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## “Making the Difficult Choice”: Understanding Georgia’s Test-Based Grade Retention Policy in Reading

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**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 at one Georgia elementary school. 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; high-stakes testing; literacy; social promotion; test-based grade retention

### “Tomando la Decisión Difícil”: Entendiendo la Política de Repetir el Grado Basado en la Prueba de la Lectura en Georgia

**Resumen:** El autor utiliza los conceptos de Bourdieu de campo, el capital y habitus para analizar cómo los estudiantes, padres, maestros y administradores están respondiendo a la política de repetir el grado basado en la prueba de la lectura en una escuela primaria de Georgia. En este estudio de casos múltiples, el autor entrevistó, observó, y recogió documentos relativos a diez alumnos de

quinto grado, sus padres, maestros y administradores. Dentro del campo de retener a los estudiantes según los resultados de la prueba, los estudiantes y sus padres trajeron capital cultural, social y económico que recibió poco valor, y ellos aceptan fácilmente que las pruebas de competencia con criterio de referencia (CRCT) eran confiables y la retención era justa. Sin embargo, en la creencia de que la retención en última instancia produce mas desigualdades la dirección, los profesores y los administradores utilizaron procedimientos para apelar las políticas y para garantizar que la retención no se basas únicamente en las calificaciones obtenidas.

**Palabras clave:** Bourdieu; exámenes de alto riesgo; alfabetización; promoción social; repetición de curso basada en exámenes

### **“Tomando Decisões Complexas”: Compreender a Política Para Repetir um ano Baseandose no Teste de Leitura na Geórgia**

**Resumo:** O autor utiliza os conceitos de Bourdieu de campo, o capital e habitus para analisar como os alunos, pais, professores e administradores estão respondendo a política de repetir o curso com base no teste de leitura em um curso da série do ensino fundamental na Georgia. Neste estudo de casos múltiplos, o autor entrevistou, observou e coletou documentos relacionados com dez alunos do quinto ano, os seus pais, professores e administradores. Dentro do campo de reter os alunos de acordo com os resultados do teste, os alunos e seus pais trouxeram capital cultural, social e econômico que receberam pouco valor, e eles aceitaram facilmente que os testes de proficiência com referência (CRCT) são fiáveis e a retenção era justa. No entanto, na crença de que a retenção finalmente produzir mais desigualdades, professores e gestores apelaram as políticas para assegurar que as bases de retenção não foram feitas só sobre os resultados dos testes.

**Palavras-chave:** Bourdieu; exames de consequências severas; alfabetização; promoção social; repetição de cursos baseada em exames

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 the legislature to 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. (pp. 23-24)

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

The Georgia legislature moved quickly. On March 21, 2001, it passed the Georgia Promotion, Placement, and Retention Law (Georgia State Board of Education, 2001), which required 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 for 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), perhaps surprisingly, researchers have found that the majority of students (61-68% of third graders in 2003-2004) who failed the CRCT in gateway grades were "placed" in the next grade through an appeals procedure (Henry, Rickman, Fortner, & Henrick, 2005; Mordica, 2006). Numerous researchers have studied the effects of test-based retention on academic achievement, but few have examined how such policies are actually being implemented in schools. Research that examines how students, parents, teachers, and administrators are responding to such policies could provide initial information for explaining how and why such "placements" are occurring in spite of a policy designed to end social promotion.

## **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 a group of 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 was being implemented in a Georgia elementary school.

## **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 began in 1999 when President Bill Clinton's administration issued a report (U.S. Department of Education, 1999) providing a guide for educators, and state and local leaders to 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" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 5). Chicago had implemented a test-based retention policy in 1996, under the direction of Mayor Richard M. Daley, and the report showcased the Chicago policy as a model for other cities and states (Russo, 2005).

Unlike teacher-based retention, in which promotion and retention decisions are made by the classroom teacher, test-based retention policies establish promotional gateways in which students have to meet specific criteria, such as passing a state or local test in certain grades to be promoted. As of 2011, 15 states had established such policies (Educational Commission of the States, 2005, 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 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 that attempt to determine if retention combined with interventions 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 been 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; Winters & Greene, 2012). Retained students fall behind in subsequent grades but have a larger likelihood of later dropping-out of school than their peers that are not retained (Allensworth, 2005; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009).

Only a handful of studies have examined how these policies are actually being implemented and how the participants involved 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), excluding lowest performing students from testing, focusing resources on those held accountable to the test, exempting students from testing through special education, and declaring students that did not qualify for special education as unteachable (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 241).

Another study that focused on students' and teachers' responses to test-based retention was Anagnostopoulos' (2006) study of 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 for demoted students and enroll in remedial math and reading courses, although they could take other tenth-grade courses. Anagnostopoulos (2006) found 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 students' identity constructions and social exclusion.

Drawing on Bourdieu (1982/1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990), Anagnostopoulos (2006) showed that Chicago's test-based retention policy enacted symbolic violence on demoted students by obscuring the connection between test scores and class inequities and fostering 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. African American students were about 4% more likely to be retained, and Latino students were about 9% more likely to be retained than White students, even when controlling for academic achievement. Research that documents how decisions in these placement 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) 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 the analogy of a card game to explain field, capital, and habitus and the complex relationships between them. 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 social structures that have their own rules and means of domination that assign value to the resources agents have. 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 with its rules for allocating and accruing resources and ultimately determining winners and losers. Social institutions, such as schools, may reside within a number of different fields, somewhat like concentric circles. Georgia schools reside within the field of Georgia's test-based retention policy, 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). These relationships affect what is expected of public education, how it is organized, and the values it legitimizes. In this study, I specifically examine the field of test-based retention in Georgia, a social field 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 capital various players bring can enable or prohibit their likelihood of accruing additional 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 established 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 shapes how individuals within a given field play the game. Fields have rules and requirements that humans often accept unknowingly. When these structures from the field become ingrained in people’s minds, affecting their decisions and actions, a doxic relationship, as Bourdieu (1972/1977) called it, exists.

For example, a doxic relationship 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 relationships 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 a society do not completely determine outcomes. Individuals have some agency in how they play their cards. Although the strategy-generating dispositions of individuals can match the structures of a given field, what he called orthodoxy, they can also reject them through heterodoxy. In other words, individuals do possess some generative capabilities for improving their social standings. 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).

Bourdieu’s (1972/1977) concepts of field, capital, and habitus provided a useful framework for understanding how students, parents, teachers, and administrators responded to the test-based retention policy in Georgia. By analyzing the field of test-based retention in a Georgia elementary school in which passing a test for promotion is required and examining the habitus of the students, their parents, teachers, and administrators, I could better understand how the different individuals affected by this policy are responding (playing their cards).

My overarching question was as follows: How are students who struggle with the reading CRCT, parents, teachers, and administrators responding to Georgia’s test-based retention policy? Additionally, I asked the following sub-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

I designed a qualitative, multiple case study (Stake, 2006) to explore the experiences of ten case 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 was similar to that of Georgia elementary schools statewide. At Plains, approximately 57% of the students received free or reduced lunches, and the student body was 64% White, 16% Latino, 14% African American, 2% Asian American, and 4% multiracial. Nine percent of the students were English language learners. Although a semi-rural school, Plains was large, over 900 students, and received 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, a practice which has been documented in other studies in Georgia (Henry et al., 2005; Mordica, 2006).

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 16 of Mrs. Hunter’s students who she identified as receiving some type of intervention in reading. Ten chose to participate. See Table 1 for a description of the student participants and the interventions they received.

Table 1  
*Student Participant Characteristics and Received Interventions*

Student	Gender	Ethnicity	Family Income	Reading Interventions	Language Spoken at Home
Alyssa	female	White	\$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



Table 1 (Cont.'d)

*Student Participant Characteristics and Received Interventions*

Student	Gender	Ethnicity	Family Income	Reading Interventions	Language Spoken at Home
Kenyon	male	biracial (African American and Latino)	\$25,500- \$46,999	RtI Tier 3, EIP	English
Hallie	female	White	\$25,500- \$46,999	RtI Tier 2, EIP	English
Alexandria	female	Romanian	less than \$25,500	ESOL, RtI Tier 3, EIP	Romanian
Nathan	male	White	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 the study because Mrs. Hunter identified them as students she was closely monitoring and was considering placing in intervention for reading.

In addition to the ten students, their parents, classroom teacher, and administrators (principal and assistant principal), numerous interventionists were also participants. 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 interventions. Students may qualify for intervention as an English Language Learner (ELL) and/or EIP student, along with any required Response to Intervention (RTI)<sup>1</sup> Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions. Thirty-four students, parents, teachers, interventionists, and administrators, participated in the study.

### Data Collection

Three forms of data were collected: interviews, observations, and documents. I conducted semi-structured life world interviews “with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomenon” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 3). The interview protocols (available upon request) consisted of guiding questions that were informed by a Bourdieusian lens. They were Bourdieusian in the sense that they were designed to specifically draw my attention to the doxa the participants appeared to take for granted, the capital the participants brought to the study, and how habitus was involved in their responses to test-based retention.

<sup>1</sup> RTI is an alternative to the ability-achievement discrepancy model used for identifying students with learning disabilities. RTI provides assistance through early intervention, progress monitoring, and research-based interventions for children who are behind academically. RTI is typically delivered in three tiers (Tiers 1-3), with Tier 3 being the most intense level of intervention.

<sup>2</sup> Three groups (the Legislative Black Caucus, the Georgia Parent Teacher Association, and the Georgia

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 (once before and once after the initial CRCT administration), 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 children 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. I conducted a single interview with each of the three who spent the largest amount of time with the most students: 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 days. I observed the first administration of the reading CRCT by serving as a proctor. 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, during 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, I collected and analyzed relevant documents (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 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, 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**

I began analyzing 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 engaged in 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 to 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. Similarly to Handsfield and Jimenez (2009), I applied Bourdieu’s concepts of field, capital, and habitus as sensitizing concepts to the categories obtained using the constant comparative method because “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-seated 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. 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; written essays were used to make retention decisions 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 enacted test-based retention policies. 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, some prominent politicians began to promote them. 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).<sup>2</sup> 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. Students 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) in 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 implemented 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) reported that when she was first hired at Plains the principal retained as many as 65 students per year. The principal 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

matter. However, Mrs. Thomas explained that the implementation of grade retention 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 the 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 subsequent principals at Plains had been largely opposed to retention. The administration at the time of this study continued to discourage the retention of students. They 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 were considered for retention each year, Mrs. Tate, the assistant principal, required that students receive Tier 3 interventions throughout the year and that parents be notified mid-year that their child was at risk for being retained:

I will not retain a child if we have not done Tier 3 interventions on them. 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 needed to be considered, Mrs. Tate liked to have the Tier 3 progress monitoring record that could show where students “flat-lined” in their academic progress. She also had parents and teachers who were considering retention complete the *Light’s Retention Scale* (Light, 2006), a diagnostic assessment designed to identify which students might benefit from retention. These procedures helped curb the retention of students whose teachers might support retention.

Mrs. Mathews, the principal, made it clear that she too did 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 relied on the school’s opinion regarding retention. However, sometimes parents did argue that their child should be retained. If a parent demanded it, the school would consider it; however, more often than not they educated the parents that promotion would likely be the best option. Mrs. Mathews noted that the district administrators supported her in this approach towards grade retention.

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.

### **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 test-based retention (e.g., high reading scores, academic achievement, financial security, fluent English). However, a lack of capital valued by the school should not be viewed as 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, however, 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 institutional cultural capital or credentials and therefore symbolic capital or 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 state assessments. Each failing score hindered the school's likelihood of making Annual Yearly Progress.

The students represented a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds: three were White (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 native English speakers, an 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. Several students (Hallie, Nathan, Michelle, Aurianna, Candace, and Donovan) thought that if they failed they would have to attend summer school and retake the test in the summer, which suggested they lacked embodied cultural capital. The students were also confused about the grades in which the test-based retention policy applied. For example, Alexandria thought the policy had applied in fourth grade and that she had 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 that I'm not that much of a 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. The students also did not know the score that they needed to pass and how many opportunities they had to retake it.

**Parents.** According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990), parents transmit cultural capital through the field to ensure that it is inherited by their children. Thus, the disparities between social

classes are reproduced. This became apparent via the parents' 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 the embodied cultural capital of language proficiency, four of the students' parents spoke languages other than English: Candace and Donovan's parents and Michelle's father spoke Spanish only; Michelle's mother spoke Spanish and English, and Alexandria's mother spoke Romanian and English.

The vast majority of parents had heard about the test-based retention policy but did not know specific details about the policy. 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 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 were steeped in details regarding 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 elementary education, and the test-based retention in Georgia that structured the field, 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 were actually successful at rejecting the *doxa* of testing through *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-seated 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 which largely centered on struggling academically and exhibiting "bad behavior." Several mentioned that students should be retained if they earned low grades, did not understand the academic 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. Like the students in Anagnostopoulos's (2006) study, Plains students 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 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 in their fifth- and fourth-grade years.

Like the students, all ten of the students' parents believed that retention was a good idea and could help their children. They explained that being behind academically was the main reason for justifying retaining children. Donovan's mother thought students should be retained less often in the upper grades. The rest of the parents felt they were equally appropriate for students in any grade. All but one of the parents believed that the CRCT was a trustworthy indicator of their children's reading abilities. Only one parent, 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 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. 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 to make placement decisions, but continued to support the testing policy itself. It is possible that because the use of single assessments for high-stakes decisions has been highly critiqued publicly in education debates (Heubert & Hauser, 1999) parents and students questioned this aspect of the policy yet accepted 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 than 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 in the fifth grade 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 decisions they believed would most help their students.

**Educating parents.** Educating parents through letters, phone calls, and face-to-face meetings 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 about the test policy:

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 along with moving and the 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 do not pass the test, 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 to appeal 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 asked to check one of two options: (a) they are in agreement with the retention or (b) 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 added 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 liked 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 gave her the chance to more personally notify parents, 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.

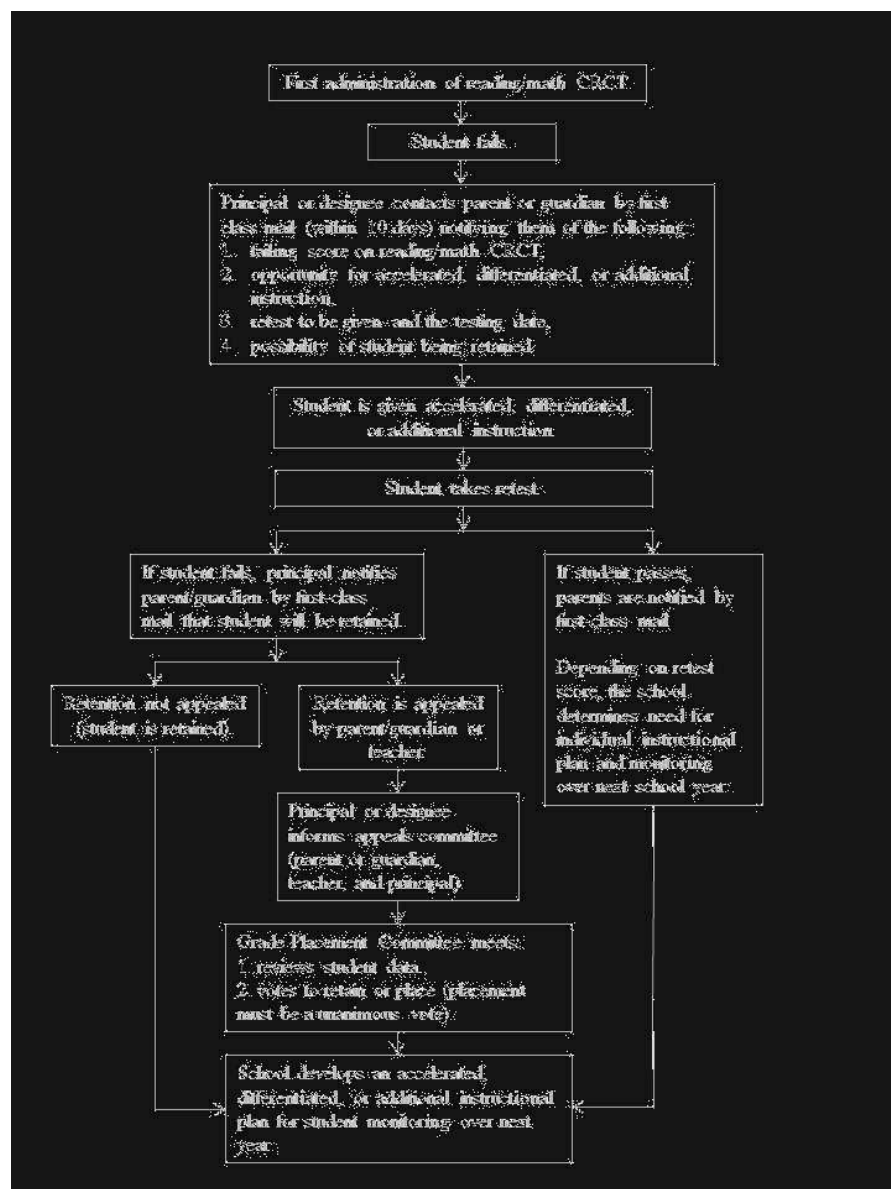


Figure 1. Promotion and Placement Timeline.

Note: 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>

Second, she called the teacher and parents prior to sending the letters to take the initiative for making sure the appeal happened. She called the teacher first to get 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 gave Mrs. Tate an opportunity to schedule a time for the appeals meeting with the teacher. When Mrs. Tate called the parent, she did so with the teacher's backing and possible dates both she and the teacher could meet. She was then able to get a sense of what the parent was 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 received 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 to pass. Hallie had expressed confidence that she would pass the first administration of the reading CRCT when I initially 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 before she sent the letter. She let him know Hallie's score had improved, but she had just failed by a couple of questions. He would need to attend the meeting, however, to discuss 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 because there was a good deal of reading involved. Hallie's father was eager to agree to 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 to the end of the meeting. Her father said she had been up early, was worried, and eager to find out the news. Hallie 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 found that when they educated parents about retention, most parents were eager to have their children placed in the next grade rather than be retained, 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 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 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 be good for her as well. They were worried about her self-esteem, like you know getting left behind, and everybody is 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 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 Alyssa for a 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 their children's 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 teachers and administrators at Plains were largely successful at attempting to upset a doxic structure they feared would reproduce their students' struggles in school. The administrators at Plains were able to raise awareness of the unintended, negative consequences of grade retention, among their teachers through research and education who in turn helped raise awareness among parents. Having recognized the doxic relationship the policy created, they actively took steps to thwart reproduction. Although they were unable to completely circumvent the policy, they were able to legally modify their implementation of the policy to ensure what they believed would be more equitable outcomes.

The case of Alyssa was certainly an exception in that her mother had enough valued capital (e.g., she was White, fluent in English, middle class, college educated, and 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.

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 their principal and assistant principal who were in turn encouraged by district administrators. 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 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 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 by doing what they must to survive (Kramsch, 2008). To maintain voters' support, public school officials must advocate for rigorous, meritocratic promotion standards. At the same time they can only maintain such standards with the given capital they possess. As with social promotion, massive retention is economically unsustainable and politically unattractive also. Consequently, policy makers naturally respond by implementing what appear to be rigorous policies to end social promotion while tacitly allowing schools to "place" 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 because they do not allow researchers to make 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, because Plains appears in many ways to be a "typical case" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 75) suggests that both theoretical and logical generalizations are appropriate (Luker, 2008). Demographically, Plains reflects the average 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 whether or not the teachers' and administrators' reasons for justifying placements are also typical.

A second limitation of this study regards the uncertainty inherently involved in documenting the participants' habitus. As a researcher, it is impossible 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 problematic. Yet, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argued that such challenges by no means prevent deeper understandings of habitus. By observing participants' dispositions and perceptions, they argued, 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**

Although the findings of this multiple case study are limited to one elementary school in Georgia, they do provide implications useful for both policymakers and educators. Despite the fact that policymakers nationwide are receiving political pressure to ensure high promotion standards, to many of the teachers in this study, this policy was largely interpreted as an empty threat. Although students and parents believed students were working harder because of the policy, most knew little

about the policy, and those who knew about it were confused about with which grades and subjects it applied. Moreover, the teachers believed that students did not increase their efforts 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 of the tests, 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 perhaps some of its objectives could be achieved by alternative policies that do not have the potential for placing 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 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).

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 to pass. 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 them from dropping out of school.

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