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Joshua L. Hatfield¹, John R. Slate²

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¹ **Joshua L. Hatfield**, Sam Houston State University, Department of Educational Leadership, Huntsville, TX USA, jlh151@shsu.edu,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7524-1878>

² **John R. Slate**, Sam Houston State University, Department of Educational Leadership, Huntsville, TX USA, jrs051@shsu.edu,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9915-7849>



Differences in Reading by the Retention Status of English Learners: A Texas, Statewide Investigation

Joshua L. Hatfield¹, John R. Slate²

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Abstract

In this study, the degree to which Kindergarten retention was related to the reading performance of English Learners in Grade 3 was addressed. Through inferential statistical analyses of Texas statewide data, statistically significant differences were yielded between English Learners who had been retained in kindergarten and their counterparts who had not been retained in kindergarten. English Learners who had been retained in kindergarten performed statistically significantly poorer on the Approaches Grade Level standard, the Meets Grade Level standard, and the Masters Grade Level standard on the Texas mandated assessment in Grade 3 than did English Learners who had not been retained. Clearly, retention in Kindergarten of these English Learners did not yield the intended outcomes. Implications and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Retention, English Learners, Kindergarten, Intervention, Grade 3, Texas

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INTRODUCTION

The Texas Education Agency (2020) reported that 1,055,043 English Learners were enrolled in Texas public schools in the 2018-2019 school year. Twelve years previously, in 2006-2007, less than three quarters of a million English Learners were enrolled in Texas public schools. A decade before that, in 1996-1997, just over half a million English Learners were enrolled in Texas public schools. As such, over the past two decades, the State of Texas has experienced a 50% increase in the number of English Learners enrolled in Texas public schools.

English Learners continue to struggle to meet state assessment expectations in Texas. According to Bowman et al. (2010), academic achievement gaps are present for Spanish speaking students from Mexico. In regard to Spanish speaking students, 76% do not meet the state expectation in reading and 53% do not meet the expectations in mathematics. In more recent studies, researchers (e.g., Bowman-Perrott et al., 2009; Ludwig et al., 2019) have indicated interventions on specific reading skills (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) will have positive effects on the academic growth of English Learners.

One intervention that has been used for decades is that of retention or holding students back and having them repeat the same grade level. Retention, however, does not fill in academic gaps. It is quality teaching and intervention that play a vital role in student progress. Teachers must build quality interventions for students not meeting expectations, which researchers (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2009; Hatti, 2017; Ludwig et al., 2019) indicate are the key to progress, not retention. Other researchers (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2009; Ludwig et al., 2019) have noted that a student's primary language must be strong before second language acquisition can occur successfully. Intervention is necessary in both languages to close the academic gaps of English Learners.

In Texas, students are required in Grades 5 and 8 by the Student Success Initiative to pass the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR). Students who fail the STAAR tests will be retained. All other grade level retention policies in Texas are implemented at the school district level. According to the Texas Education Agency (2020), students who are continuously promoted pass the state assessment at a higher rate than students who had been retained. Interestingly, Locke and Sparks (2019) concluded that Kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers who have less than three years of experience usually do not have enough knowledge to determine if a student should be retained. Inexperienced teachers make recommendations for retention at a higher rate than experienced teachers. Also established was that retention decreased for students who were living in poverty whose parents are active in the child's learning at school and home (Locke & Sparks, 2019).

The effect of retention on students has been discussed in both social/emotional and academic progress spheres. Hatti (2017) completed a meta-analysis study in which he documented the different types of activities in education that affect student learning measured with effect sizes. In this study, retention was clearly established as the poorest possible choice that can be made for students who struggle to learn the expected material on the expected timeline. This information coupled with researchers (Clotfelter et al., 2009; DeFeyter et al., 2020; Locke & Sparks, 2019; Range et al., 2012) who have determined that gains do not last from retaining students should make it clear that retention is not a viable solution.

English Learners require intensive intervention to close the academic achievement gaps and retention only adds a negative social/emotion effect. As research studies are published about the effects of retention and intervention for English Learners, intervention is necessary for building skills. While state and federal laws make it enticing for administrators and teachers

to retain students in the hope they will pass the next state assessment, retention has been documented to be an ineffective option.

METHOD

Statement of the Problem

English Learners tend to have academic achievement gaps, gaps that have resulted in many English Learners being retained. Many individuals believe when students have an additional year to learn the English language, that they will close the gap. Other researchers (e.g., Clotfelter et al., 2009; DeFeyter et al., 2020; Range et al., 2012) have determined, however, that any academic gains are short lived. Curran and Kitchin (2018) reported the presence of statistically significant larger gaps in science, starting in kindergarten based on ethnicity/race compared to gaps in mathematics and reading. Deficits continue to be a lifelong concern as Lazarus and Ortega (2007) stated that low-achieving students are likely to be retained, drop out of school, and hold low wage jobs.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this study was to determine the degree to which Kindergarten retention was related to the reading performance of English Learners in Grade 3 on the Texas state-mandated assessment. One specific purpose was to ascertain the extent to which Kindergarten retention of English Learners was related to their Grade 3 Approaches Grade Level Standard performance. The next purpose was to ascertain the extent to which Kindergarten retention of English Learners was related to their Grade 3 Meets Grade Level Standard performance. The last purpose was to determine the degree to which Kindergarten retention of English Learners was related to their Grade 3 Masters Grade Level Standard performance.

Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions were addressed: (a) What is the difference in the Approaches Grade Level Standard performance of English Learners by their retention status?; (b) What is the difference in the Meets Grade Level Standard performance of English Learners by their retention status?; and (c) What is the difference in the Masters Grade Level Standard performance of English Learners by their retention status?

Significance of the Study

This study was conducted to determine the degree to which retention in Kindergarten was related to reading performance in Grade 3 of English Learners. Accordingly, results from this statewide investigation would add to the limited available research. Though research studies have been conducted on retention (e.g., Lazarus & Ortega, 2007; Range et al., 2012) few published empirical articles could be located concerning research in Texas on the degree to which Kindergarten retention was related to the reading performance of English Learners in Grade 3. Several stakeholders would benefit from this study when making retention decisions which include elementary principals, elementary teachers, central office officials, and parents of English Learners.

Research Design

A causal comparative research design was present through the use of archival data (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). All data analyzed herein were pre-existing data. The independent variable was that of Kindergarten retention status. Three dependent variables, Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, and Masters Grade Level, were present. A causal comparative research design analyzing archival data was optimal using pre-existing data from the Texas Education Agency.

Participants and Instrumentation

Participants in this study were English Learners: One group of English Learners had been retained in Kindergarten and one group of English Learners had not been retained in Kindergarten. Student data on reading achievement, English Language Learner status, and retention status in Kindergarten were downloaded from an existing database from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System. Specifically focused upon were the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness results for third grade. The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Grade 3 Reading is a measure in three main categories: understanding across genres, analysis of literary text, and analysis of informational text. Students are measured to determine if they have sufficient knowledge to move on to the next grade level. Texas also measures if students have received the necessary information from their teachers for academic success (Texas Education Agency, n.d., para. 5).

For the purpose of this research the following definitions were used. According to the Texas Education Agency, the Approaches Grade Level “category indicates that students are likely to succeed in the next grade or course with targeted academic intervention. Students in this category generally demonstrate the ability to apply the assessed knowledge and skills in familiar contexts.” Meets Grade Level indicates “students have a high likelihood of success in the next grade or course but may still need some short-term, targeted academic intervention. Students in this category generally demonstrate the ability to think critically and apply the assessed knowledge and skills in familiar contexts.” Masters Grade Level specifies “students are expected to succeed in the next grade or course with little or no academic intervention. Students in this category demonstrate the ability to think critically and apply the assessed knowledge and skills in varied contexts, both familiar and unfamiliar” (Texas Education Agency, 2017). According to the Encyclopedia of Children’s Health (2020) retention is “repeating an academic year of school” (para. 1). The last term to define is English Language Learner from The Glossary of Education Reform (2013) defined as “students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses” (para. 1).

FINDINGS

To ascertain whether differences were present differences in reading performance by the retention status of English Learners, Pearson chi-square analyses were conducted. This statistical procedure was viewed as the optimal statistical procedures to use because frequency data were present for retention status and for the three STAAR Reading performance measures. As such, chi-squares are the statistical procedure of choice when all variables are categorical (Slate & Rojas-LeBouef, 2011). In addition, with the large sample size, the available sample

size per cell was more than five. Therefore, the assumptions for using a Pearson chi-square procedure were met.

For the first research question on the Approaches Grade Level standard performance of English Learners by their retention status, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 53.03$, $p < .001$. The effect size for this finding, Cramer's V, was below small, .07 (Cohen, 1988). As revealed in Table 1, almost twice the percentage of English Learners who were retained in Kindergarten did not meet the Approaches Grade Level standard compared to English Learners who were not retained in Kindergarten.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics in Approaches Reading Performance by the Kindergarten Retention Status of English Learners

Retention Status	Did Not Meet <i>n</i> and %age of Total	Met <i>n</i> and %age of Total
Not Retained	(<i>n</i> = 3,374) 27.4%	(<i>n</i> = 8,953) 72.6%
Retained	(<i>n</i> = 67) 57.8%	(<i>n</i> = 49) 42.2%

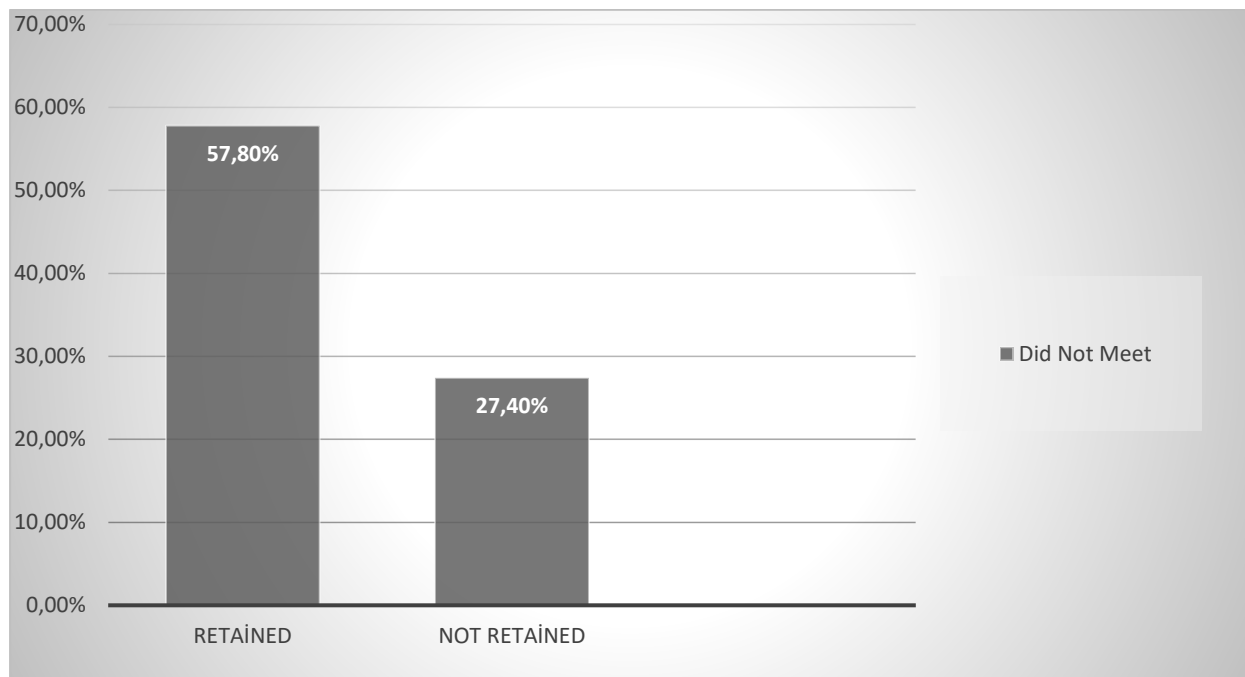


Figure 1. Student percentages in Approaches Grade Level in reading by the Kindergarten retention status of English Learners.

For the second research question on the Meets Grade Level standard performance of English Learners by their retention status, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 16.32$, $p < .001$. The effect size for this finding, Cramer's V, was below small, .04 (Cohen, 1988). As delineated in Table 2, the percentage of English Learners who were retained in Kindergarten and who met this standard was less than half the percentage of English Learners who were not retained in Kindergarten and who met this standard.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics in Meets Reading Performance by the Kindergarten Retention Status of English Learners

Retention Status	Did Not Meet <i>n</i> and %age of Total	Met <i>n</i> and %age of Total
Not Retained	(<i>n</i> = 7,865) 63.8%	(<i>n</i> = 4,461) 36.2%
Retained	(<i>n</i> = 95) 81.9%	(<i>n</i> = 21) 18.1%

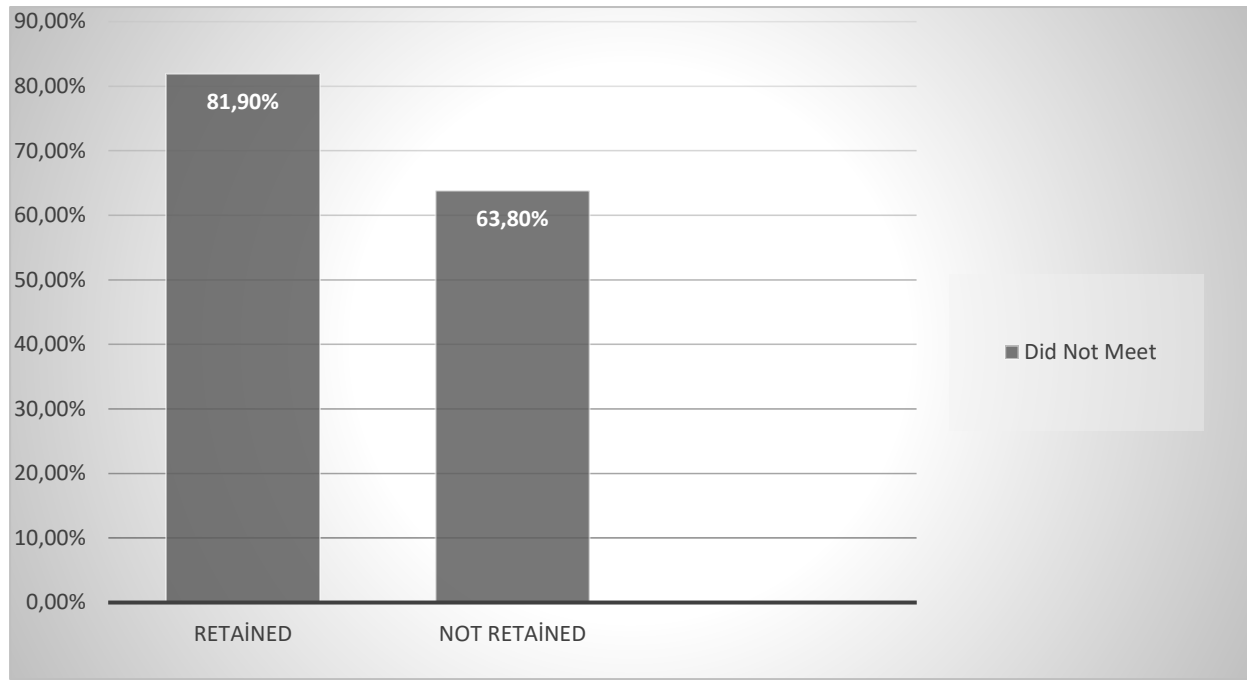


Figure 2. Student percentages in Meets Grade Level in reading by the Kindergarten retention status of English Learners.

For the third research question on the Masters Grade Level standard performance of English Learners by their retention status, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 8.41$, $p = .004$. The effect size for this finding, Cramer’s V, was below small, .03 (Cohen, 1988). The percentage of English Learners who were retained in Kindergarten and who did meet the Masters Grade Level standard was less than half the percentage of English Learners who were not retained in Kindergarten and who met the Masters Grade Level standard.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics in Masters Reading Performance by the Kindergarten Retention Status of English Learners

Retention Status	Did Not Meet <i>n</i> and %age of Total	Met <i>n</i> and %age of Total
Not Retained	(<i>n</i> = 9,951) 80.7%	(<i>n</i> = 2,375) 19.3%
Retained	(<i>n</i> = 106) 91.4%	(<i>n</i> = 10) 8.6%

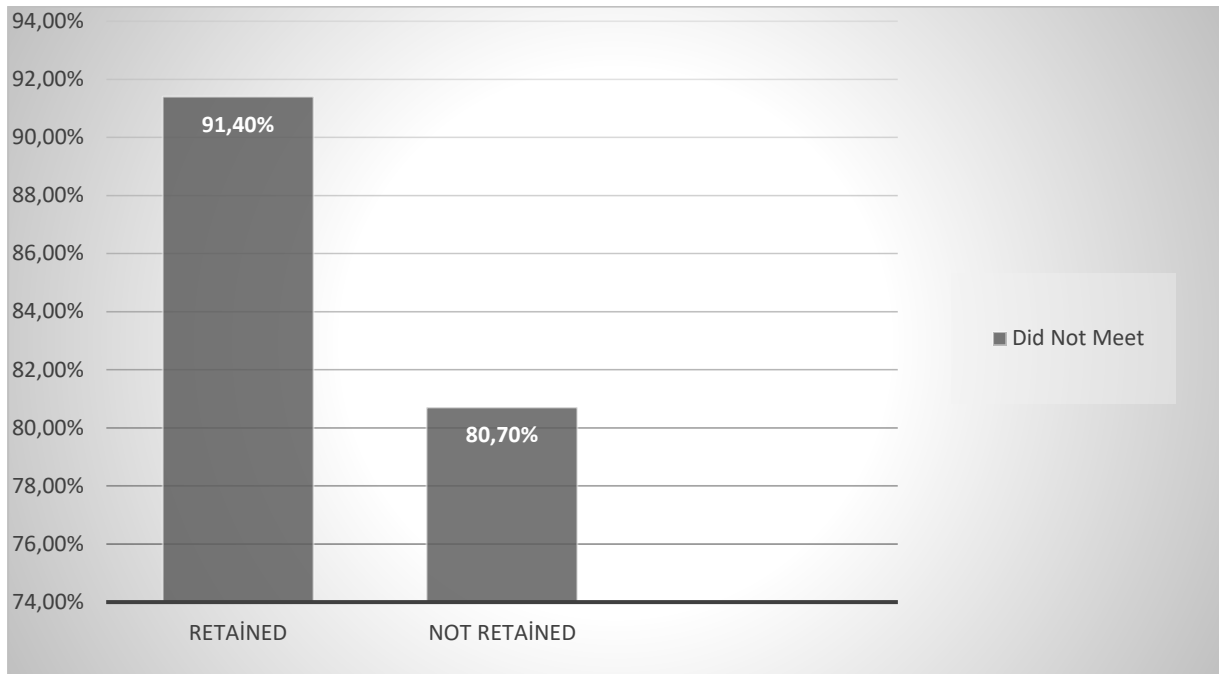


Figure 3. Percentages of students in Masters Grade Level in reading by the Kindergarten retention status of English Learners.

DISCUSSION AND RESULT

In this study, the degree to which retention in Kindergarten was related to three reading measures on the Texas state-mandated assessment in Grade 3 of English Learners was addressed. Statistically significant differences were revealed on the Approaches Grade Level standard, the Meets Grade Level standard, and the Masters Grade Level standard. In all three instances, English Learners who had been retained in Kindergarten performed statistically significantly poorer than English Learners who had not been retained in Kindergarten. Though effect sizes were below small, almost twice the percentage of English Learners who were retained in Kindergarten did not meet the Approaches Grade Level standard compared to English Learners who were not retained in Kindergarten. about one fourth more English Learners did not meet the Meets Grade Level standard who were retained in Kindergarten than English Learners who were not retained in Kindergarten. Concerning the Masters Grade Level standard, English Learners who were retained in Kindergarten and who met the Masters Grade Level standard was less than half the percentage of English Learners who were not retained in Kindergarten and who met this standard.

Regarding the research questions, as each standard increased in difficulty, the percentage of English Learners who did not meet the expectation increased in both groups who were retained and who were not retained. The number of students who were retained in Kindergarten was slightly less than one percent of the English Language Learner population in Kindergarten for that school year. In reviewing the descriptive statistics, it is also important to note that about two thirds of the English Language Learner population did not meet the Meets Reading performance standard.

As discussed in the opening paragraphs of this article, English Learners continue to struggle to meet state assessment expectations in Texas. Findings delineated herein were congruent with Bowman et al. (2010) who documented the clear presence of academic

achievement gaps Spanish speaking students from Mexico. With specific reference to reading, English Learners who were retained had much higher percentages who did not meet Texas state expectations than English Learners who had not been retained. Of note, however, is that both groups of English Learners performed poorly in reading. Though no comparative interventions to retention were addressed herein, an argument could be made that Hatti's (2017) indication that retention was the poorest possible intervention was correct. Our findings, in conjunction with the results of other researchers (Clotfelter et al., 2009; DeFeyter et al., 2020; Locke & Sparks, 2019; Range et al., 2012), provide clear evidence that whatever gains may exist from retention, if any, are not long lasting. As such, we are in strong agreement with researchers and policymakers that that retention is not a viable solution.

Implications for Policy and for Practice

Because almost 82% of English Learners did not meet the standard for Meets Reading Performance, policies need to be created regarding specific requirements about the retention of English Learners. Results from this investigation could be used to bolster the argument that retention is simply not an effect intervention for young students. Practitioners need to make sure they have a well-established response to intervention in place for all struggling students as other researchers have indicated intervention as the key to progress, not retention (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2009; Hatti, 2017; Ludwig et al., 2019). For the response to intervention, teachers who work with English Learners should receive appropriate training.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based upon the results of this investigation, several recommendations for future research can be made. It is recommended that future researchers complete a multiyear study to determine if the percentages of retained English Learners who did not meet the Reading Performance standard is consistent each year. Researchers could further determine if the students retained would benefit from a different intervention, such as, working with specialist in small groups. Another study where researchers could compare reading and mathematics performance to determine the differences could be conducted. It is also recommended that future researchers conduct a study to determine why two thirds of all English Learners did not meet the Reading Performance standard.

CONCLUSION

The overall purpose of this study was to determine the degree to which Kindergarten retention was related to the reading performance of English Learners in Grade 3. About one quarter more English Learners did not meet the Meets Reading standard who were retained in Kindergarten than English Learners who were not retained in Kindergarten. It is important to note that about two thirds of all the English Learners did not meet the Meets Reading performance standard. Results from this investigation on Kindergarten retention provide clear and strong evidence that English Learners did not benefit from being retained. Even after retention, three years later their academic achievement was still below the academic achievement of their peers who had not been retained.

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