

Passed Along: Black Women Reflect on the Long-Term Effects of Social Promotion and Retention in Schools

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ABSTRACT: Biographies and personal narratives are important for helping us understand how individuals make sense of their experiences and lives. This article explores the educational life histories of two adult Black women that we call Lauren and Shantel. Although both women graduated from US high schools, neither received the basic education and learning supports that would prepare them for successful adulthood. This study demonstrates the long-term cumulative effects of social promotion and retention on the life outcomes of poor people of color and underscores the importance of prioritizing both students' academic and socioemotional needs.

KEYWORDS: retention in schools, social promotion, educational life histories



In an era of high-stakes testing, educational researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders have grown increasingly concerned about the harmful effects of both social promotion and retention of students. Social promotion is the practice of moving students to the next grade regardless of their academic abilities. Often used as a means to ensure struggling students remain with students in their age group, social promotion frequently does significant harm to students academically and socioemotionally (Jimenson et al., 2006). Their inability to keep up with the material shakes the students' confidence; they lose interest in school and lack motivation, and, unlike what most studies show (Cariffo & Carey, 2010), some still drop out.

Retention, on the other hand, is the practice of holding students in a grade until they achieve the requisite academic skills, as reflected on a range of performance indicators, to succeed in the next grade level. The practice of retention of students is controversial around the world (Bonvin et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2010; Goos et al., 2013a; Goos et al., 2013b; Martin 2011), and in the United States, it significantly increases students' risk of dropping out by 40% (Hennick, 2008; Jimenson et al., 2006). Retained students in the United States are disproportionately Black (24%) compared to their White counterparts (8%) (Jimenson et al., 2006), and in Australia, indigenous students are the majority retained compared to their white counterparts (Anderson, 2012). Neither social promotion nor retention is shown to be helpful educational

practices (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000) that further students' academic performance. Often the practices do more harm to academic achievement (Cariffo & Carey, 2010).

Most research explores the short-term effects of social promotion and retention, but little is known about the long-term effects of these practices on students. For example, what about the students who graduated successfully? How did social promotion and/or retention affect the adult lives of these graduated students? Grounded in the perspective that biography and personal narrative are central to the process of understanding educational experiences, this article addresses the effects of social promotion on high school graduates. We use a life history research approach (Goodson & Sikes, 2001) to investigate the lives of Lauren and Shantel,¹ two adult Black women who live in the inner city of a large urbanized Northeastern US metropolitan area. Specifically, we explore how they recall their struggles in school, their experiences being passed along in the pipeline of learning, and the ongoing effects their experiences continue to have on their lives as adults. Life histories are important because they provide a holistic view of marginalized teachers and students (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Building upon this foundation, we apply notions of biography to the experiences of adults.

Historical Context of Social Promotion and Retention

Grade retention and social promotion are controversial issues that have plagued the educational system around the world for decades. There are some countries like Spain, France, and the United States that practice retention frequently, and others like Finland and Greece that tend to practice the reform more sparingly (Goos et al., 2013b). Regardless, these are reform practices that are commonly found in schools around the world, but not without its criticism.

For example, Chen and colleagues (2010) found that the practice of retention ultimately academically hurt the students in rural China. In secondary schools, like in Australia, retention is shown to negatively affect academics and students' self-esteem (Martin, 2011), and in Flemish schools it is found in the primary grades, retention did not help students reach their academic goals (Goos et al., 2013b). For both reforms, in Switzerland, retention and promotion is mainly dictated by the teacher's attitude (Bonvin et al., 2008). Although retention was found to not support the students' academics in the long term, the argument for social promotion was found to be more beneficial than the alternative. But, in the United States where these two reforms are a constant in most school districts, there is an interesting history of how retention and social promotion came to be.

In American history, before grade schools gained popularity, students of all ages shared a common classroom with one teacher. However, as Cariffo and Carey (2010) discuss, as parents grew concerned about their younger

children being taught in a classroom with older students; grade schools went into effect. In the beginning, this new school model seemed ideal; however, as the years went on and many students were retained, parents grew concerned once again, raising the same argument they had years before. They were not comfortable with their young children in the same classes as much older students. And parents were not the only ones arguing against grade retention; urban districts were struggling to raise money for their public schools and retained students were becoming too expensive. "A low-cost solution to both problems was social promotion, or simply promoting students along with their age-groups—whether they had adequately mastered required skills or not" (Cariffo & Carey, 2010, p. 221).

Aside from being easy to administer and less costly than grade retention, social promotion gained added popularity in US school districts where schools were pressured to reduce dropout rates (Frey, 2005; Quenemoen, Leht, Thurlow, Thompson, & Bolt, 2000). When compared to grade retention, social promotion seemed ideal. It was cheap and easy to implement. Students were no longer tested to determine if they would make the grade. In an attempt to keep dropout rates low and continue to receive funding, schools adopted social promotion and consequently pushed many students out of school without the necessary skills needed for them to live productive lives. According to Cariffo and Carey (2010), "By the turn of the twentieth century, retention rates had reached nearly 50 percent, and 20 percent of all [retained] students left school before finishing eighth grade" (221). Studies in the United States show that people who are retained are more likely than their promoted classmates to drop out of school (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; Frey, 2005; Hauser, 1999; Rush & Vitale, 1994; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Promoted students were more likely to graduate than those who were retained.

In spite of these ideas, research and studies argue that both educational reform practices are not viable educational practices (Cariffo & Carey, 2010, p. 222). Although promoted students are less likely than retained students to drop out of school or have immediate "harmful effects on socio-emotional and behavioral adjustments" (Jimerson et al., 2006, p. 88), socially promoted students eventually hit an academic road block when they start a new grade, sometimes a full grade level beneath their peers (Quenemoen et al., 2000). Social promotion also shapes the learning opportunities of students who are up to academic par for their grade level. When students are socially promoted, teachers who receive socially promoted students end up teaching to the level of the socially promoted students. One can argue that the whole class could be academically harmed by this practice. Plus, this incessant "teaching down" does not help the promoted student catch up or focus on his or her needs (Cariffo & Carey, 2010). The student simply sits in a classroom for a year, completing some tasks and being pushed on to the next grade until they reach high school and are finally pushed out of the education system. Such a fate is not uncommon; in fact, the two women reflected in this article, Shantel

and Lauren, were interviewed and told of their experiences with being *both* retained and then socially promoted repeatedly; ultimately graduating from high school with very few skills and reading levels as low as second grade. In order to understand the long-term effects of retention and social promotion that are often missing from the literature (Frey, 2005), Shantel and Lauren's educational life histories become pertinent voices that need to be heard.

Most studies insist that social promotion and retention have negative outcomes and support these claims with data and observations (Cariffo & Carey, 2010; Frey, 2005; Jimerson et al., 2006). These studies, nationally and internationally, are majority quantitative approaches to looking at retention and social promotion (Anderson, 2012; Bonvin et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2010; Goos et al., 2013a; Goos et al., 2013b; Martin, 2011), and none of the research uses life histories to show the positive and/or negative effects of social promotion in later grades and even adulthood. Stone and Engel (2007) communicates how "most research has focused on identifying the effects of grade retention rather than defining the experience of grade retention or gaining insight into the process" (p. 606), while others call for research looking at the long-term effects on retention and social promotion (Frey, 2005). Our goal is to highlight the educational life histories of two women, Lauren and Shantel, who experienced social promotion and retention. The purpose of presenting their life histories is to emphasize the impact that social promotion *and* retention may have on the lives of students, particularly those who struggle early on.

Theoretical Framework

Personal narrative and life histories are essential to understanding schools' influence on students and society. For example, researchers in the life sciences use the Life History Theory (LHT) to understand the reproductive nature of humans and other organisms. Hill (2005) discusses how "the ultimate description of an organism is not just a description of its adult phase, but that of its life cycle . . . the life history of an organism can be thought of as a complete description of that organism" (p. 79). This concept of LHT can also be transferred to the social sciences and the educational field. In this instance, we argue that life history, as a methodological and theoretical approach, provides a framework in understanding education and the organizational system of schooling. We build from Foster's (1997) idea of life history work:

Life history not only provides material about individual lives but also offers the opportunity to explore how individual lives are shaped by society. Thus, life history research offers critical insights into larger social processes by connecting the lives to society. (p. xxii)

Foster argues that past educational experiences influence future perspectives. We adopt this argument, as it was the main theoretical grounding for

this work. Thus, life histories are used as method and theory intertwined. Through this theoretical framework, we explore the lives of two adults and the effects of social promotion and retention on their lives—past and present.

Methodology

The PARTNERS (Prison Alumni Reaching to Learners) Project was a one-year project aimed at working with formally incarcerated adults, who dropped out of school, in order to develop a partnership to assist current students at risk of dropping out. The stories of Lauren (50 years old)² and Shantel (38 years old) are part of a larger study intended to draw from the collective knowledge, insights, and life experiences of marginalized people. During the first stage of the study, we intended to conduct life history interviews of adults who did not complete school. While recruiting for interviews, two women approached us and asked to be interviewed. They explained that they had completed high school and thus did not fit into the population we hoped to interview. But both urged us to listen to their stories because they were products of social promotion and retention. They thought that socially promoted graduates faced a unique challenge in society that had both similarities and differences from populations who do not hold a high school diploma, and that we might be interested in hearing their stories to supplement our study. This article presents data from their educational life history interviews. Each woman participated in a one, 2- to 2.5-hour education life history interview (Goodson & Sikes, 2011). The interviews were conducted by Author 1 in Lauren and Shantel's home, as it was most convenient for them. The interviews were then transcribed and member checks were completed.

Data Analysis

We analyzed using content analysis and constant comparative analysis. Specifically, we looked at the themes of learning disability, educational struggles, and moments of being pushed out in education. We also looked for any other emerging themes and patterns that presented themselves in the data. The whole data analysis process was triangulated, as the two researchers and an outside researcher analyzed the data separately and then came together to compare themes. The highlighted themes in this data only represent themes that were simultaneously coded by two or more of the analyzers.

Being Passed Along

Lauren and Shantel were both retained in kindergarten but experienced social promotion through the duration of their schooling. Both women successfully graduated from high school but with very low literacy abilities.

Additionally, both women had learning disabilities that were evident to teachers in kindergarten but were not addressed until very late in their schooling career. Though troubling, these results deepen our understanding of the effects of social promotion and retention and generate an understanding from the subjective lived experiences of Black women.

"I Struggled Real Hard": Lauren's Story

Lauren (50 years old) is an energetic, heavy-set Black woman. She is a mother of one adult (31-year-old) daughter, who is a product of Lauren's marriage immediately after graduating high school, and a grandmother to a teenage grandson. Lauren is the middle child of five children. Although her parents are currently married, her father was absent for most of her life due to drug and alcohol addiction. Thus, Lauren's mother was the breadwinner and supporter of her five children, which had an impact on Lauren's schooling. She attended all public schools within a small, urban city of New Jersey, where Lauren was born and raised.

Early Warning Signs

Lauren discussed how reading and writing was always a struggle from the start. In describing her elementary school experience, she explained, "I struggled real hard, as far as learning how to spell my name at first, and when I did learn how to spell it, it was because that was something that I had to use every day." Lauren's issues with writing were compounded with her issues with reading comprehension. She explained her reading comprehension process in the following way:

You can read it to me, and I can learn it from you reading it to me. But if I got to read it, I can't understand it. I can read it, and in two minutes, you can say, 'Okay, tell me what you read. What was it all about?' And I couldn't tell you, but you can read it to me, and I get so much understanding out of it, to where I can actually tell you what was it all about.

Teachers noticed early on Lauren's reading comprehension and writing struggles. In kindergarten, she was retained for a year: "I stayed back in kindergarten. . . . In kindergarten, I used to do my homework, but I weren't [sic] learning nothing." Lauren agreed that being retained was a good idea at this age. Yet, being held back made it so that Lauren and her sister were in the same grade for the rest of her schooling experience.

From Lauren's perspective, her reading challenges stemmed from two reasons. One reason was that Lauren is dyslexic. Her dyslexia was not discovered until years later in high school. The second reason was that she had no parental support with schoolwork. She explained, "Because my mother worked all the time. So she couldn't help us. She couldn't help me with my schoolwork.

So I think that's why my reading and spelling was so off. Because I didn't have no one to go to to help me."

It was during Lauren's elementary school years that she adapted a strategy of masking her reading difficulties by misbehaving. Her increasing adaptive reliance on misbehaving as a means of masking her learning difficulties, minimal parental support, and the gross oversight of her dyslexia laid a foundation for a schooling experience mired by social promotion and retention and void of academic preparation that paved the way for transitions into subsequent life stages.

Social Promotion and the Continued Struggle

Lauren acknowledged that she was oftentimes too embarrassed to ask for help and grew angry whenever she was called on to read because she felt that the teacher was picking on her, "And she didn't even know—half the time, the teacher didn't even know I had a problem. . . . I was just acting out my embarrassment of my reading disability." So, Lauren would often get in arguments or fights with other students or the teachers, "because I was angry inside. I was angry inside because I was scared to reach out and ask for help." Lauren kept up this facade of not caring, but emotionally, she was struggling inside.

The socioemotional struggle within school started to escalate over time. Lauren was constantly getting in trouble for fighting, and misbehaviors in school continued to worsen. Lauren admitted that she never told anyone about her reading and writing problems and that as a kid she would go home, look out the window, and say to herself, "God why me? When did I do something wrong for me to be punished the way I'm being punished as far as the reading, why can't I read? What is it that I got to do to try to learn how to read?" Lauren even commented on her struggles in school, saying, "By the time I got to middle school, I still didn't know nothing. I shouldn't have been there. I should have been in Special Ed. the whole time." She also added that she "didn't understand, how you going to pass somebody that never had nothing higher than an F?" For Lauren, she did not find that social promotion was beneficial, and every year she kept falling behind her fellow students.

As part of Lauren's protective mechanism, she would refuse to disclose her troubles with reading and writing to teachers or others around her. This solidified itself during her middle school years. Lauren recalled:

Back in the day, I can say them teachers in [the school], they was just there for a paycheck. Because they didn't really care. They didn't care. . . . I heard a couple of my teachers say, "Well, I got mine, you got to get yours." So that showed me right there that you didn't care, you was only there for one reason and one reason only, that's a job. So, if I hear stuff like that, I ain't opening up to you. I'm not going to open up to you. My soul is not going to allow me to open up to you.

Lauren mentioned that she even went through an evaluation process when leaving both the elementary and middle school, but her need to be classified into Special Education classes was still not recognized. "I feel like they should have—you know, because they [the school] evaluate you. I feel like they should have put me in Special Ed. then. I should have come out of middle school—out of grammar school in Special Ed. I really do."

During her high school years, Lauren grew close to a school counselor that recognized her struggles with reading comprehension. It was not until ninth grade that the school counselor advocated for Lauren, and she was finally put into Special Education classes. With these, Lauren recalled the following:

I started advancing, and because people started showing me that they cared. . . . There was a one-on-one lady [teacher], and we'd sit there, and we would read. I mean, we started from books like *The Cat in the Hat*. The whole nine. We started from there, all the way up. I was in a kindergarten reading level in high school, to where that—when I got into 10th grade, it was about maybe 5th grade.

It was the supports with Special Education that Lauren started to advance with her reading and writing abilities. But Lauren reflected and felt: "I like my 9th and my 10th [grades], I don't feel like they should have passed me. I feel like they should have held me back." Lauren then graduated high school, immediately married, and gave birth to her daughter all the same year. But, with the social promotion she experienced, being continually passed along in school really had an effect on her adult life.

Life With a Diploma

After graduation, Lauren told her husband about her reading disability. She explained:

I opened up to him and told him about my reading and spelling. He used that against me. And I hated him. He would just throw it up in my face. "That's why you can't read, that's why you dumb," you know. And I used to just look at him, like, you just don't know.

This was the first time that Lauren really opened up to anyone about her reading in her personal life, but her husband was not supportive of her. Very shortly after marrying, her husband went into the Army, and Lauren was a single mother.

In order to support her family, Lauren worked in fast-food restaurants. She was a hard worker and was often promoted on the job, but her reading difficulties would always start to be a problem. "I done been managers in all of them [fast food restaurants]. But I just can't hold that manager position

when it's time to do that paperwork. When they ask me to log this into the computer, I act like I forgot."

Yet, with the pressure to support her family as the only breadwinner, and with Lauren's limited reading ability, the following year she turned to selling drugs in order to earn an income. She was in and out of jail on drug charges and shoplifting charges. But, it was in prison that she finally opened up a second time, to an officer she trusted, about her reading disability. The officer told Lauren, "We have a class here, and it's like, everybody in college look at it like it's a kindergarten class, but if that's where you have to go to start to make it [reading and writing] better, then that's where you go. And I went." It was in prison that Lauren was able to get an intensive focus on her reading disability. She attended class every day. She also had a peer that she trusted tutor her twice a week.

They had some of the inmates as tutors. And there was this one girl in my unit that I was comfortable with. We ate together. So I picked her as my tutor. I asked her would she be my tutor, and she was like, yeah, that was her job in prison, as a tutor. And so maybe twice out of the week I went. I got As and everything. But when I got out of prison, I didn't go back out there and sell drugs or nothing like that, you know, I just went on to work.

Lauren was determined to not get in trouble with the law. The in-prison educational opportunities, which were missing in her K-12 schooling experience, gave her the reading skills and abilities to support herself after release. She has continued to work in the fast-food industry. Lauren became more open to disclosing her dyslexia to others around her. For example, when she moved to get a job, she recalled, "So the lady in Detroit, she hired me as an assistant manager, she knew [about my reading problems], because I told her. . . I still got a position. All I did was open [the restaurant]. She did all the paperwork." At the time of our interview, Lauren was working toward a degree in early childhood education. She was taking one class at a time with an online institution, and she relied on friends to tutor her on material she continued to struggle with.

"I'm Not Ashamed of That Anymore": Shantel's Story

Shantel (38 years old) is a very petite and shy Black woman. Shantel explained that her small stature is due to her being a premature birth (preemie). She is the mother to a teenage son, but she currently does not have custody of her son. Shantel also had a daughter, given birth a year after her son, but she died of a crib death.

Shantel grew up in a home with her mother and brother, who is one year older than her. Shantel was an identical twin, but was told that her twin died at birth, although she suspected that the twin was just given to another local family. Her father was murdered when Shantel was 7, so her mother was the

main breadwinner of the house. The household was not pleasant, according to Shantel. Her mother abused her mentally and physically, and her brother abused her sexually. School was often an outlet away from her negative home environment, and Shantel attended all urban, public schools.

Early Warning Signs

Shantel's mother was very dichotomous in many ways. At home, she was abusive "mentally, physically, and spiritually." As Shantel recalled,

She would make me do pushups if I did something wrong, smack my face if I did something wrong. She would cover up the abuse by keeping me dressed. Feeding me, so people wouldn't know. Keeping my hair done and stuff, so that people wouldn't know.

But, when it came to school, Shantel's mother was an involved parent. She was always connected to events that Shantel participated in, while also regularly attending PTA meetings.

She would come to PTA meetings. I used to sing in the choir. She would help take us to wherever we had to go to sing. . . . If they didn't have a bus or nothing, she would pile us all in her car, and the teachers were real good with her.

But, similar to Lauren, Shantel was also retained in kindergarten. She stated, "When I was in kindergarten, my mom said that they had to keep me back, because I couldn't learn, so they had to keep me back." This was the first time that Shantel was retained in school. Yet, her struggles with reading and writing continued throughout her schooling experience. Shantel was then again retained in fourth grade. Since Shantel was small in stature, and social promotion decisions are often based on the physical stature of the student, her fourth grade teachers decided to retain her again.

She [the teacher] had to keep me back because I was so small, and at the age of 14, I didn't develop breasts yet. I was so small. So she had to keep me back [in fourth grade], because she—she didn't want the other kids to know, pick on me [for my size].

Kindergarten and fourth grade were the only two times that Shantel was retained in school. Throughout the rest of her schooling experience, Shantel was socially promoted through the years.

Social Promotion and the Continued Struggle

Similar to Lauren, Shantel would often mask her reading issues with behavior. Shantel claimed that by eighth grade she was placed in a Special Education

classroom. She claimed there were two reasons for her Special Education placement: her behavior problem was getting to be too much for the school; her mother and a teacher named Ms. Apple advocated for the services. Shantel was put in a self-contained special education classroom where, "I was in one class all day." It was at this time that Shantel really started to embrace school and explained, "I got an award for perfect attendance."

After Shantel's classification, she went to a high school that was specifically for students with special needs.

When I got to high school, I went to [Stoney Street High], that's a Special Ed. [school]. I did everything that they asked me. I went to school. They found me a job, I was going to school and work. So I passed with flying colors when I graduated. I was in music class, I ran track.

At this point, Shantel felt successful in a school that accommodated her needs and found school to be a safe place. Shantel further articulated this deep connection to school:

I always went to school. Because I didn't want to be caught by the truant officers or—I just went to school. School was my safe haven. Because I know that nobody would hit me, nobody would like hold back my hands, and stuff like that, so school was my best friend.

Socioemotionally, Stoney Street High provided a healthy framework and stability for Shantel. She went from being a misbehavior child, due to her academic struggles, to embracing the school environment. Teachers also provided socioemotional supports for Shantel. In her 9th grade year, Shantel had a teacher named Miss Montgomery. Miss Montgomery was the first loving adult in Shantel's life:

She actually spent time with me. She was a mom that I wanted for my mom. And I mean, she'd be taking me home, like going over her house. I would be with her kids, she would let me eat dinner with her and spend the night. And the kids [lower students] was—some kids was like, jealous. I don't know why. They used to call me a teacher's pet.

Although Stoney Street High was a great place for emotional growth for Shantel, she still struggled academically. Shantel did pass with "flying colors" and received her diploma, but the fact of the matter is Shantel was not learning to read.

When I was in school, my grade level is a 2. Second grade level. I'm not ashamed to say that now. I used to. I used to go like, people going to make fun of me, but no more. I have a reading and spelling problem. I'm not ashamed of that anymore.

Life With a Diploma

During high school and after graduation, Shantel had children, but this was to please her mother. Although Shantel is a lesbian, she thought that having children would make her closer to her mother:

I had kids to please my mom. I thought it was going to be better, but it made it worse. She would watch my kids while I was in school. That was a good thing. But when I got home, I had to have them. And I didn't want to make any babies, I didn't want kids. I thought it was going to be better, but it just didn't. It only made it worse.

Being a single, teenage mother of a child (one died an early death), Shantel was struggling to find a place in the world. After high school and without the safe haven of school, she eventually turned to drugs as an escape. Shantel has since been in and out of jail for her drug use. She lost custody of her son a few years back due to a physical abuse charge.

I never sold drugs. I did them. It's a learning experience. It's not a good thing. It's not. I want to let them [youth today] know that, you know what I'm saying, you don't have to go out there and sell drugs. Because it's like, people turning on you. There's no money out there. So try and get a job.

Shantel tries to follow her own advice of finding a job, but it has always been difficult. One reason, she confided, was that she had trouble filling out the applications due to her inability to read. Second, she was often scared about her past convictions:

I been going out and filling out applications at the mall. I've been scared because I have a record. I'm scared that they won't hire me. Because the questions on there, have you ever been convicted. And I'm scared now. "Like, yeah. We don't need you here." So, I mean, but everybody has to try.

At the time of this interview, Shantel was celebrating one year of sobriety. She was living with Lauren, who was helping Shantel out when she did not have a place to go. Lauren was helping Shantel with filling out job applications, due to her reading issues, and trying to help her secure a full-time position.

The Effects of Being Passed Along

Lauren and Shantel were both retained *and* socially promoted and had low literacy skills as adults. Despite their struggle to read and write, Lauren and Shantel were promoted repeatedly and received little to no additional help in or outside the classroom until they reached upper middle and high school. However, by this time, evidence suggests that it may have been too late to repair the damage (Hauser, 1999; Frey, 2005).

On the other hand, Lauren and Shantel teach us, through their stories, that special education supports make a significant difference. For Lauren, special education helped to move her reading ability forward, when it was just stagnant at a kindergarten level, until she received services. Moreover, for both Lauren and Shantel, special education provided a much-needed emotional support. Cariffo and Carey (2010) argue that "social and emotional outcomes of education are as important as the academic outcomes" (228). According to these researchers, students who are promoted year after year without the necessary skills to perform well in the next grade also suffer from negative socioemotional outcomes. They describe these socially promoted students as frustrated students who are already struggling and suggest that as they continue their educational careers, they will become less interested, less cooperative, and more likely to misbehave and act out in class. This was certainly the case for both Lauren and Shantel, as they would act out and misbehave to mask their learning struggles, but all this dissipated when they both received special education services.

Even though Lauren and Shantel were both retained and socially promoted in school, their story teaches us that neither approach is beneficial without the added instructional supports (in this case, special education) to supplement the academic learning. In their respective interviews, both women commented on their academic successes after they were placed in special education and given the added help that they required. In today's schools, these participants would benefit from individualized instruction in inclusive (nonrestrictive) classrooms that would meet their academic and socioemotional needs. This concept is supported by Stone and Engel's research. Stone and Engel (2007) argue that grade retention without added instruction is useless; students like Lauren and Shantel need extra (individualized) instruction and attention and when they get it, they can improve. Stone and Engel introduced the ideas of remediation and recycling to describe the possible experiences of retained students and attempt to explain the variation in student achievement during the retained year.

Stone and Engel (2007) argue that "simply repeating a grade . . . [rather than] repeating a grade with supplemental educational resources and supports" (p. 608) results in negative effects (recycling) while academic remediation boasts large positive effects of student achievement. They go on to say that "teachers contribute to variation in retention to the extent that they structure the retention experience in ways that attend to students' unique academic and motivational needs" (p. 608). Shantel told excited stories about her teacher Miss Montgomery who took a special interest in her and supported her in and out of the classroom. Not surprisingly, once placed in special education and meeting Miss Montgomery, Shantel was motivated and achieved more in school, proof that success is intertwined with supports of students' needs (Jimerson et al., 2006).

Yes, in their respective interviews, neither woman commented on their experience during their second year of the repeated grade, although it can be

assumed from the research and their educational narratives that the repeated year did not benefit them in any way. For example, Lauren admitted to being bored in class and acting out in frustration of not being able to do the work. She also expressed not being able to read and her confusion with being passed on when she was getting F's on all of her assignments. From their educational life histories and comments on how they struggled as adults since they could not read or write, it is safe to assume that Lauren and Shantel were recycled, not remediated. The women talked about how their lack of skills negatively affected their adult lives. Shantel still cannot read higher than a second grade level and Lauren's struggle to read and write is resulting in her not being able to take higher positions at her jobs.

Remediation did not come until years later when they were placed in special education classes in high school where they were able to receive special, individualized instruction. Despite these improvements, though, Shantel and Lauren had been given added support when it was too late. By eighth and ninth grade, these two women had already lost years of academic instruction by being passed on to the next grade without mastering the skills of the years prior to social promotion. Because of social promotion, the women were able to graduate, but graduated with limited educational skills needed for them to live productive lives. Ultimately, the practice of retention (in this case, recycling) and social promotion had negative, and in some cases like Shantel, lasting effects on their adult lives.

Conclusion

Research on retention and social promotion typically focuses on the lack of academic achievement in students after the second year or on the decline in motivation and the increased struggles of students who are repeatedly promoted (Cariffo & Carey, 2010; Frey, 2005; Hauser, 1999; Jimerson et al., 2006). But the research seems to taper off around eighth grade. There is not much research that provides insight into how the negative effects of these two educational practices play out into adulthood. The educational life histories of Lauren and Shantel expand on what researchers already know about social promotion and retention by allowing researchers to actually see, in this case, the negative results of how these educational practices play out in the lives of two Black women who unfortunately found themselves victim to these practices. It is through their voice that the human element is added to the research on social promotion and retention, while highlighting the long-term effects of schooling on adulthood. **DEB**

Notes

1. All names and places are pseudonyms in order to ensure anonymity.
2. The ages reflect the participants' age at the time of the educational life history interviews.

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