not the best way available for general learning and educational difficulties in our schools today. In short, grade repetition is a blunt instrument for cure learning problems. As illustrated in Finnish example, it normally has unwanted side-effects that become costly to individuals and the society. Asking student to repeat a grade to improve learning is like asking brain surgeon to operate on brain tissue using a kitchen knife.

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