FLUNKING GRADES . R [redacted]

Education Policy Perspectives

General Editor: Professor Ivor Goodson, Faculty of Education

University of Western Ontario, London,
Canada N6G 1G7

Education policy analysis has long been a neglected area in the United Kingdom and, to some extent, in the USA and Australia. The result has been a profound gap between the study of education and the formulation of education policy. For practitioners such a lack of analysis of the new policy initiatives has worrying implications particularly at such a time of policy flux and change. Education policy has, in recent years, been a matter for intense political debate —the political and public interest in the working of the system has come at

Flunking Grades:
Research and Policies on Retention

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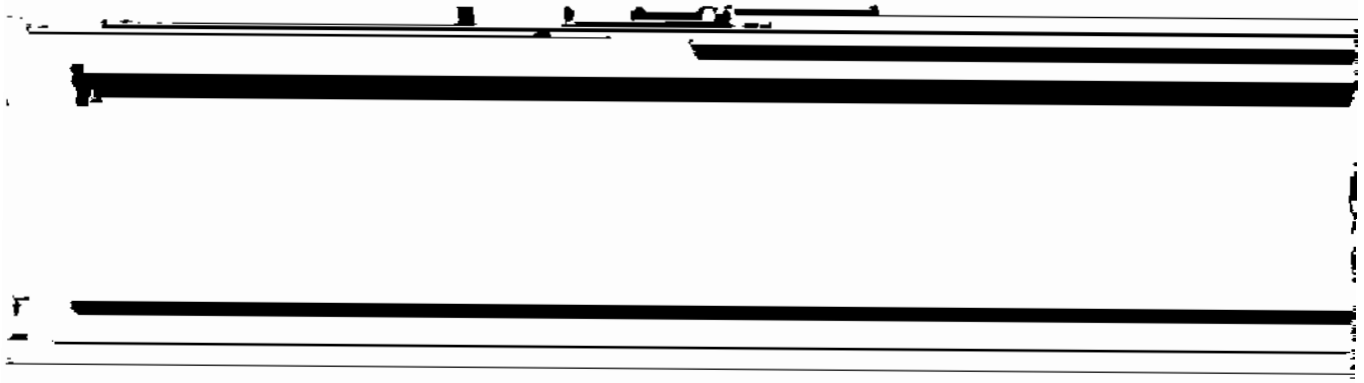
Edited by



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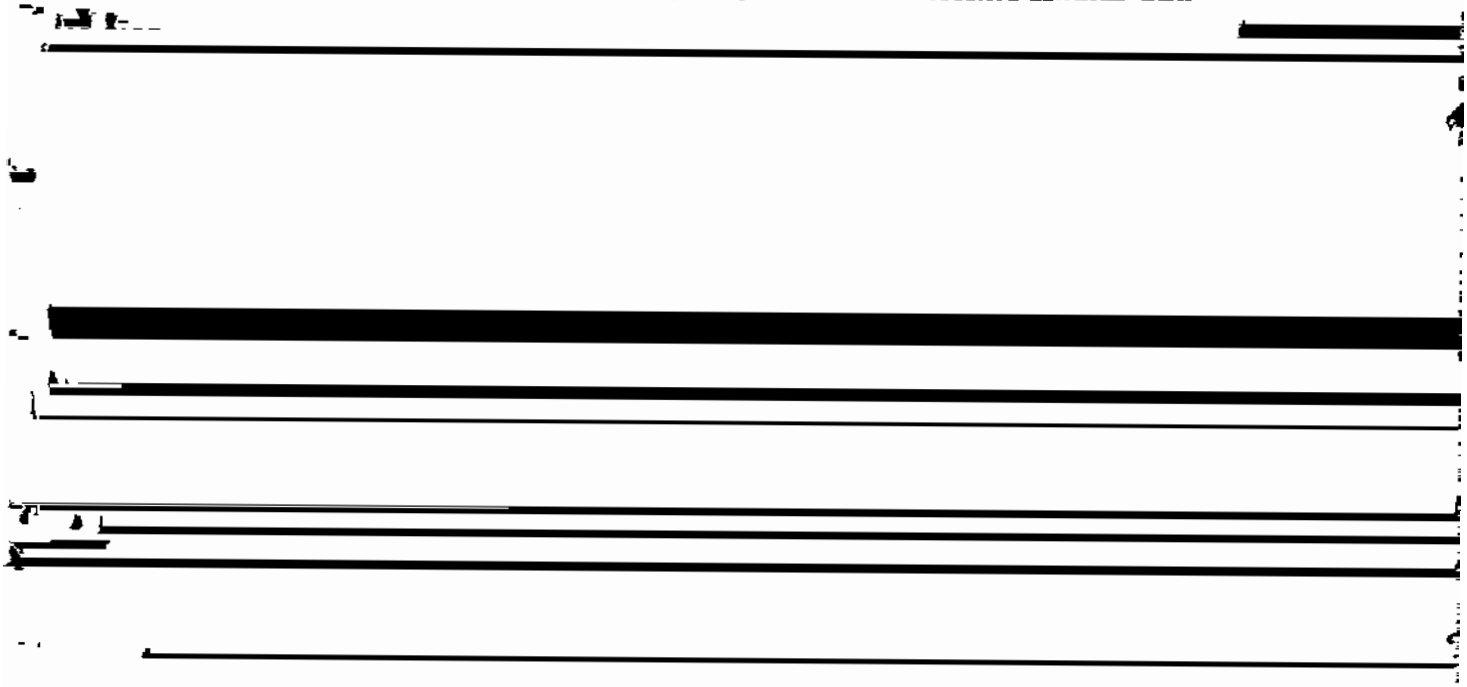
Flunking grades.



evaluation series)
Includes bibliographies and index.
1. Promotion (School)—United States. 2. Grade repetition—United States. 3. Academic achievement.

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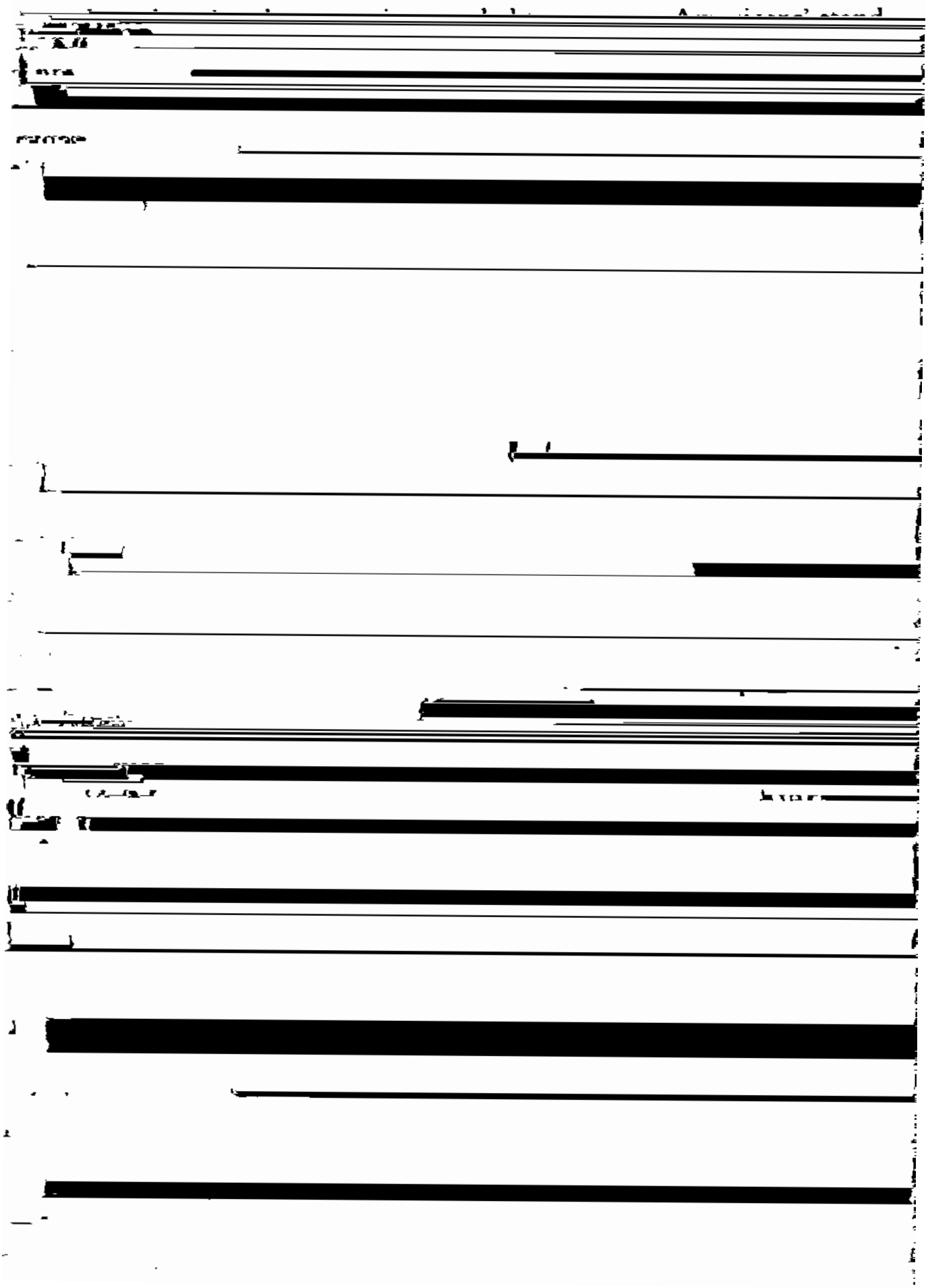
[redacted]

Chapter 1:
Introduction and Overview

This book is about research on the topic of flunking. A pejorative term avoided by adults, flunking is used by children to describe the experience of repeating a grade in school. Although research on 'grade retention' has a long history, it is of particular importance today when

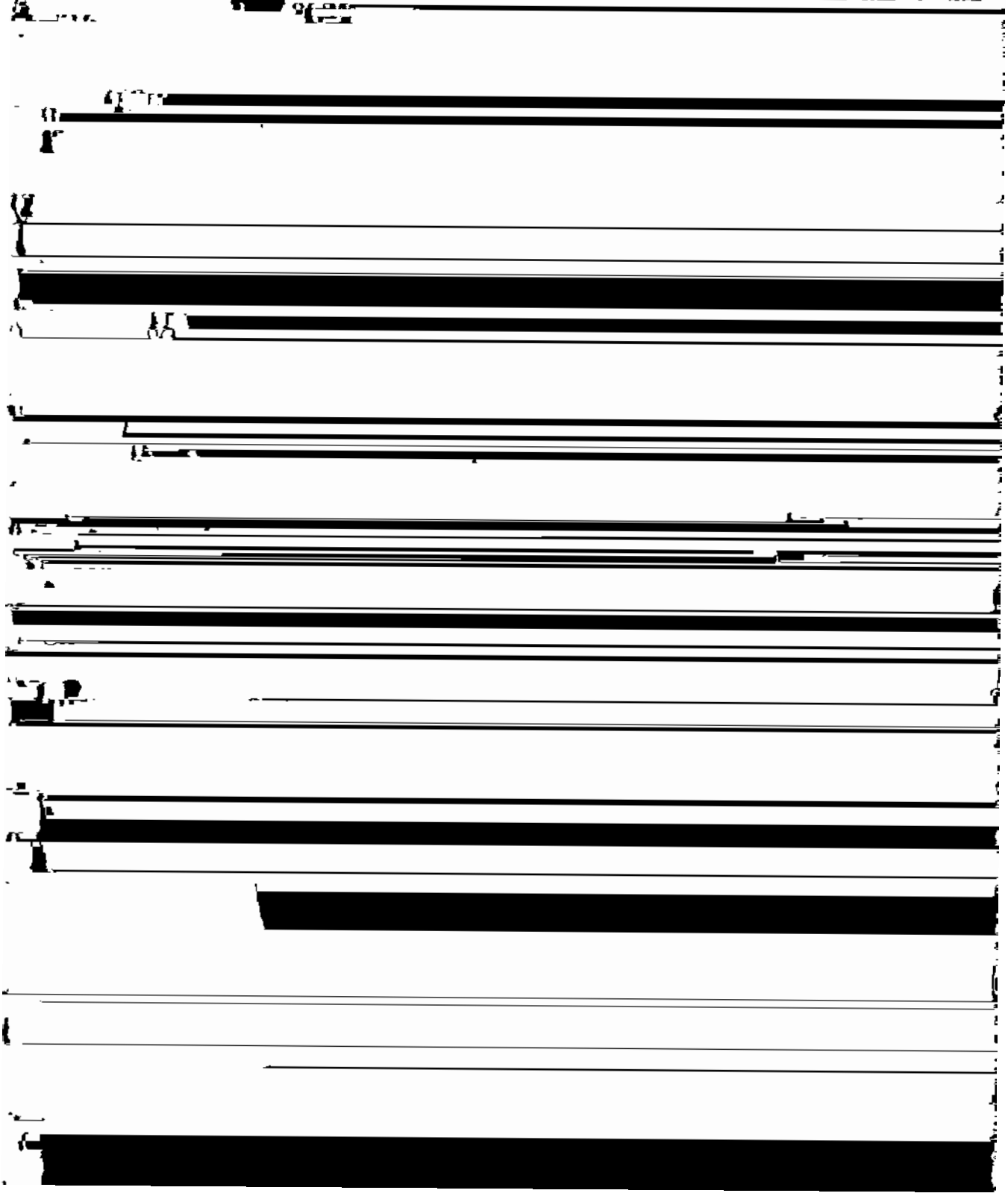


harmful effect on individuals with 'accumulated educational deficits' (1978, p. 9). The NAE panel approved, instead, of 'critical competency [illegible] selected lower grade levels for 'diagnosing individual student

students who fail will not be passed on unnoticed but will have another opportunity to acquire necessary skills. Furthermore, at a time when the nation's future is in peril, removing those who lag behind is also expected to facilitate the pace of learning for students who merit promotion.

The end of social promotion is enthusiastically endorsed by the public. In the 1983 Gallup Poll, 75 per cent of US citizens agreed with the statement 'children should be promoted from grade to grade only if they can pass examinations' (p. 38). In the 1986 Gallup survey, Americans strongly favored making requirements stricter for both grade to grade promotion and high school graduation, with endorse-

Anderson (1969) provided a short history of graded education which serves as background to the conflict between retention and social promotion policies. What Americans presume to be the natural form of schooling is a product of the industrial revolution and mass education beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Earlier, when only a few students were educated, each could proceed at his own pace through



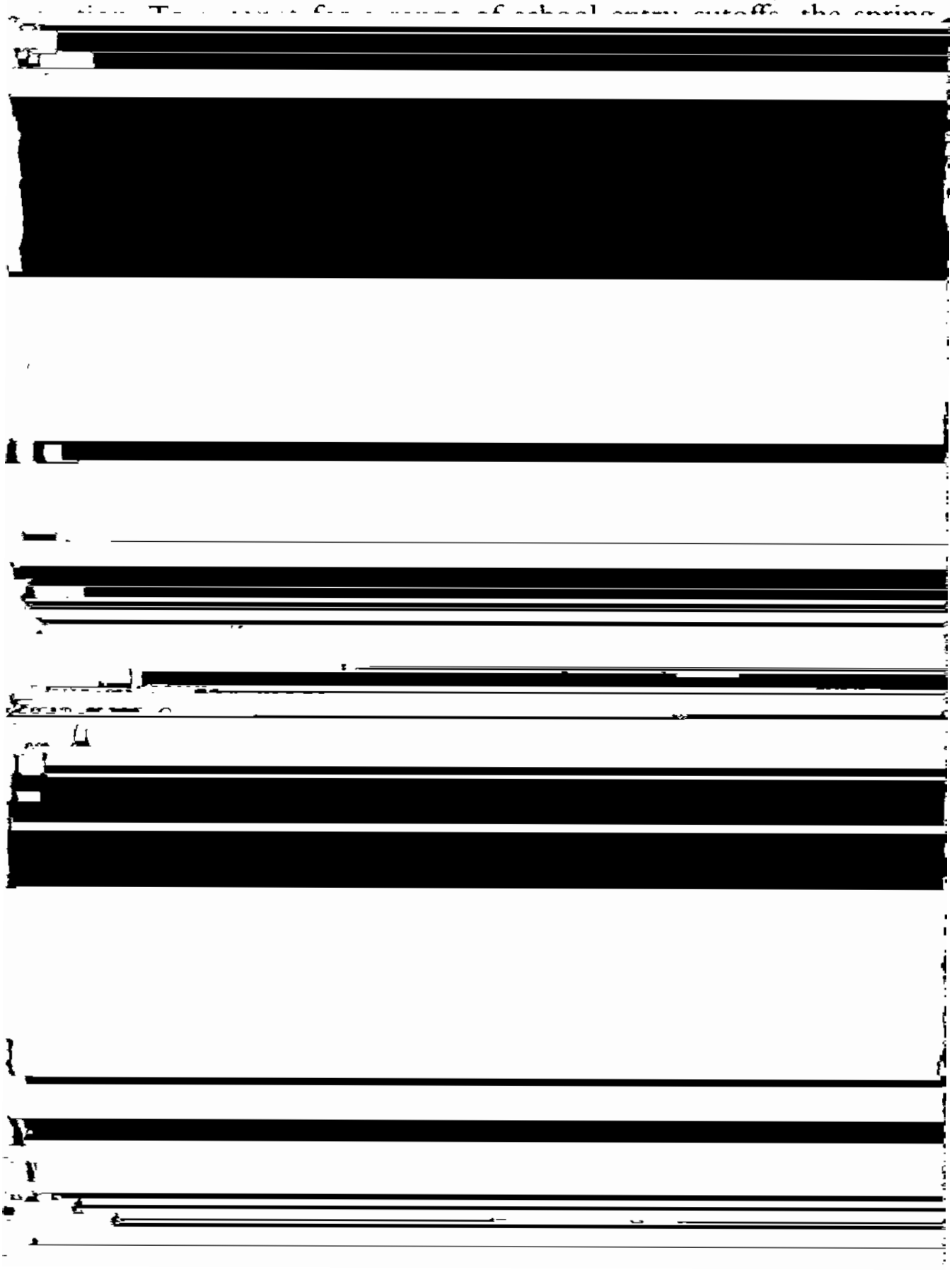
Retention Rates

There are no national data on the number of children retained in grade

retentions has increased substantially as schools in many jurisdictions, especially large cities, have installed achievement-based promotion policies.

Despite its salience, rates of promotion and retention are not kept by governmental agencies. Instead retention rates must be inferred from the proportion of pupils of a given age who are not in the appropriate (or modal) grade. For example, third grade is the normal grade for eight-year-olds. Therefore, most eight-year-olds enrolled in second or first grade are likely to have been retained. This indicator has been used

per cent of whites were enrolled below modal grade compared to 38 per cent of blacks. The discrepancies between spring and fall statistics in 1970 and 1976 also reveal the limitations in using overage to infer

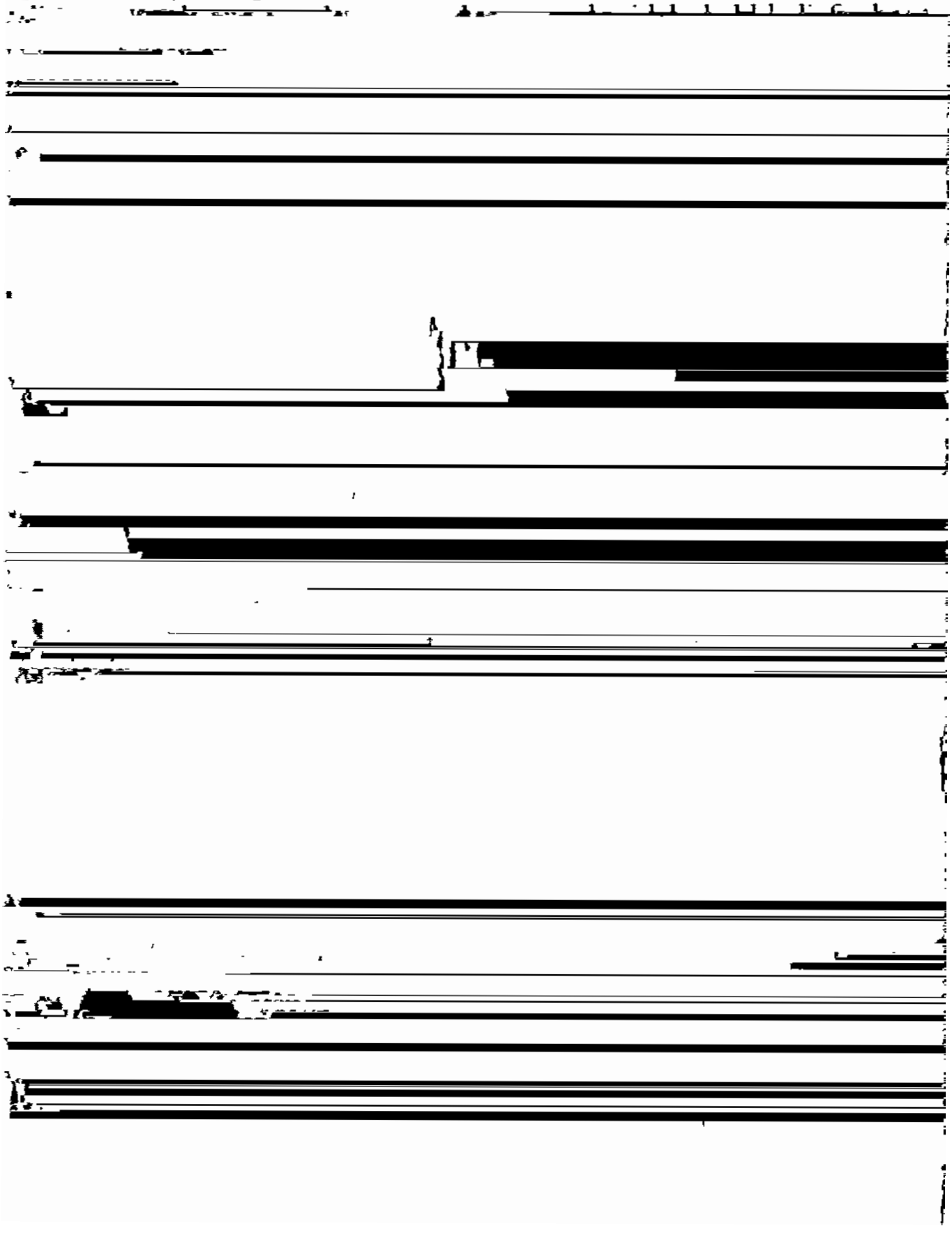


State or Region	Grade K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total (K-12)

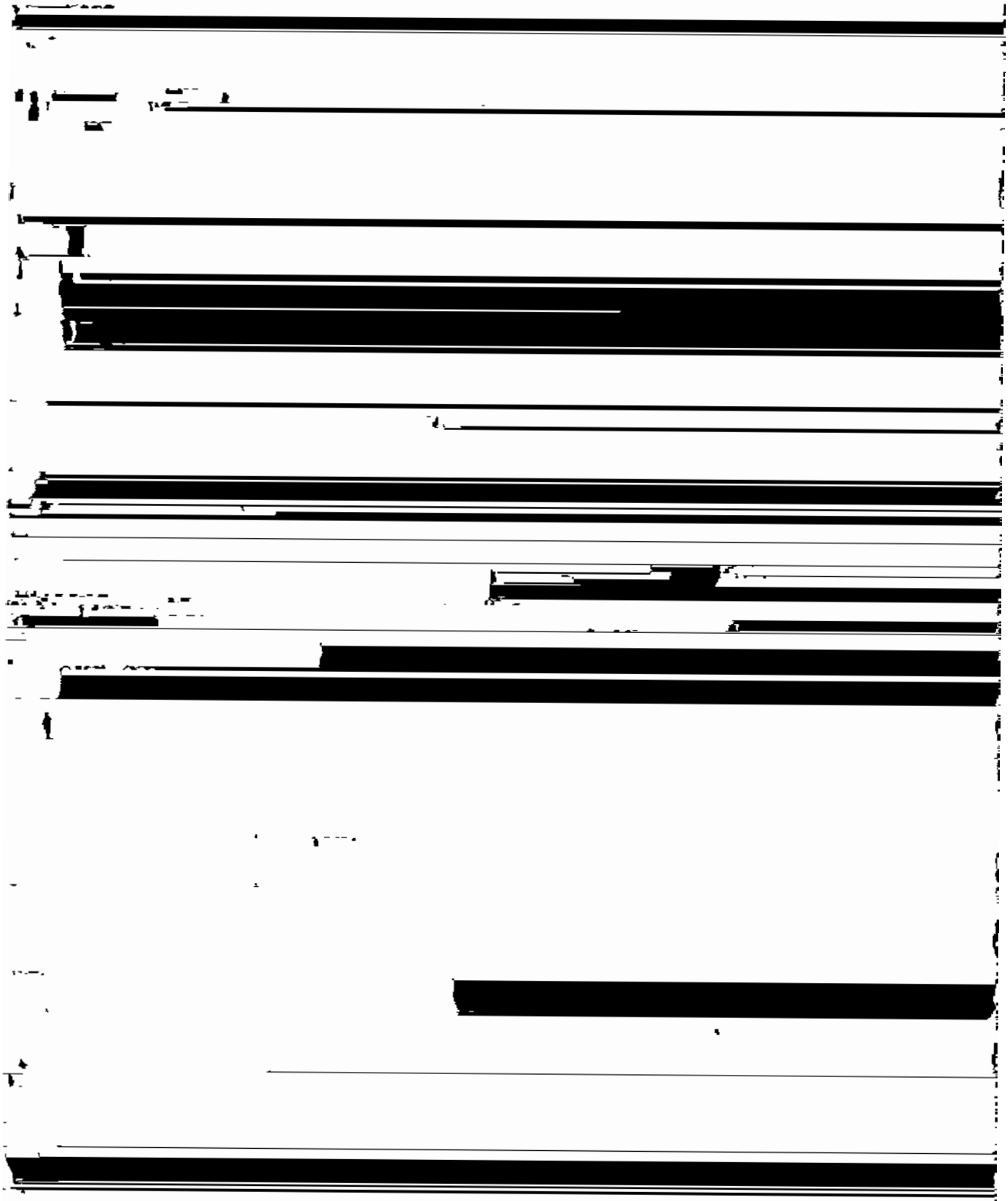
account for roughly 15 per cent of all retained students by grade 8.

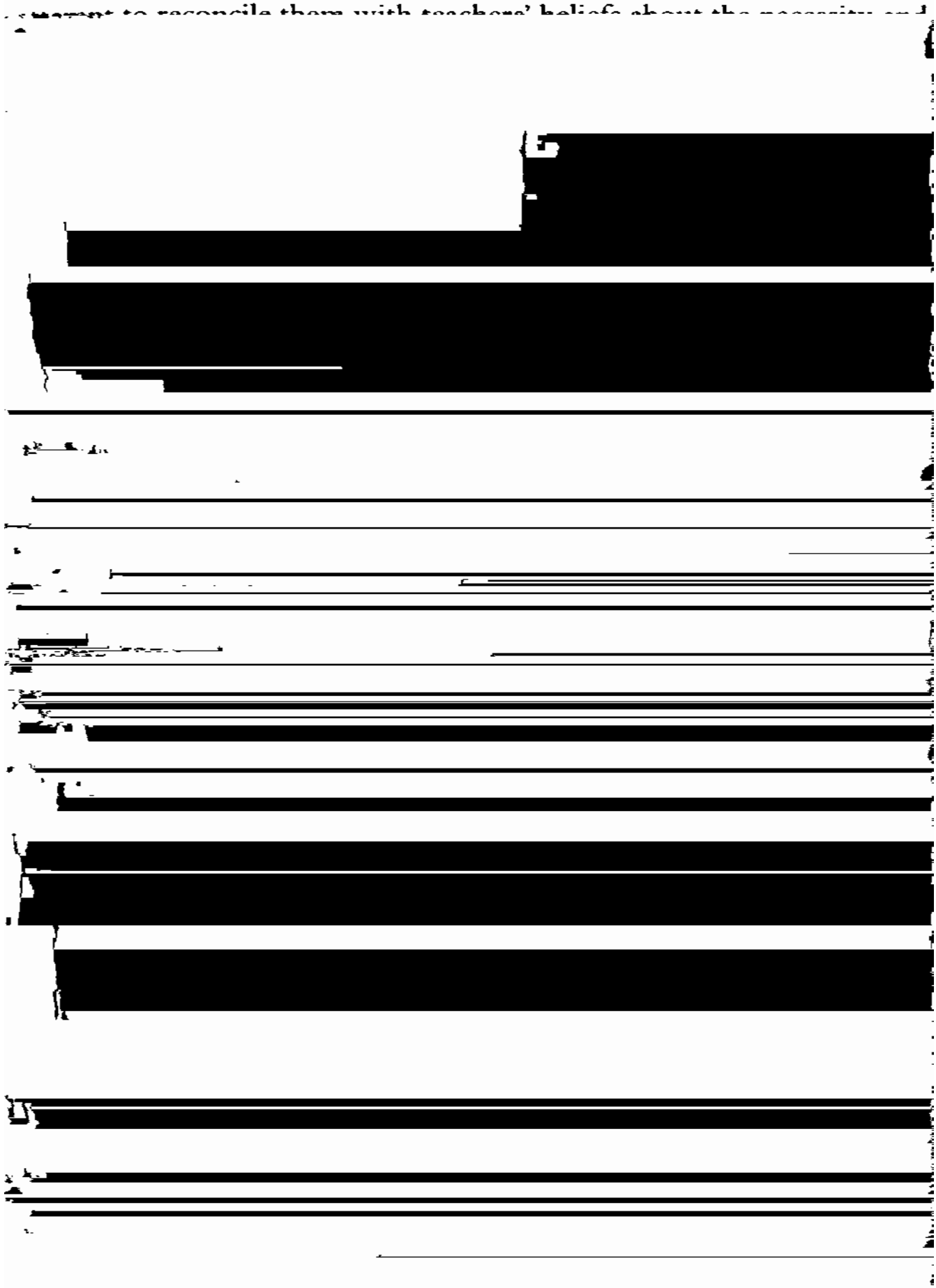
A simple sum of the recent retention data in Arizona through grade

The purpose of this book is to present both the research evidence on the effects of grade retention and research on school policies and practices regarding retention. The book is organized to illuminate the



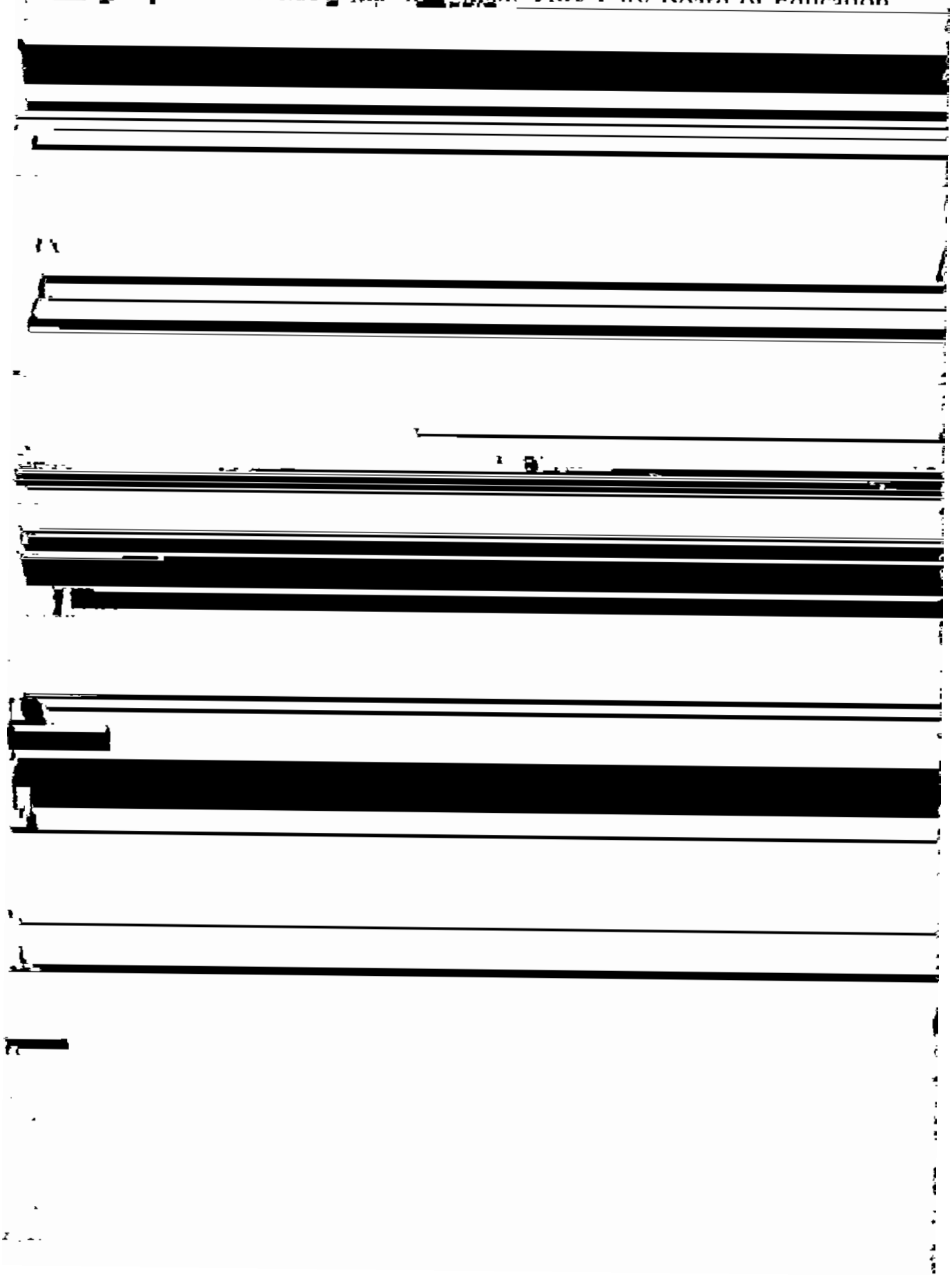
phenomenon. An extra year to mature or acquire readiness skills is seen by some as a way to prevent subsequent stress and failure. Research-based conclusions about kindergarten retention have not been rehashed exhaustively by reviewers. Here Shepard analyzes the results of fifteen controlled studies, mostly dissertations to evaluate the effects of extra-





school structure, standardized curriculum, graded education, and the

MACCHIAROLA, F. J. (1981) *Promotional Policy for Students in Grades Kindergarten* [illegible] New York City Board of Education



P-20, No. 408. 'School Enrollment — Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1982.' Washington, DC, U.S. Government Printing Office.

Chapter 2:

A Meta-Analysis of Research Studies

C. Thomas Holmes

Editors' Introduction

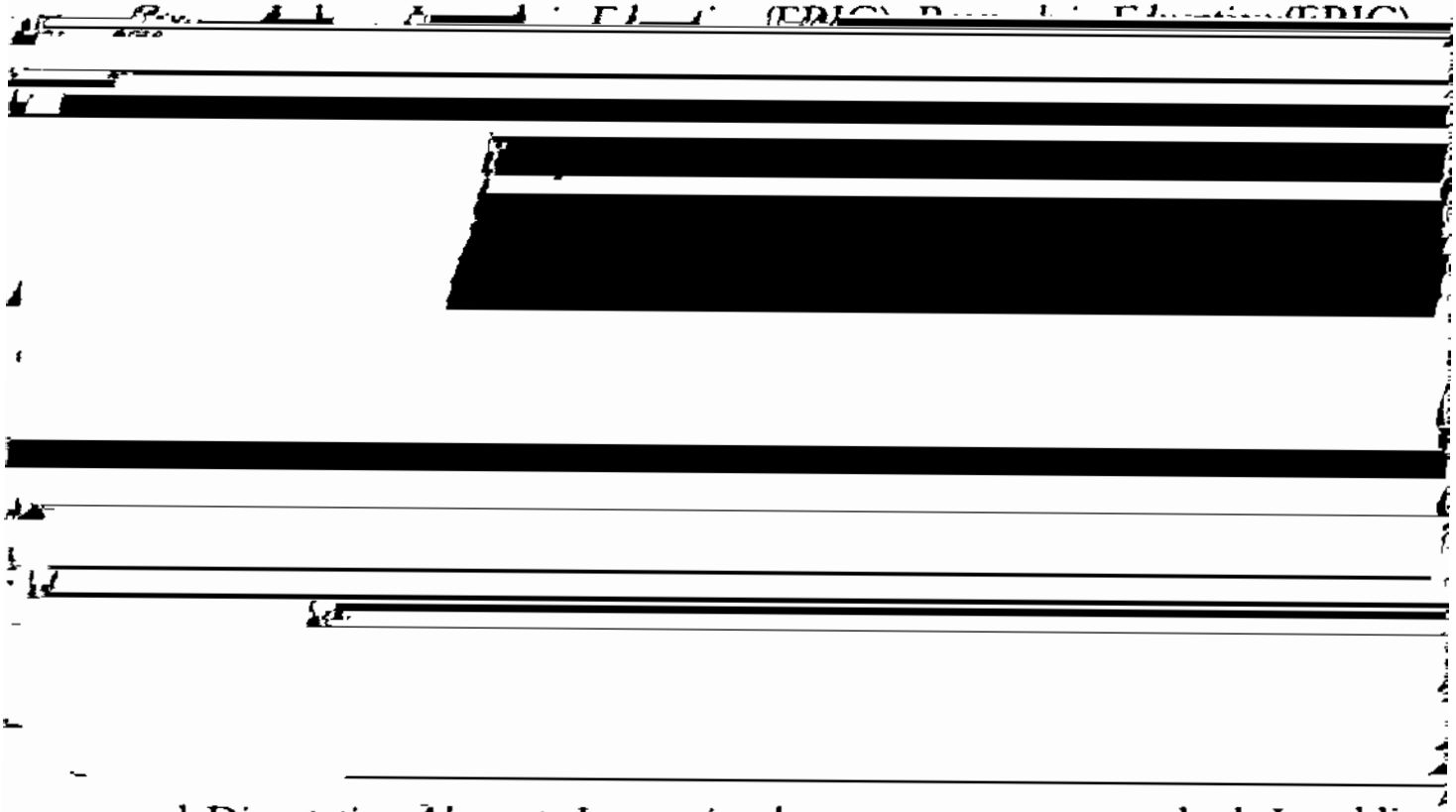
Because of the high visibility of grade retention policies more than twenty reviews of retention research have been authored since 1980. The most distinguished of

grade? Do initial effects persist over time? What are the characteristics of the few positive studies that were found? Did these studies involve special students or

design?

Sources of Data

A systematic search of the literature was conducted to identify studies that were potentially relevant. Descriptors such as grade retention, grade repetition, non-promotion, grade failure, and suggested synonyms were used across reference data bases. In the initial phase,



and *Dissertation Abstracts International* were computer searched. In addition, a manual search was conducted of *Education Index* and *Master's Thesis in Education*. In the second phase, each report located in phase one was consulted, when possible, for additional citations. The search produced a bibliography of approximately 850 entries.

from many different outcome measures including different tests at

Table 1: Mean Effect Sizes

	# of ES's	# of Studies	ES (Weighted by Effect)	ES (Weighted by Study)
[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
Academic achievement	536	47	−.19	−.31
Language arts	106	18	−.16	−.33
Reading	144	34	−.08	−.30
Mathematics	137	31	−.11	−.25
Social studies	7	3	−.35	−.37
Grade point average	4	3	−.58	−.78
Personal adjustment	234	27	−.09	−.21
Social	101	27	−.09	−.21
Emotional	33	10	+.03	−.12
Behavioral	24	10	−.13	−.23
Self-concept	45	11	−.13	+.06
Attitude toward school	39	10	−.05	−.18
Attendance	7	5	−.18	−.22

junior high grades. These 861 ES's were then grouped for further study into five major categories of the dependent variables, (a) academic achievement; (b) personal adjustment; (c) self-concept; (d) attitude toward school; and (e) attendance.

Academic Achievement

The majority of all effect sizes (62 per cent) were measurements of

Table 2: Mean Effect Sizes for Academic Achievement

By grade of retention	K	1	2	3	4	5–7
TOTAL						
weighted by study (# studies)	− .28(8)	− .28(12)	− .10(4)	− .15(7)	− .36(6)	− .38(5)
NEGATIVE STUDIES	− 32(25)	− .52(35)	− .45(11)	− .39(105)	− .37(81)	− 37(108)
	− .37(7)	− .54(9)	− .38(3)	− .33(6)	− .36(6)	− .38(5)
POSITIVE STUDIES	+ .29(16)	+ .57(40)	+ .74(18)	+ 95(18)	0	0
	+ .29(1)	+ .53(3)	+ .74(1)	+ .95(1)		

Equal years (same age, different grades)	1 Yr	2 Yrs	3 Yrs	3+ Yrs
TOTAL	− .45(178)	− .51(32)	− 67(22)	− .83(18)
	− .41(28)	− .64(5)	− 74(3)	− .88(3)
NEGATIVE STUDIES	− .46(174)	− .51(32)	− 67(22)	− .88(18)
	− .46(26)	− 64(5)	− 74(3)	− .88(3)
	+ 27(2)			

Equal grades (different ages, same grade)	1 Yr	2 Yrs	3 Yrs	3+ Yrs
TOTAL	+ .25(107)	+ .19(61)	+ .09(33)	.00(41)
	.00(10)	+ 02(7)	− 12(5)	+ .04(6)
NEGATIVE STUDIES	− .03(77)	− .19(25)	− 28(15)	− .34(28)
	− .22(8)	− .28(4)	− .25(4)	− 31(4)
POSITIVE STUDIES	+ .96(30)	+ .46(36)	+ .40(18)	+ .73(13)
	+ .88(2)	+ .42(3)	+ 40(1)	+ .74(2)

benefit from retention. Based on eight studies in kindergarten and twelve studies in first grade, the average effects were − .28 and − .28, respectively.

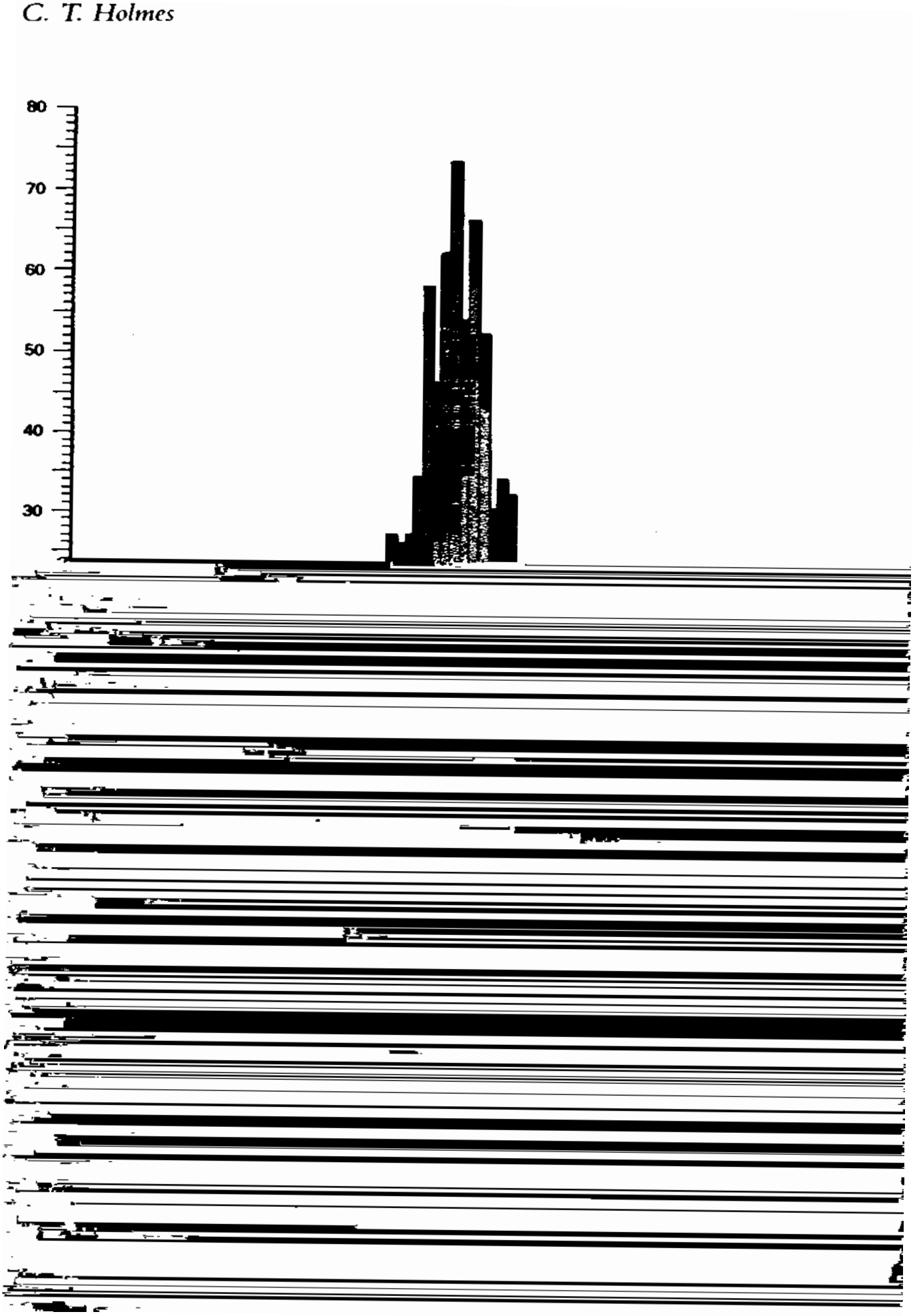
section.

Self-Concept, Attitude toward School and Attendance

Eleven of the studies measured the effects of retention on the self-concepts of pupils, with a mean ES of −.13. Ten studies yielded thirty-nine ES's with measures of attitude toward school indicating that the two sets of groups were essentially not different with respect to measures of attitude. The mean ES for attendance of −.18 indicated that on average retained groups were absent from school at a greater rate.

Secondary Analysis

Because the overall effect was somewhat less negative than that reported in an earlier meta-analysis (Holmes and Matthews, 1984), where a mean ES of −.37 was obtained from an analysis of forty-four studies, an attempt was made to pinpoint what had changed. Based on an analysis of the nineteen additional studies (Holmes, 1986), a set of


80
70
60
50
40
30

The Positive Studies

The set of positive studies consisted of nine investigations, most of which have been published during the 1980s. These studies have generally focused on academic achievement as the outcome measure

Seven of these nine studies were conducted as dissertation or masters

special classes with low student-teacher ratios. One of the plans,

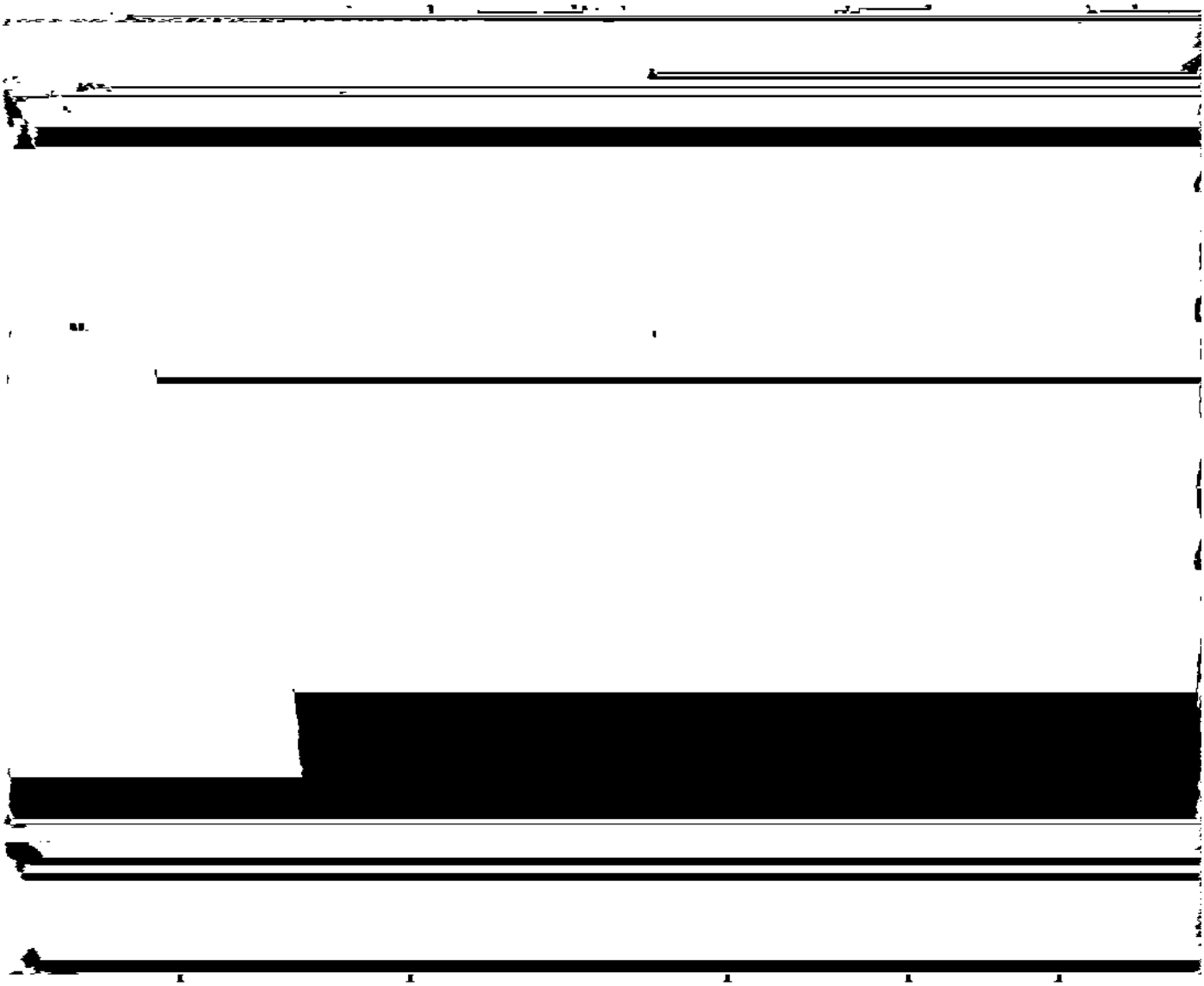
Table 3: Studies with Matched Subjects

Study	Matched On						ES
	IQ	*Achievement test*	*SES*	*Sex*	*Grades*	*Other*	
1	X		X	X		X	−.23
2	X		X	X			−.39
3		X					−.73
4	X			X		X	−.96
5				X	X	X	−.66
6		X					−.42
7	X	X	X	X		X	−.63
8	X	X				X	−.06
9		X		X		X	−.40
10	X			X		X	+.20
11	X			X		X	−.32
12		X				X	−.05
13		X					−.04
14		X		X			−.43
15	X	X		X		X	−.48
16	X		X			X	+.31
17		X	X			X	+.76
18		X					−.39
19		X	X	X		X	−.41
20		X	X	X		X	−.13
21	X	X				X	−.65
22	X			X		X	−.59
24	X	X		X		X	−.15
Mean	−.30	−.30					−.28

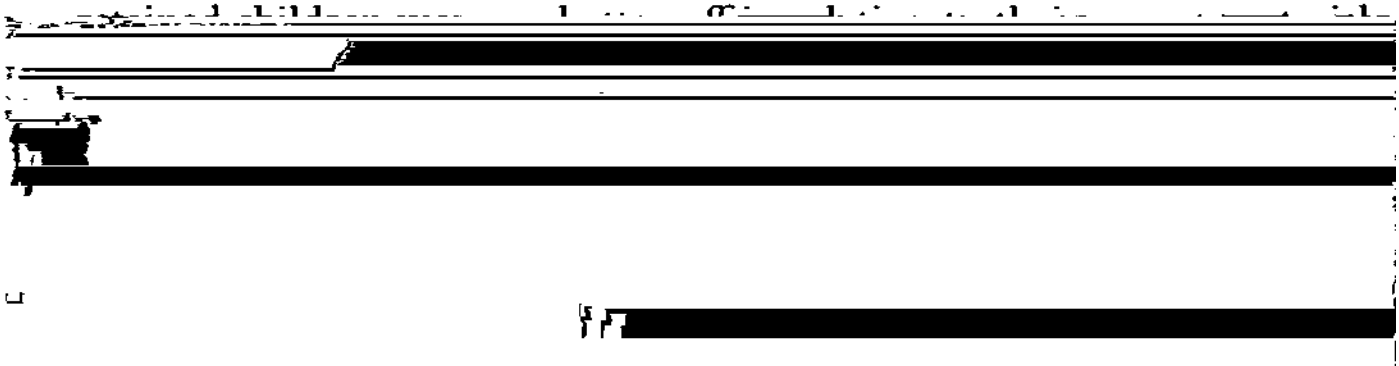
standard deviation below their matched counterparts. Thus, better controlled studies showed on average a greater negative effect for retention.

Conclusions

studies', two notes of caution must be emphasized. First, the few positive studies involved intensive remediation plus retention and ironically an unusually able population of retainees. These studies failed



amount of remediation. Second, positive studies tended to be based on more favorable comparisons with grade peers rather than age peers, used only academic outcome measures, and most did not follow-up past one year. When all available longitudinal studies were taken together, the same-grade apparent benefit disappeared over time so that



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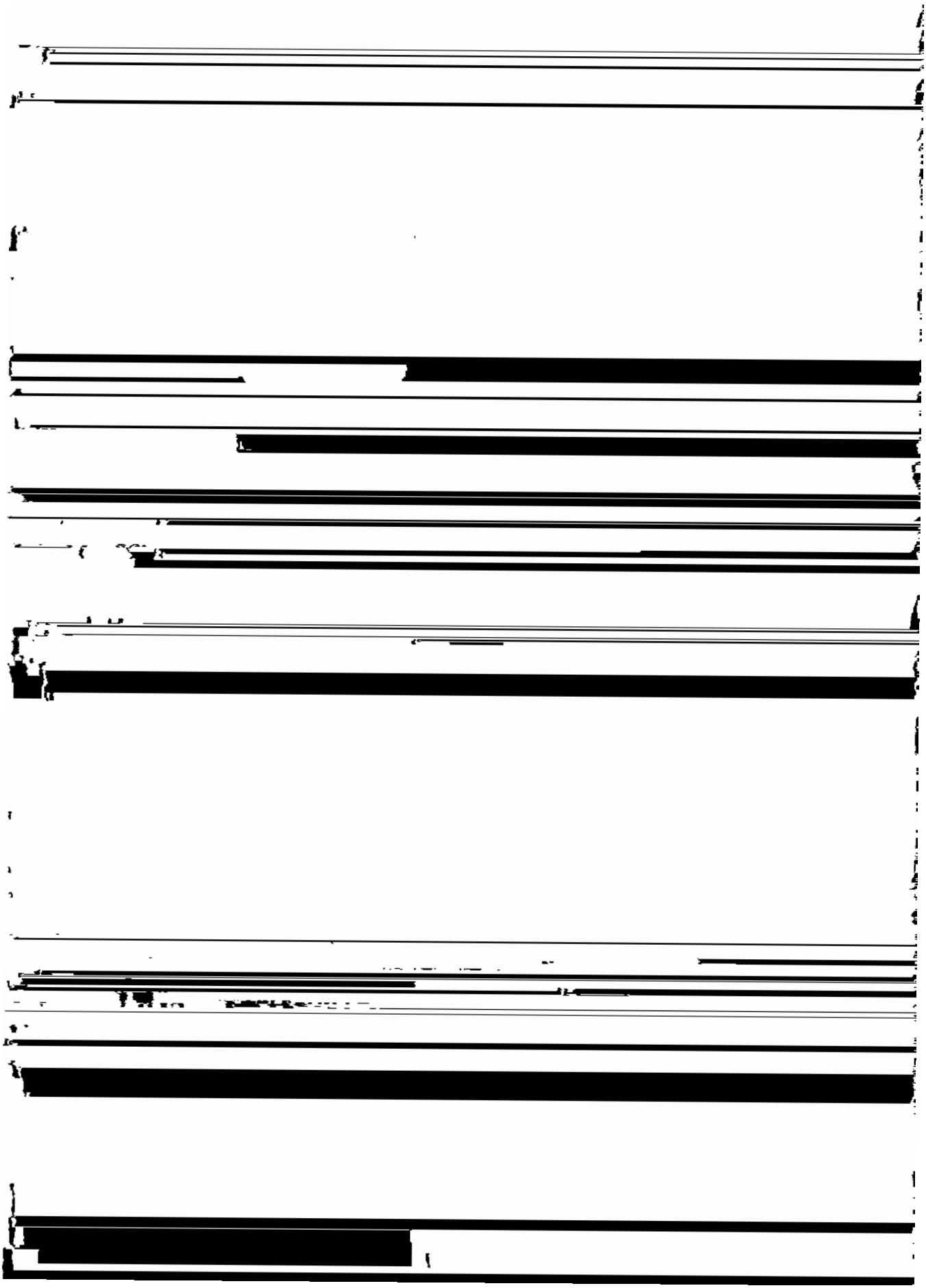

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Chapter 3:
Repeating and Dropping Out of School[1]

James B. Grissom and Lorrie A. Shepard

[redacted]

In a typical end-of-school-year news story, USA Today *reported that one-quarter of the first graders in a Mississippi community would be held back because 'they can't read at a first-grade level'* (USA Today, *15–17 April 1988, p. 1*). *Consistent with the view that retention will repair deficient skills and improve students' life chances, the principal explained her decision: 'In years past, those*

[redacted]

students would have been promoted to second grade. Then they might have

[redacted]

What are the effects of grade retention on dropout prevention? Is it true to say that holding children back will make them less at risk for dropping out? In the research literature on retention there is little mention of long term consequences. In Holmes' review (chapter 2), for example, only eighteen of sixty-three controlled studies provided any data three or more years past the retention year. None followed retained students into high school. It is in the literature on school

To the teacher deciding whether Justin should be retained in first grade,

typical school dropout by listing across studies the variables that distinguish graduates from dropouts. Dropouts consistently come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have little support for school from home, perform poorly on academic tasks, have poor self-esteem, a

(Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage and Rutter, 1986). It is also typical that dropouts have repeated one or more grades in school. For example, the Association of California Urban School Districts (1985) reported that in

ington state, 50 per cent of the high school dropouts had repeated a grade in school. Of those dropouts who repeated, far more than half had repeated first grade.

Another older study is an example of large-scale surveys of dropouts conducted by social scientists interested in education or labor economics. Bachman, Green and Wirtanen (1971) studied a nationally representative sample of high school boys and, again, identified various variables that distinguished three groups, those who dropped out, those who graduated but did not attend college, and those who went on to college. Their conclusions about failing a grade in school (against which they caution inferring cause and effect) were as follows:

> attainment is quite strong. More than half of the dropouts had failed a grade by the time they reached tenth grade; the same sort of failure had occurred for 27 per cent of those who ended their education with high school graduation, and only 8 per cent of those who went on to college. (p. 54).

Bachman *et al.* (1971) also conducted multiple classification analyses to determine how well dropping out could be predicted from a combination of background, school experience, and personality

[redacted]

Austin Independent School District

Descriptive Statistics

	Dropouts (N = 942)	*Graduates and stay-ins (N = 2965)*
GPA		
Average	76.6	85 8
% in 60–69.9 gpa range	19.8%	1.5%
% in 70–79 9 gpa range	47 1%	18 9%
% in 80–89 9 gpa range	28.7%	47.5%
% in 90–99.0 gpa range	4.4%	32.1%
Grade level		
% Below grade	45.3%	15 2%
% At grade	53.1%	75 5%
% Above grade	1.6%	9 3%
Ethnicity		
% Hispanic	35.6%	20.6%
% Black	[redacted]	[redacted]
% Anglo/Other	44.7%	63.0%
Discipline		
Average # of Serious Discipline Incidents	.5	.1
Sex		

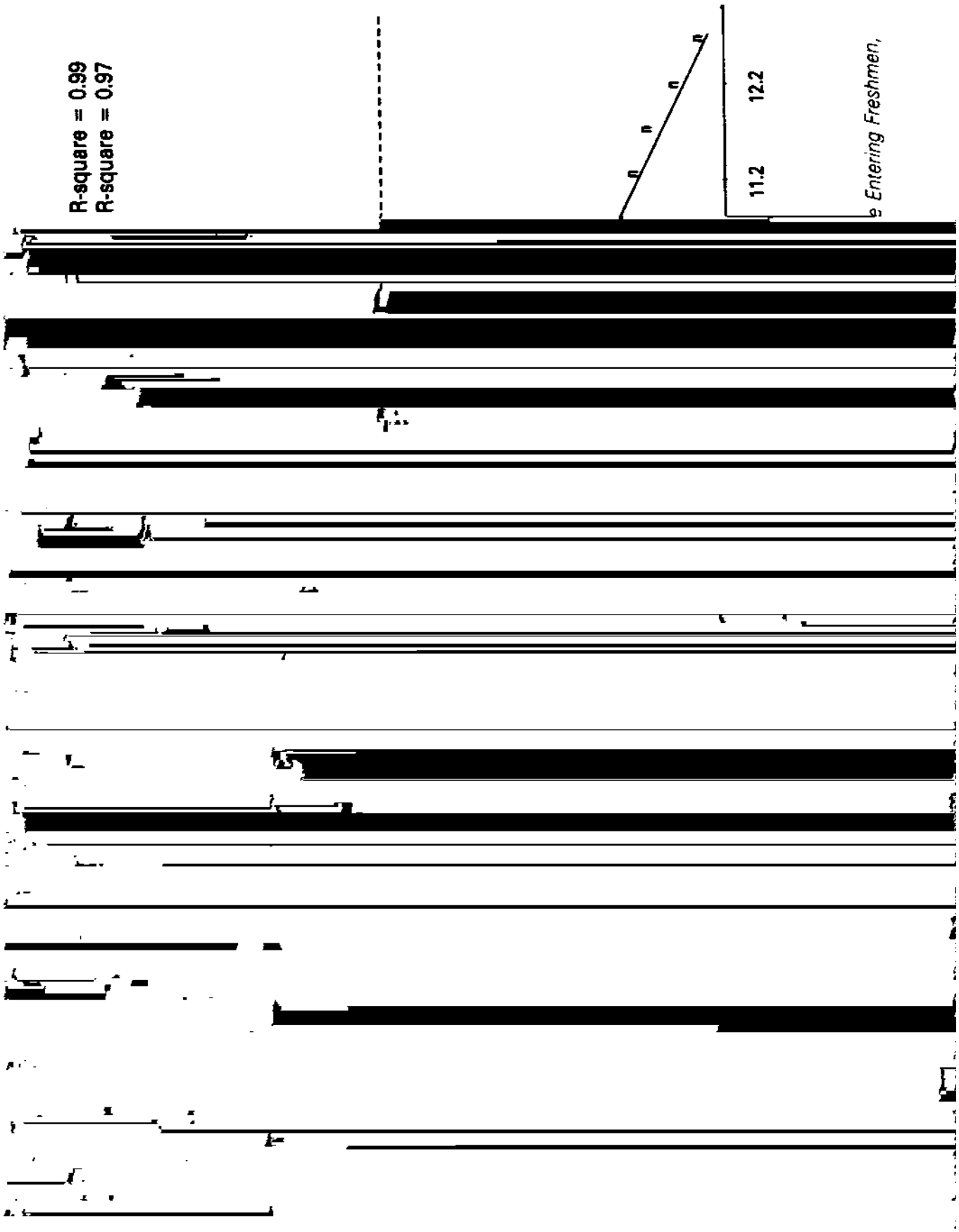
scores, retention, gpa, and family background. The surprising feature of Lloyd's study was that all these variables were measured in the third grade. Being overage in third grade or having been retained by that time correlated .31 and .27, respectively, with dropping out of high school.

Accounting for Achievement

Repeating a grade might directly increase the risk of dropping out. The competing hypothesis is that poor achievement explains both retention and dropping out. Is it possible to disentangle the effects of poor achievement and grade failure? Here we focus on a series of studies (Hess and Lauber, 1985; Rice, Toles, Schulz, Harvey and Foster, 1987; Schulz, Toles, Rice, Brauer and Harvey, 1986) conducted in the Chicago public schools that in various ways adjusted for student achievement before examining the effect of retention on dropping out. The Chicago studies are also exemplary in that extensive effort

students. Even if the retention could have served to raise reading scores by a stanine, the chances of students dropping out were increased.

The Hess and Lauber report was based on 30,000 students in the [redacted] combined these data with successive cohorts entering through 1980 which resulted in a sample of 77,000. They predicted dropout status using both log-linear and multiple regression analyses. When eighth-grade reading scores and entry age were entered first, they (and their [redacted]


R-square = 0.99
R-square = 0.97
11.2
12.2
Entering Freshmen,

	Entering			Dropout Rate		
	1979	1980	1981	1979	1980	1981
Age						
Normal-Age	21,495	17,959	16,769	34.2	29.0	33.9
Over-Age	7,528	6,909	9,190	62.5	54.8	64.9

decrease to early dropouts; nonetheless, it is plausible that some portion of the attrition is due to dropouts that occurred before high school and thus outside the boundaries of the study.

Causal-model Analyses

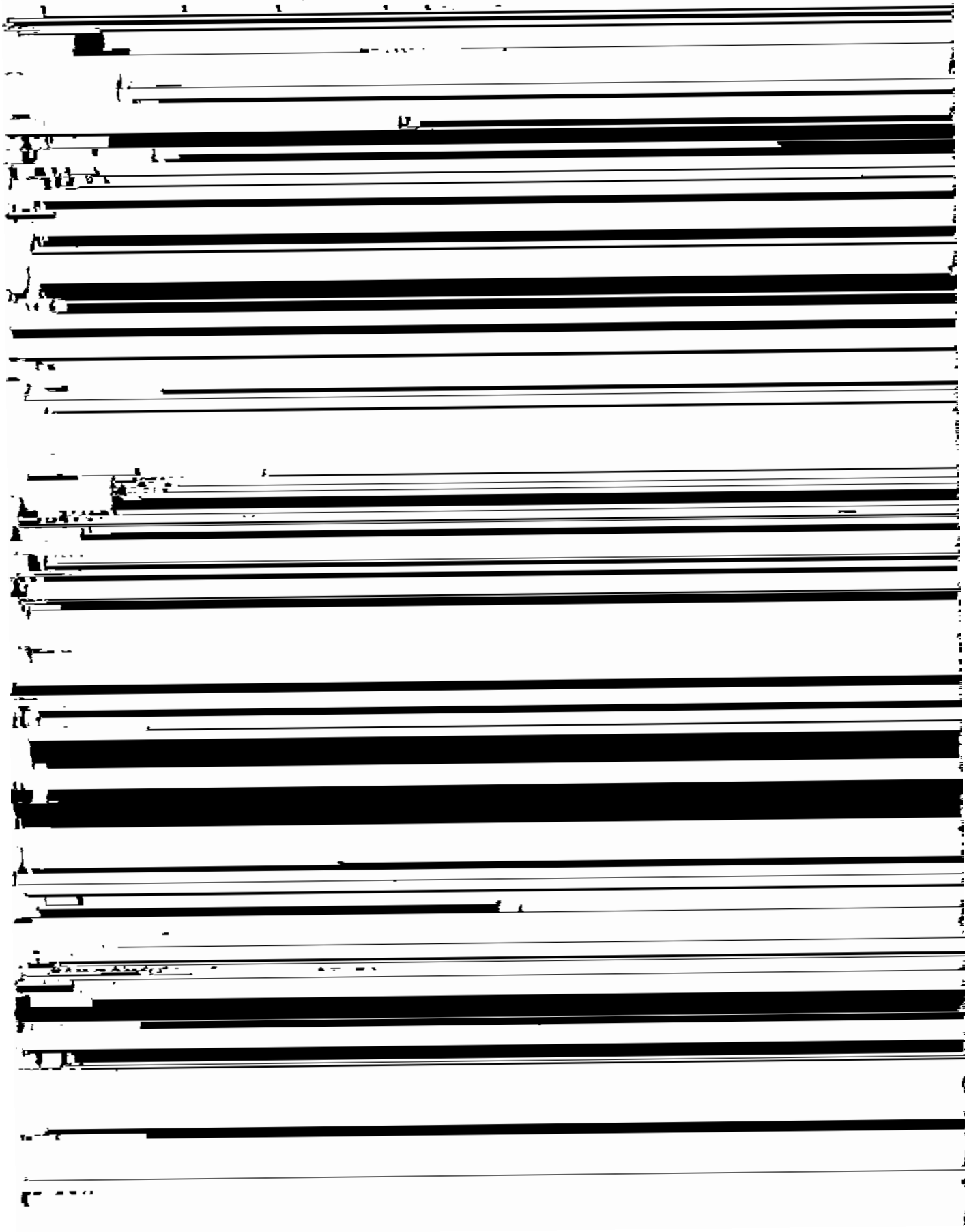
In this section we present our own analyses of three large-city-school

data sets using causal modeling. Our purposes are to provide a conceptual framework as well as statistical controls and to test the similarity of findings across communities of quite different socio-economic status.

Conceptual Model

For policy purposes it is important to understand whether the practice of grade retention contributes directly to the dropout problem. A structural model was developed to represent the hypothesized relations among factors leading to dropping out of high school. Causal modeling

clearly represent causal connections between independent and dependent variables. If important variables are omitted from the analysis,



Hispanic and 18 per cent black; its dropout rate computed longitud-

inally is from 20–24 per cent. Data were provided by the Office of

reliability of the achievement measure, because any underestimate of achievement in the analysis will act to inflate the [redacted]

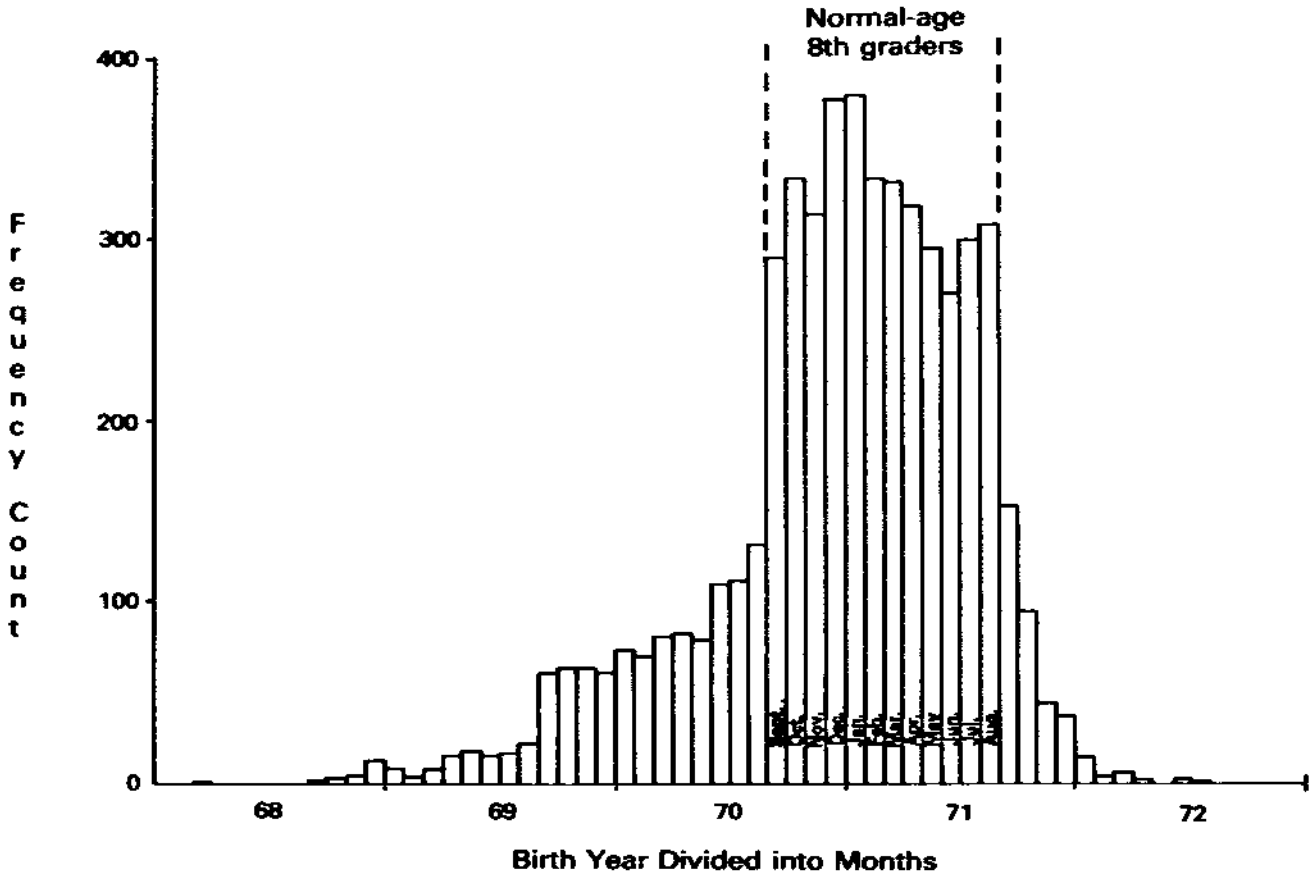


Figure 2: Austin ISD Students in Grade 8 Grouped by Birth Year and Month.

Smith, 1985). Therefore, analyses were conducted using both an exact September definition of overage and an exaggerated or stricter definition of overage with the ambiguous 3-months students removed. In addition, separate analyses were conducted using verified retentions only, verified plus inferred retentions and overage only with known retentions removed.

Ultimately the fidelity of overage as a proxy for retention is not so serious a question if overage itself becomes the variable of interest and

Model Estimation and Results for Austin ISD

This section provides only a brief summary of the more extensive analyses reported in Grissom (1988). Structural equations were specified on the basis of the conceptual model and parameters were estimated

Path coefficients for the Austin data are presented in figure 3 separately for the two different achievement composites using the exact

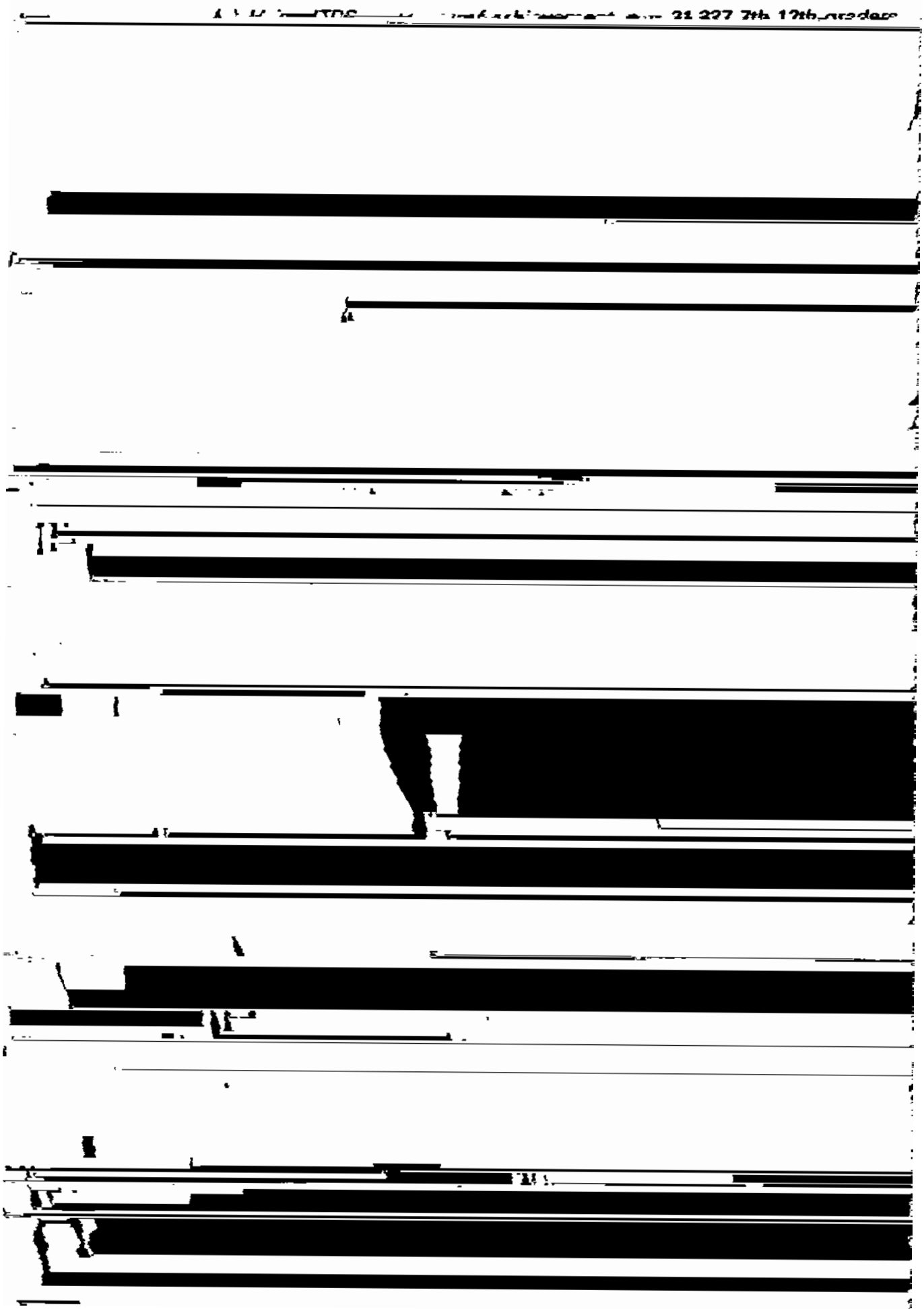


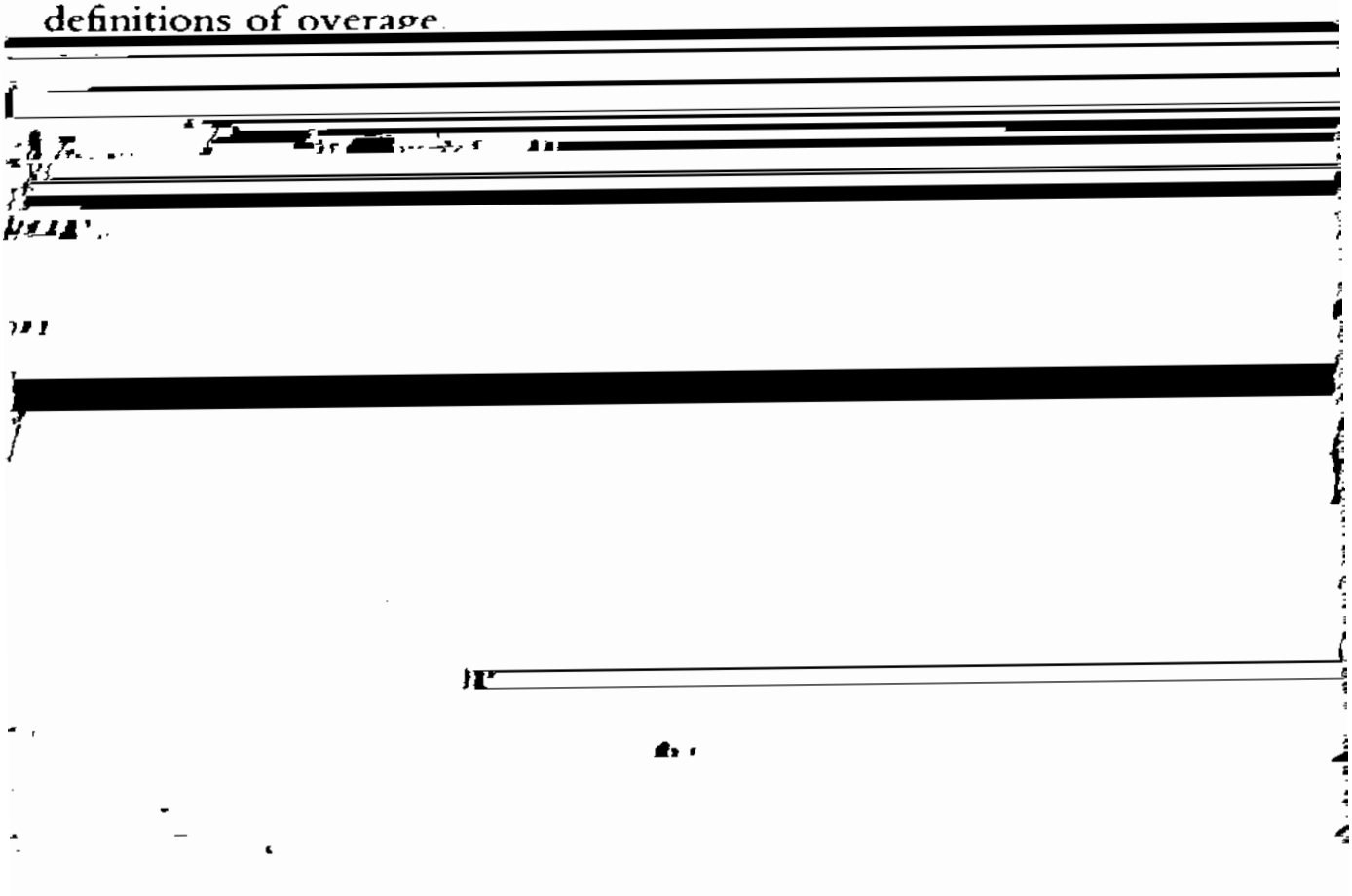
Table 5—Path Coefficients and R^2 [illegible]

Using ITB Achievement

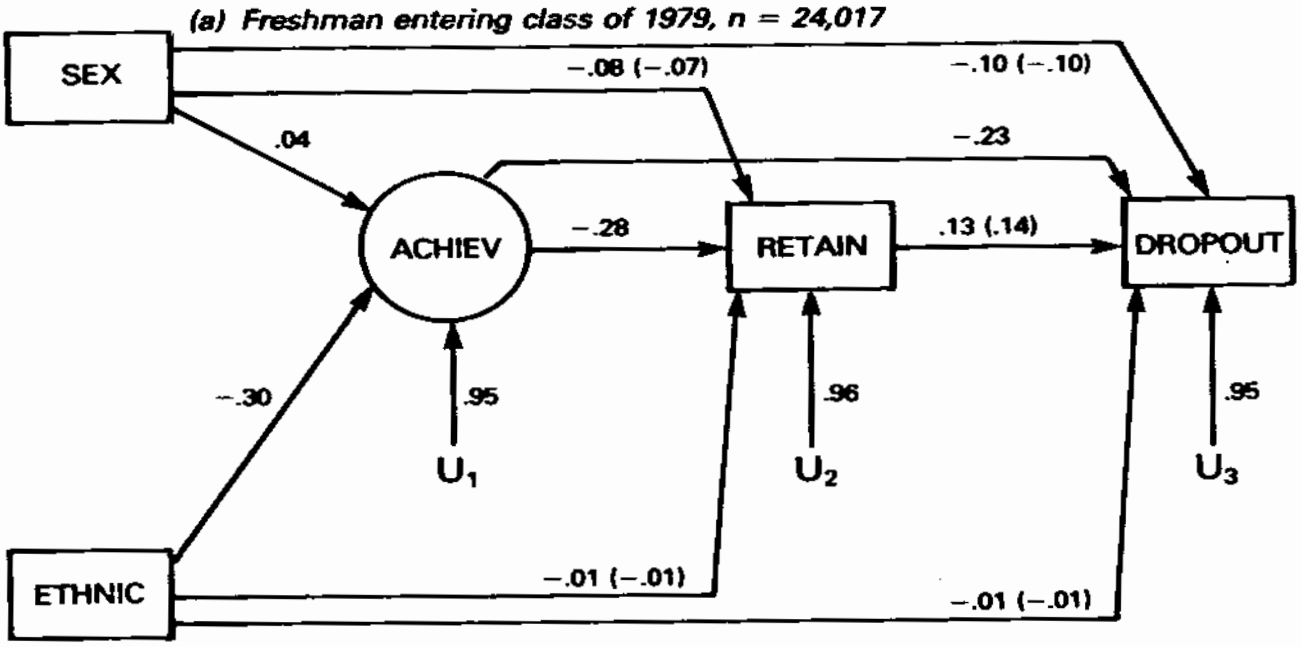
	Achievement					
	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
R^2 =	.277	286	.309	.275	.260	.267
SES	− .248	− 244	− 199	− 164	− 139	− 142

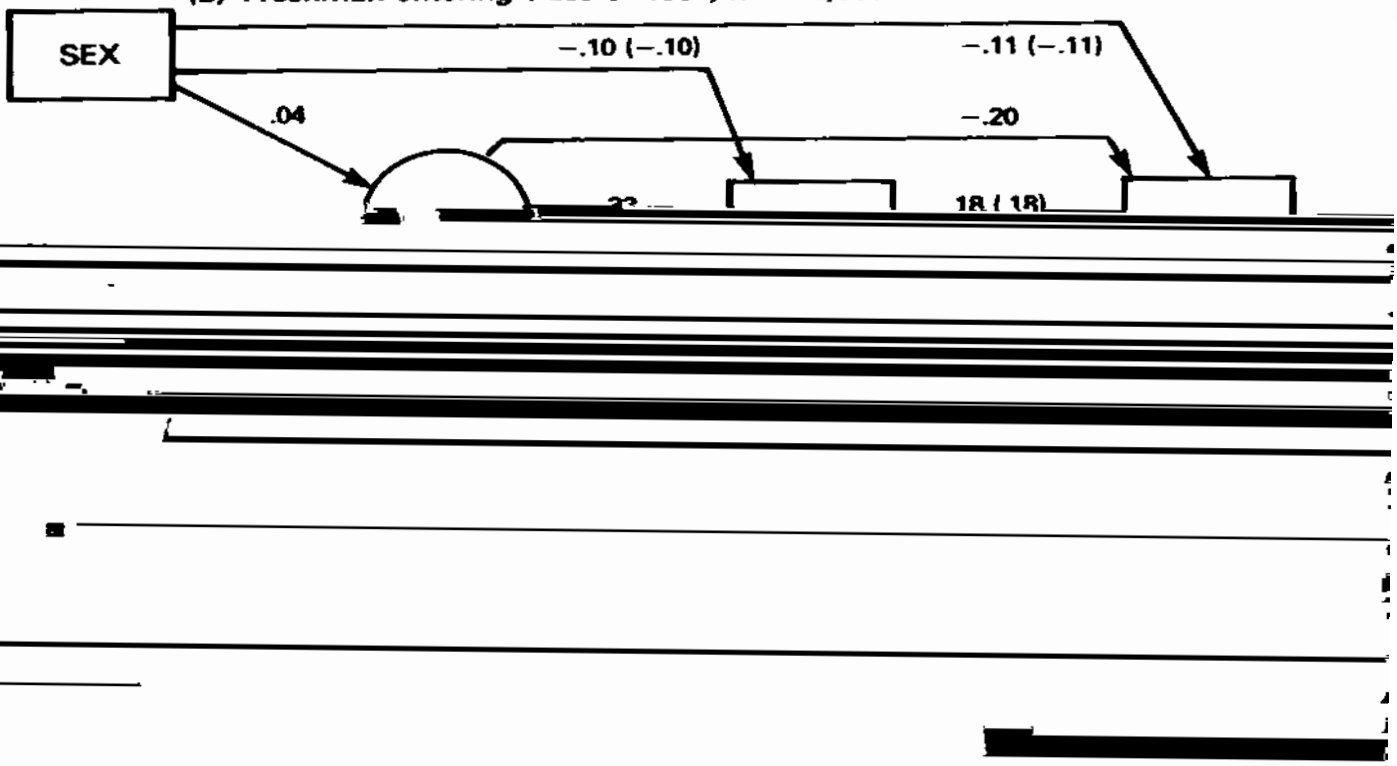
effect of retention on dropping out was increased to .35(.34). Known grade retentions alone (i.e., junior-high and high school retentions) had a path to retention of .34, with an increase in the probability of dropping out of 29 percentage points. When verified retentions were combined with the exaggerated definition of overage, producing the most inclusive and certain measure of retention, the effect on dropping out was .34 with a probability increase of 27 percentage points. Thus

birthdate information, we could not experiment with more stringent definitions of overage.



Structural equations were specified for a model with SES


(a) Freshman entering class of 1979, n = 24,017
SEX
ETHNIC
ACHIEV
RETAIN
DROPOUT
.04
−.30
−.08 (−.07)
−.10 (−.10)
−.23
−.28
.13 (.14)
−.01 (−.01)
−.01 (−.01)
.95
.96
.95
U1
U2
U3


(b) Freshman entering class of 1981, n = 20,003
SEX
.04
−.10 (−.10)
−.11 (−.11)
−.20

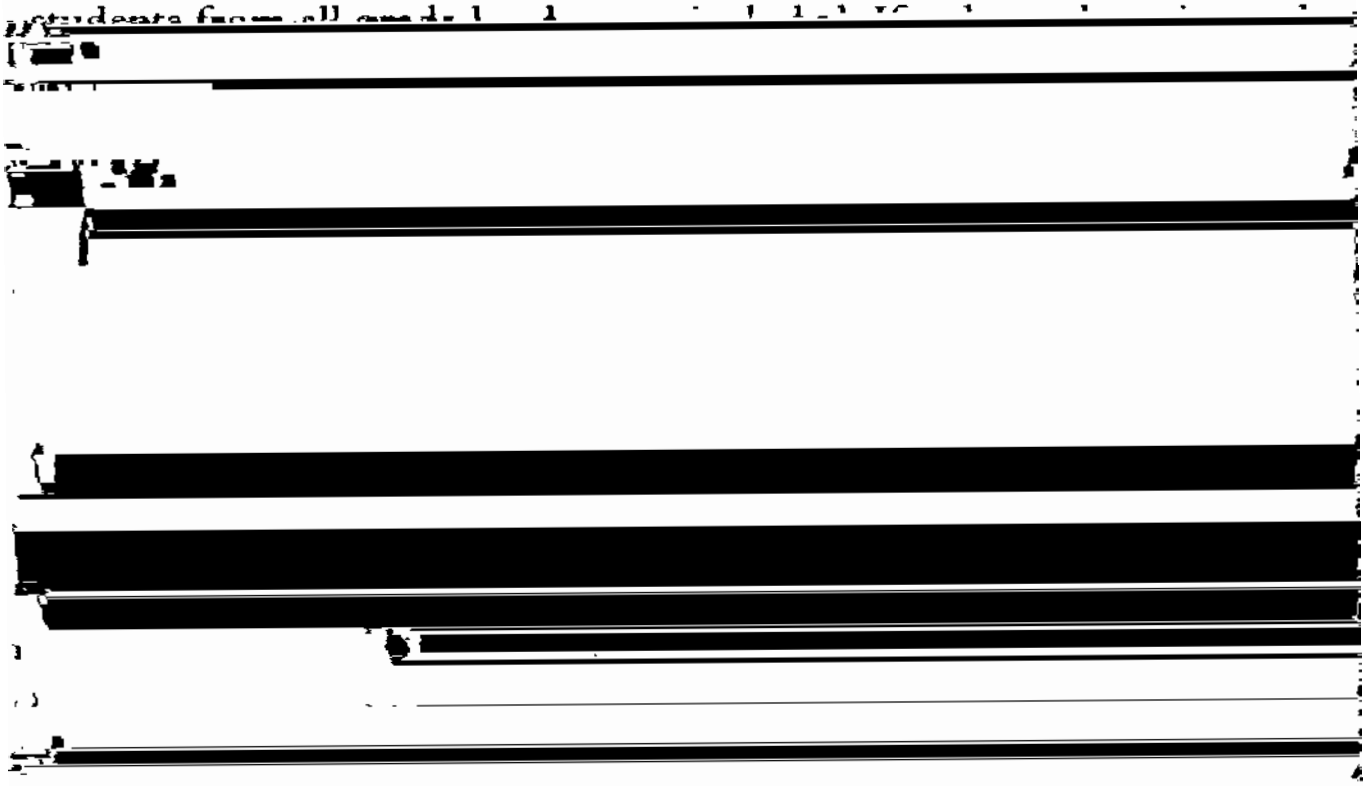
district was selected because of its high average socioeconomic level to test the effect of retention on dropping out in quite different circumstances. District 3 has a minority population of 21 per cent and a dropout rate of 4 per cent. Data were provided by the Research and Testing Office for a 1985/86 sample of 38,364 seventh–twelfth graders. Subsequent grade retentions and school leaving status were then updated over the next two school years. It was agreed that the district would not be identified by name.

Variables for District 3

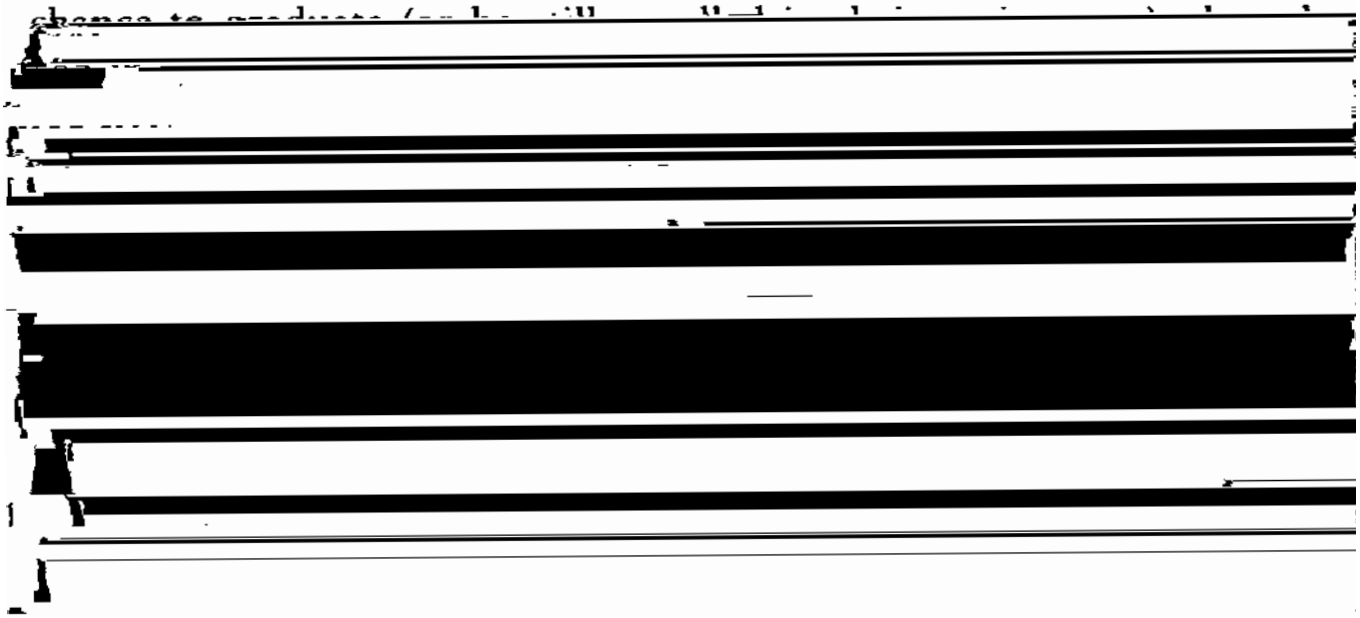
Sex was coded 0 for males and 1 for females. Blacks and Hispanics were coded 1 as members of minority groups, Anglos were coded 0. Achievement was estimated by composite score on the California Achievement Test (CAT). Using normal curve units, test scores were averaged for each student across the years of available data.

recent three years. In addition retention was inferred from overage using the procedures described previously. However, District 3, like many other districts in the North-eastern region of the country, has a late entrance age of 31 December. Therefore, when overage is defined precisely as this boundary, there will be many students with September to December birthdays who appear to be too old but were never retained. Instead, if they had started school in a state like Texas, they

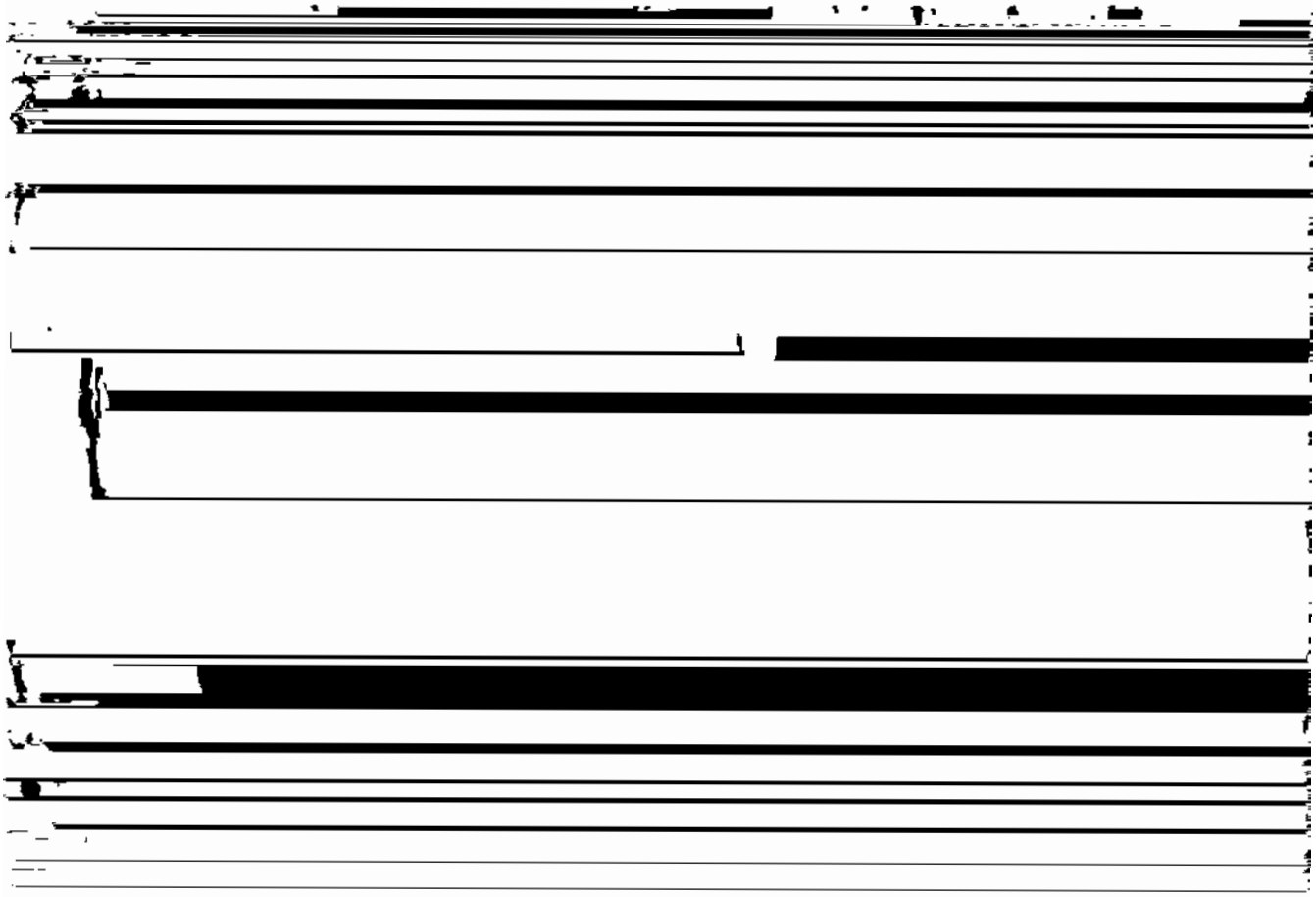
coefficients are quite different, however, suggesting that a student who is made to repeat during grades 7–12 has a greater increase in the probability of dropping out (27 percentage points) than the total mix of overage students, many of whom were retained in earlier grades. As would be expected when many students are misclassified on the retention variable, the retention-dropping out relation was much weaker when the exact definition of overage was used to infer retention, with standardized and unstandardized coefficients of only .21 and .10; all other paths in this analysis, however, remained very close to those in figure 5(a). The results in figure 5 are conservative because



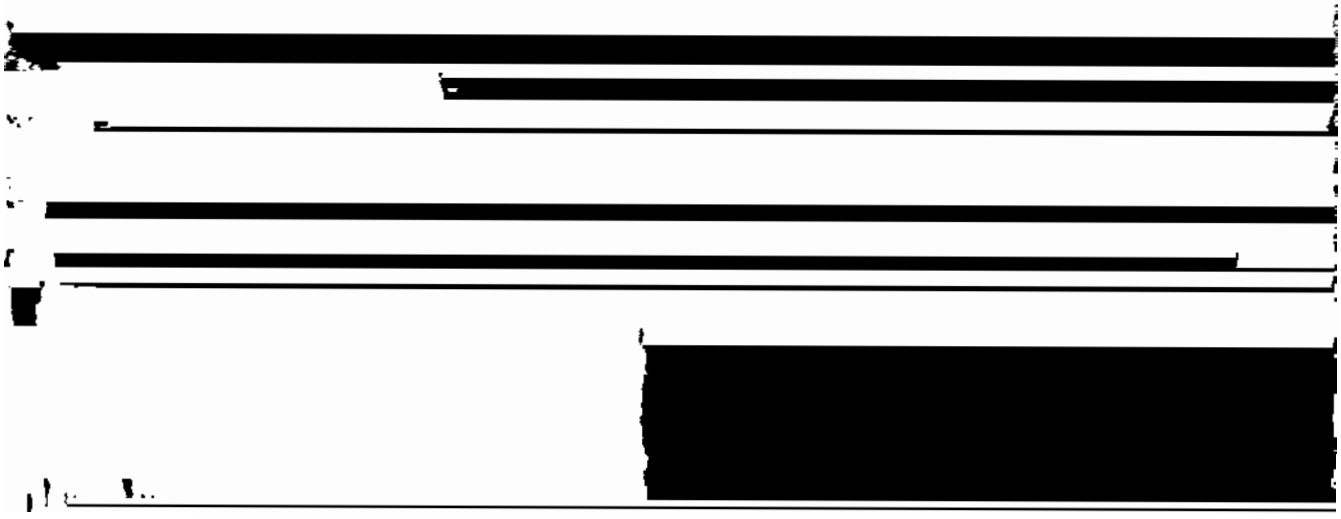
10–12 were included, because only these students would have had a



age to represent retention. An additional caveat is needed about the time precedence of achievement. In the conceptual model, achievement occurs before grade retention. Except for the eighth grade retainees in Chicago and some unspecified number of later grade retentions in



tests were administered. Thus we have used these measures as if they were indicators of relatively enduring levels of achievement. Advocates who believe that retention increases achievement would say that the scores of retained children were higher, then, by some amount than they would have been previously. Based on Holmes' meta-analysis



circumstances outside of school. Different aspects of retention may be more or less salient when considering existing influences on dropping out.

From nationally representative data, Erkstrom, Goertz, Pollack and Rock (1986) found that dropouts said they left because they 'did not like school' (33 per cent) or had 'poor grades' (33 per cent). Rumberger (1983) had reported similar results from the National Longitudinal Survey; 44 per cent of dropouts gave school related reasons for leaving. They disliked school, had poor performance, or had been expelled or suspended. Looking at the same High School and Beyond data analyzed by Eksrom *et al.*, Wehlage and Rutter (1986) described a mutual process

injured self-esteem from the original decision. To the extent that

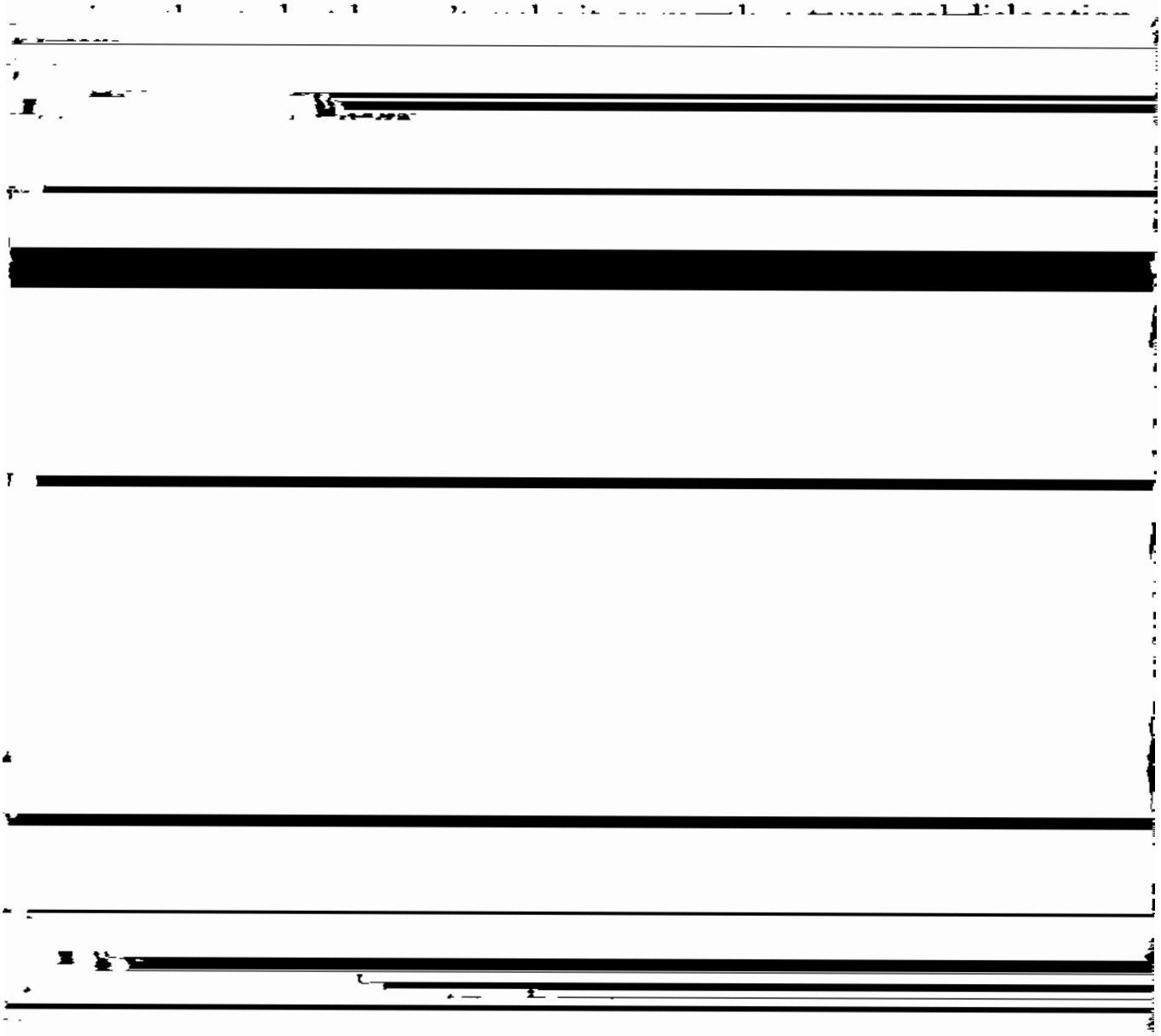
effect would be the same whether the child had repeated grade 1 or grade 10.

These explanations are not mutually exclusive. Regardless of what students are able to voice as the primary reason for quitting, multiple factors may all be operating, both pushing and pulling students away from school.

Conclusions

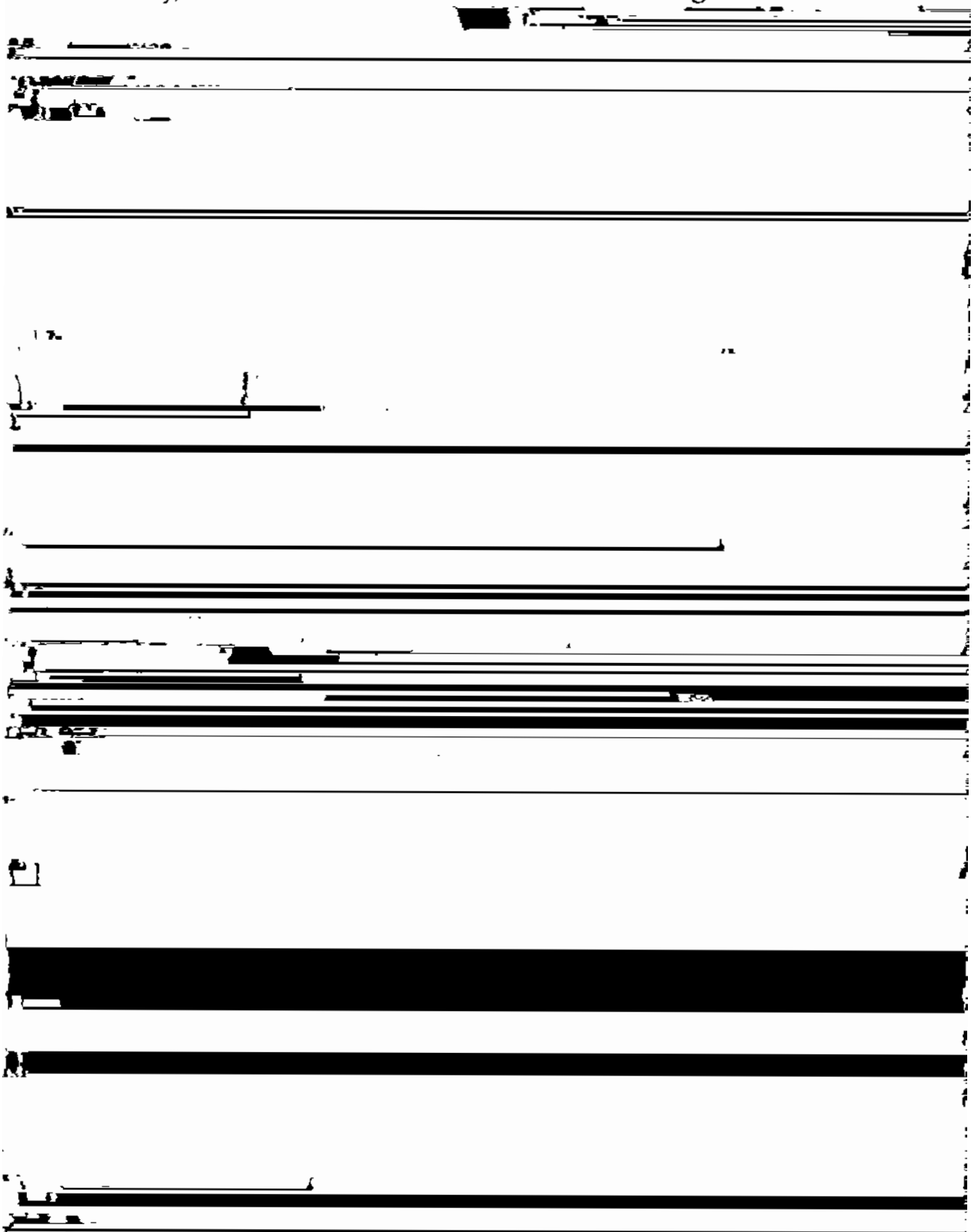
anticipate a new rate of 25 per cent as groups of previously retained students reached high school age.

Students leave school for a variety of reasons, often because they are not good at school or because the attractions of job, marriage, or associations with out-of-school peers become harder to resist. In many cases dropouts may not be very articulate or perceptive in explaining their reasons for leaving to survey researchers. Grade retention is a discrete policy intervention that appears to contribute to the dropout problem. Whether it is a part of a negative set of experiences that



that makes the student too old for his classmates and a year further from graduation, the negative consequences of the extra year are clear. As noted by Rice *et al.* (1987), the repeat year would have to produce achievement gains of thirty months to compensate for the negative effects of being made a year too old.

variability, from which these common understandings derive. The Austin



proportion in figure 3a was 36 per cent which is typical (or an underestimate) of cumulative retention rates inferred from data reported in chapter

NATRIELLO, G. (Ed.) (1987) *School Dropouts: Patterns and Policies*, New York, Teachers College Press.

NOTH, N. and O'NEILL, B. (1981) *Dropout Identification—A Preliminary Study of*

ington State University (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 215 013).

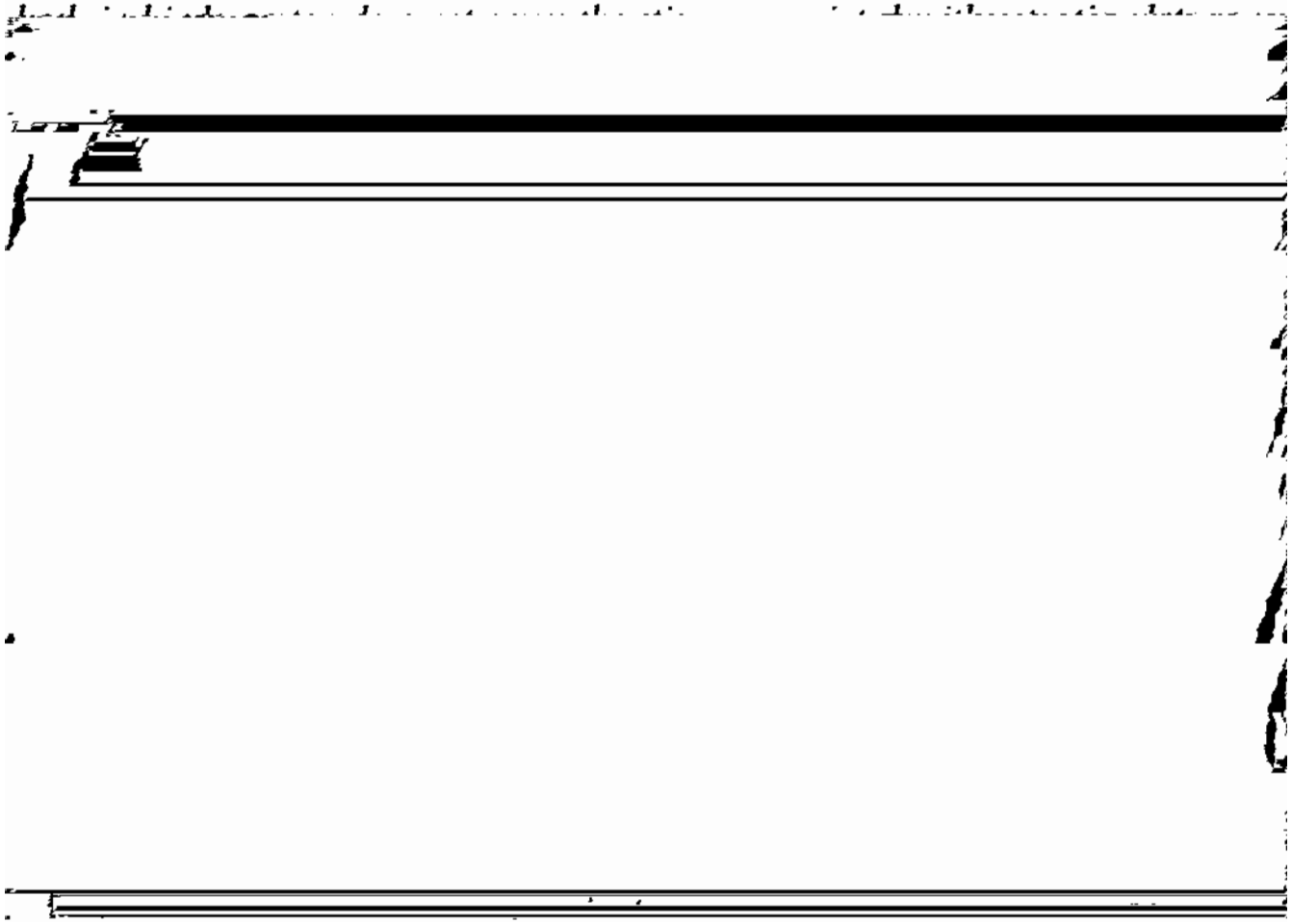
RANDALL, C. V. (1966) *A Study of Early School Leavers and Significant Causes*, Bloomington, MN, Bloomington Public Schools.

Chapter 4: A Review of Research on Kindergarten Retention

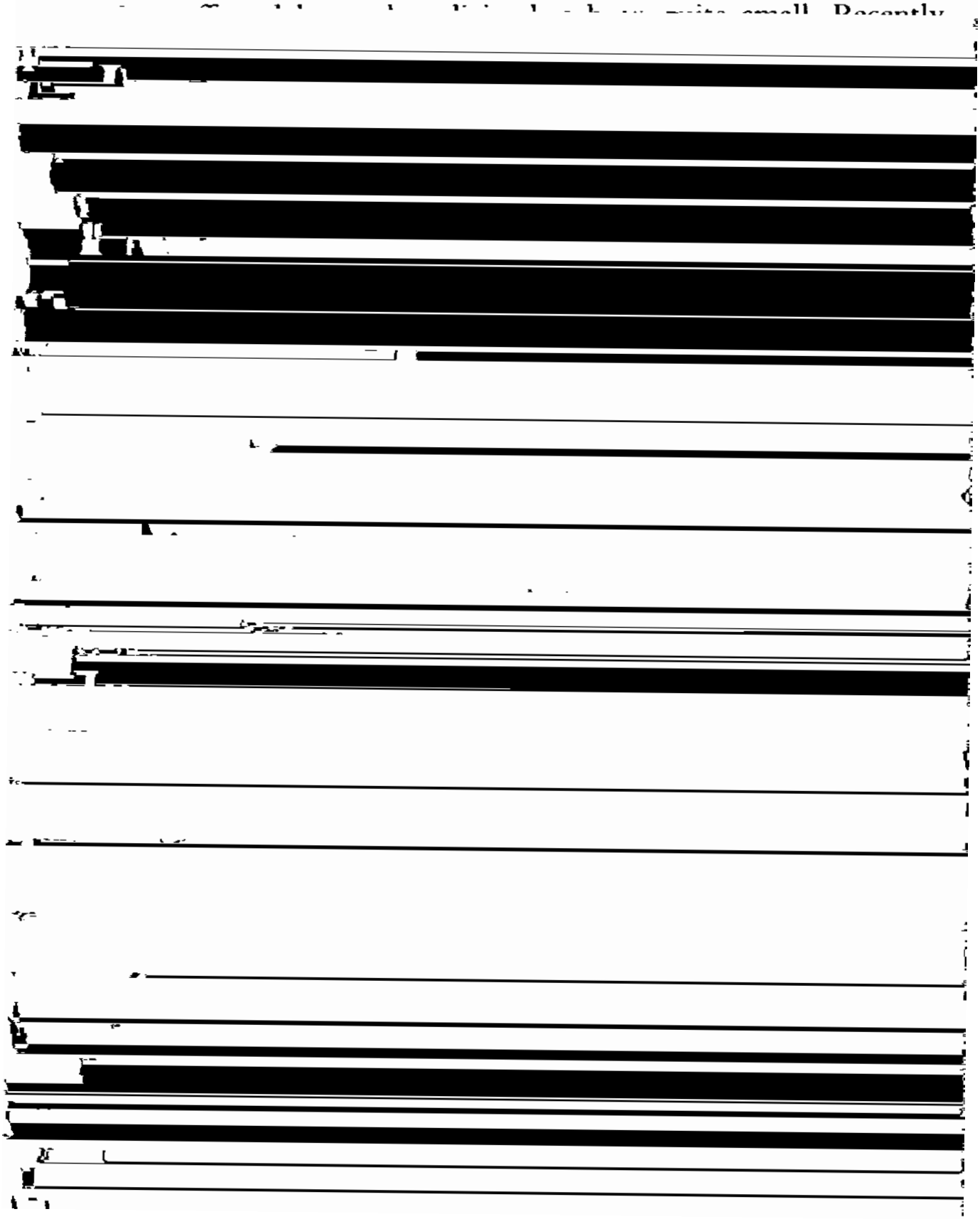
Lorrie A. Shepard

Editors' Introduction

Repeating kindergarten is intended to be different from non-promotion at other grade levels. Because it comes before academic failure it is meant to be a preventative treatment. The populations served and its social effects are thought to be different. Often children are selected for kindergarten retention because of immaturity rather than poor academic skills. And, many believe that being held



Holding children back in kindergarten in large numbers is a phenomenon of the 1980s. In the past, a relatively small number of school districts have followed the recommendation of the Gesell Institute (1982) to have immature children repeat kindergarten. But nationally the number



Gredler provided the only review of research on transition rooms. Here Gredler's major findings are recapitulated. Then the results of

Gredler's Review

I like the 800 references on grade retention and sixty empirical studies

found by Holmes (chapter 2), relatively few controlled studies exist on the effects of kindergarten retention or transition room placement

individualized instruction were no better off at the end of first grade than at-risk children who had been promoted with no special instruction. The group that did best of all, however, was the transition-room-eligible children who had been promoted but received individualized instruction in the regular classroom.

Additional Studies

In order to expand Gredler's review, especially to include more recent studies, computer-assisted searches were conducted of education and psychology data bases using the following descriptors: transition room, kindergarten retention, pre-first, and developmental kindergarten. Reference lists were also cross-checked to identify additional studies

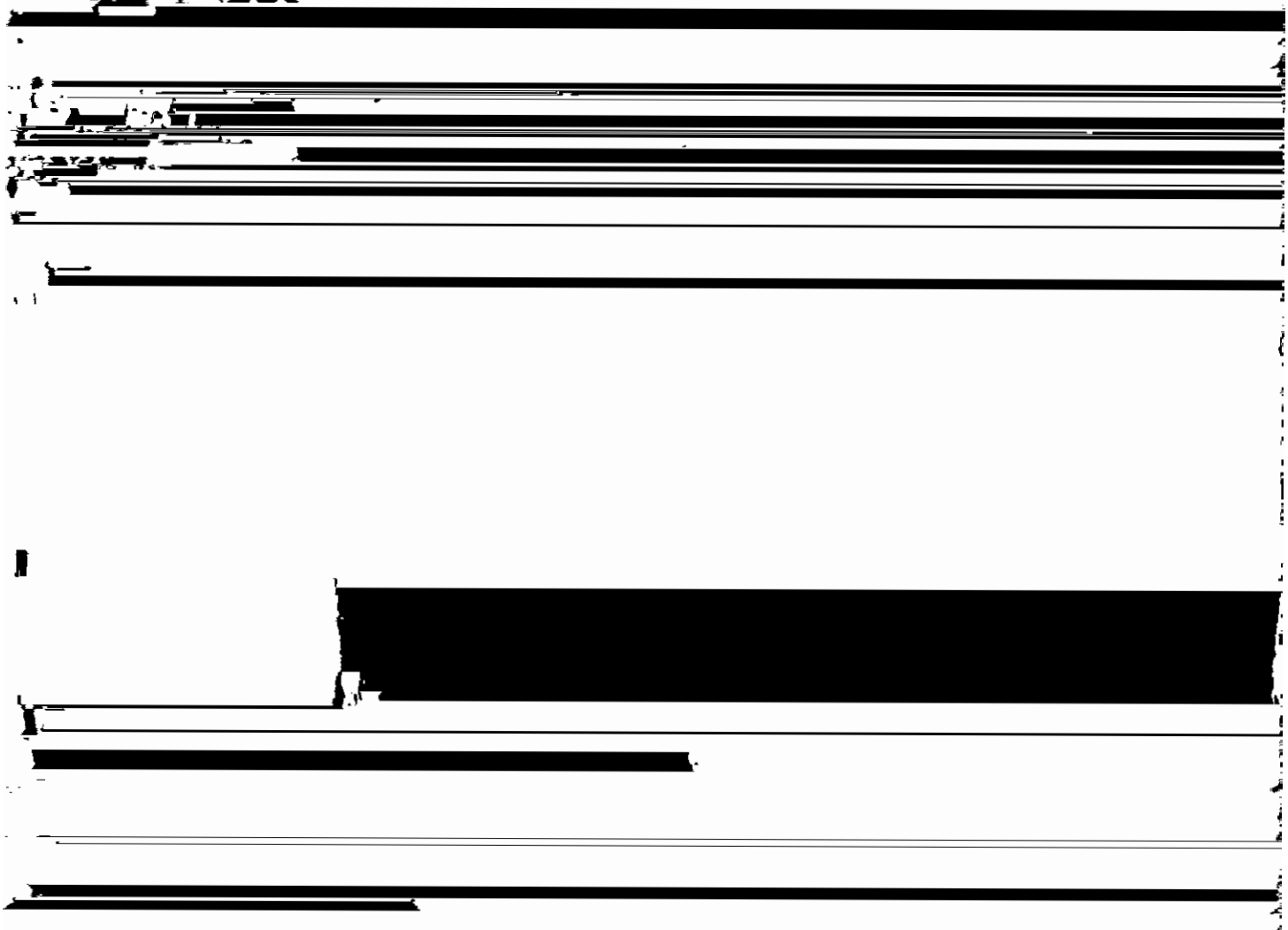
children who went directly to first grade. For example, Kilby (1982)

eligible students across three separate years. Initial readiness scores were used to make covariance adjustments. There were no significant differences between the groups on achievement measures at the end of first grade, second grade, or fourth grade; (tests were not available in third grade). Kilby also examined several years of test scores for a small group of junior first graders ($n = 12$) who were then completing eighth

grade. They were consistently behind in achievement compared to a representative sample of classmates in grades 4 through 8. When

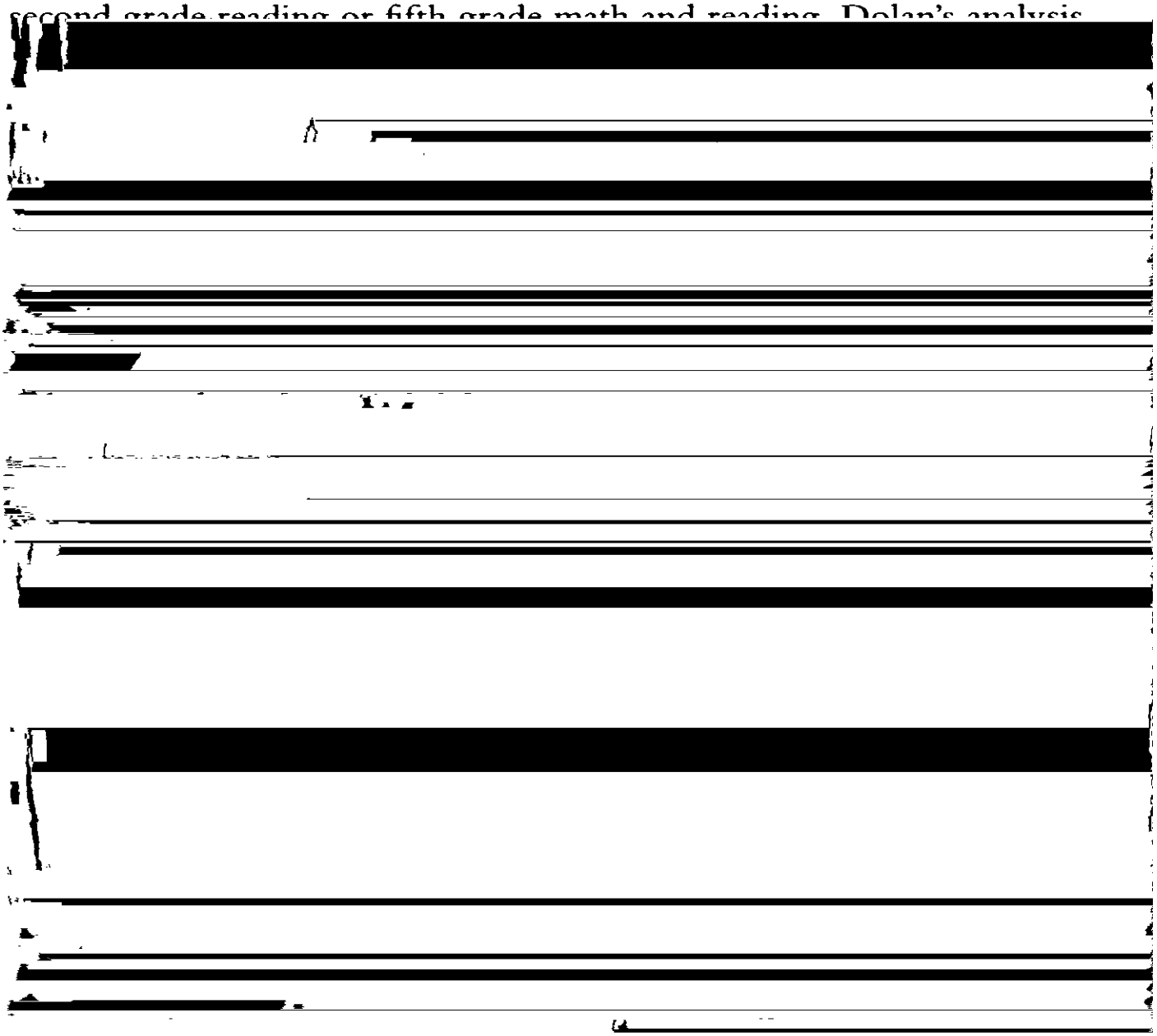
differences between these groups on achievement tests given at the end of their second, third, fourth, and sixth grade years, respectively. Similarly, Caggiano (1984) found no difference on standardized achievement measures at the end of second, fourth, and sixth grades between Gesell identified children who spent an extra year in transition room and those whose parents refused the extra year. Caggiano did, however, find statistically significant differences favoring the transition group on two of four behavioral rating scales. In contrast, the transition group had significantly more referrals to special education in subsequent years and significantly more special education placements. (The study was classified as 'no difference' because most of the outcomes showed no difference and significant findings did not consistently favor one group.)

An evaluation of transition rooms in the Kirkwood School District



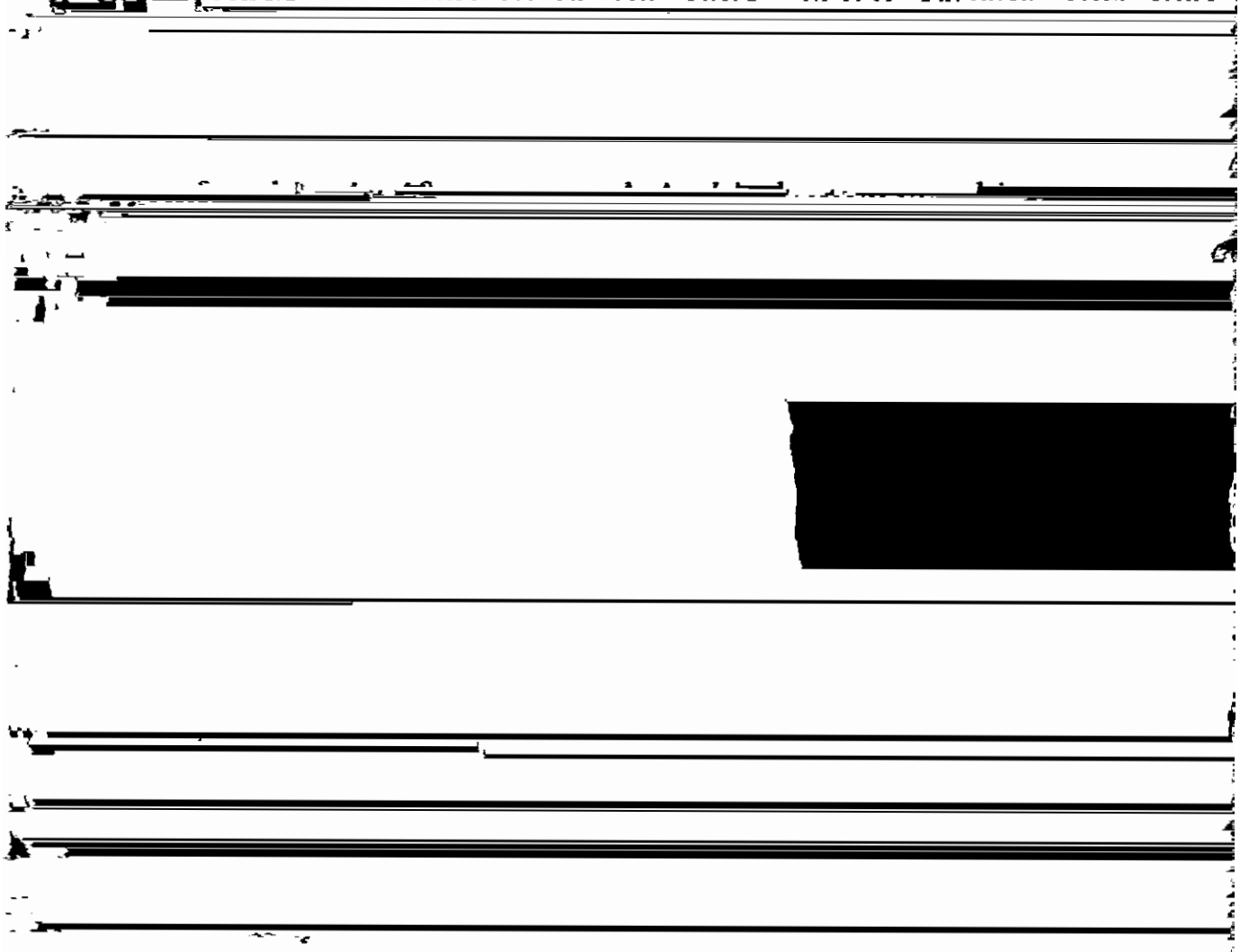
outperformed transition children. However, because the negative findings were no greater than might have been expected from the initial differences between the groups, this minimally controlled study was classified as a no difference result. Conversely, generally positive effects for transition reported by Stapleford (1982) were also treated as no

above national norms. Although covariance adjustments were used to permit some degree of control, comparative data were not provided beyond first grade. The only other positive study was reported by Dolan (1982). Dolan's study had only five or six children in the 'parent refusal' group in follow-up grades and most of the specific contrasts between transition children and the refusal group were not statistically significant. However, when significant results did obtain, they favored the transition group. For example, children who spent a year in transition subsequently had better second grade math scores and less need for special services. The groups were not significantly different in second grade reading or fifth grade math and reading. Dolan's analysis



Three studies by Hunter (1975), Sheets (1977) and Wilson and Hewett (1978) were classified as uncontrolled because transition child-

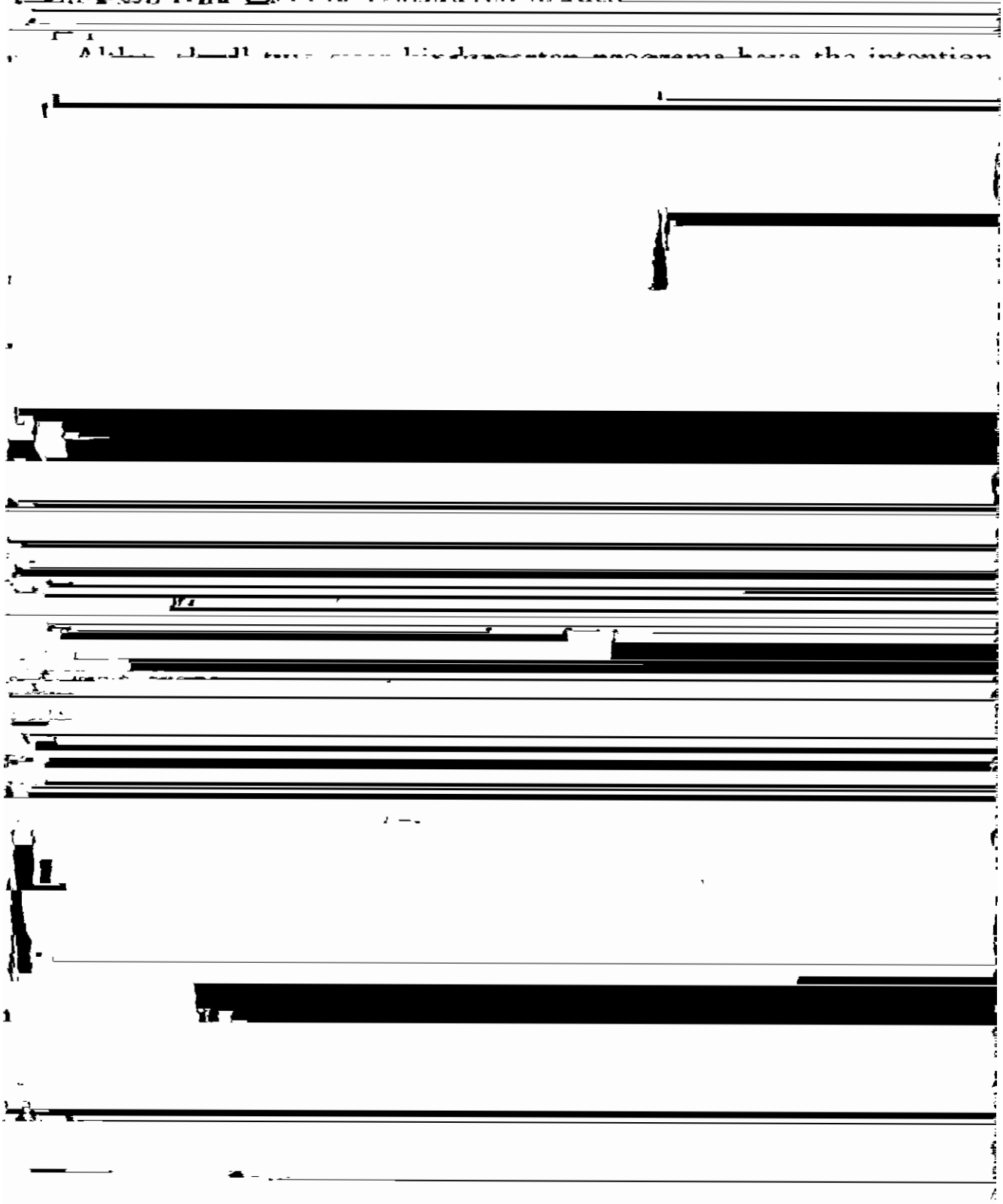
for example, a 28 percentile point gain in reading, from 1980 to 1985 during the period when development kindergartens had been implemented. The authors noted that 'the gift of time provided by developmental placement *appears* to be the only altered variable that may



scores during the five-year span' (p. 3). A careful reading of their data,

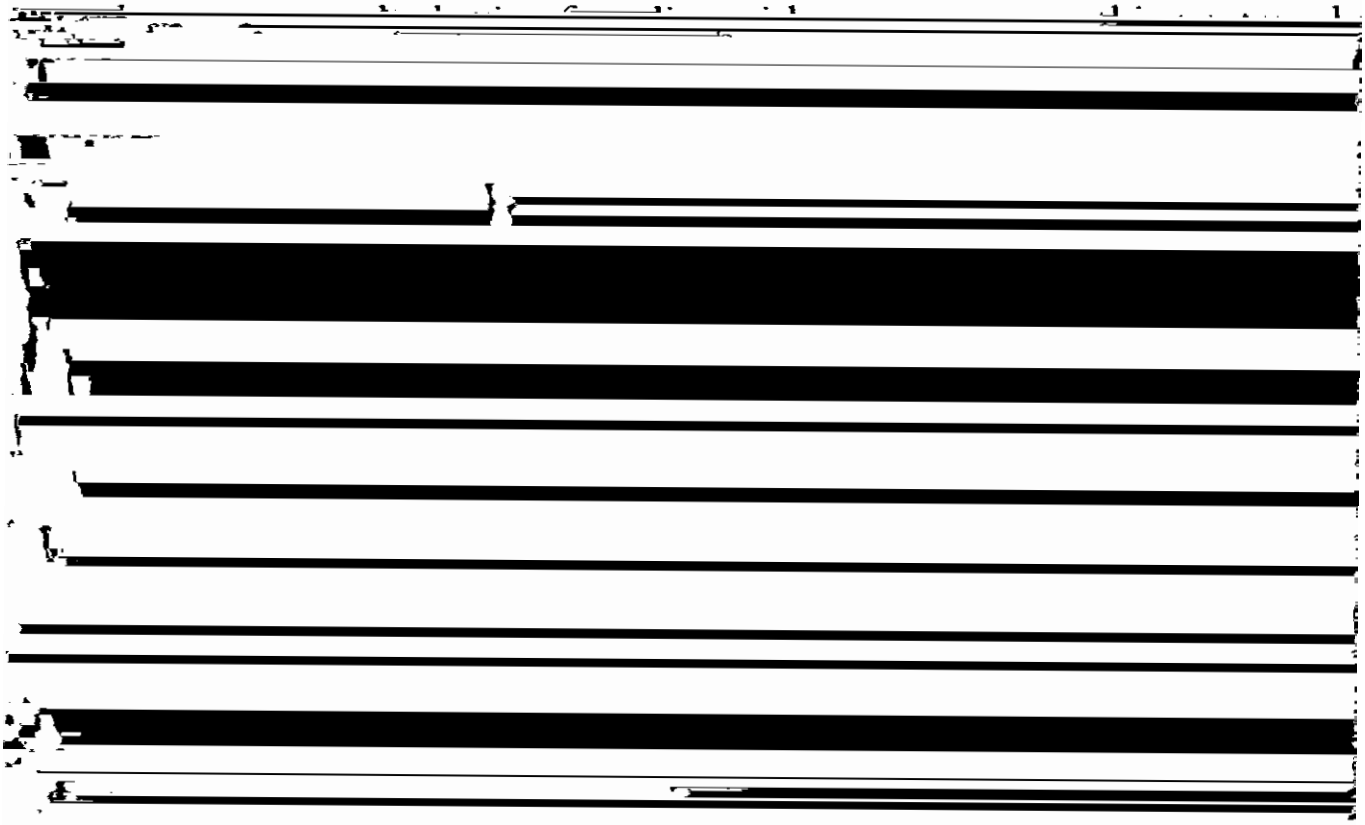
however, reveals that schools without developmental programs gained an average of 7.3 percentile points per year compared to average gains of 7.7 points per year in schools where the program had been in place for two or three years, suggesting that scores were going up regardless of the special program. Furthermore, the average reading scores then dropped by 25 percentile points from 1985 to 1987. A study reported by Ford (1985) had no control group but compared readiness scores for transition participants at the end of their transition year to their own

spurious results in favor of the transition program. Each of these population issues will be considered in turn.

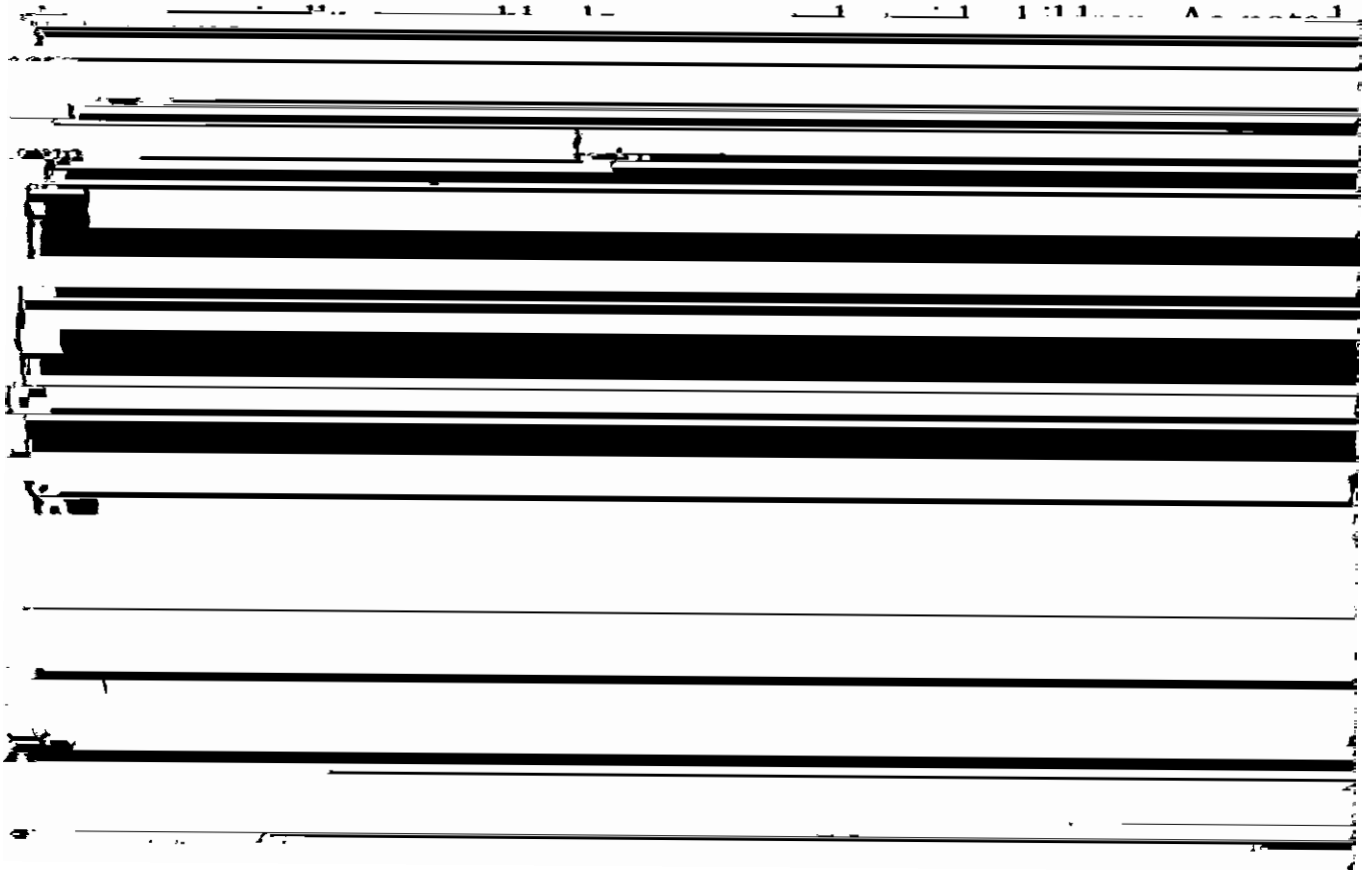


times sharp philosophical differences about the definition of readiness and the selection of children who might benefit from an extra year. At one extreme, transition rooms are seen as a pre-special education intervention and are intended for children with poor academic prog-

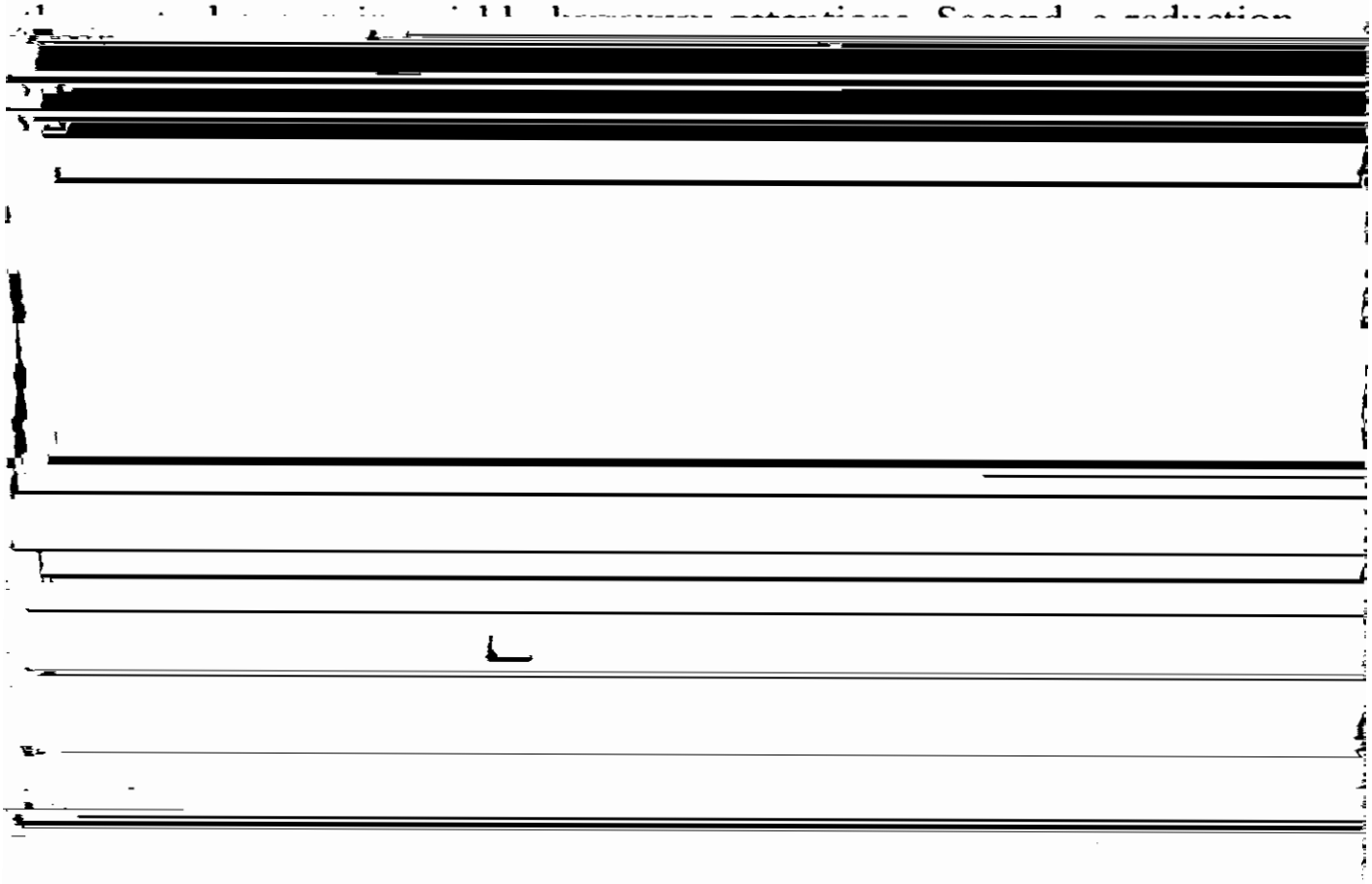
decision to promote these children implies that their characteristics were not as severe as those for the retained group. From what we can



is not necessarily an accurate depiction in the case of kindergarten retention. The reverse is more likely true; i.e., transition children might



A final methodological issue concerns the use of subsequent grade retention as an outcome measure to judge the benefit of extra-year placements. Because kindergarten retention is intended to prevent failure later on, researchers are led naturally to count subsequent retentions (the fewer the better) as a quantification of program benefits. Such data are spurious, however, for two reasons. First, in studies where comparisons are made between later retentions for control and kindergarten retainees, kindergarten retentions are not counted, thus



in future retentions is an artifact of implicit policies against 'double retentions'.

Consider, for example, the findings reported by Kilby (1982). When two sets of junior first grade participants and non-attending controls were followed up through second and fourth grades, respectively, only two of eighty-two program participants had been retained subsequently and none had been retained twice. On the other hand, eight of thirty non-attending candidates (27 per cent) were later retained and four (13 per cent) were retained twice. If kindergarten retentions had been counted, however, the rates of single retentions would have been 98 per cent for junior first graders versus 27 per cent

the other the oldest in his class, teachers are likely to retain the youngest boy but promote the oldest.

Achievement data obtained in conjunction with the study reported in chapter 5 further corroborate the disassociation between actual achievement and retention decisions for previously retained children. In the study reported by Shepard and Smith (1987) kindergarten retainees were compared at the end of first grade to an equally [redacted]

five sets of scales reflecting both academic success and [redacted]

as unready children who refused the special placement. Academically able but immature children who repeat kindergarten may well be at the top of their first grade class but are not ahead of where they would have

JONES, R. R. (1985) 'The effects of

toral dissertation, University of Oregon.
TURLEY, C. C. (1979) 'A study of elementary school children for whom a

Chapter 5: Academic and Emotional Effects of Kindergarten Retention in One School District[1]

Lorrie A. Shepard and Mary Lee Smith

Editors' Introduction

In a climate of extreme opinions, for and against repeating kindergarten, it is unlikely that dry, summarized research findings will be persuasive to those who hold contrary opinions. There is always the thought that somehow the groups were inappropriately selected or the outcome measures too narrowly focused to grant credence to the findings. Chapter 5 presents an in-depth study of kindergarten retention in one school district, intended to give flesh to the research reviewed in chapter 4. In a single study it is possible to describe methods in greater detail thus enabling the reader to examine critically the integrity of study conclusions.

The research reported here also had the benefit of issues raised by previous studies. The question as to whether children were placed in [illegible]

scales, how parents can hold simultaneously both positive and negative feelings about program effects.

'time clocks tick slower?' Will they have a happier and more successful first-grade experience for having waited? Or, as some parents fear, is staying back in kindergarten simply a case of 'flunking', just like repeating any other grade? This chapter presents detailed results of a comparative study undertaken as part of a policy analysis for a Colorado school district (Shepard and Smith, 1985). The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effects of kindergarten retention. Were the

retained children more successful academically than they would have

Sample Characteristics

Elementary schools within the district differed markedly in the percentage of children spending two years before first grade, from 0 to 25 per cent. In some schools as many as 38 per cent of kindergartners were recommended to repeat. The 'high-retaining schools' were not of one particular type or location, i.e., they were spread throughout the district and served both higher and lower socioeconomic neighborhoods.

Because the schools were so different in retention rates, the present study did not have to rely on the questionable practice of selecting control (promoted) subjects from the same school as the retained children. Thus we could avoid the threat that control children were systematically more or less able. Instead, more comparable subjects

Table 1: Characteristics of High-Retaining and Matched Control, Low-Retaining Schools (in Matched Pairs)

	High-retaining schools	Low-retaining schools	
	School A	*School (a)*	*School (e1)*
n*	559	225	477
FRL**	13%	14%	3%
CTBS***	5.0/4.9	5.1/5.0	5.0/4.8
% R in K****	16%	0%	2%
	School B	*School (b)*	
n	590	607	
FRL	7%	24%	
CTBS	5.0/4.7	4.2/4.2	
% R in K	20%	4%	
	School C	*School (c)*	*School (e2)*
n	593	483	302
FRL	3%	16%	8%
CTBS	4.4/4.4	4.5/4.5	4.9/5.0
	School D	*School (d)*	
n	520	415	
FRL	37%	38%	
CTBS	4.2/4.1	4.0/3.6	
	high ESL pop.	high ESL pop.	
% R in K	19%	3%	

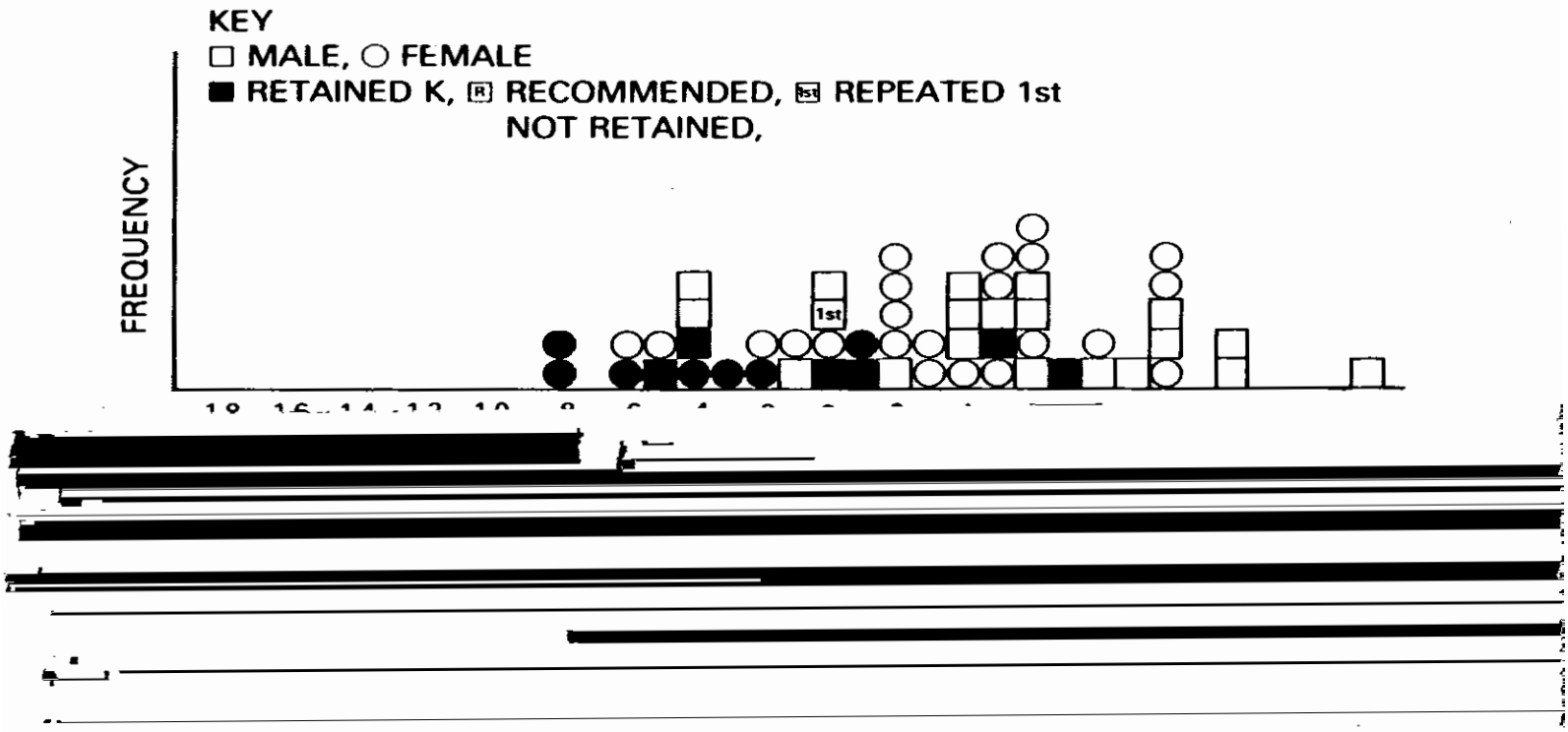
* K-6 enrollment

** % of school population receiving free or reduced lunch (FRL)

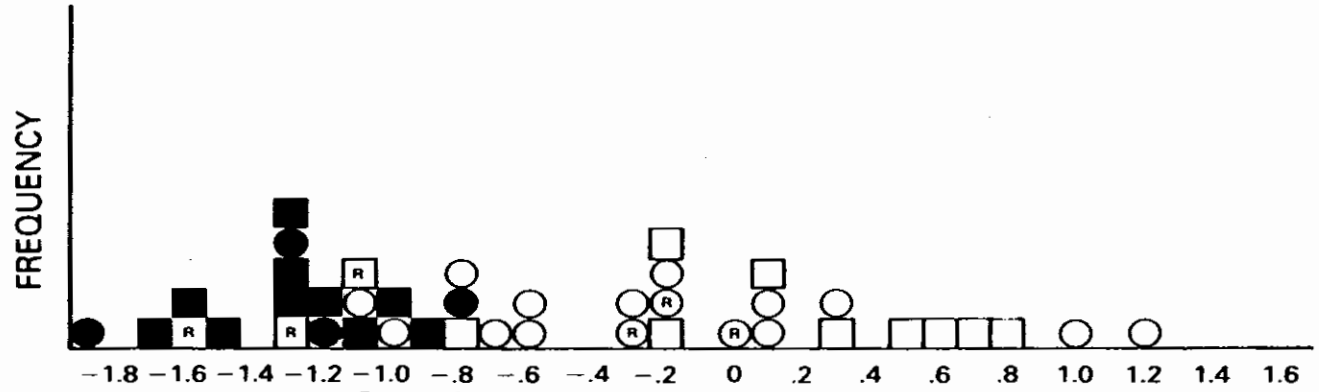
*** Third grade CTBS school means in grade equivalent units for total battery and/or 'expected' grade equivalent based on short form aptitude tests

**** % retained in kindergarten, based on 1982/83 data in all schools except school (e2) where the rate reported is for 1981/82

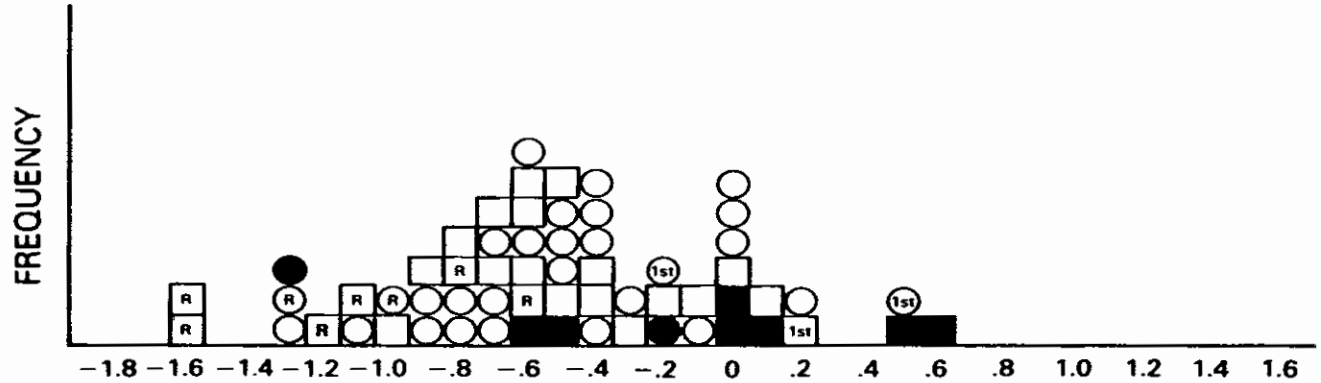
served as an alternate



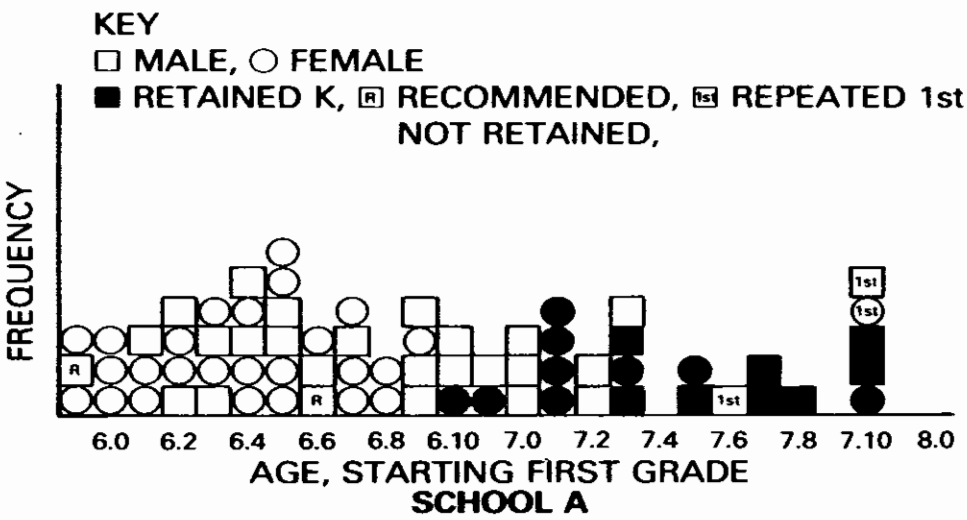
STANDARDIZED SANTA CLARA SCORE
SCHOOL A

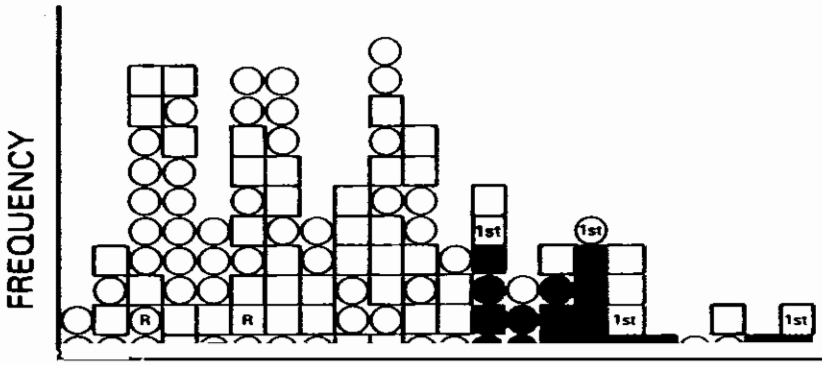


STANDARDIZED SANTA CLARA SCORE
SCHOOL B



STANDARDIZED SANTA CLARA SCORE





AGE, STARTING FIRST GRADE
SCHOOL B

parents of the least ready children had not, the practice of kindergarten retention in this school had greatly increased the heterogeneity of the first-grade class. Children who were average or above on readiness measures when they came to school then spent an extra year in kindergarten and were 7 years old when they entered first grade. These already advantaged children were then in the same class with just barely 6-year-olds who had been the lowest scorers on readiness measures. If what occurred in school C were to generalize to other school districts then parent choice as well as teacher selection criteria might explain the occasions where transition children are more able than the parent-refusal control group (chapter 4 in this volume).

In the second stage of sampling, a matched-control child was

school or schools. Retained and control children were matched on sex, birthday, SES factors, and entry Santa Clara scores. In creating the

for combining separate item responses, a scoring procedure had to be devised for the purposes of this study. Separate sub-test scores were computed for each child as the sum of the item scores. Then, based on sampled schools, means and standard deviations were calculated for each sub-test. These statistics could then be used to determine each child's standard score on each sub-test. Finally, each child received a total Santa Clara score that was the average of his or her separate z scores. These total or composite scores were used to match children who started school with the same level of academic readiness. Of the forty matched cases, twenty-three were matched on initial Santa Clara scores with z-score differences of less than .2; an additional six pairs had z differences between .2 and .3. The remaining eleven matched pairs were noted to favor one group or the other on z scores and were excluded

5 = top group (the five top children in this class). The purpose of having teachers rate all these first graders and not merely those involved in the study was not only to ensure true relative comparisons but to control for reactivity and the instrumentation threat to internal validity. The

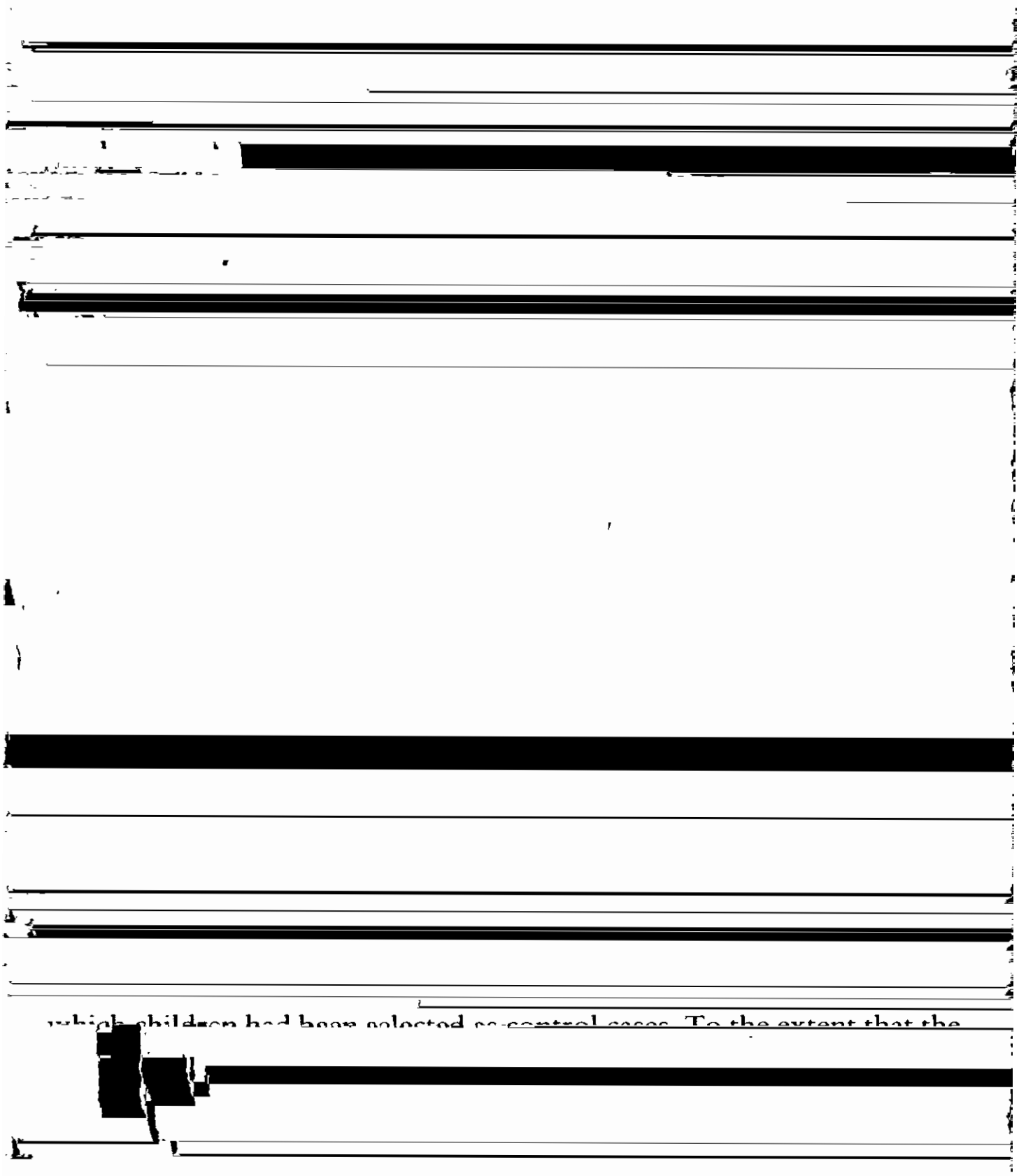
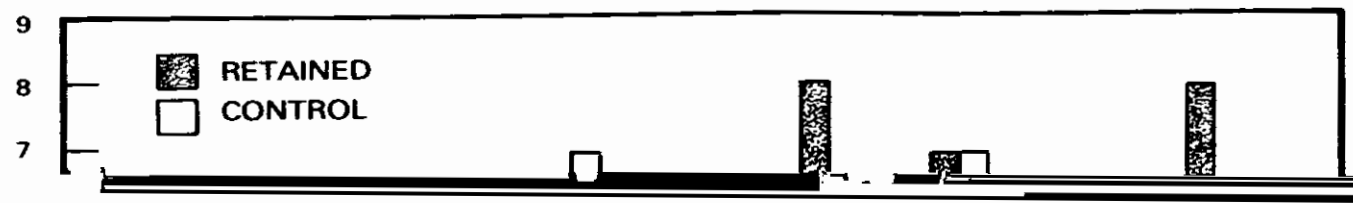


Table 2: First Grade Outrcome Measures for Previously Retained Children and Matched Controls

[redacted]

	[illegible] (in kindergarten)			[illegible]		
	$\bar{X}$	*s*	*n*	$\bar{X}$	*s*	*n*
Teacher Ratings						
(Compared to classmates,						
1 = lowest group, 5 = highest group)						
Reading	2.65	1.31	40	2.50	1.32	40
Math	2.80	1.29	40	2.68	1.33	40
Social Maturity	2.83	1.15	40	2.65	1.29	40
Learner Self-Concept	2.90	1.30	40	2.55	1.20	40
Attention	2.73	1.20	40	2.63	1.35	40
[redacted]						
CTBS Reading						
Raw Score	69.85	9.78	40	64.55	12.96	40
National percentile	63rd			56th		
Grade eqivalent	1.9			1.8		
CTBS Math						
Raw Score	44.65	8.94	40	45.93	7.50	40
National percentile	78th			81st		
Grade equivalent	2.2			2.3		

matching on the stability and magnitude of effects. The concern about the size of the differences is addressed using the more appropriate metric [redacted] of effect sizes. Effect sizes are defined as the difference between the experimental and control (retained minus control) in standard deviation units, i.e., divided by the pooled standard deviation (Glass, McGaw, and Smith, 1981). For the CTBS scores we had the benefit of national [redacted]

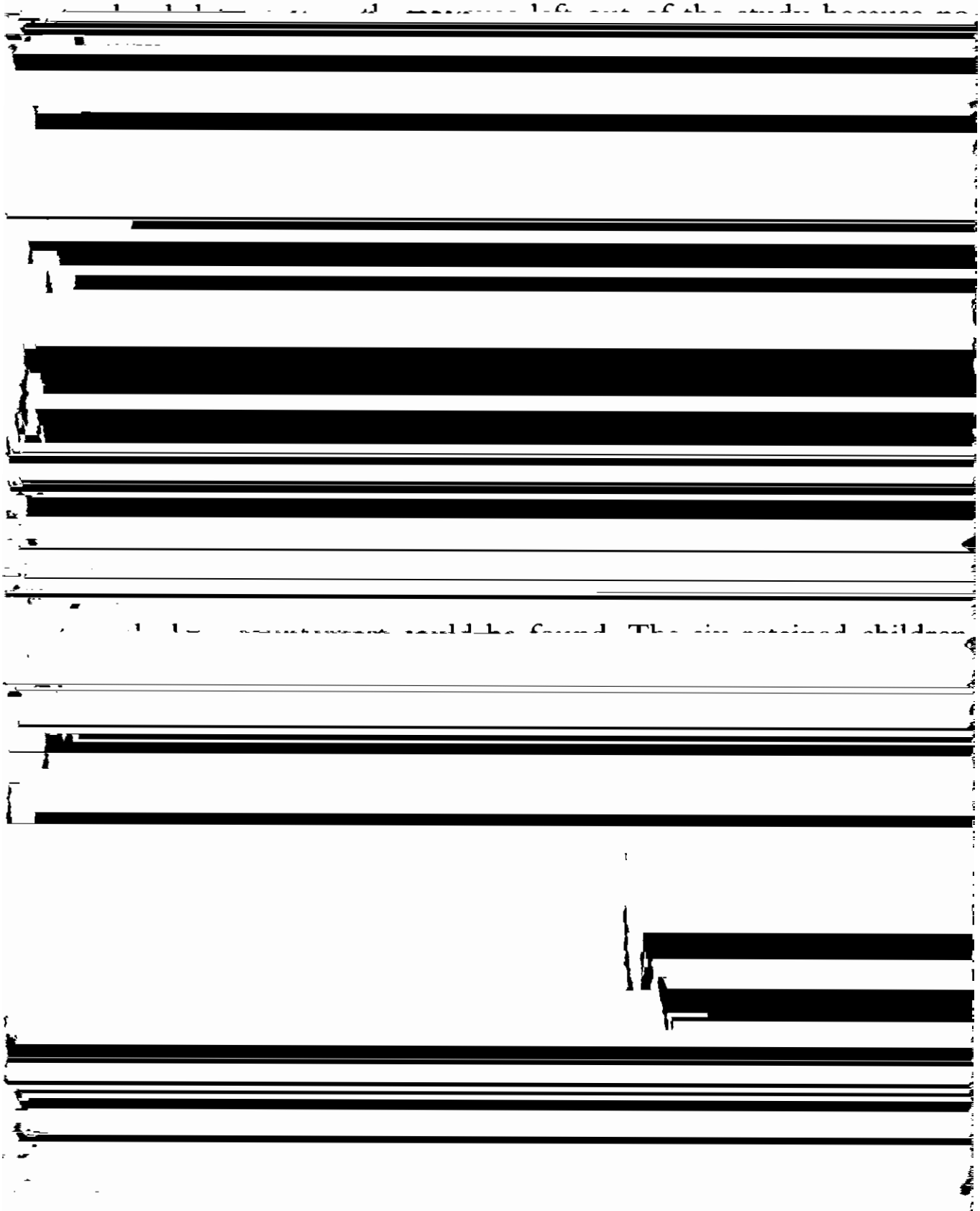

9
8
7
RETAINED
CONTROL

before first grade did not raise academic performance in comparison to classmates. As rated by first grade teachers, there was no harm to self-concept for the retained group in comparison to the control group. Interestingly, the retained group was not better off after an additional year in terms of social maturity or attention to school work. The claims

followed to third grade. The youngness effect also disappears by about third grade (*ibid.*). Thus, the lack of benefit from waiting a year is not

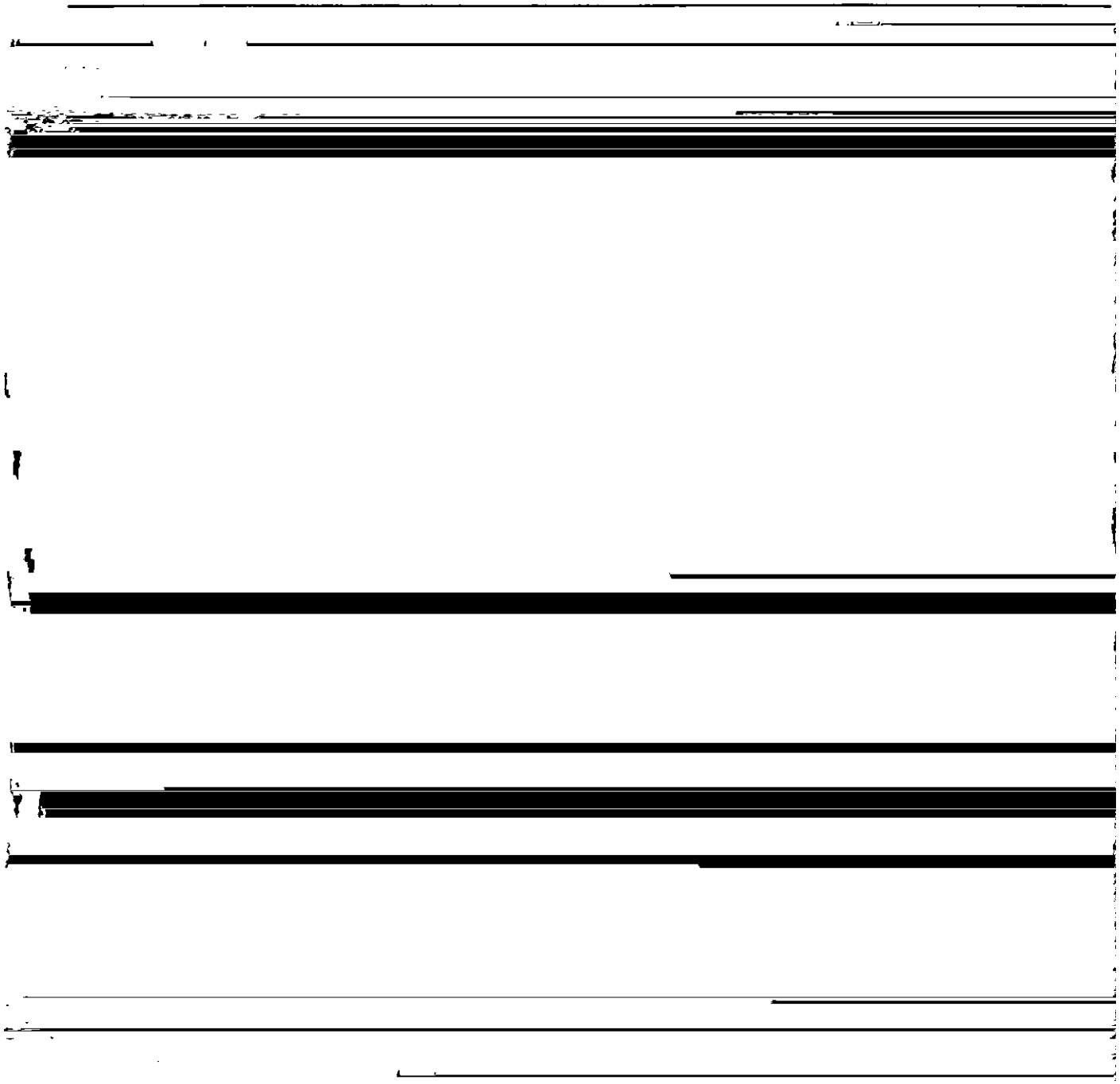
Even careful matching does not preclude regression artifacts when the treated and control groups are chosen from different populations or different regions of a distribution. In traditional grade retention research, control groups are likely to be systematically more able, thus potentially masking outcomes favorable to retention (Jackson, 1975). Conversely, several studies of kindergarten retention reviewed in chapter 4 placed more able groups in extra-year programs than the at-risk group who were promoted to first grade and served as controls.

six cases (four from school A) prior to matching because of missing



with missing entry data had mean first grade CTBS scores of 72.5 and 45.7 in reading and math, respectively. These values are slightly above the total retained group means (see table 2) but are the same as school A

Table 3: Quantitative Ratings from Parent Interviews



subjects?' (Doing extremely well = 5; Having serious difficulty = 1)

	Retained	*At Risk Not Retained*	*Recommended Not Retained*	*First Grade Retained*
$\bar{X}$	3.38	3.43	3.46	3.14
s	.82	.42	.52	1.07
$s_{\bar{x}}$	.15	.08	.16	.40
n	29	28	10	7

'How would you describe his attitude toward school?' (Very positive, loves school = 5; Has a very negative attitude toward school = 1)

	Retained	*At Risk Not Retained*	*Recommended Not Retained*	*First Grade Retained*
$\bar{X}$	3.93	4.50	4.36	4.14
s	1.14	.75	.81	.90

Responses describing the effects of retention were coded whether they occurred in response to standard questions or incidentally in answer to other questions.

parents were an extra year to mature, an academic advantage or 'boost', and more self-confidence.

At the same time that a very large majority of parents expressed an overall positive effect of retention, an equally large proportion reported on negative experiences that had been a part of retention for their child

The continuum which was constructed reflected the relative salience or weight these negative occurrences seemed to have for the parents (rather than the presence or absence of negative events). For example, parents in all of the categories mentioned hurtful comments from other children or adults: but the overall tone of the responses placed in category 1 were so positive that these negative side effects seemed to have very little import. In contrast, category 4 was created expressly to represent the parents who wanted to give a positive overall vote for the

Table 4: Parent Reports of the Effects of Kindergarten Retention: A Continuum of Excerpts from Positive to Negative

[redacted]

Table 4 (Continued)

and he learns. That's the important thing, and I think that's what going to two years of kindergarten did.

that she's a real tall girl. She probably was one of the biggest in the first kindergarten

than the other kids.

Table 4 (Continued)

month or two of the second year. The kids he went to kindergarten with who went on to first grade made life miserable. Unfortunately, there are about five of them in the neighborhood. We tried to help him cope with it and by about December, it was just assumed in the neighborhood that he was a kindergartener and they were first grade.

[redacted]

I'll tell you the drawbacks first. I think it decreased her attention and I was upset at the [redacted] They said to hold her back and she knew everything so she

[redacted]

Table 4 (Continued)

important also. The way they explained it to me, I could understand their point, and I just thought maybe it would be best for him. I don't think [illegible]

> We were somewhat disappointed with (his progress in kindergarten). The teachers had segregated him pretty much from the rest of the kids in the class because of his age (entry age 5.3).

> They put him in this category that he was underdeveloped and that no matter what they would do he would continue that way. They structured his class around that fact. This was due to a prejudice in my opinion.

Results in table 4 should be interpreted with the understanding that the respondent group were on average somewhat favorably disposed toward the potential benefits of retention.

Concerning parents' views two years later the interview data

transition participants even though transition children had sometimes shown an initial advantage

In our study, children who had repeated kindergarten were compared at the end of first grade to matched control children who had been equally young and unready when they first began school. The retained children were, of course, one year older when measured at the end of first grade. On teacher ratings of reading and math achievement there were no differences between the groups. On CTBS math the groups

on Social-emotional Outcomes. Parents Rate Extra-year Programs Positively but Describe Negative Side Effects from Retention

Most controlled studies have not included affective outcomes. Bell

'staying back', communicated by other children and adults, are the same as in higher grades.

Note

1 Substantial portions of this chapter are reproduced with permission from Shepard, L. A. and Smith, M. L. (1987) 'Effects of kindergarten retention at

Chapter 6: Attitudes of Students, Parents, and Educators toward Repeating a Grade[1]

Deborah A. Byrnes

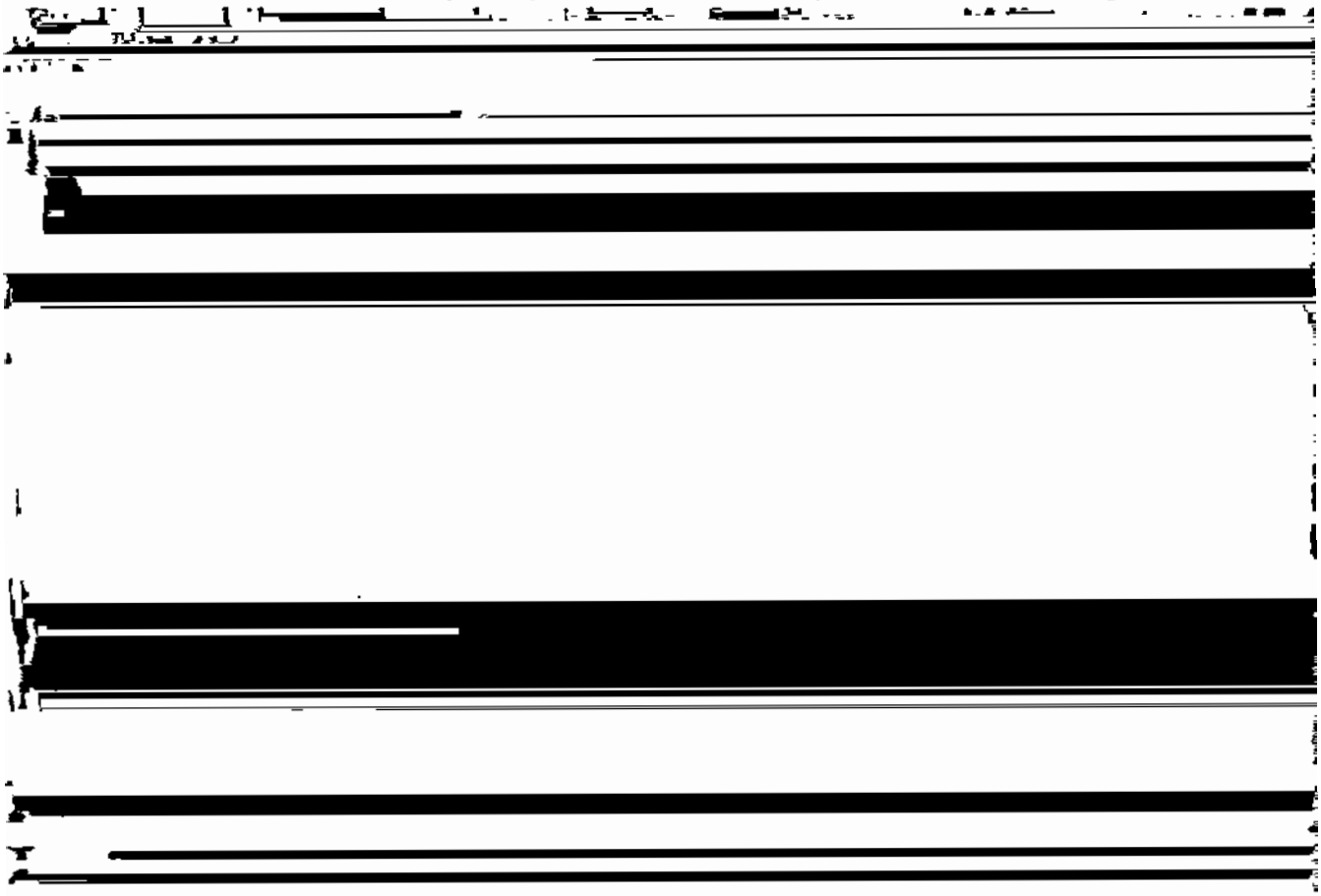
Editors' Introduction

This chapter marks the divide in the book between research on the consequences of retention and research about practice. Byrnes provides both types of data and draws the contrast between beliefs about retention and its verified effects.

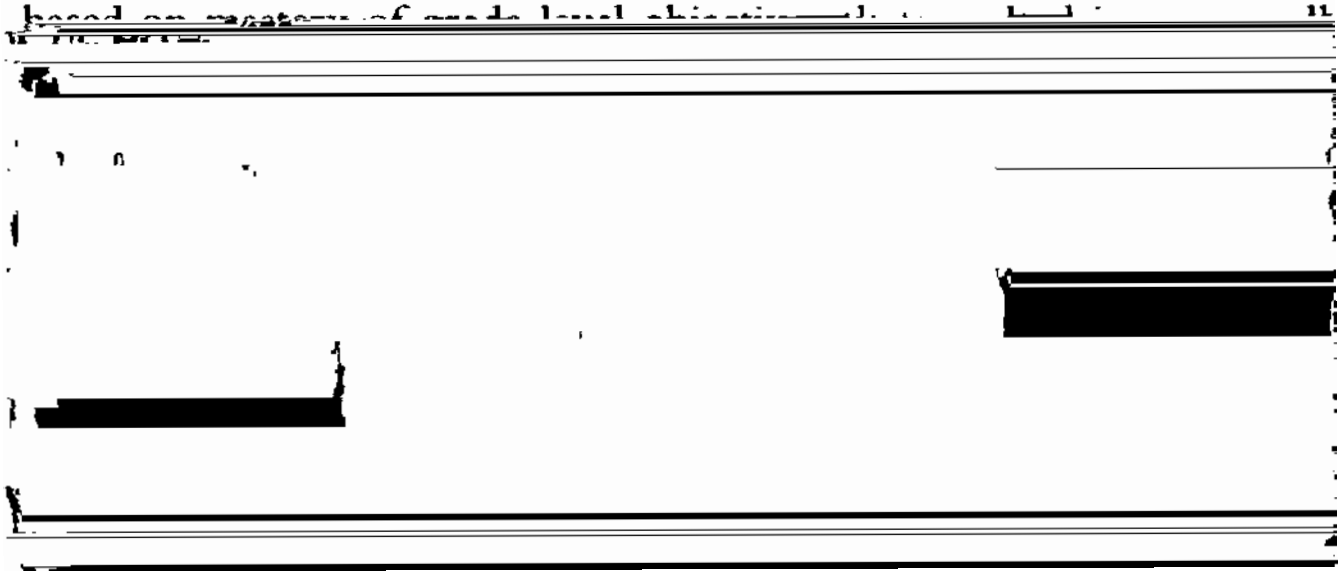
Parent, teacher and principal opinions about the advisability of retention

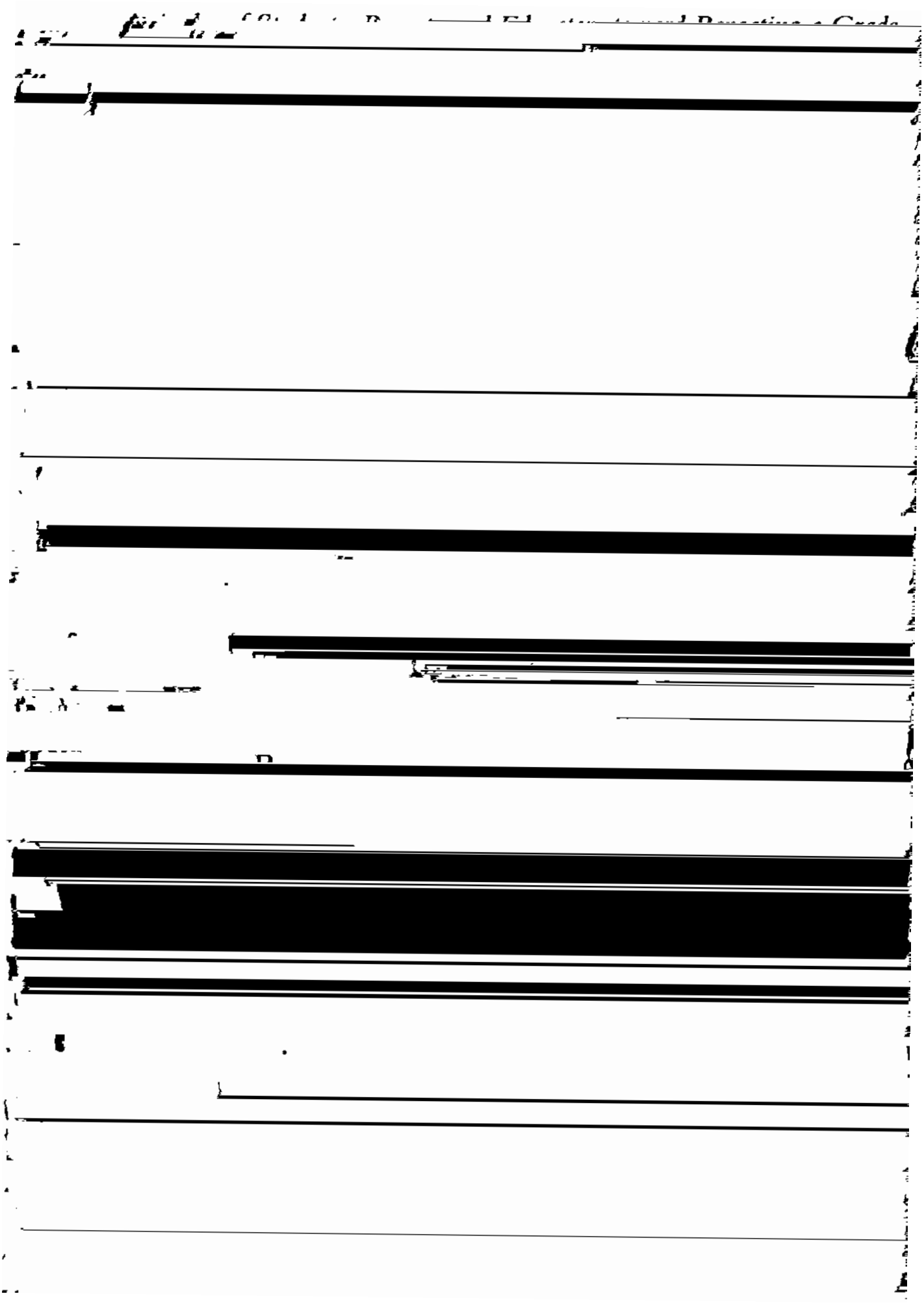
pupil achievement, it is important to understand the meaning of this experience for children and to look more closely at how parents, teachers and principals view the use of retention.

repetition given to parents, teachers and principals; and personal interviews with non-promoted children and their teachers. Both parts of the study were conducted in a school district of 26,000 elementary students in a large southwestern US border city. This district is composed of two quite diverse communities separated for the most part by a freeway. On one side of the freeway the community is middle to low SES with the majority of families speaking both Spanish and

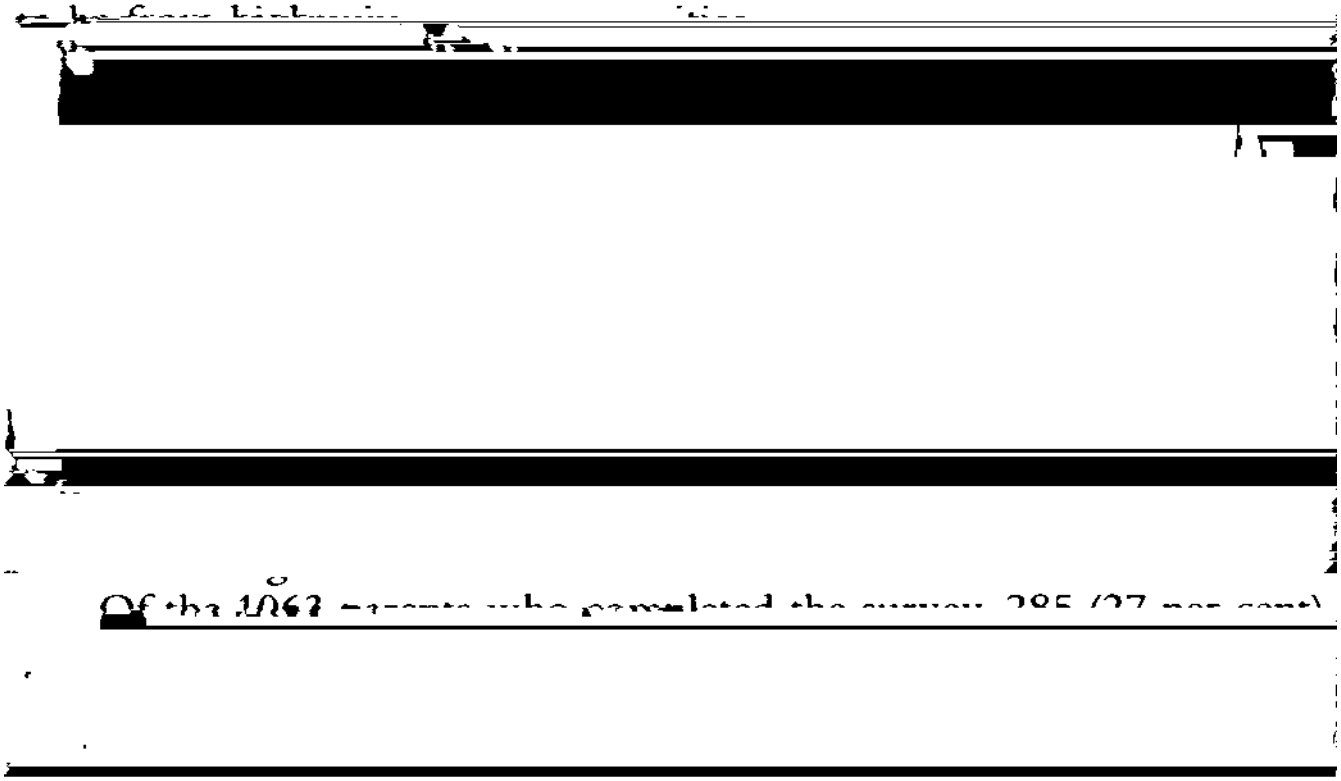


with fewer bilingual families. The school district in which the study took place had recently implemented a strict non-promotion policy





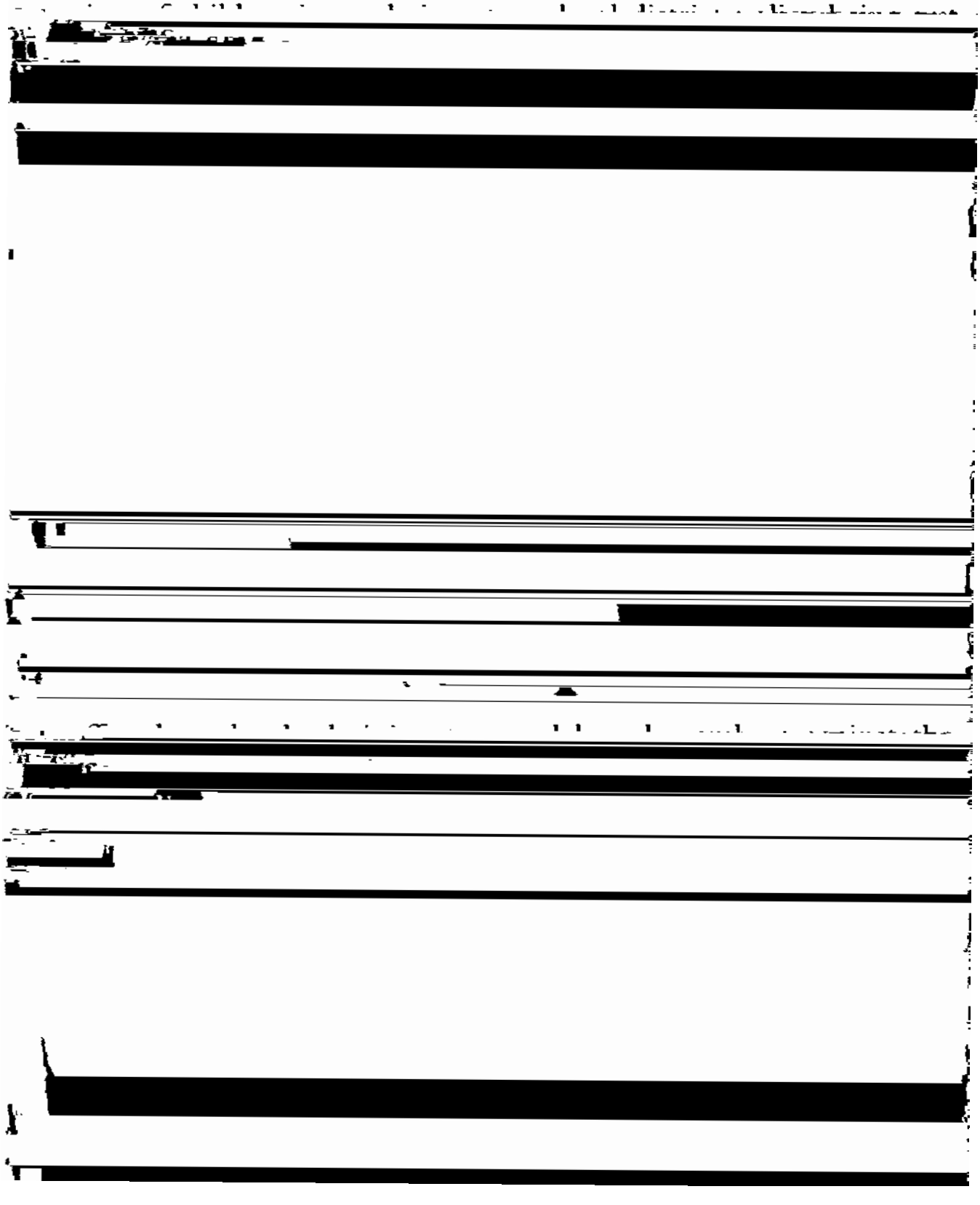
to retain. A fairly large percentage of parents (20 per cent), in contrast to principals (3 per cent) and teachers (3 per cent), felt the parent should have the final say. Parents who felt they should have the final say tended



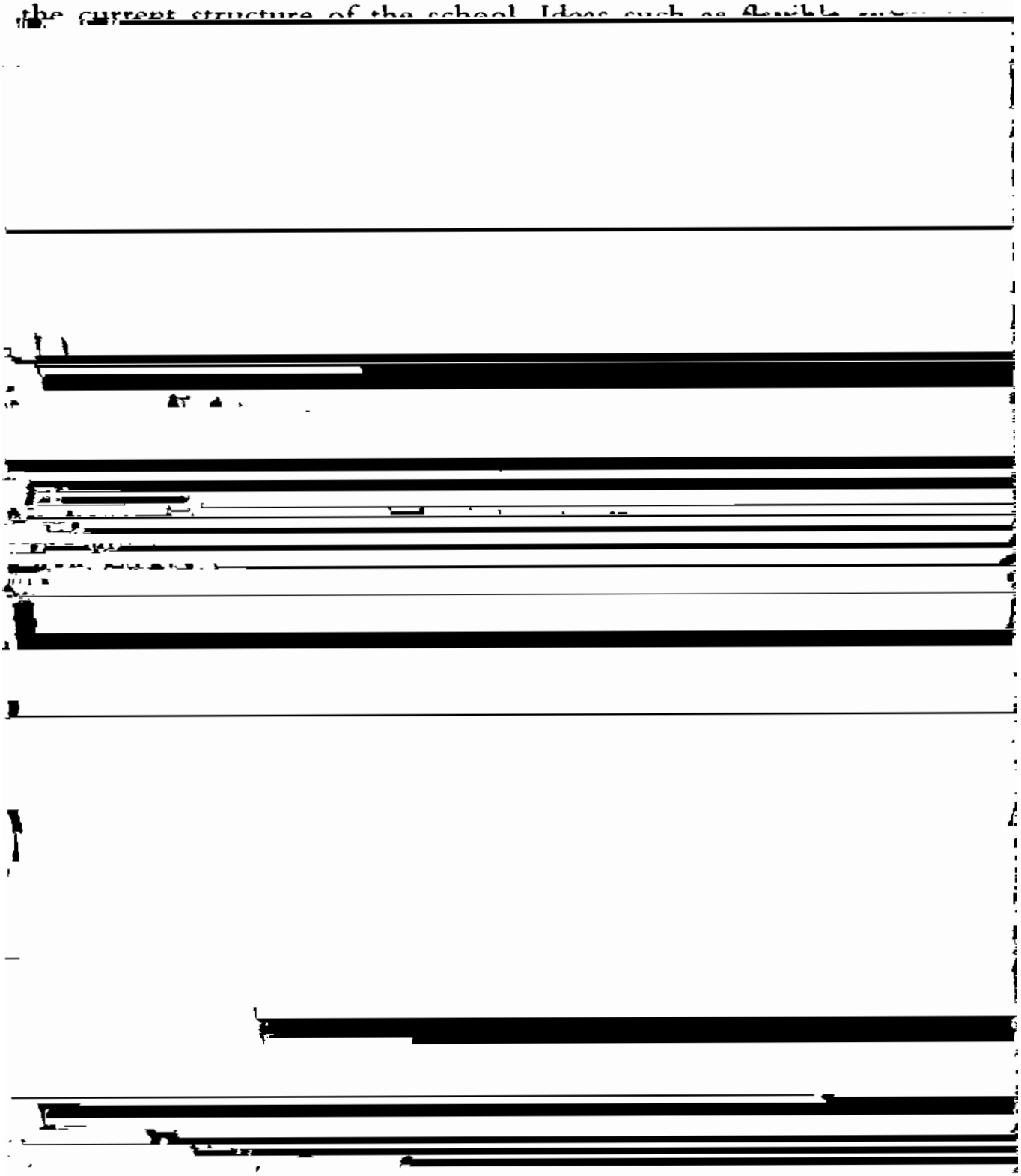
Of the 1062 parents who completed the survey, 285 (27 per cent)

Discussion of Survey Findings

Research findings indicate that repeating a grade does not improve a student's subsequent performance. Yet the majority of parents, teachers and principals in this school district felt that students should be retained if they do not meet grade level expectations. It is apparent that the



However, those options chosen most frequently, smaller classes with more individualized instruction, and increased remedial instruction opportunities, are also alternatives which are the least threatening to the current structure of the school. Ideas such as flexible



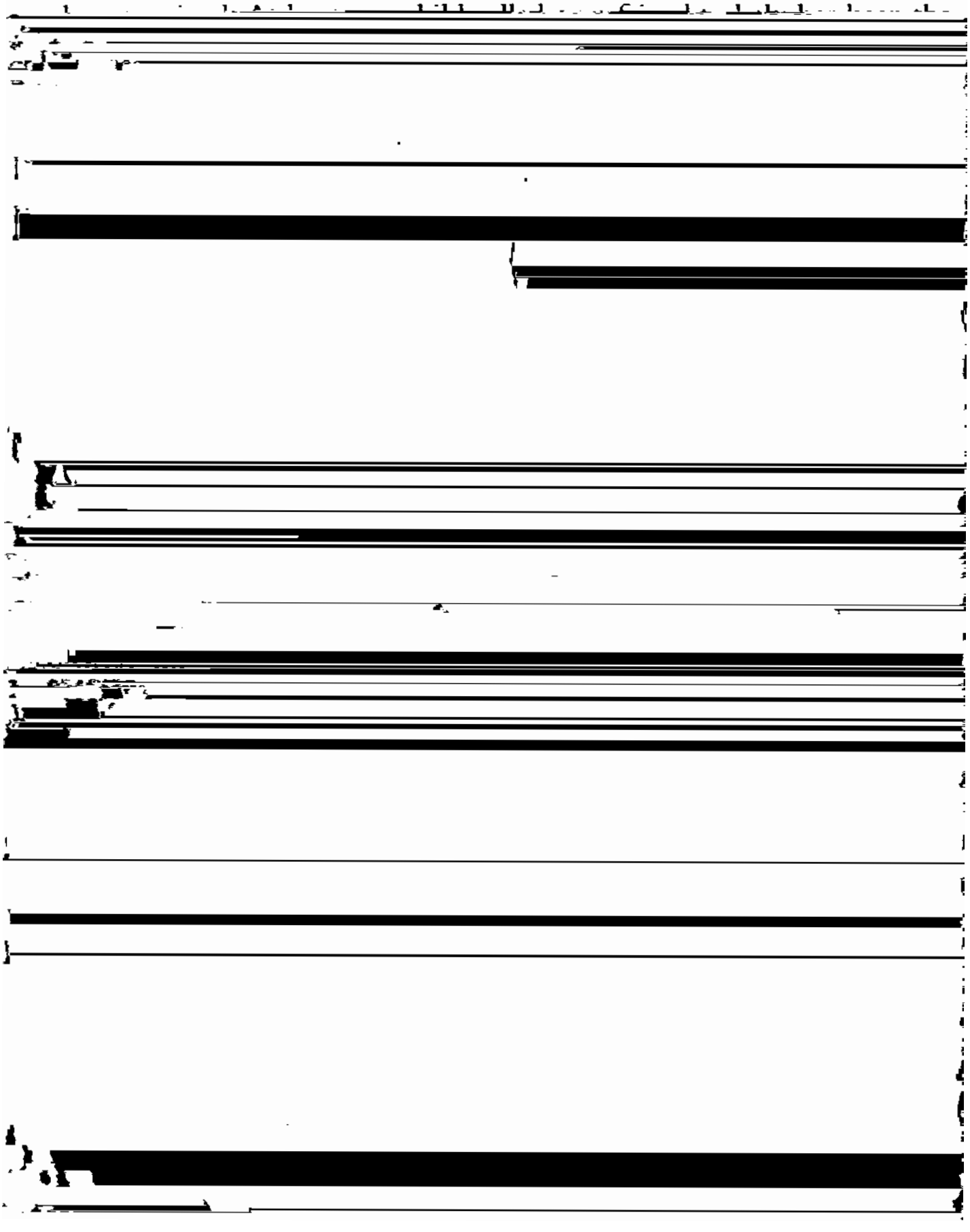
ture, which involve a greater change in the structure of the school, were not supported by the majority of the teachers and principals.

Views of Children

All students were introduced to the topic of retention in the following way: 'Some students who need more time to learn spend another year in the same grade. Have you or any of the students in your class ever had that happen?' (Interestingly, despite the efforts of the researcher and her assistant to stay away from any negative labeling of the retention experience, it was at this point that many of the children automatically referred to the experience as 'flunking'.) Of the seventy-one children who were repeating a grade, 73 per cent named themselves. Interestingly, only 57 per cent of the retained girls included themselves, whereas 81 per cent of the boys named themselves. First grade girls in particular were the most likely children not to admit they had been retained, even after the question was clarified or repeated.

Most of the children who did not name themselves did, however,

had written. It became evident from responses such as the above that many of these children did not feel comfortable admitting that they had

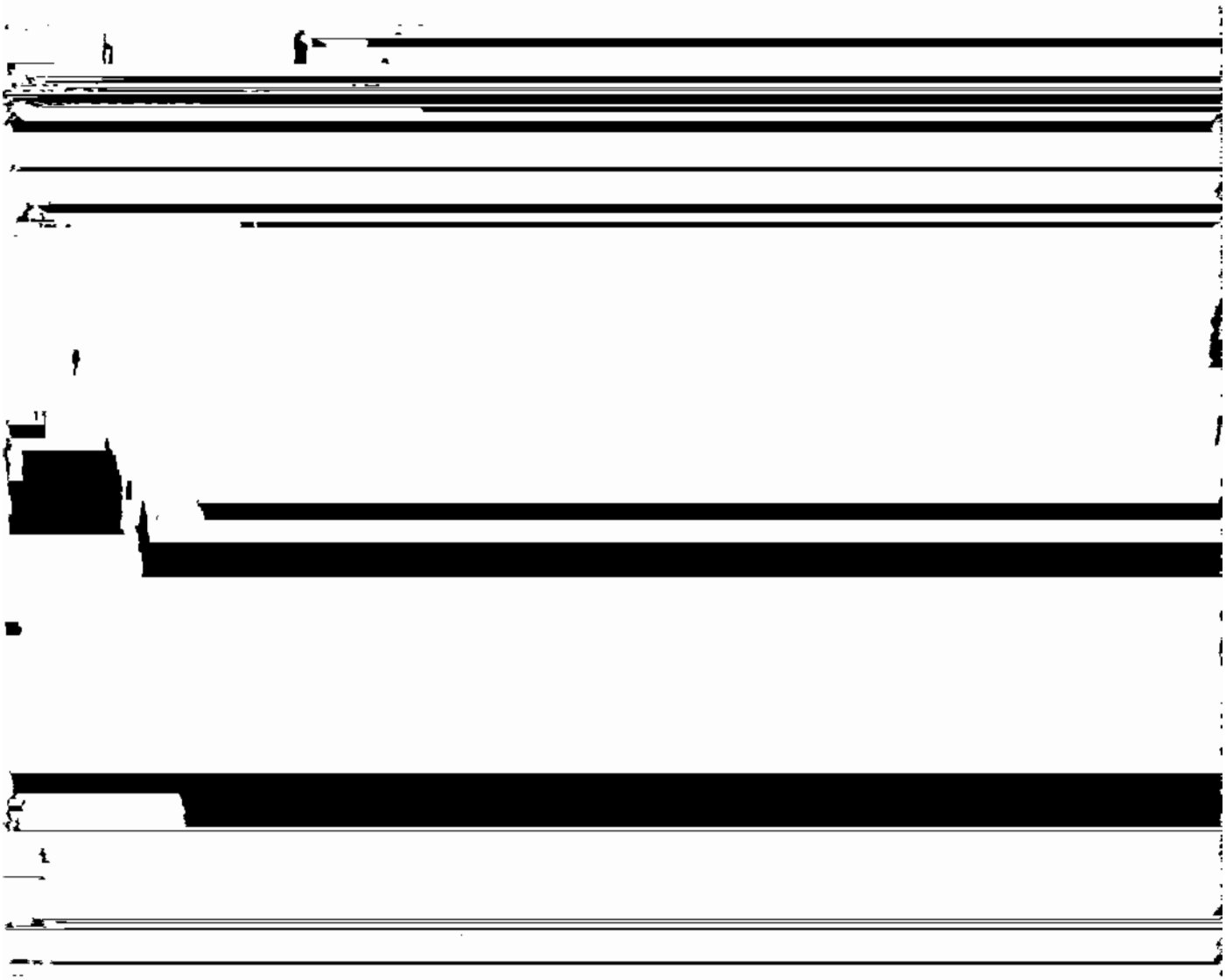


'happy' to stay in first because 'I can learn more'. In response to whether she should have been retained she replied, 'yes'. It is evident that several of the children who responded positively had mixed feelings about the experience. Notably, none of the nineteen (27 per cent) children who denied being retained responded positively about

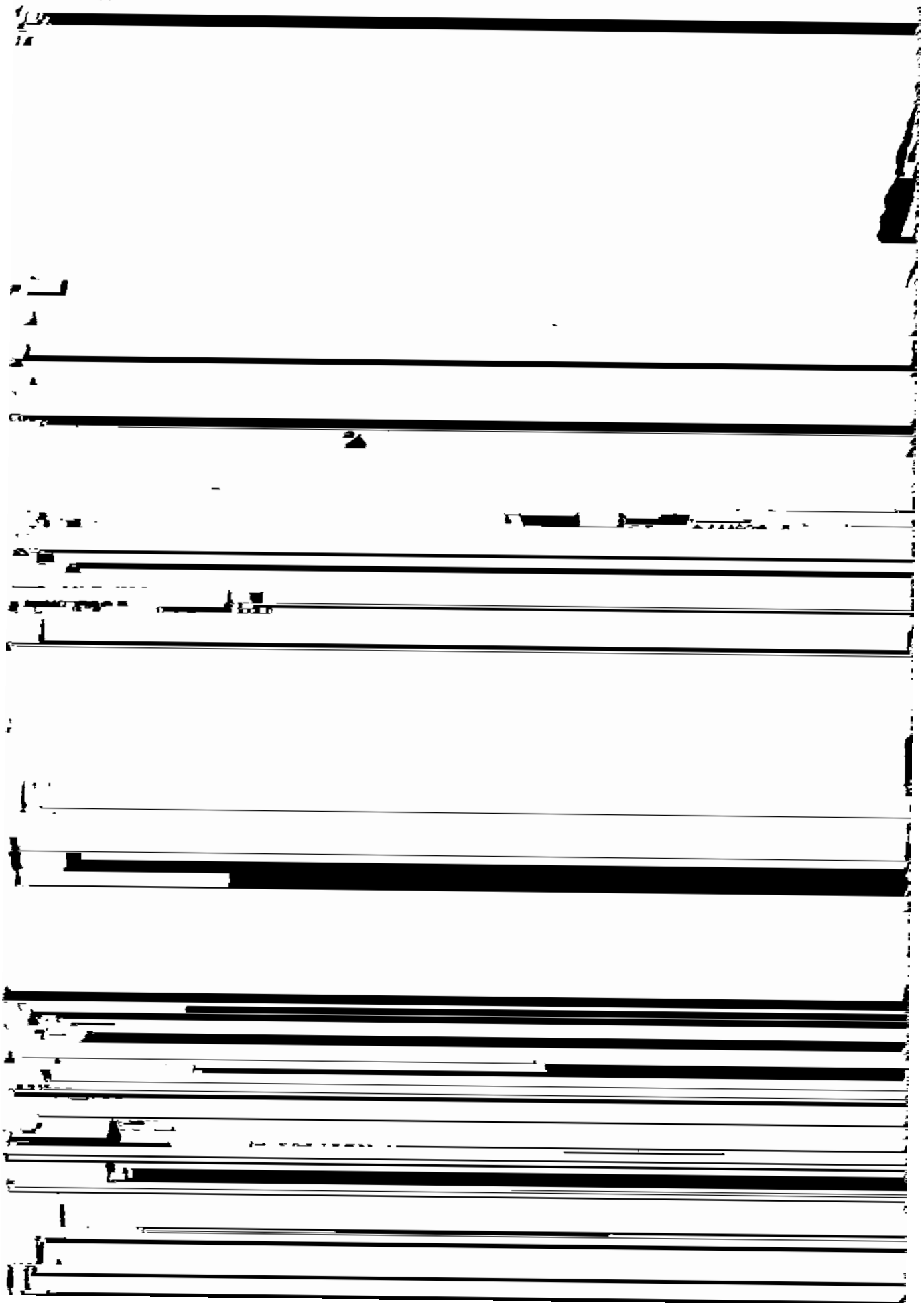
Carol [third grade]: They were okay. They hope I pass this year.

Robert [sixth grade]: They were mad. They said that I better pass cause I need a good education.

These comments may not accurately reflect what their parents' actual responses were but they do reflect how children interpreted and remembered their parents' feelings about their retention. Interestingly, children who were good students (in the top 25 per cent of their class) and children who were slated for possible retention the following year



parents feel?' was presented to them. One high achieving first grade girl



give them information at all. This point will be discussed further in the

cousin', 'thinking you do good and then flunking', and 'my sister talking about it' were also mentioned.

Most of the retained children found it difficult to think of something good about not being promoted, and a few seemed incredulous that they were even being asked. Twenty-one per cent said there was 'nothing good about it'. Fifteen per cent of the children responded with 'I don't know'. Several children felt their new friends they had made were the best part (15 per cent), while others mentioned their teachers were nice (5 per cent) or they like doing their work better this year (5 per cent). Others, representing a total of 39 per cent, said: 'I learned a lot'; 'I'm doing better'; 'Different things to do this year'; 'It taught me a lesson'; 'The work is easy'; and 'I don't get in as much trouble'.

When the non-promoted children with older or younger school-age siblings were asked if they had any brothers or sisters who had repeated grades, 76 per cent replied 'yes'. Two of these children, one with five and the other with six siblings, said everyone in their family

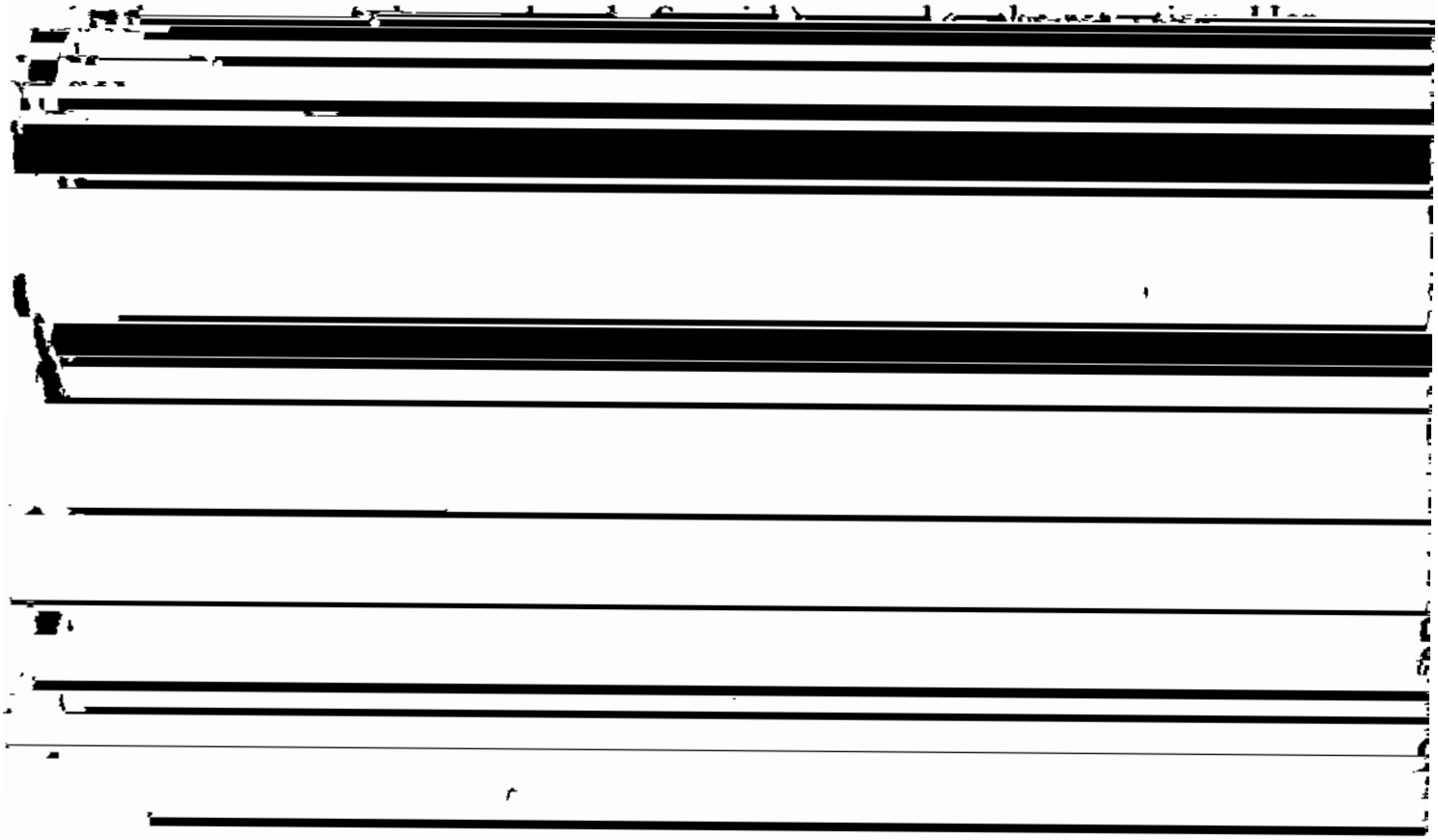
be retained and had talked to her about it long before Stacey saw it on her report card. Stacey asserted that children should be retained 'if they didn't do good on stuff'.

According to Stacey's current teacher, Stacey's mother, a teacher at a private school in the area, had requested that Stacey be retained. Despite Stacey's comments that she did not do well in math, her school records indicate she has always made satisfactory progress in math. In fact, the only area in which Stacey received an unsatisfactory grade was handwriting. From information in her school file, it was apparent that her mother and school officials actually retained Stacey because she acted immaturely and had poor work skills. Stacey's mother was reported to have said that if there was any question about Stacey's ability to do well in second grade, Stacey should be retained. Apparently, this is partly in reaction to the fact that Stacey's older sister was not retained and is now doing poorly in the sixth grade. Not surpris-

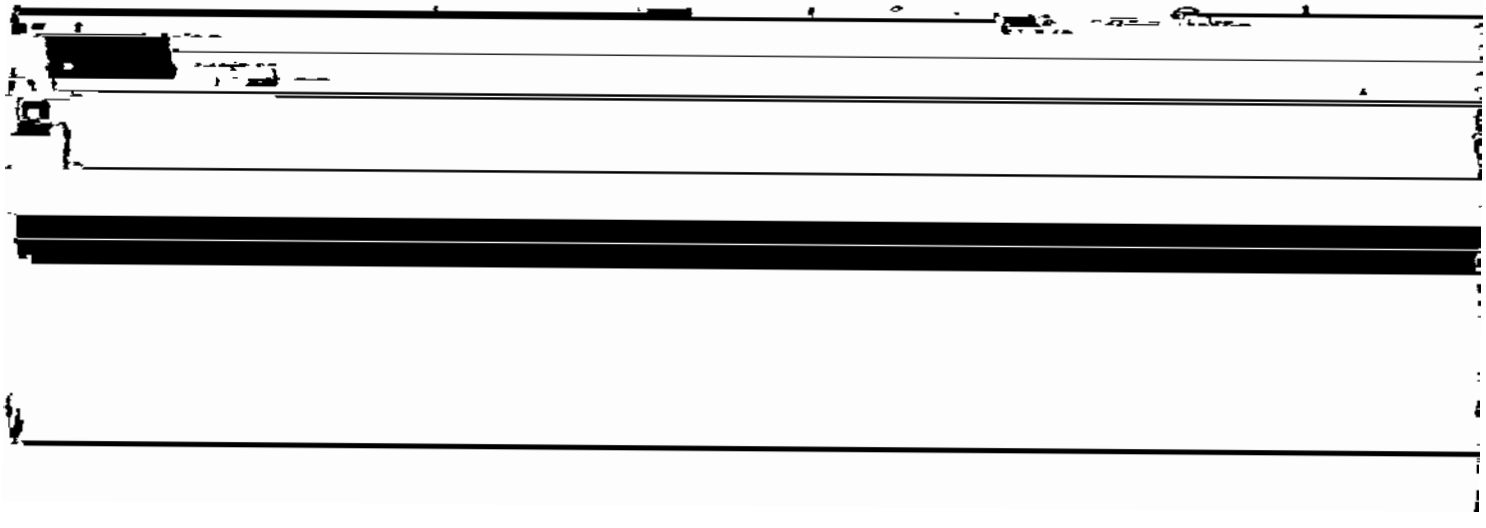
(However, she still has poor handwriting skills.) Stacey was not seen as being immature or having behavior problems during her second year in

that keeping children in the same grade was not a good idea because it made them sad.

School records indicate that Ivette was retained because she did not know English. Her original first grade teacher described her as well behaved, a hard worker and a good student, one who did not do well in school only because she predominantly spoke Spanish. Records indicate



current first grade teacher indicated that Ivette is now in the top 25 per cent of the class and is well adjusted socially and emotionally. When Ivette's current first grade teacher was asked if Ivette received any individual instruction in her classroom, the teacher replied 'no'. However, she did inform the interviewer that Ivette had been receiving ESL



saw retention as a negative experience, he believed that it was justifiable for academic reasons that he was retained.

School records indicate that George was retained because he just wouldn't work. His initial first grade teacher commented that 'George [redacted]

[redacted]

not interested in school'. This teacher also mentioned that George often complained of illness. He missed sixteen days of school his first year in [redacted]

[redacted]

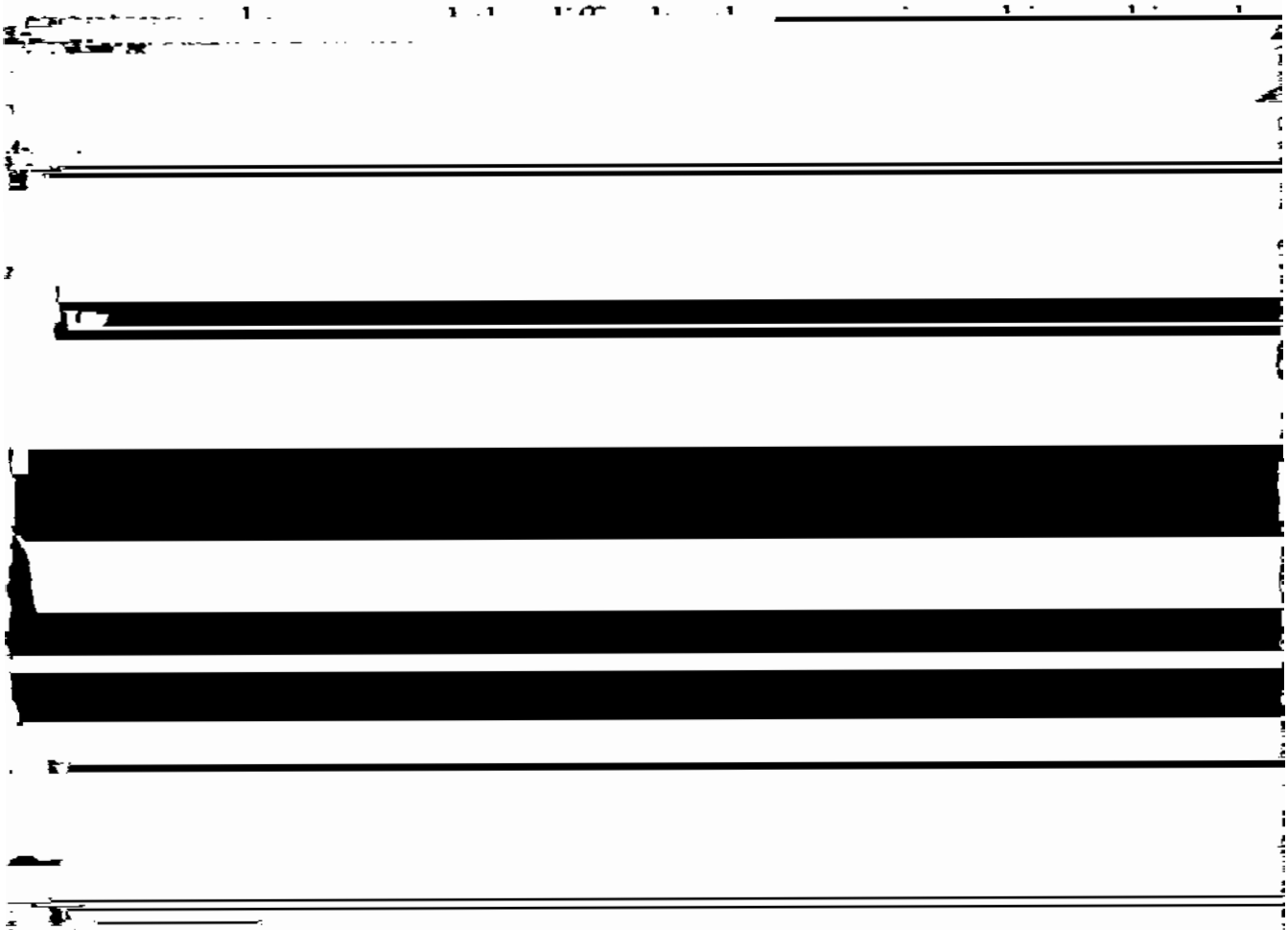
[redacted]

often led to teachers labeling children as future retainees as early in the academic year as January. Discussing the matter with the children was another story. The question 'How do you let the children know they will be repeating a grade?' elicited varied and interesting responses. Sixty per cent of the teachers left it up to the parents, either directly or indirectly. Some specifically discussed how the parents should handle it, while others assumed the parent would naturally discuss it with the child in a constructive way. With the sixth grade children it was often assumed, due to a frequently verbalized policy concerning grades for promotion to junior high, that they were well aware of their status. At one school, however, the principal tried to meet personally with all sixth grade students to be retained.

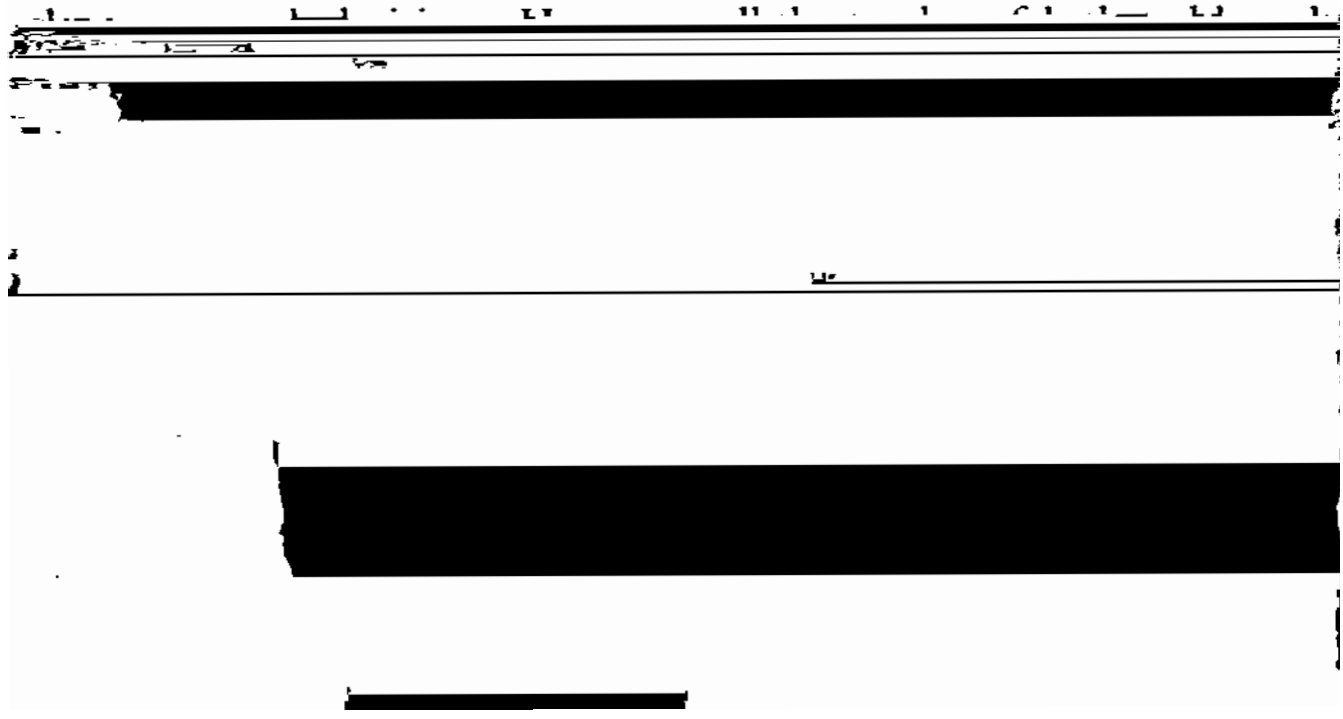
First grade teachers seemed to have a particularly difficult time discussing non-promotion with their students. Even those who did talk directly to the children gave euphemistic or even untrue explanations at times out of concern for the child's feelings. Children were told, 'You'll

whom information regarding parents' attitudes toward retention could

their concern for each of the children they retained was evident. Many



decision to retain. For example, one teacher stated that she often lost

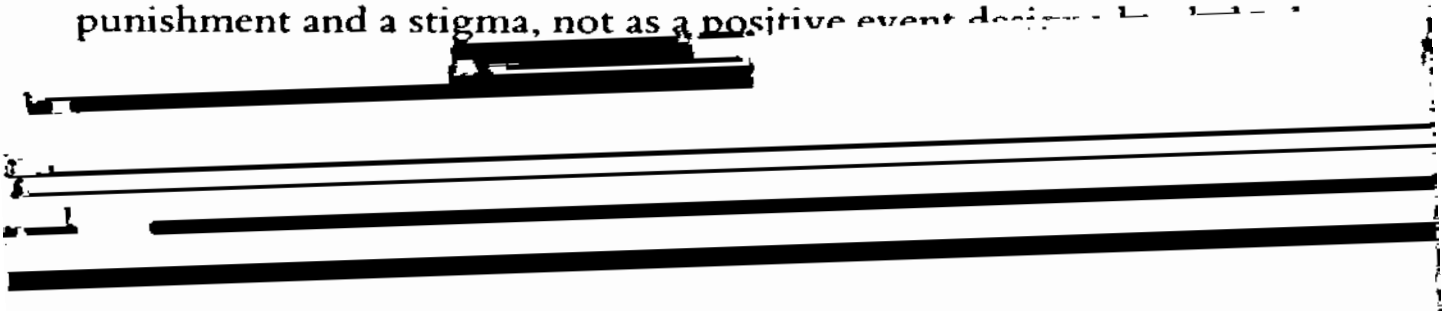


grading in the next higher grade. Consistent with survey data,

the situation by punishing the child for her or his failure to be promoted.

Conclusion

A survey of principals', teachers' and parents' views of retention in grade revealed that non-promotion is a popular means of improving poor school achievement. Grade repetition is intuitively thought to help children who are considered unable to deal responsibly with tasks typically assigned to students in the next grade. Children who lack basic skills, have poor work habits or are immature are all likely candidates for retention in grade. These children, who are characterized as not being motivated to work, having poor self-esteem, and being immature, are given another year in the same grade in the hope that time and a repeat of the same curriculum will make them more capable students in the future. Unfortunately, children who are retained generally do no better than their matched counterparts who have been promoted (see chapter 2 in this volume). Retention is generally not an effective remedial strategy. Retained children perceive retention as a punishment and a stigma, not as a positive event



Notes

1 Portions of this chapter are based on previously published articles: Byrnes and Yamamoto (1985, 1986).
2 Annual retention rates should not be confused with cumulative retention rates (which are rarely computed by school districts). If these data were stable from year to year and discounting double retentions, then by sixth grade the cumulative rate in this district would be 31.5 per cent; i.e., nearly one third of all pupils would have been retained at some time before sixth grade.
3 All names used in this analysis are fictitious but were chosen to preserve the sex and ethnic group identity of the subjects.

BOSSING, L. and BRIEN, P. (1979) *A Review of the Elementary School Promotion Retention Dilemma*, Murray, Kentucky, Murray State University (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 212-362).

BYRNES, D. and YAMAMOTO, K. (1985) 'Academic retention: An inside look', *Education*, 106, pp. 208–14.

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HOLMES, C. T. and MATTHEWS, K. M. (1984) 'The effects of nonpromotion on elementary and junior high school pupils: A meta-analysis', *Review of Educational Research*, 54, pp. 225–36.

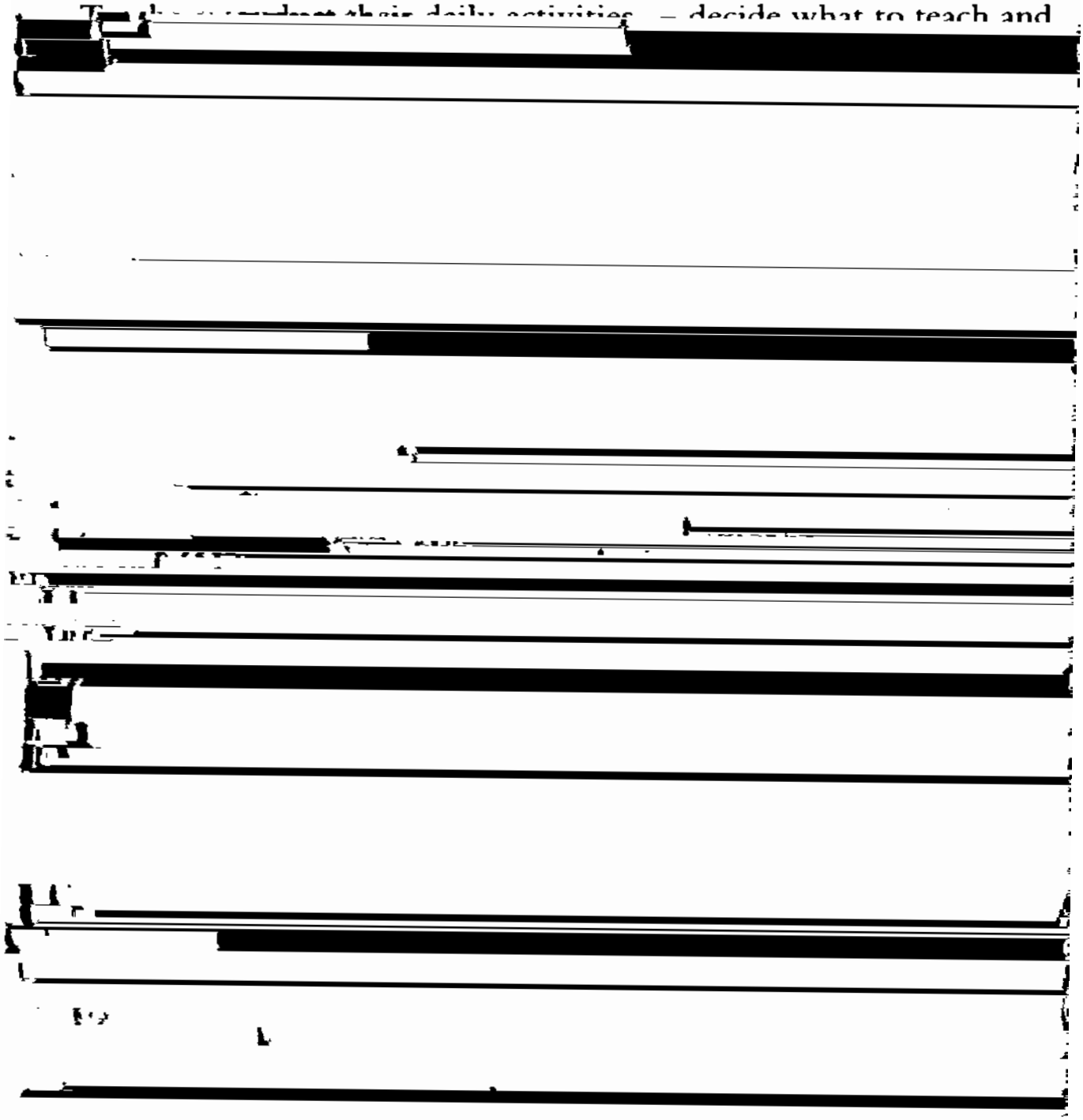
HUMPHREYS, P. (1965) 'The school's concern in non-promotion', *Theory into Practice*, 4, pp. 88–92.

JACKSON, G. B. (1975) 'The research evidence on the effects of grade [illegible] *Review of Educational Research*, 45, pp. 613–35

Chapter 7:
Teachers' Beliefs about Retention

Mary Lee Smith

with very few exceptions, that children who have been retained for a second year in a grade are not better off than initially equivalent children who have been promoted. This is true whether the outcome is achievement or adjustment and whether the reason for the retention was low academic performance or immaturity.

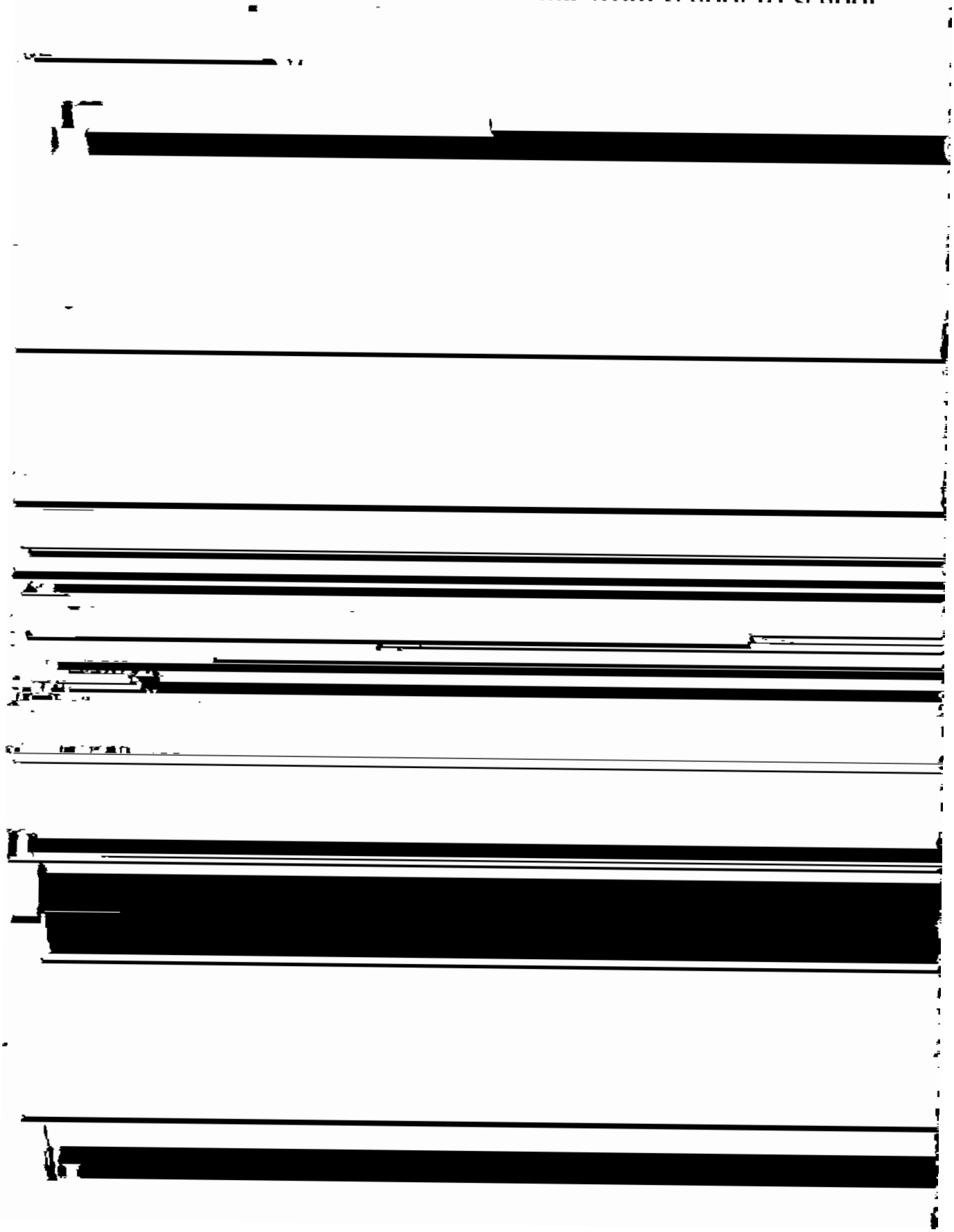


and whether to alter the pupil's progress through the grades — based on sets of beliefs about the nature of learning and development and images of what school should be. Research evidence is either not accessible to them or seems not to apply in their particular circumstances. Instead, teachers rely on practical knowledge.

circumstance. For example, a kindergarten teacher [illegible]

the following situation. Every child except one in her class is proceeding through the curriculum. Invariably, one boy leaves his seatwork to

retaining a child for an extra year in kindergarten or by screening children into a prekindergarten or transition kinder-

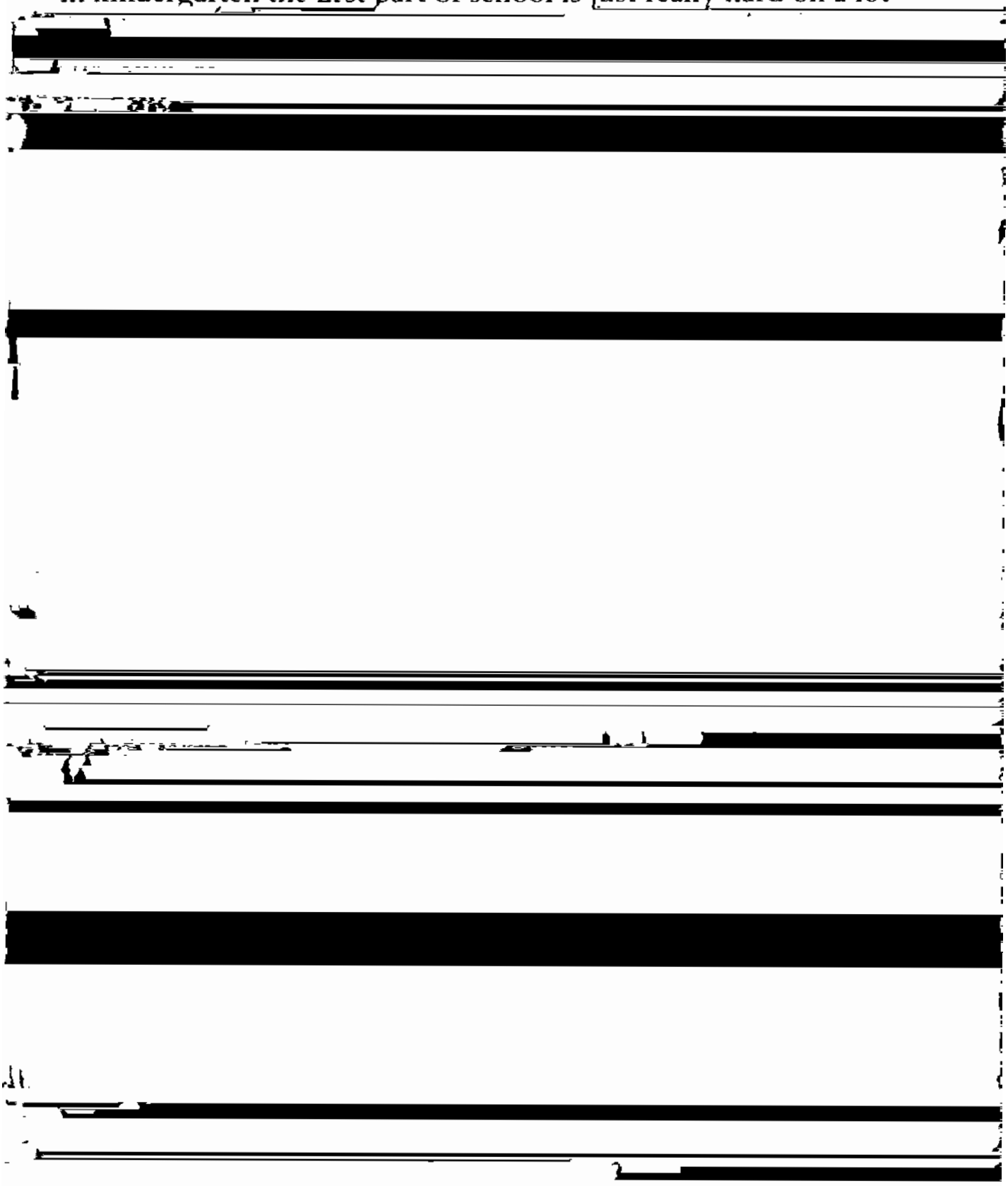


perceptions about the outcome of retention reported in chapter 5) included the parents' recollection of their interactions with teachers over the decision to retain as well as the parents' report of their children's reaction.

Findings

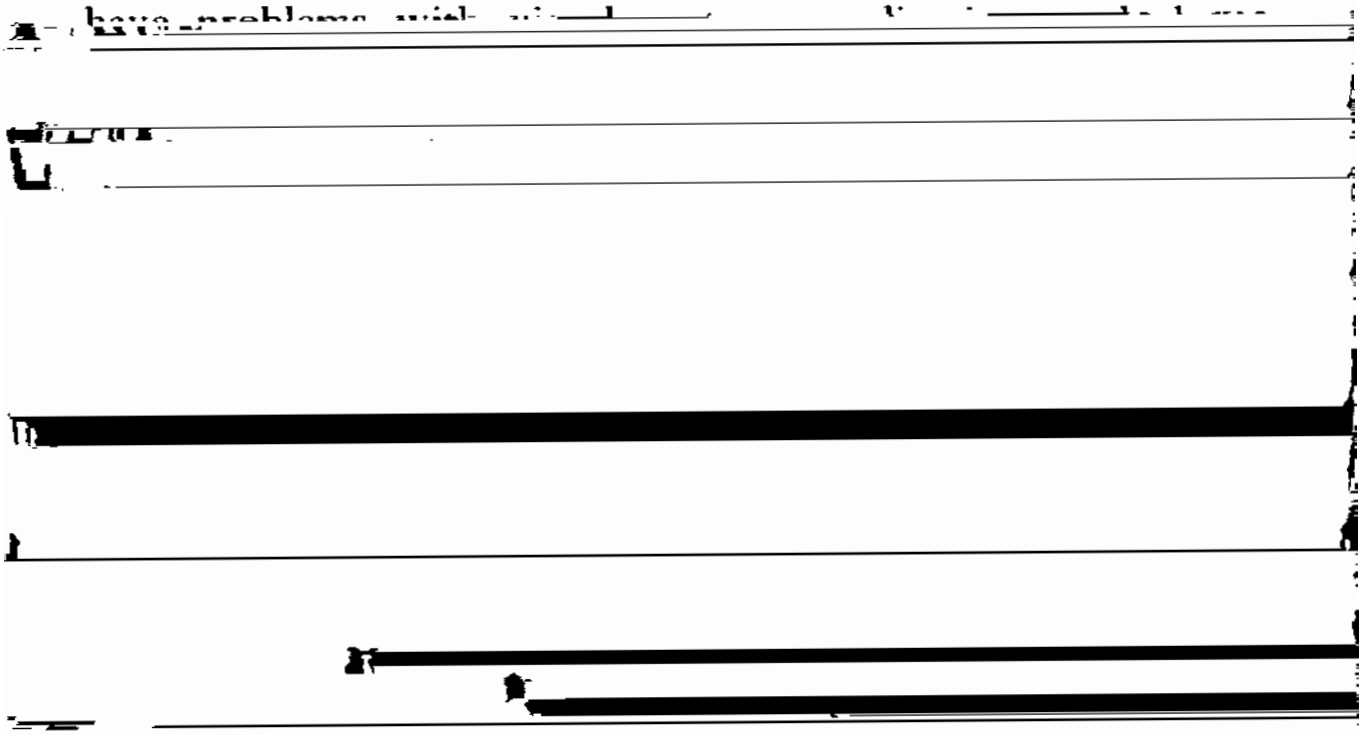
Teachers' Beliefs about Development

go of mom, they're not ready to take directions from another person, and I just feel like this is a developmental stage. And that every child will eventually go through the stages. But right now in kindergarten the first part of school is just really hard on a lot



The remainder of the teachers were labeled 'non-nativists' and fell

specific training program to correct it. After treatment, the child will be able to function more or less normally like his peers in kindergarten. The beliefs of diagnostic-prescriptive teachers differ from those of Remediationists in that the latter intensify general instruction and the former target therapies to diagnosed disorders.

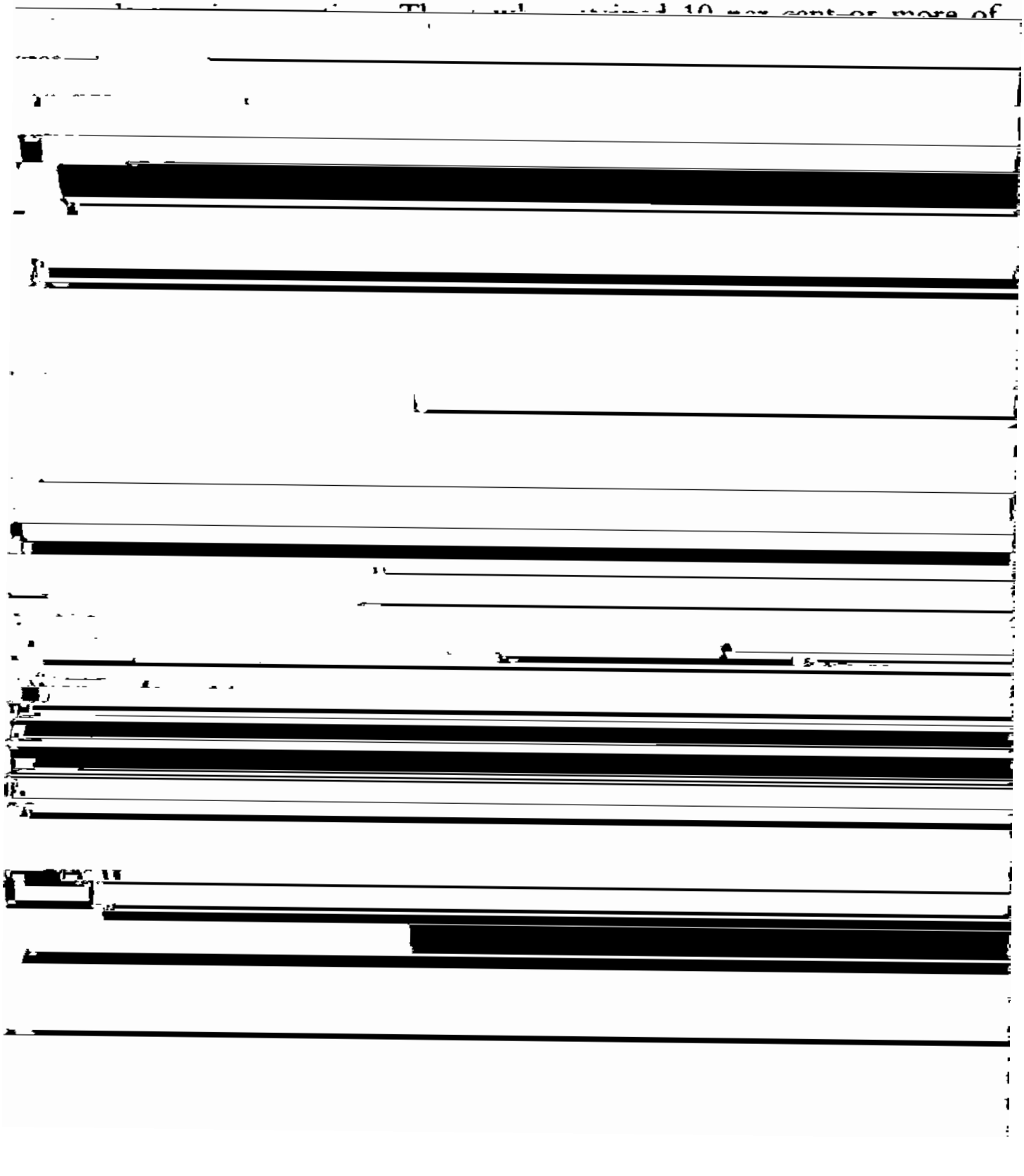
> You always have children who can handle everything else but have problems with [redacted]
>
> 
>
> children probably are going to have those problems so that wouldn't be any reason for retention. We have our learning lab, and children that are showing these problems work there ... If a child absolutely couldn't listen, I'll certainly try very hard to find out what the problem is before wanting to keep him in kindergarten another year. The reasons he can't attend may be because he has an auditory problem...If he has this block or a problem, then he's got to learn to work around that to compensate for it, and that's what we'll try to give him, are ways to compensate.

Interactionists

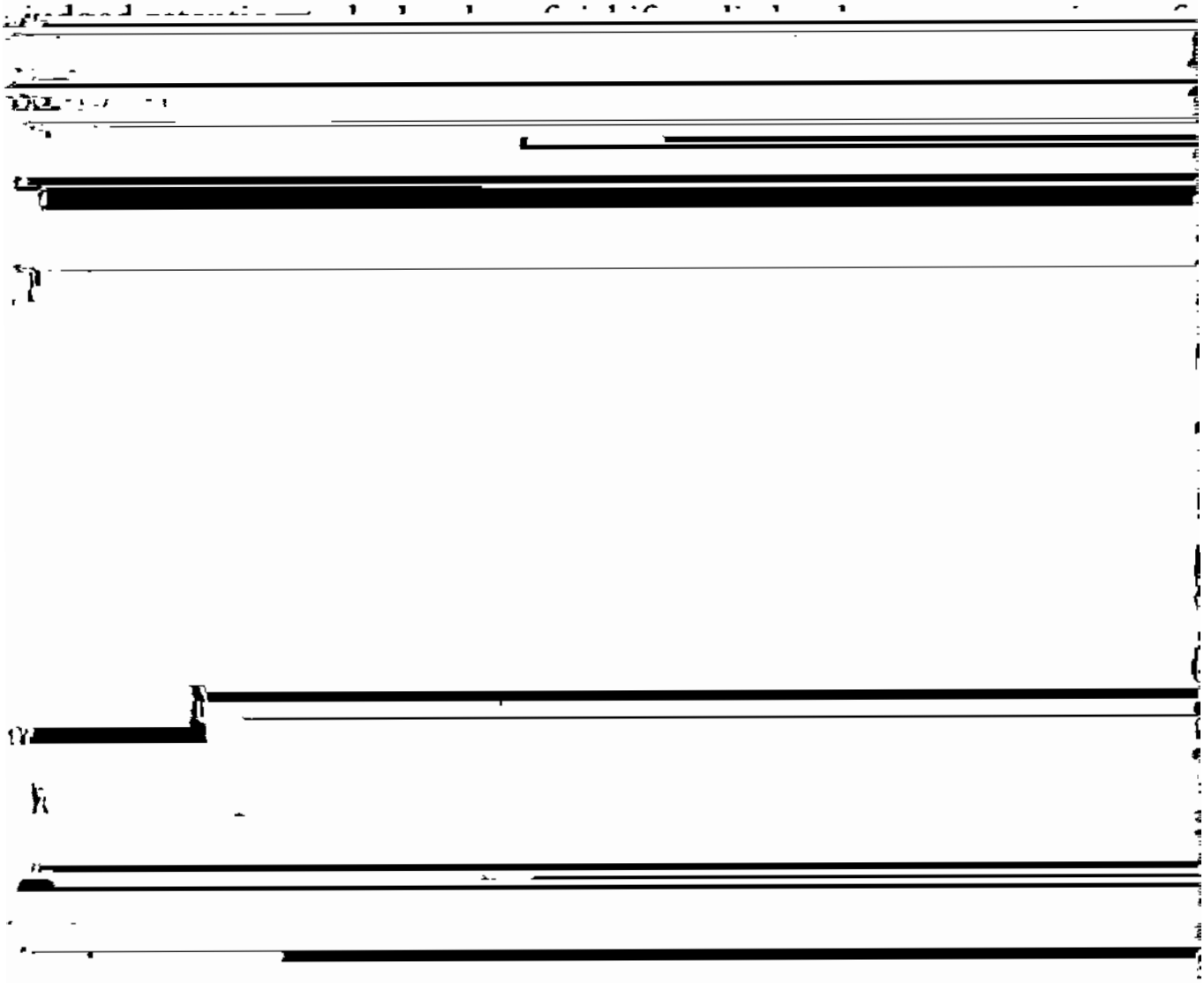
This group believes in a complex pattern of interactions between the psychological nature of the child and the environments provided by teachers. They believe that the environment and materials should be arranged by the teacher based on an ongoing study of each child and what interest of his might awaken the learning process. Levels of developmental [redacted]

Retention Practices and Beliefs about Development

The next step in the analysis was to determine whether the retention practices of the teachers could be accounted for by their beliefs about the development of readiness for school. Table 1 shows the cross-tabulation of teachers by belief-system (nativist vs. non-nativists)



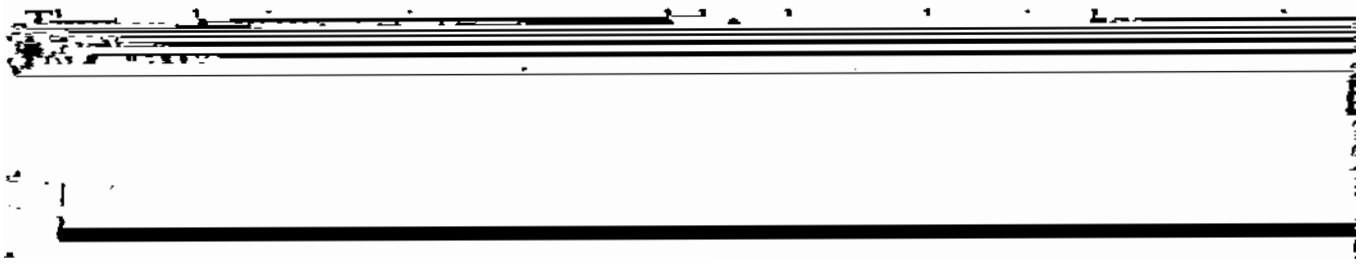
nativists, who use it frequently. This expectation was not fulfilled. teachers of all belief types and those who retain relatively few pupils all endorsed retention as an effective solution to a perceived problem. They may have defined the problem differently, but what they said about the solution was the same. Presumably, low-retaining teachers would have



children.

Beliefs about retention and its consequences are detailed in this section along with representative excerpts from the data.

Retention is beneficial



[redacted]

Retaining is really beneficial for some of those that just have to struggle and struggle because the next year they might be at the top of their class. And rather than push and put them ahead one year and let them struggle, it would be much more beneficial to the child to just wait, so they can be superstars at the head of the class.

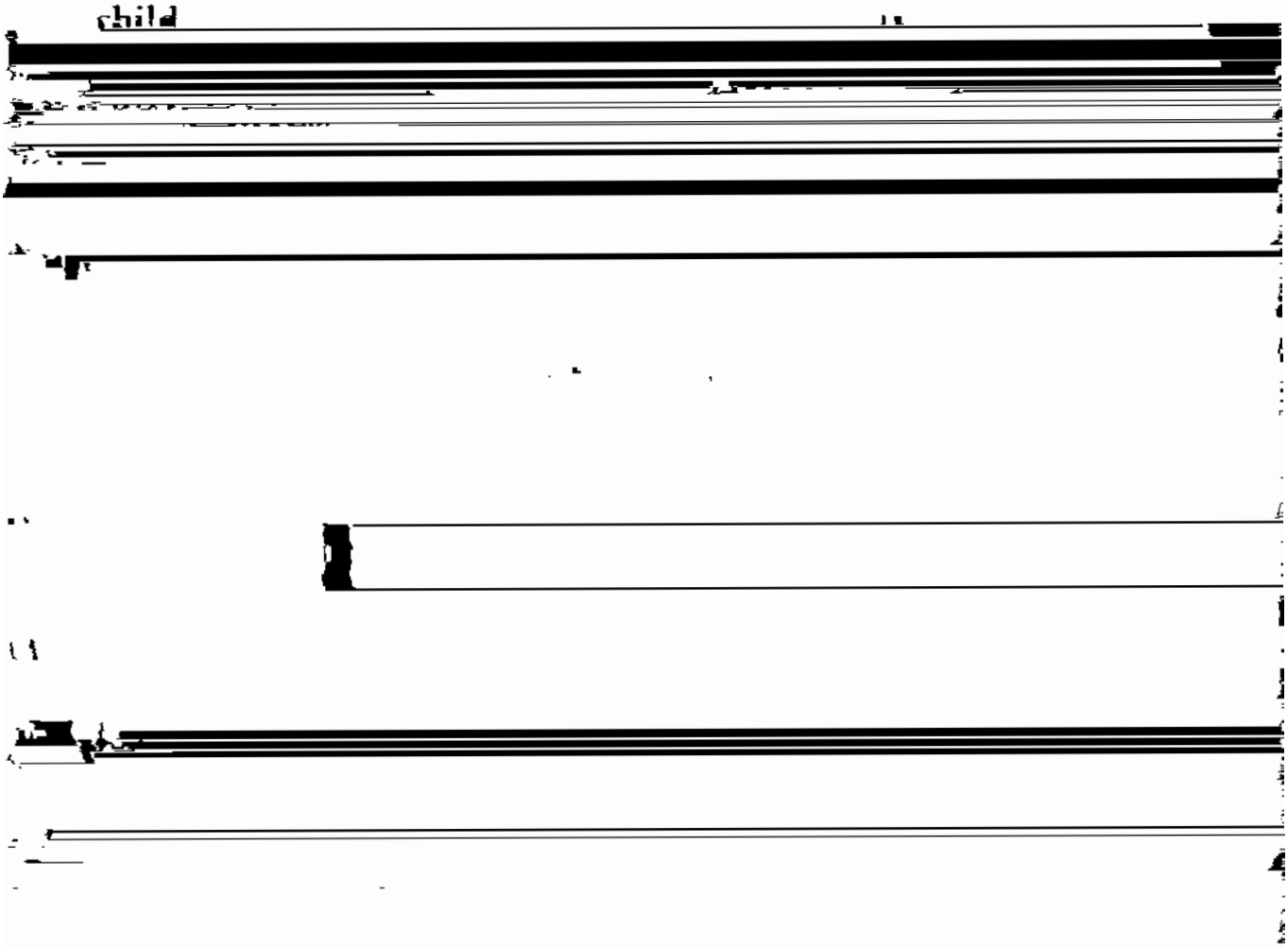
Retention was believed to prevent a variety of ill effects, for

[redacted]

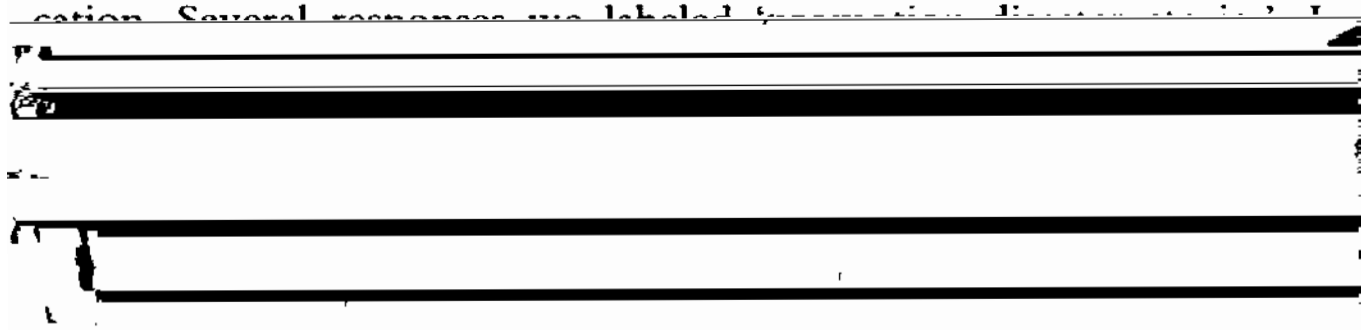
> There's not the stigma of failure in kindergarten, so that is the time to do it.

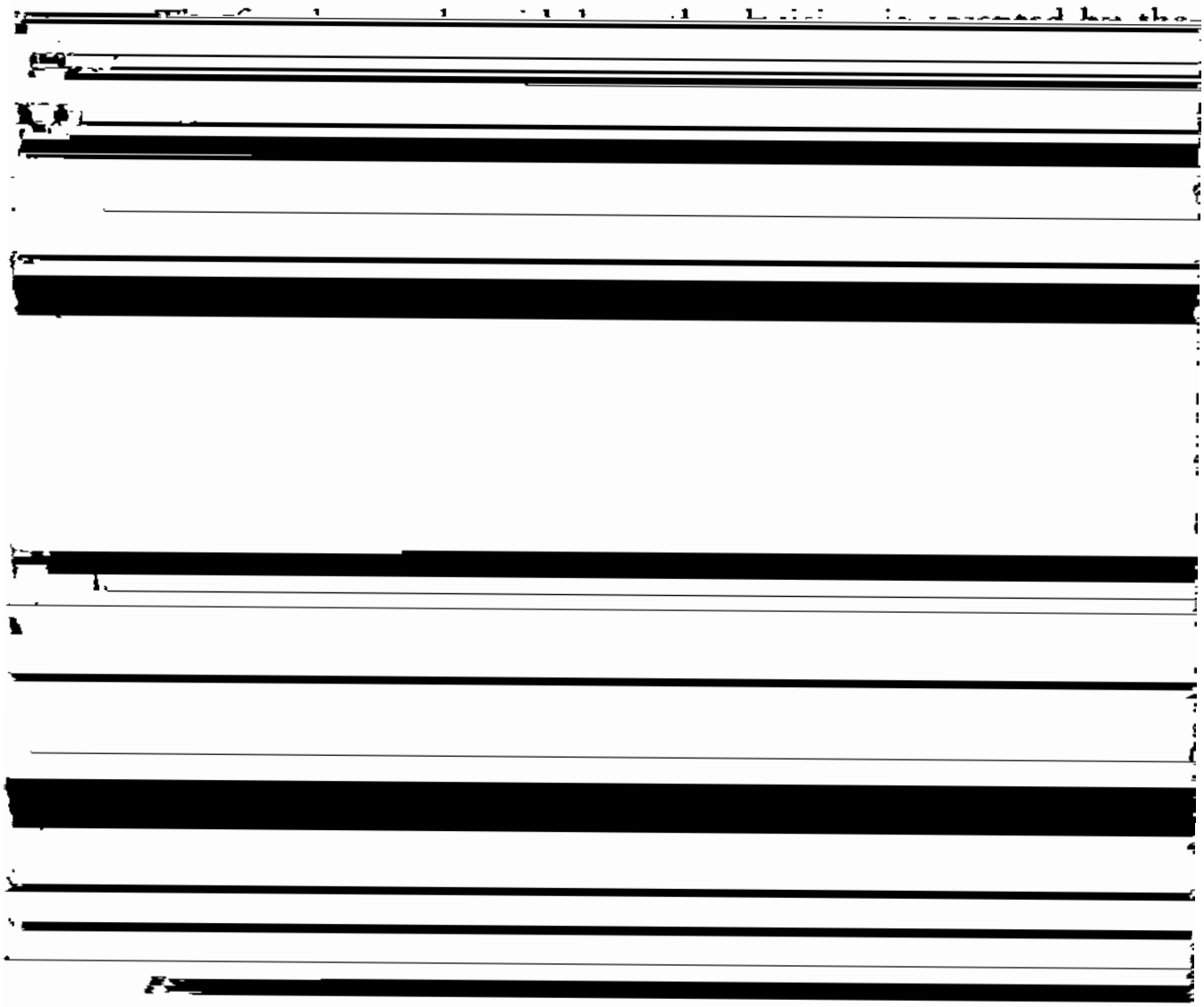
For nativist teachers particularly, the benefits of retention are simply the result of having more time to mature.

> Sometimes you just have to wait for Mother Nature to help the child



concerning the harmful effects of promoting a kindergartner who should have been retained. Children such as these were judged to be destined for failure, subsequent retention, or referral for special education. Several responses were labeled '



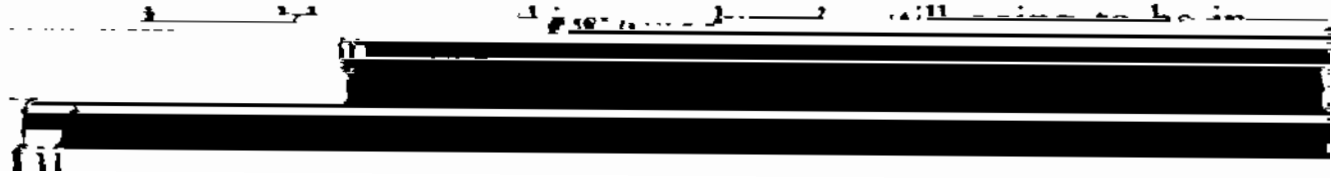


parent and consequently how the parents present it to the child.

> If the parents let the child know they are happy with the decision ... if they're not happy and there's a lot of wavering on it, then I think it's almost — then I think it is probably harmful to the child. Because they are going to read that from the parent. And the kids really will read what you're feeling. And if you accept it, they accept it. So it depends on how the parent approaches the child.

How the teacher 'handles' the retention decision is also viewed as influencing whether retention will help or hurt the child:

> If it's handled correctly, there shouldn't be [any risks to retention]. I think if it's approached in a positive way, 'this is going to be terrific, it's going to be fun, you're going to have a new



Interactions with parents

Making the decision to retain a child places teachers in complex relationships with the child's parents. Few retentions are initiated by parents. Because some principals insist that parents make the final decision, teachers who have made the recommendation to retain must persuade the parents. Teachers talked about marshaling evidence from the child's performance throughout the year, passing out pamphlets like 'A Gift of Time', bringing in 'experts' to test the children and bolster the case, having the parents visit the classroom to see for themselves the putative difference between their child and his or her peers. Some

these kindergarten clothes and we want that child to go. All his friends are going to first grade. Oh, I can't stand for him to stay back.' But that's so minor in kindergarten.

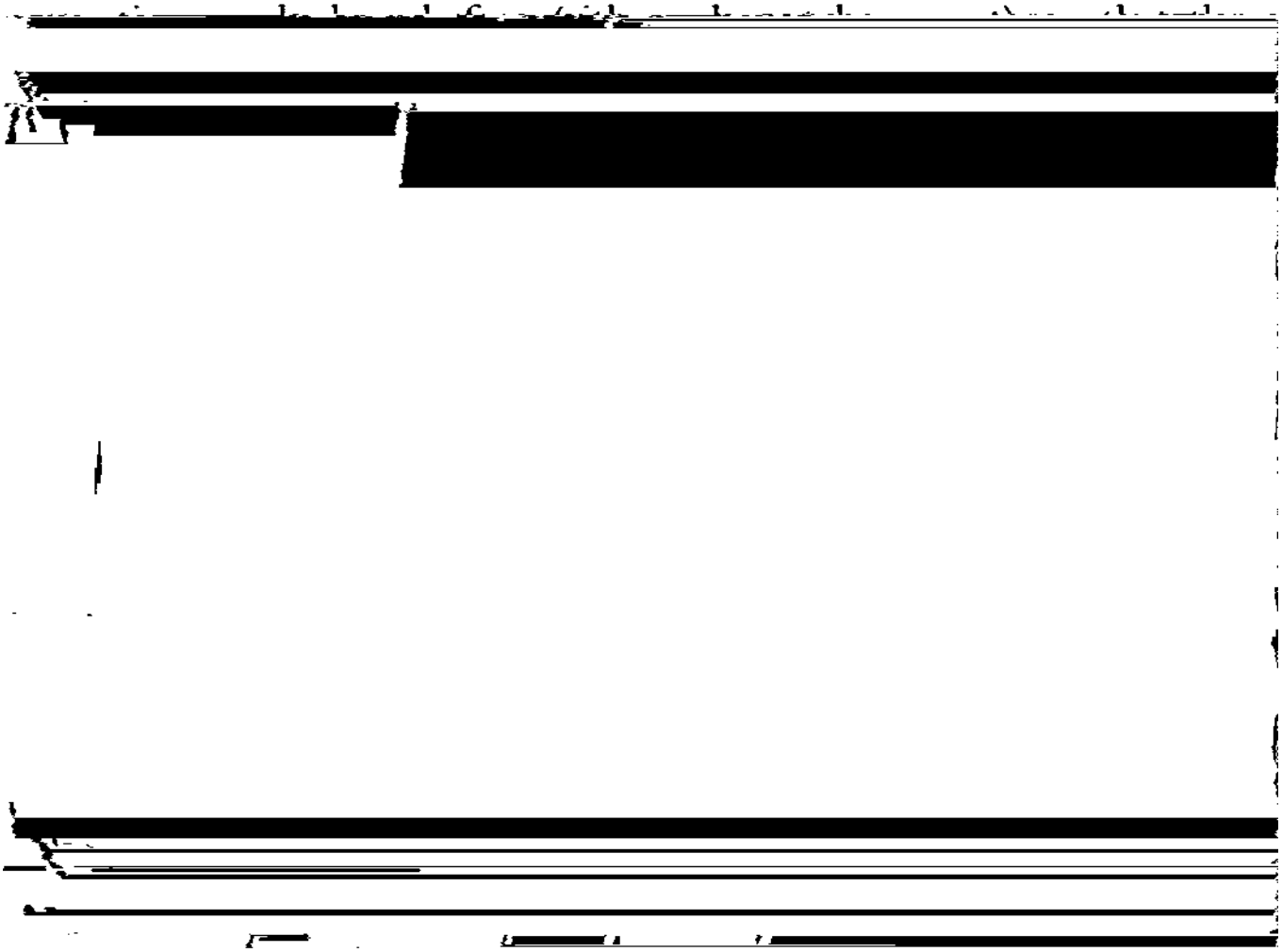
They were willing to risk her whole future!

In some schools, the parents' point of view was genuinely respected, and the first grade teachers into whose classes the children were

wise worked to ensure the children's success.

The teachers' interviews were cross-referenced with data from interviews with parents. Teachers consistently underplayed the extent of conflict with parents over the decision to retain and underestimated the degree of parents' active resistance or passive but unhappy compliance.

The sentiments above are in the minority. In most cases teachers discounted the possibility that children might be bored or frustrated by

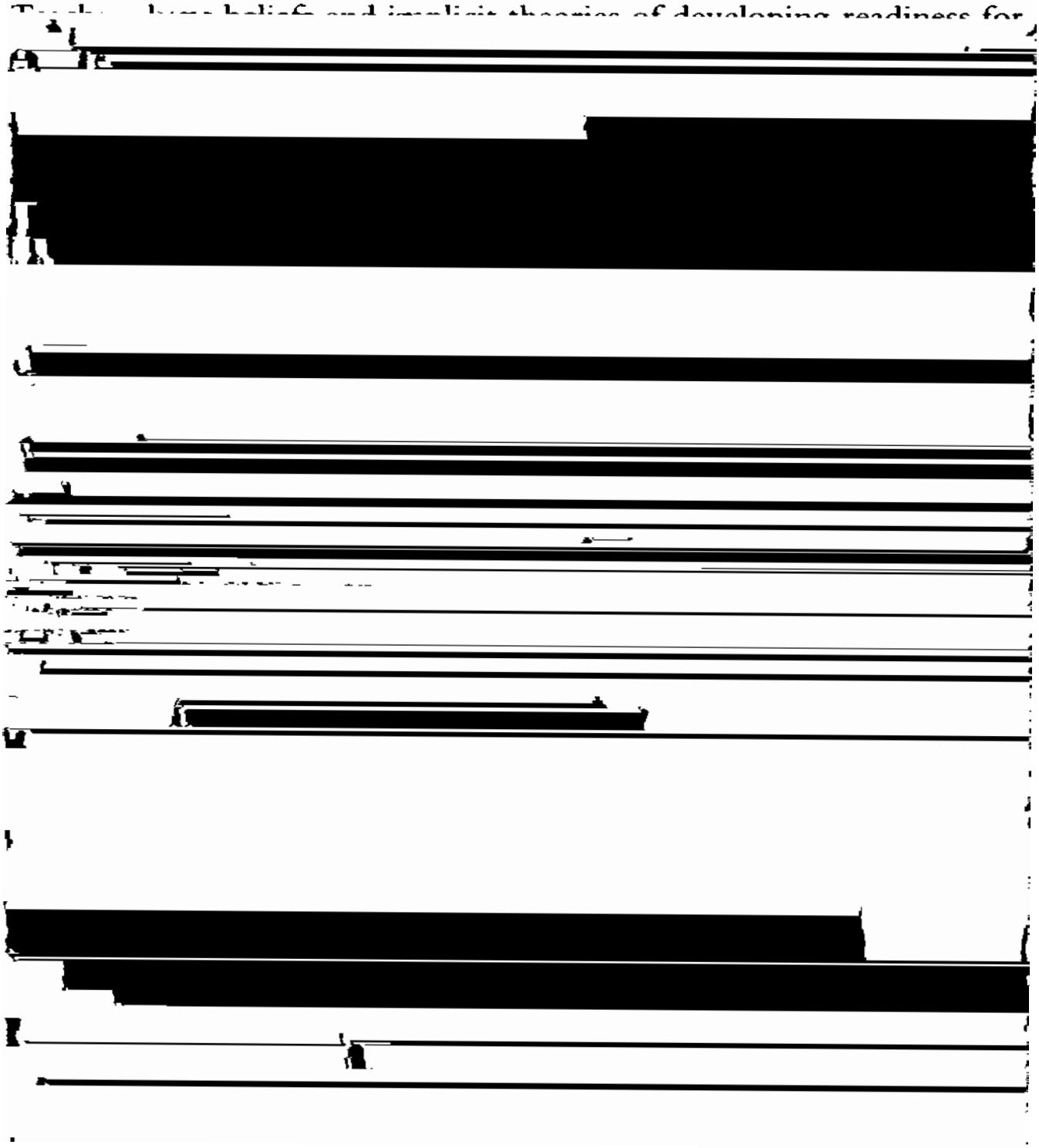


might experience any more than the most minor and ephemeral emotions. The value of social promotion, that is, keeping a child with his age-mates for reasons of social and emotional cohesiveness was

conditions that lead to retention:

> I have a lot of trouble failing anyone. It means I haven't done my job. I feel it's my job to take all the kids who come in and teach them what they need even though they are behind in their development.

Practical vs. Propositional Knowledge



group study yields. Two groups start out alike, one gets the treatment — in this case retention — and the other group gets an alternative

methods are repeated and intensified. If necessary, children are recycled through the whole package by retaining them for a second year in kindergarten.

Many teachers reject this view of schooling as inappropriate for young children, yet feel powerless to alter the structure of the school, the externally-imposed curriculum and accountability requirements placed on them. The only autonomy still available to them is the recommendation to retain a child who does not fit the structure. The

[redacted]

rhetoric of teachers' beliefs about retention regularly places the problem of unreadiness or incompetence in the psychological make-up of the child rather than in the institutional characteristics of the school. The curriculum is left unexamined.

The Problem of Heterogeneity

The teacher is a self-interested theoretician. Though couched in the rhetoric of pupil benefits, her beliefs about retention are, unconsciously perhaps, conditioned by a wish for a more homogeneous and trouble-

[redacted]

be futile. There will always be a youngest child in a class, always be

parents who try to beat the odds by keeping their children out for a

exists in the literature on educational tracking and segregation that such

Chapter 8: Ending Social Promotion in Waterford: Appearances and Reality[1]

Mary Catherine Ellwein and Gene V Glass

Editors' Introduction

Teacher beliefs about retention, investigated by Smith in chapter 7, might be considered to be informal or implicit policies that govern promotion decisions. In

Since 1983, the Waterford School District has administered locally-developed, criterion-referenced tests from kindergarten through to the eighth grade. Developed by a host of content specialists, school administrators and classroom teachers, these examinations cover grade-level material in reading, mathematics and, in some grades, writing. The

bear a heavier burden for kindergarten, second-, fifth-, and seventh-grade pupils: scores on these tests are to be the primary criteria by which students are promoted or retained. Social promotion was to be

Impetus for the Promotional Gates Policy

In the early 1980s, the Waterford School District (not its real name) hired a new Superintendent. Charismatic and competent, the new leader was viewed as the answer to many of the problems plaguing the district. There was a general feeling that the 'product' leaving the Waterford schools could be improved. In the words of the D[redacted]

tions. This committee was made up of over forty individuals from teaching, administration, curriculum and other special programs. After meeting for nine months, the group produced a number of recommendations which would serve as the blueprint for district retention

Blueprint for Excellence

Recommendations from this district-wide committee dealt with a wide

Instead of having one test score to separate students into pass or

reading and mathematics readiness. Students who have scores in the satisfactory range generally will be recommended for promotion. Questionable scores will lead to a review of total performance to determine promotion or retention. Unsatisfactory scores will generally lead to retention.

The decision rules for second, fifth and seventh grade test performance were decidedly more complex. Depending on sub-test performance, students would be classified into one of three categories:

[redacted]

sub-test performance for each category. As can be seen in the table, there are six possible combinations of performance on the two sub-tests [redacted]

by a group of district educators. As described in the committee's report:

> Students recommended for a review of total performance will have their scores examined by a review team consisting of the principal, the classroom teacher plus at least one other staff member (for example, social worker, counselor, reading or

Three other relevant policies are noted:

1 All regular education students are expected to take promotional gates tests. The Individual Education Program (IEP) for special education students must specify which tests, if any, the students will take.

2 [redacted]

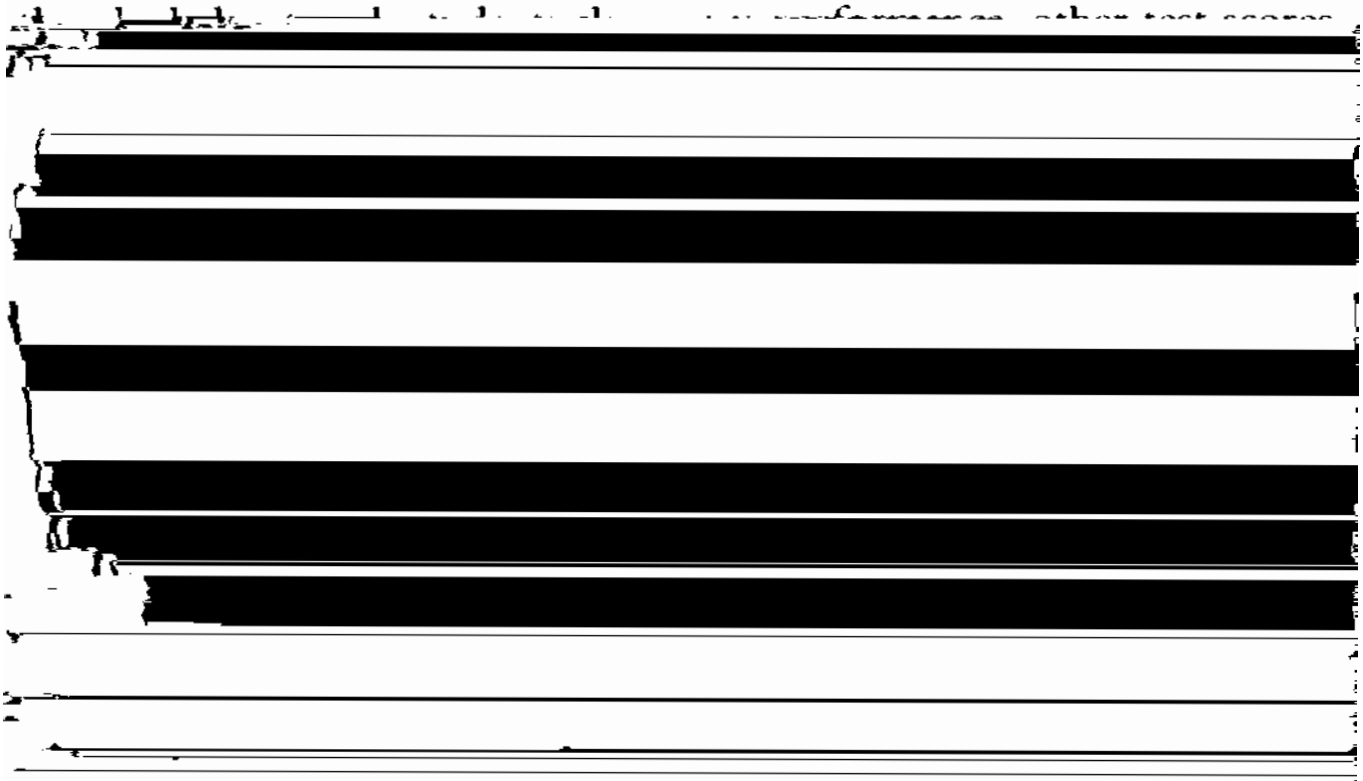
has been submitted.

3 Students who fail the promotional gate tests and are retained are eligible to receive retention services. Kindergarten retention services are delivered in a K-1 transition curriculum. Other grades offer pull-out programs skills work during the retained year.

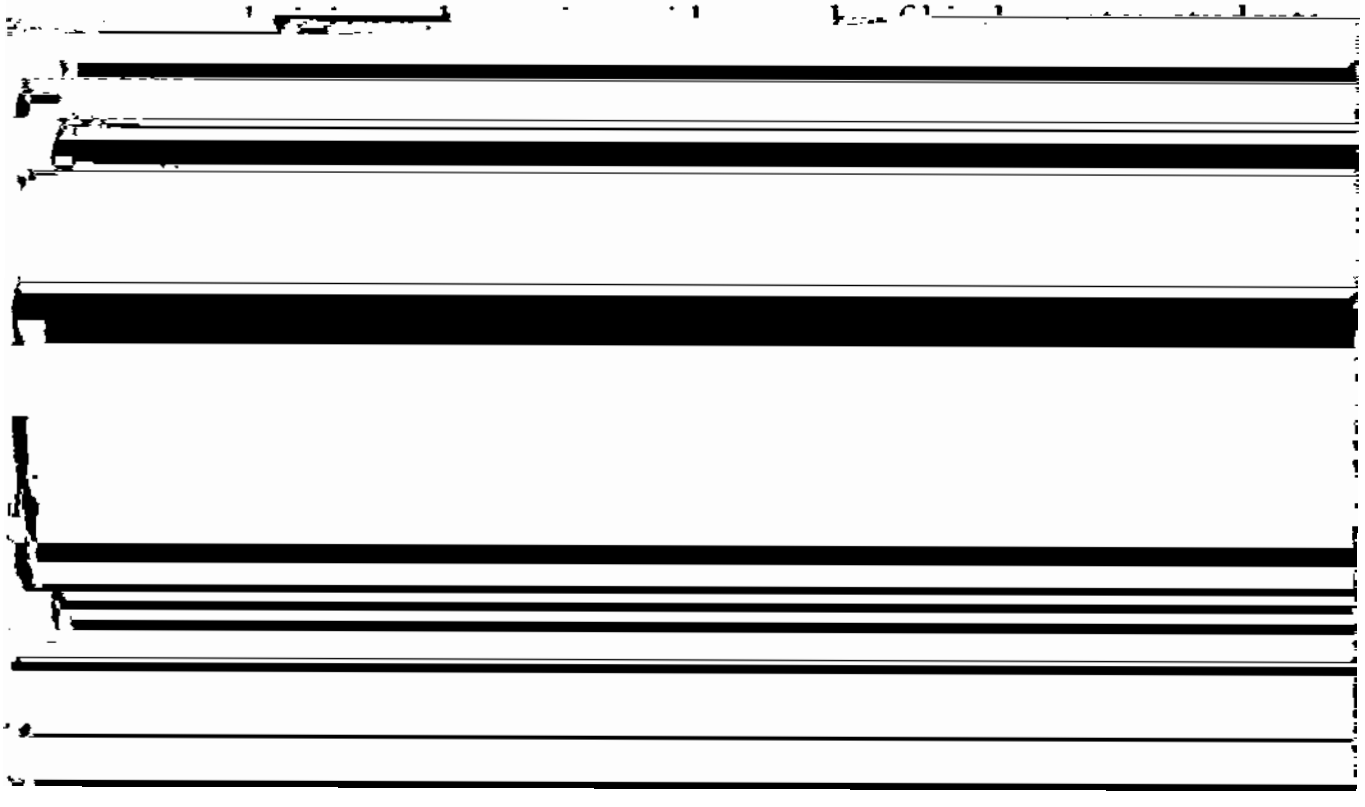
Thus, plans were carefully laid for implementation of the four [redacted]

[math or writing] skills are such that if you only had two choices — to promote or to retain — you would elect to retain the student at this time.

Teachers were urged to draw upon any and all of the information



and intuitive assessment of how the student would perform in the areas measured by the test. After teacher judgments had been obtained the



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District (Spring 1983)

Raw score	# master	# non master	# total	% master of total	% of all students scoring at or below
41	38	0	38	100	
40	74	0	74	100	
39	148	0	148	100	
38	156	2	158	99	
37	214	1	215	99 +	
36	183	3	186	98	
35	173	2	175	99	
34	147	11	158	93	
33	110	12	122	90	
32	98	11	109	90	
31	102	24	126	81	
30	94	18	112	84	37.9
29	83	13	96	86	32 9
28	63	24	87	72	29.1

Technical Issues

[redacted]

afford. We never went and asked [central administration], but we knew what the common sense approach was.

When asked if potential costs influenced the recommendations

The idea is that the passing score has to be high enough and the number of students failing low enough ... If you take a look, the

Consequences of the Promotional Gates Program

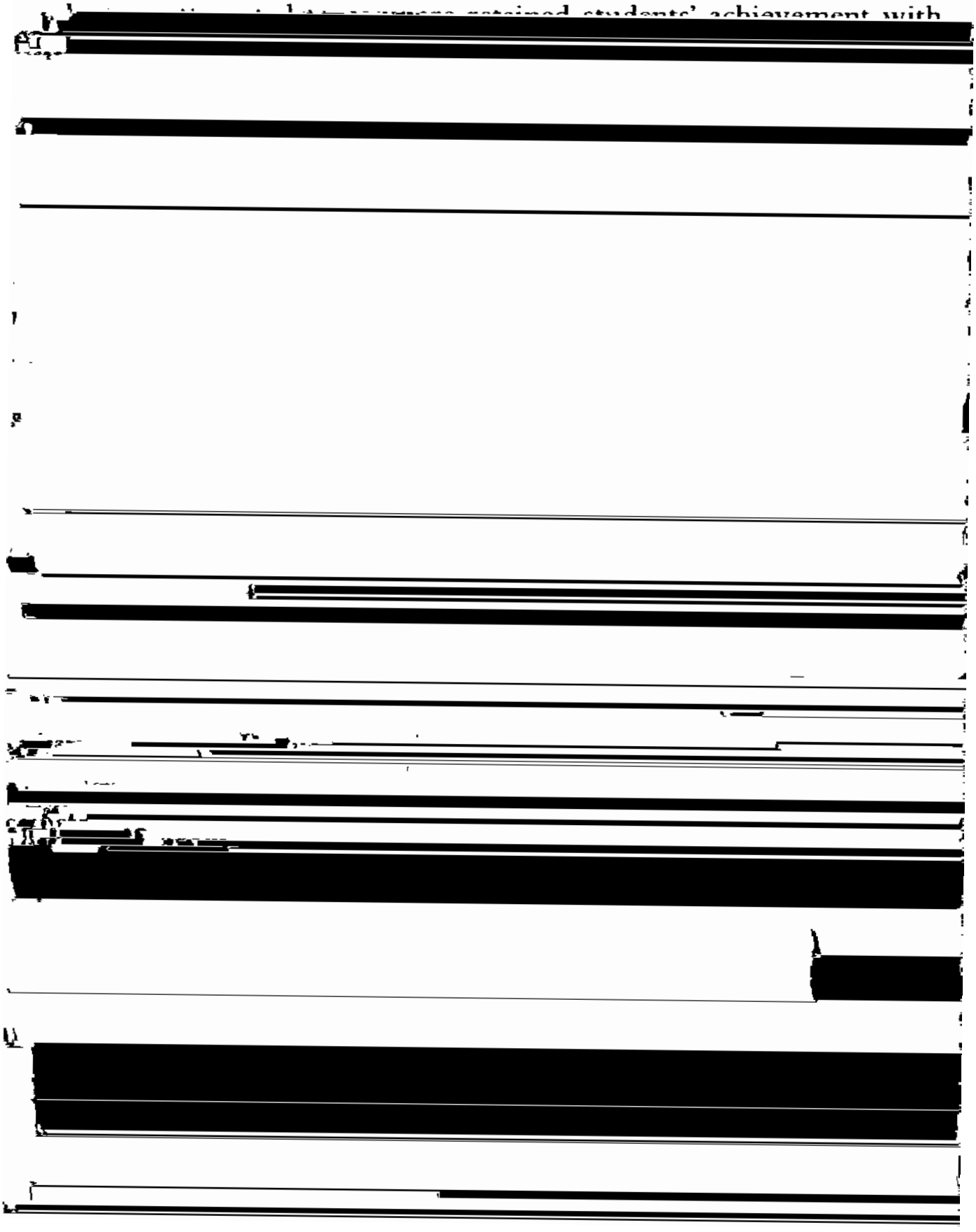
Table 3 is a summary of the passing rates for each promotional gate test since piloting began in Spring 1983. These data were provided by th

Grade	Recommendation category	Year 1984	1985	1986
	Retain	9[a]	5	7[b]
5th	Pass	—	75[a]	81
	Review	—	13[a]	9
7th	Pass	—	78[a]	74

receive transition services and at least eight children were retained even though they passed (one of whom also received transition services designed for those who failed the test). In sum, approximately 117 students (29 per cent) of the 406 who failed the 1985 promotional gate were not found in 1985/86 kindergarten classrooms. It is likely that these students were promoted to first grade. This conclusion is borne out by the evaluation report released in Fall 1986, which indicated that

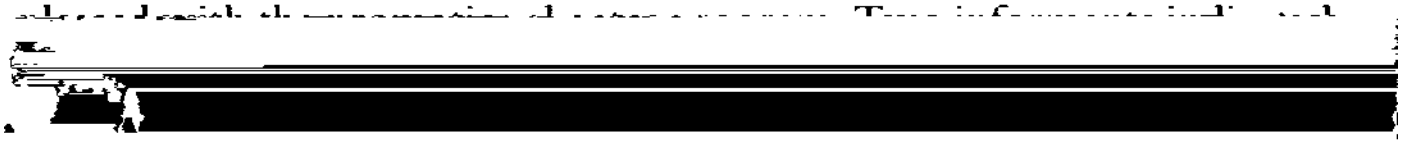
tion about their ethnicity and gender may have influenced subsequent decisions to be retained. For example, minorities accounted for 59 per cent of the students who failed the 1985 kindergarten test. However, 69 per cent of the students who were retained and received transition services were minorities. Moreover, 56 per cent of those failing the kindergarten test were male, but they accounted for 65 per cent of the

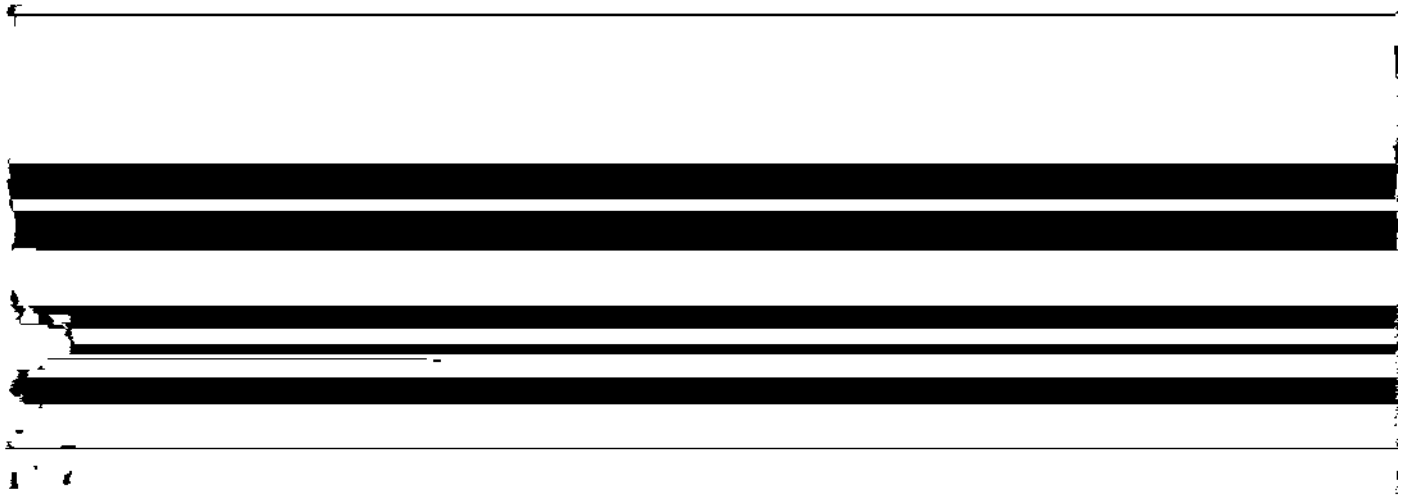
student progress and achievement. In general teachers perceived a positive impact on retained students' achievement and achievement-related behaviors (for example, time on task). In addition, district



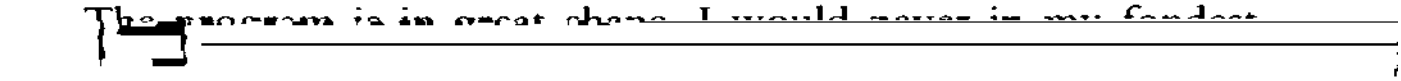
regression and difficulties with same-grade comparisons sabotage any conclusions about comparative achievement gains.

At the time of the multi-site study, Superintendent Williams was



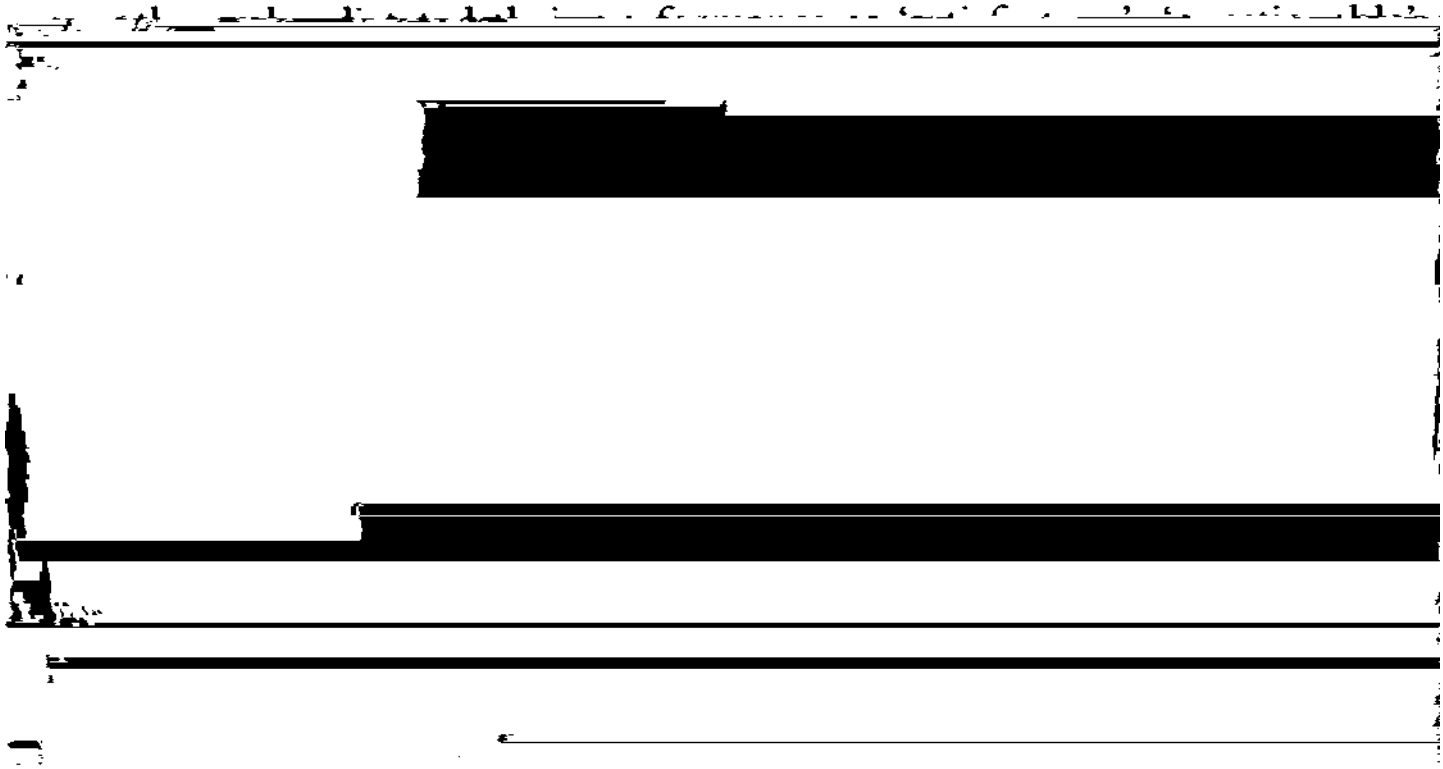


that the Superintendent had yet to hear parental complaints about the program. When asked to comment on the status of the promotional gates program, the Director of Testing remarked enthusiastically:

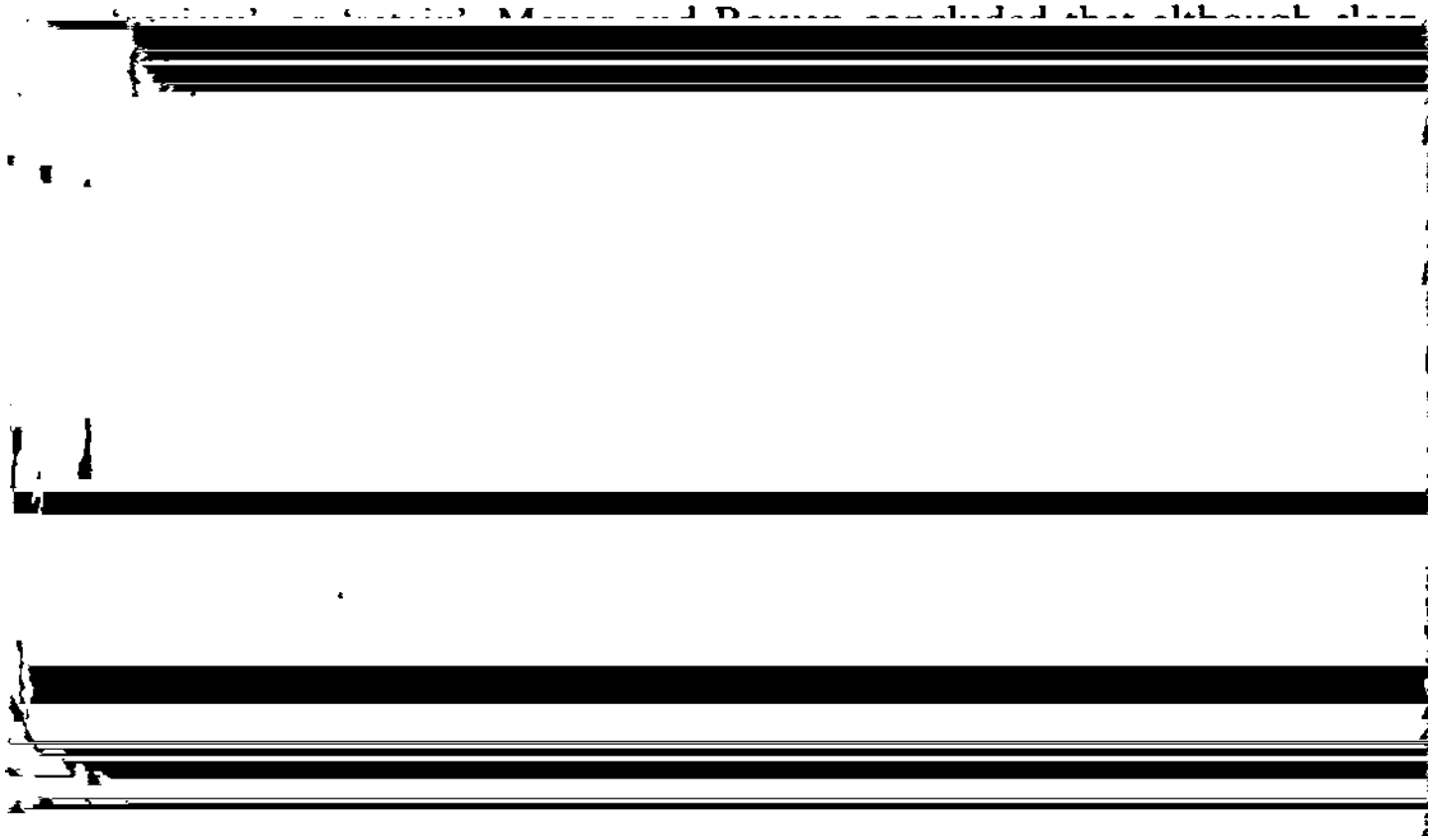


[redacted]

students, and teachers'; yet avoid controlling their 'instructional activities or outputs despite periodic shifts toward accountability' (p. 72). In Waterford, we witnessed tight control over ritual classifications of students. Rules defined students as 'masters' or 'non-masters';



or 'unsatisfactory'; and still others prescribed their fate: 'promote',



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Chapter 9:
Alternatives to Student Retention: New Images of the Learner, the Teacher and Classroom Learning

Penelope L. Peterson

Editors' Introduction

Penelope Peterson is Co-Director of the Institute for Research on Teaching and Professor of Educational Psychology and Teacher Education at Michigan State University. She is also editor of the Review of Educational Research *and Vice-President of the American Educational Research Association. Peterson is a distinguished researcher who has wedded research on how children learn with research on how teachers teach and ought to be trained as professionals. She was invited to consider the retention research and discuss alternatives*

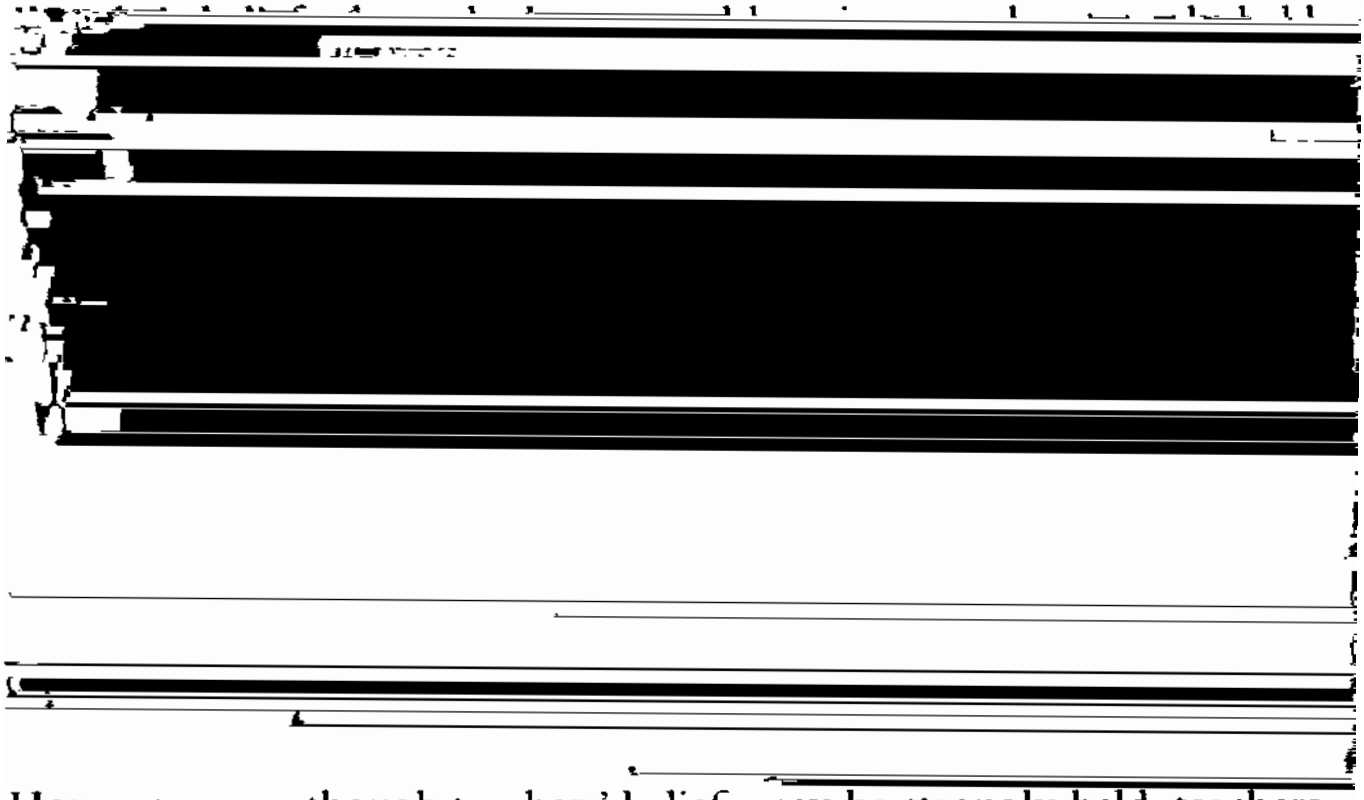
> When such hands-in-the-air resignation about achievement is reinforced by school administrators — who ought to know better — our national effort to provide equal intellectual opportunity to all our students is undermined. (William J. Bennett, (U.S. Secretary of Education) (1988) *American Education: Making It Work*, p. 34)

In the above quotation from his progress report on the status of the education reform movement in America, US Secretary of Education, William Bennett, argued persuasively that beliefs about the learner and learning may have profound effects not only on the educational opportunities and learning experiences provided to students in American classrooms, but also, ultimately, on these same students' achievement. Moreover, Bennett suggested that pervasive and deep-seated beliefs about the learner and about learning have seriously impeded the progress of educational reform in our country.

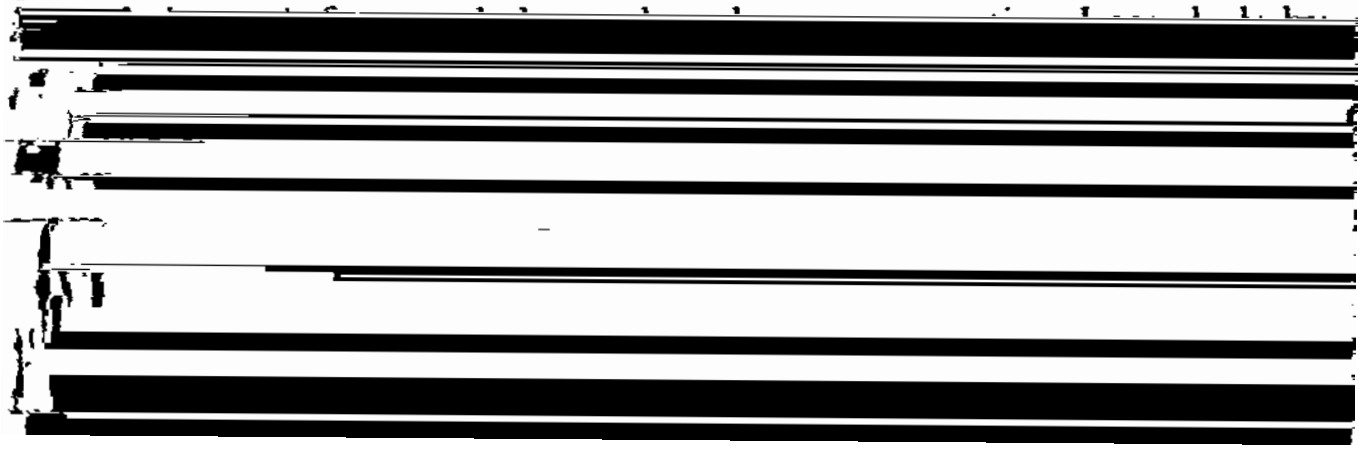
Bennett's statement provides a context within which to discuss the results of the present volume on retention practices in American education. Shepard, Smith and their colleagues have taken a sophisticated, multi-method approach to analyzing the effects of retention practices, the underlying processes that lead to retention or non-retention of students, and the processes that mediate the effects of

attempted to 'replace the traditional, but politically stigmatized, social promotion system with a new testing program'. In the words of the Superintendent, the goal was to use test data 'as primary information to

the findings on retention practices in the present volume. The purpose of my analysis is four-fold. First, I argue that teachers' beliefs about the learner and about classroom learning have powerful effects not only on their specific classroom practices but also on their more general educational practices, such as retention or non-retention of students. Secondly, I suggest that teachers vary in their images of the learner and

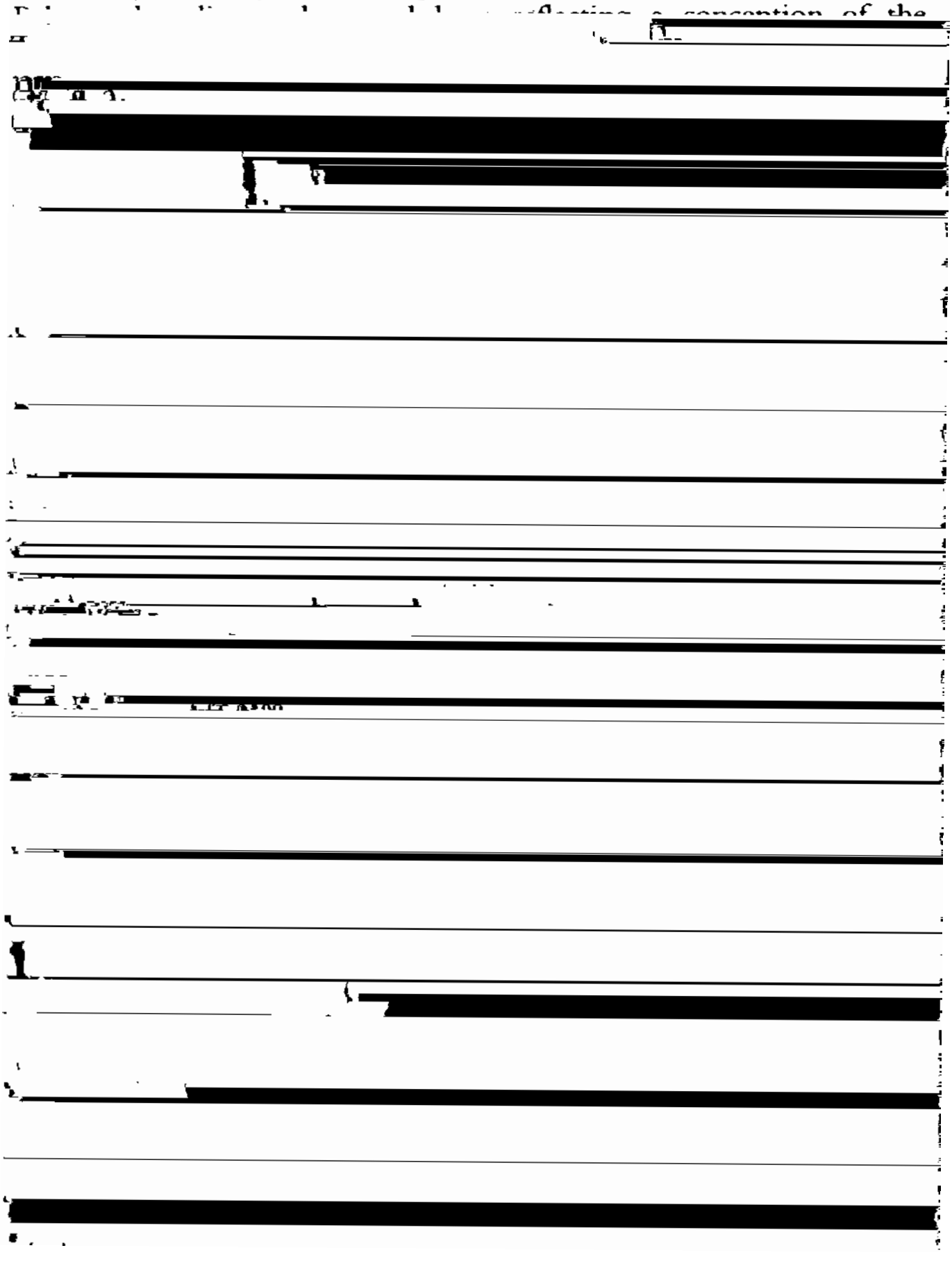


However, even though teachers' beliefs may be strongly held, teachers do change their beliefs. This leads to the third assertion: that one way for teachers' beliefs to change is as a result of being given access to new knowledge. For example, teachers may change their beliefs significantly by being given access to new research-based knowledge on children's learning even if this knowledge is based on a different image of the learner than they now have. Finally, I argue that what may be needed is a 'new' image of the teacher as knower, learner and thoughtful professional — a person who is able to use new research-based

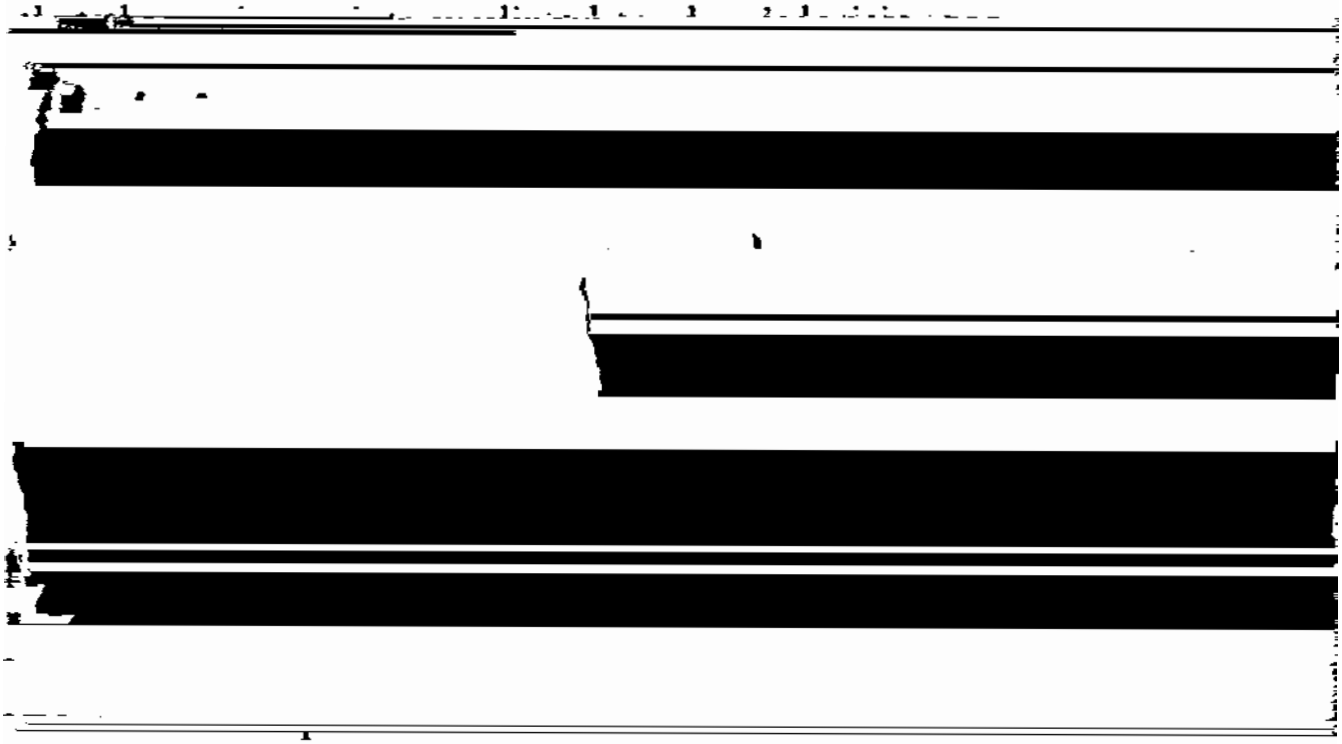


proceeds according to an evolutionary, physiological unfolding of abilities. Nativist teachers viewed this unfolding process as largely outside the influence of teachers or parents. Thus, they probably held back or retained children in kindergarten because they perceived that these children were not physiologically ready for first grade. In

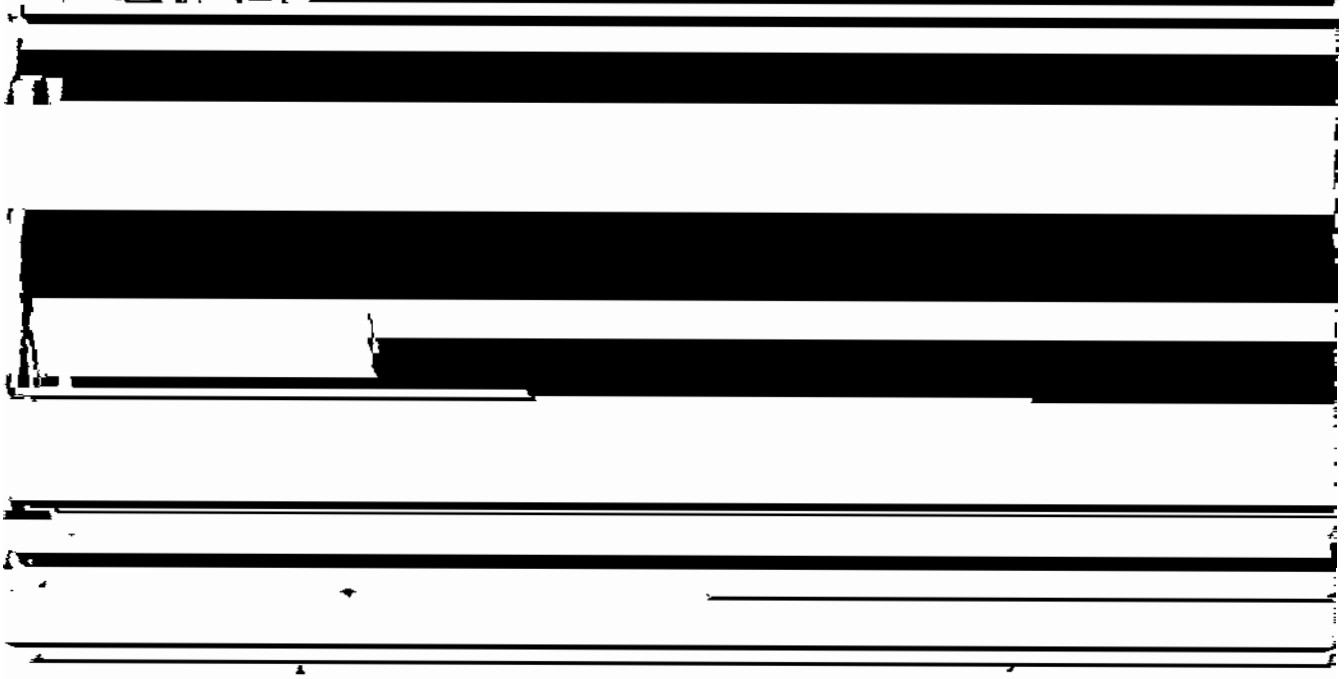
Palmer suggested nativist beliefs about the learner similar to the beliefs expressed by the kindergarten teachers that Smith interviewed.



of boys and minority children were held back, far in excess of the test-recommended proportions (p. 168), is consistent with the claim



In sum, certain dominant images of the learner and learning may be significantly related to teachers' retention practices. These include a

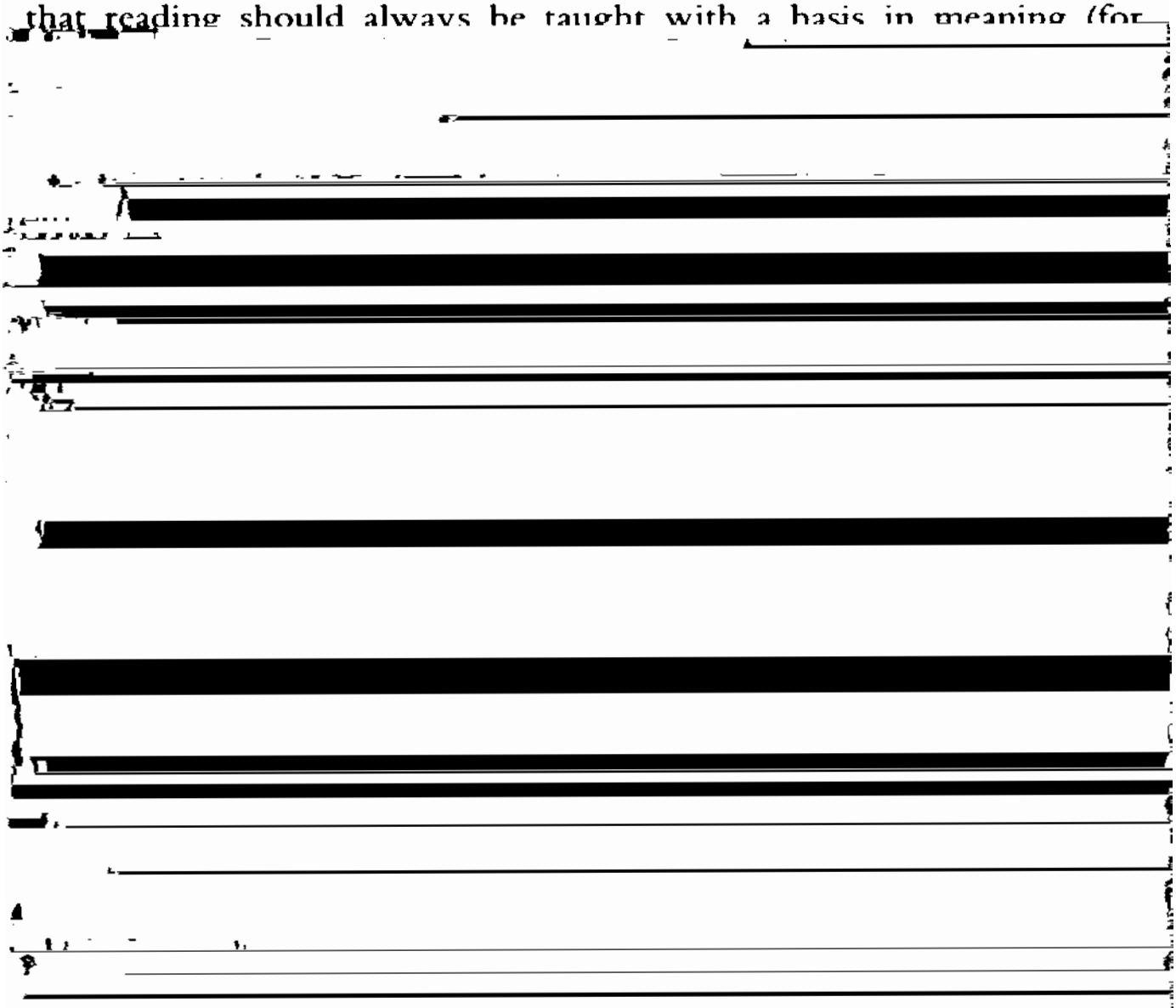


must hold the learner back until the learner has matured enough or is developmentally ready to go on. However, another idea is that the learner must acquire or learn 'basic facts' before the learner is able to go and master other skills and engage in 'higher-order' thinking and problem solving. Both these conceptions of the learner seem to be strongly related to the notion of holding the student back. In contrast,

suggest that a better metaphor is that knowledge is stored in the learner's head as a network of concepts or constructs and thus, the mind of the learner is like a 'tinker toy'. Learning involves the making of connections between the learner's existing network of knowledge and the new information to be learned. Instruction should facilitate these connections and the process of education might be defined as the construction of knowledge by the learner.

In a network theory of cognition and learning, the concepts of 'lower' and 'higher' order learning may not make sense. For example, computational skills may not exist as lower-order prerequisites for

mathematics education, such an argument applies equally well to teaching the basics in reading (see, for example, Anderson *et al.*, 1985). Recent theory and research suggest that students benefit from instructional practices that relate new knowledge in a meaningful way to the knowledge that they have already developed. This means, for example, that reading should always be taught with a basis in meaning (for



that mathematics computation should be taught in the context of real-world problem solving (for example, Resnick, 1985; Carpenter, Fennema and Peterson, 1984).

In the following discussion, I use the case of learning and teaching of addition and subtraction in first-grade mathematics to illustrate the

subtraction problem. These strategies have a clear relationship to the type of problem children are solving.

Children's Informal Knowledge of Mathematics

When young children first begin to solve addition and subtraction word problems, they are limited in their thinking about the problem to creating a direct concrete representation of the problem. For example, they use their fingers, physical objects, or counters to represent each quantity and the problem, and they can represent only the specific action or relationship described in the problem. For example, suppose a kindergarten child were given the following problem, 'Melissa has

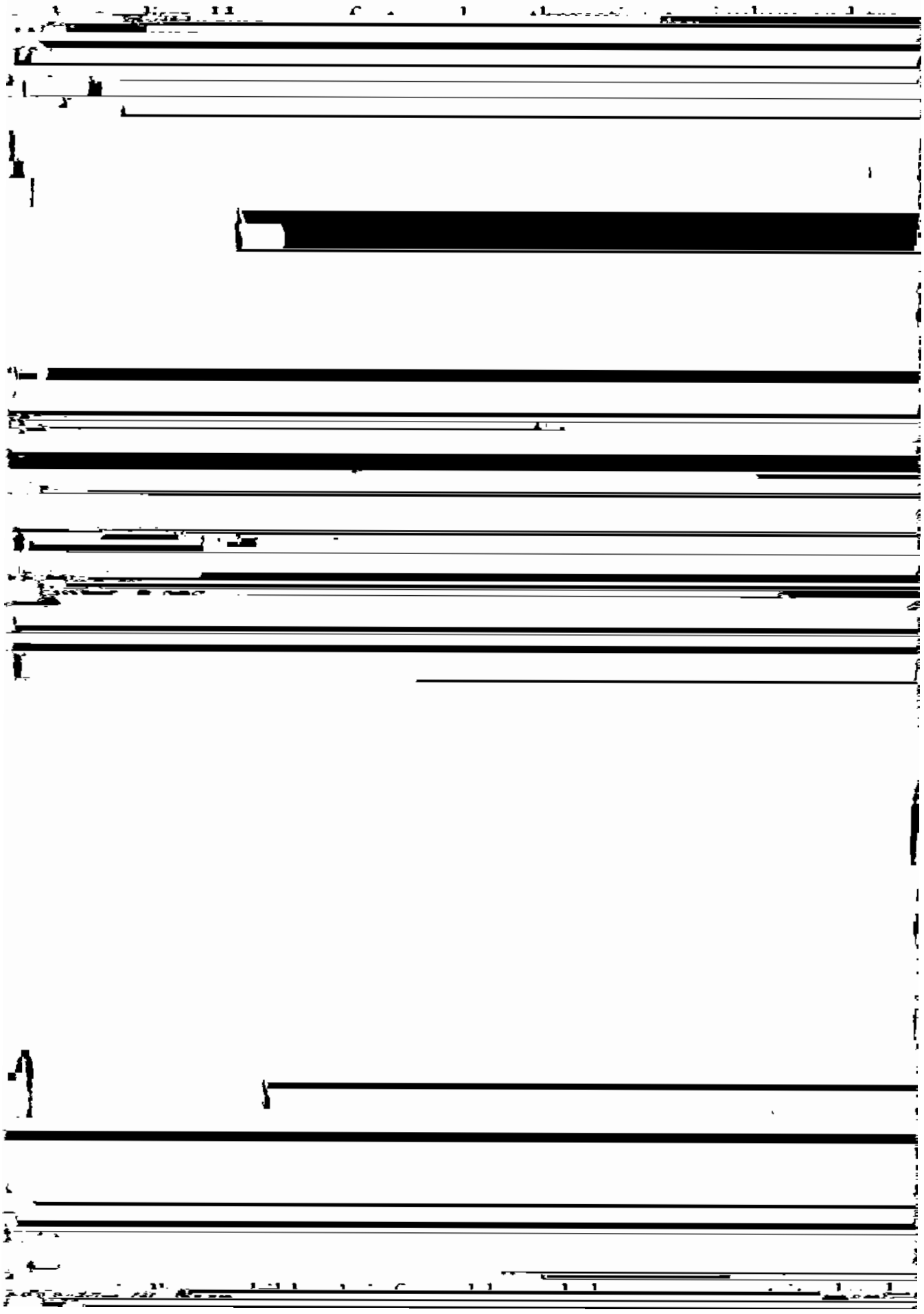
altogether?' To solve this problem, the child might use counters to make a set of three objects, add more objects until she had a total of six objects, and then count the number of objects she had added. Through

ren's use of 'derived facts' to solve a word problem presented by the teacher:

Teacher: Six frogs were sitting on lily pads. Eight more frogs joined them. How many frogs are there then?
Rudy, Denise, Theo and Sandra each answer: '14' almost immediately.
Teacher: How do you know there were 14?
Rudy: Because 6 and 6 is 12, and 2 more is 14.
Denise: Eight and 8 is 16. But this is 8 and 6. That is 2 less, so it's 14.
Theo: Well, I took 1 from the 8 and gave it to the 6. That made 7 and 7, and that's 14.
Sandra: Eight and 2 more is 10, and 4 more is 14.

and Peterson, 1987).

Researchers have shown that most children, not just bright children, figure out that new facts can be derived from the memorized facts



mathematical knowledge and understanding. A teacher who disagrees might believe instead that it is the teacher's role to organize and present mathematical knowledge; and it is the child's role to receive the mathematical knowledge presented by the teacher (Peterson *et al.*, 1989).

The Prevalence of Cognitive-Constructivist Conceptions of the Learner among First-Grade Teachers

An important question becomes, 'How prevalent is a cognitive-

learners and learners' styles. I guess learners must be actively

and verbalizing what they are doing. (Peterson *et al.*, 1989 p. 31).

Relationship of Cognitive-Constructivist Conceptions to Student Achievement

One of the most significant findings from our initial study of teachers' beliefs was the finding that teachers' conceptions were related to their students' mathematics achievement. We assessed students' achievement

An Experimental Study of Cognitive Conceptions of Learning and Classroom Practice

The possibility of a cause-effect relationship was addressed in an experimental study. Our purpose was to determine whether giving teachers access to research-based knowledge on children's mathematics learning would change teachers' conceptions of learning and make a difference in their classroom practices and subsequent student achievement.

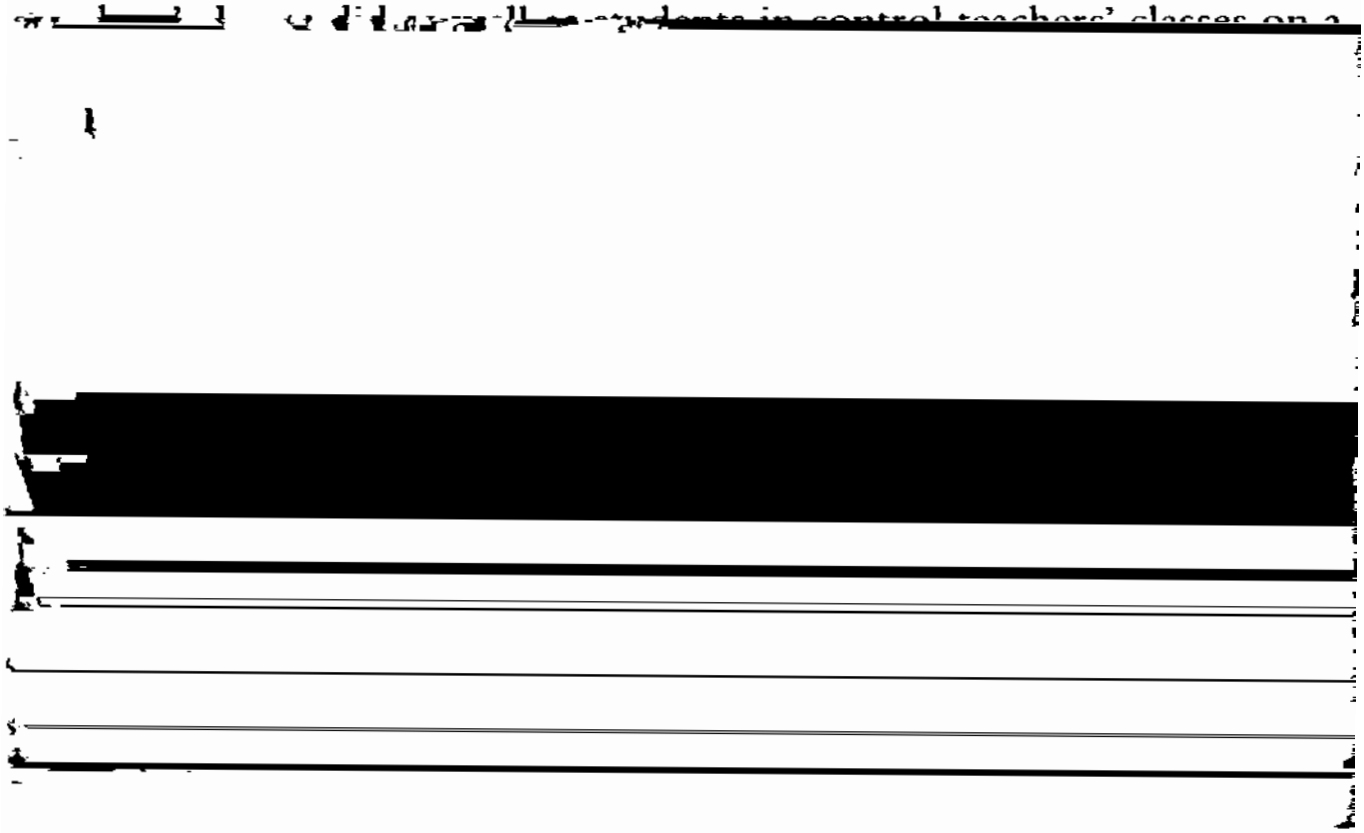
Twenty teachers were assigned randomly to an experimental group — the Cognitively-Guided Instruction (CGI) group — and twenty to a control group. Experimental teachers participated in a four-week summer workshop where we gave them access to recent findings on

[redacted]

subtraction. We did not train experimental teachers in specific techniques for altering their classroom instruction. Rather, we provided information and worked with them as 'thoughtful professionals', who construct their own knowledge and understanding. (For a complete

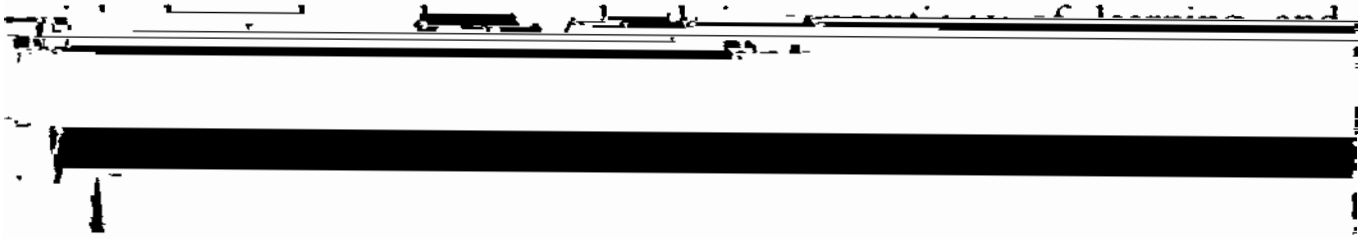
[redacted]

were more confident of their ability to solve word problems and reported significantly greater understanding of mathematics than did control students. Finally, despite the observation that control teachers spent significantly *more time* on number facts, the students in CGI



computation test, and CGI students *actually did better* in their ability to recall number facts.

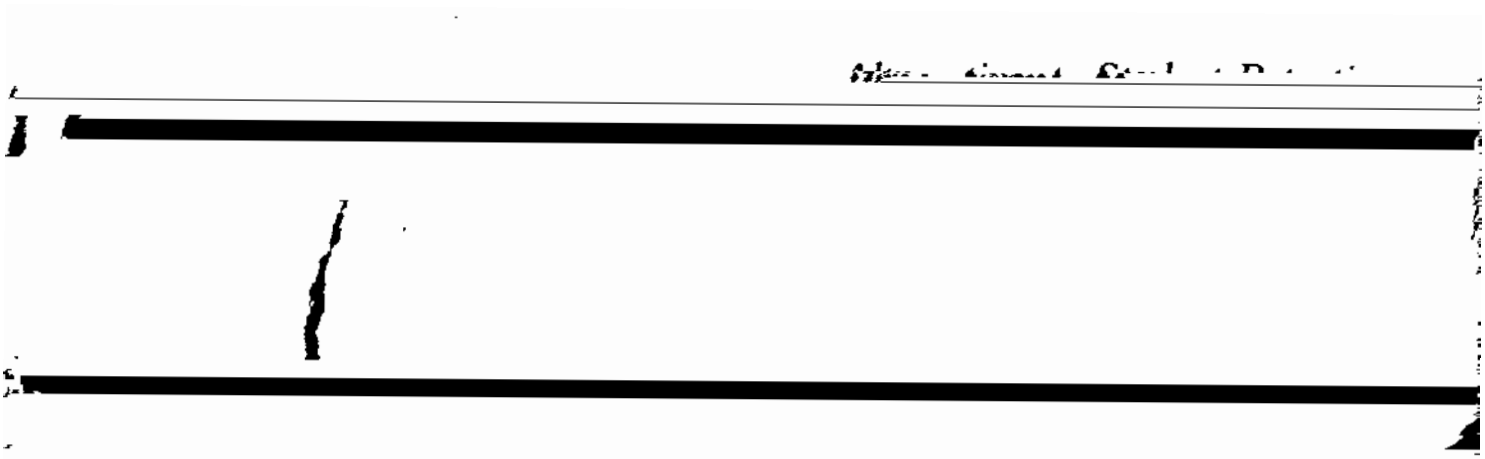
From our interview data we have evidence to suggest that teachers



> They should learn how to solve all of them ... Um, you know, I would like all my kids to be able to, if I throw out any problems, say, 'Okay, I'm going to tackle it.' You know, not throw up their hands and say, 'I can't do it.'

In a follow-up question, teacher M was asked why she decided that these kinds of word problems were important for all children in her class to learn to solve. In a revealing statement she admitted:

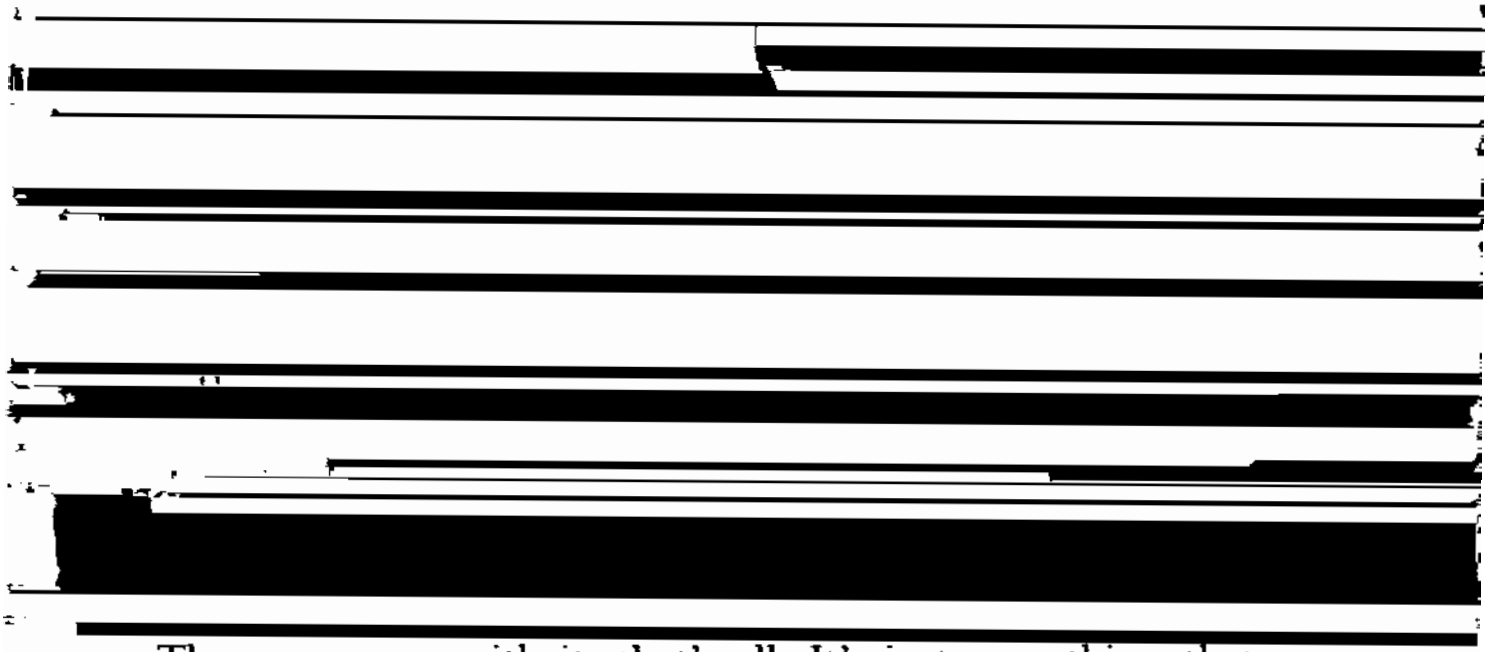
> I think that going through the workshop last summer helped,



subtraction. When asked at the end of the year to 'describe the knowledge that the children in your classroom had about addition and subtraction when they started the school year', this teacher replied:

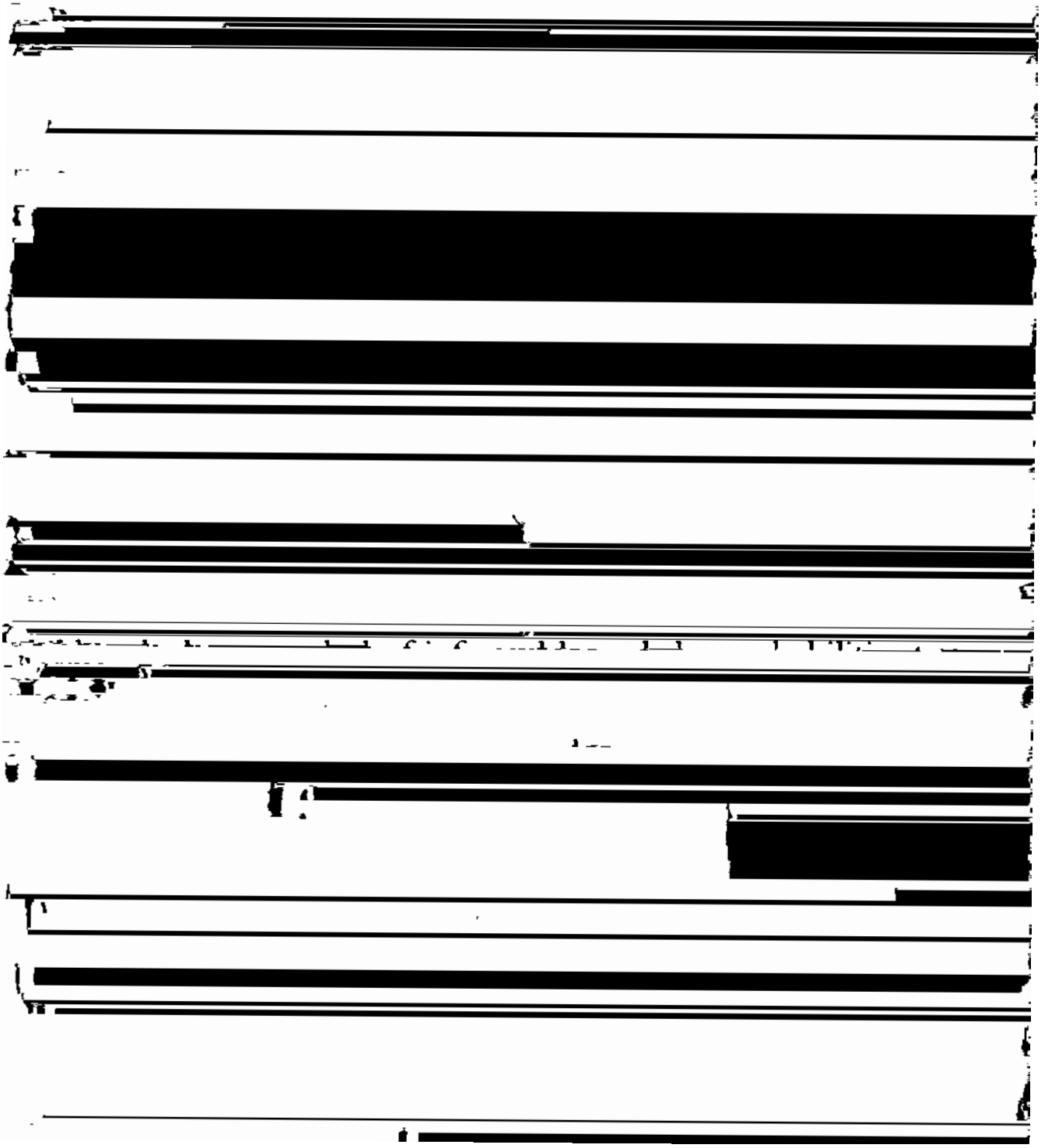
> It was all their own, basically. They had their own ideas of ways to solve the problems. They came from just a vast well. I think I counted 8 different ways that they solved the basic addition problem. It wasn't presented as a basic addition problem, but it was that. And they were generating their own concept of addition through their own past experiences.

When asked, 'Where do children get this knowledge?' the teacher



> They come up with it, that's all. It's just something that we [teachers] have to be aware of and almost have to try to fit their whole thought patterns into our scheme of the way we teach, and the way that we are going to formulate some of the roles of the concrete that we expect. So, they [children] gain it from all their different experiences that they have prior to classroom

ematics teaching, I would like to speculate on how our findings might be relevant for the issues and questions addressed in this volume. We did not ask our CGI teachers whether any children who entered their classes at the beginning of the year should have been retained in kindergarten. However, if we *had* asked this question at the end of the year, I predict that most, if not all, CGI teachers would have replied that few or no children should have been retained in kindergarten. To put it another way, a typical CGI teacher probably would have stated that all children entered her class with the ability to learn mathematics



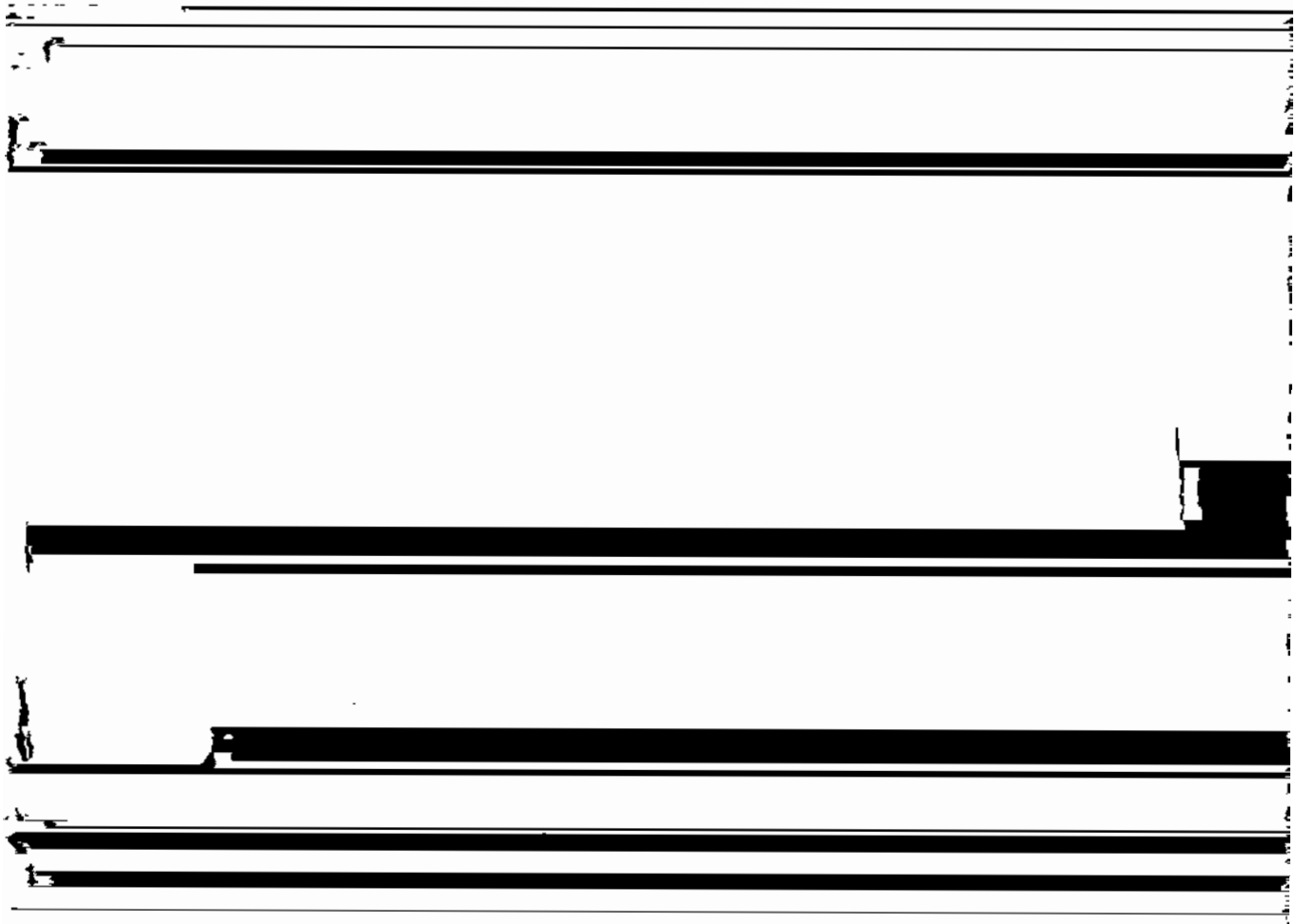
> It's embarrassing when people give you change. You know, I've gone to places, and these young teen-agers will give you change and have absolutely no idea if they are right or wrong. That's because they've learned math the wrong way. It's not that they have to be accurate 100 per cent of the time, but that they have a 'feel' that they are in the right ball park. There are certain concepts that kids should learn and feel good about ... Like if you add 0 to any number, that's going to give you the same number. [People should be able to say to themselves] 'Yes, I know this about numbers.' 'that this will happen to numbers'. and be able to build on what they know. I think some people don't have that confidence. I guess that's what I want to relate to my kids — that you know this now. You can build upon what you know.

Asking the Question: What Is Possible?

In addition to altering teachers' thinking about mathematics, teachers' goals for mathematics instruction, as well as teachers' knowledge and beliefs about the learner, the results of our study suggest that teachers

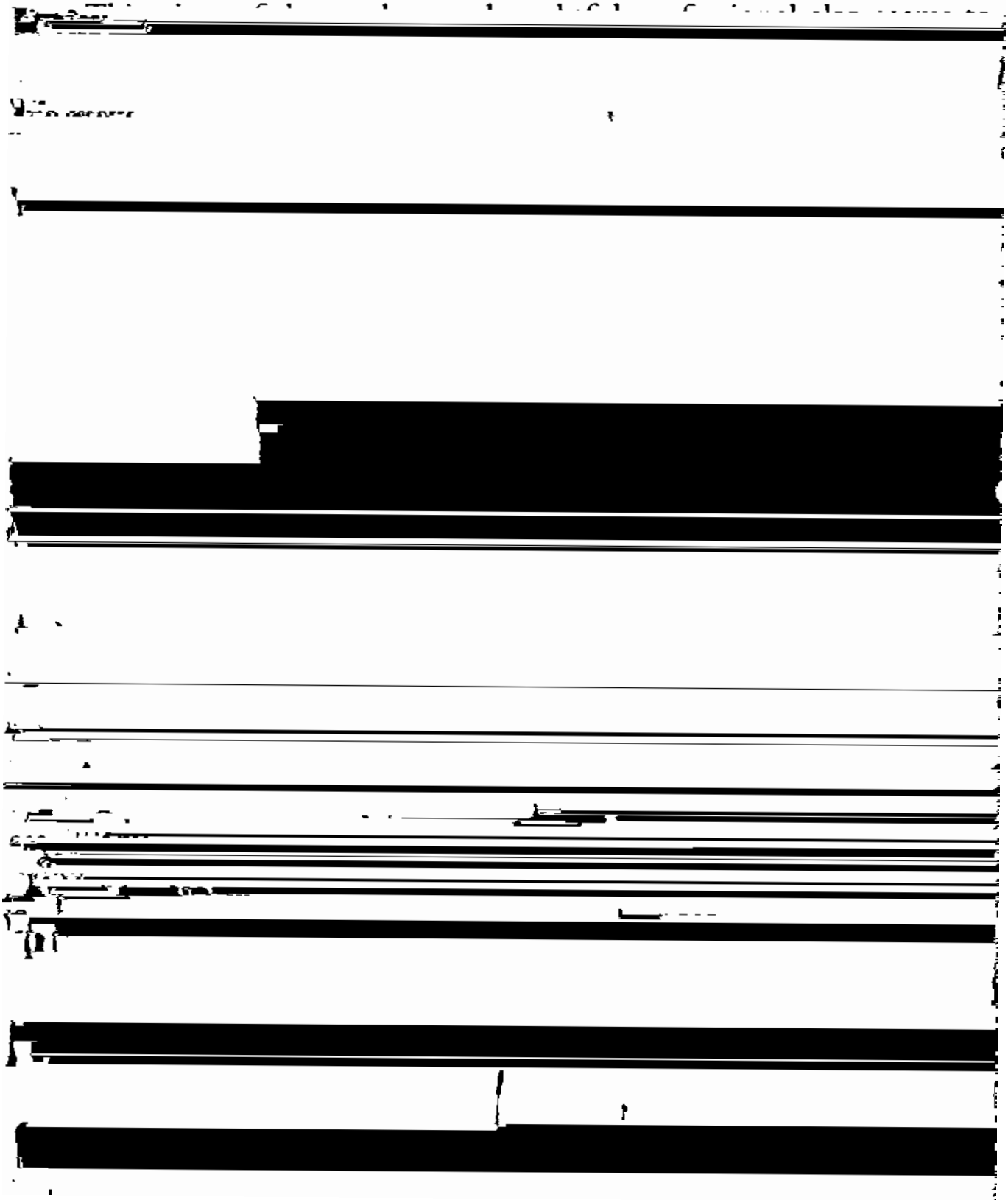
The children in teacher M's class solved this problem by constructing their own concrete representations (sets of objects) to solve the problem. The teacher and class did the problem together with the

a group of teachers in a 'study group' in mathematics problem solving. In many of her vignettes of teachers, she reports changes in teachers' beliefs and knowledge about mathematics and the learning of mathematics and changes in teachers' own mathematics knowledge as well as



tion of mathematical knowledge. The 'new' conceptions of Lampert's teachers showed some striking similarities to those of our CGI teachers. As the result of interacting with teachers in the solving of word problems, Lampert (1987) reported that teachers changed their ideas on the following: (i) what it means to know 'subtraction'; (ii) connecting teaching with the meaning of knowing; (iii) conceptualizing the standards for deciding whether students are learning what they are supposed to be learning away from a traditional belief that 'knowing mathematics' can be measured by whether students follow the rules for proceeding through the conventional arithmetic algorithm; (iv) a new conception of 'listening' to students' mathematics thinking; and (v) conceptualizing math as 'figuring things out' vs. math as 'getting things done'. These findings as well as those of others who have studied teachers' thinking and decision making (Clark and Peterson, 1986;

such an image of the teacher assumes that for any changes in classroom practice to occur they must, ultimately, be mediated through the minds of teachers. Thus, reforms of classroom practice depend on teachers, educators, administrators, and policy makers taking seriously the centrality of teachers' professional knowledge, in attempting to implement education reform.



volume but also on larger issues of education reform, currently being discussed at the state and local levels.

Notes

1 Work on this chapter was in part supported by the Center for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) which is funded by a grant from the US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Grant No. OERI-G-008690011). The views expressed in this chapter are those of the individual author and are not necessarily shared by the US Department of Education, Rutgers University, Michigan State University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison or Stanford University. Some research reported in this chapter was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation (Grant No. MDR-8550236) to Drs. Elizabeth Fennema, Thomas Carpenter and Penelope Peterson through the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Opinions expressed in this chapter do not necessarily reflect those of the co-principal investigators or the National Science Foundation.

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Chapter 10:
Policy Implications of Retention Research

Ernest R. House

Editors' Introduction

Ernie House is Director of the Laboratory for Policy Studies and Professor of Education at the University of Colorado-Boulder. He is internationally recognized as a scholar in educational evaluation and educational change. Because of

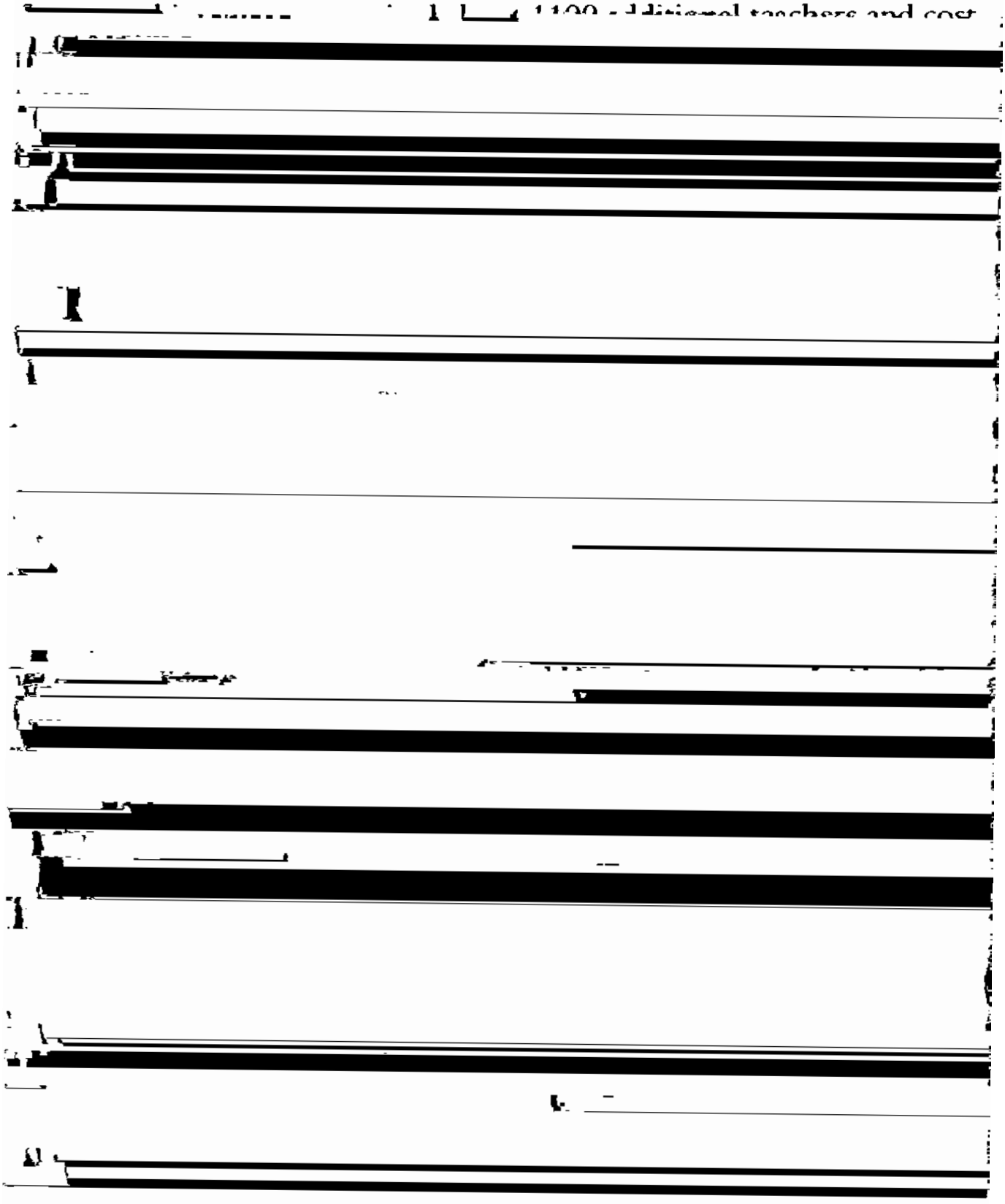
[redacted]

retention research.

Professor House has first-hand knowledge of retention policy issues, having chaired the audit team called in to investigate the evaluation of New York City's Promotional Gates Program. Here he relates the New York experience and uses

[redacted]

twenty or fewer students with specially trained teachers and special materials and programs, where the students would stay until they acquired the necessary skills to enable them to progress to the higher grades, that is until they had attained the appropriate test scores. The



retained at grade level every year; no one knows exactly how many. The formalized retention programs which employ standardized test scores and rigid cut-off points are recent innovations, but the basic practice has long been an integral feature of American schools. It is an extremely important educational practice because of its great cost —

because of the powerful negative effects upon the students retained.

This book demonstrates that the practice of retaining students in grade is absolutely contrary to the best research evidence. Few practices in education have such overwhelmingly negative research findings arrayed against them. Yet educational professionals and the public are almost universally in favor. This is an unusual situation: much of the time the best educational practice is far in advance of educational

dramatic, but they too show negative effects for the students retained. Overall, these statistics present a stark picture of the negative consequences of flunking children.

Of the sixty-three studies included in Holmes' meta-analysis, only nine recent ones completed in the 1980s reported some positive effects of holding children back. These positive studies were alike in that the programs were all in suburban settings, included few if any black students, and retained students with average IQs who were reading and performing at or near the national norm. In fact, one wonders why these children were retained at all. The students were put into special classes with a low teacher/pupil ratio, given lots of extra help, and were mainstreamed part of the day. When compared to children who were passed but *did not receive any extra help* at the end of a particular grade, i.e. the retained children were a year older, the retained children showed positive effects. Hence, one cannot say that retention has negative effects for all students under all circumstances. But one might ask why none of these studies provided the truly critical comparison of *retention and remediation* compared to *promotion and remediation*.

Negative results were also found when investigating 'transition rooms' and other means of retaining children in kindergarten. If there is [redacted]

sided in finding negative effects from flunking students. I know of no educational practice in which the research is in such agreement.

Why Does This Occur?

What do the major participants in these events think about the [redacted]

[redacted]

educators and parents in a large city. Fully 74 per cent of the principals, 65 per cent of the teachers and 59 per cent of the parents in this school [redacted]

[redacted]

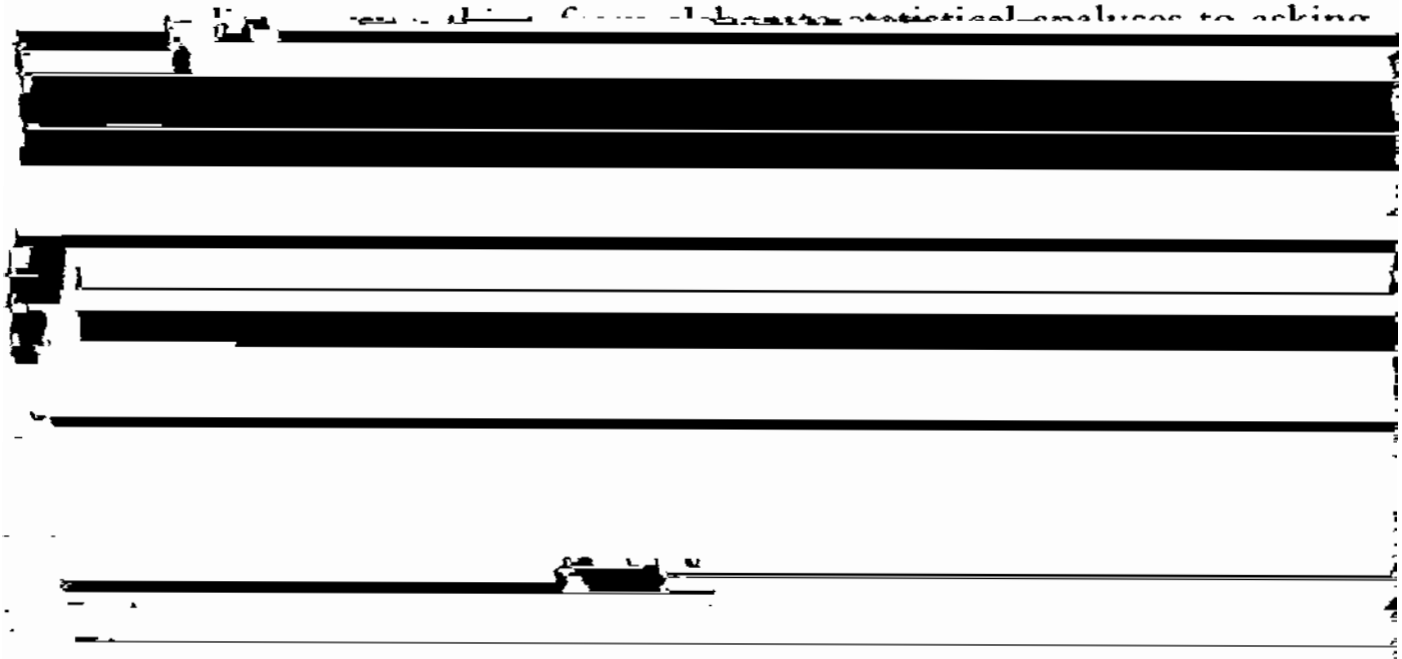
the immediate trauma of the event. Flunking evokes ridicule and [redacted]

per cent of the students, whereas teachers of other beliefs, such as the 'remediationists', held back less than 1 or 2 per cent. The remedia-

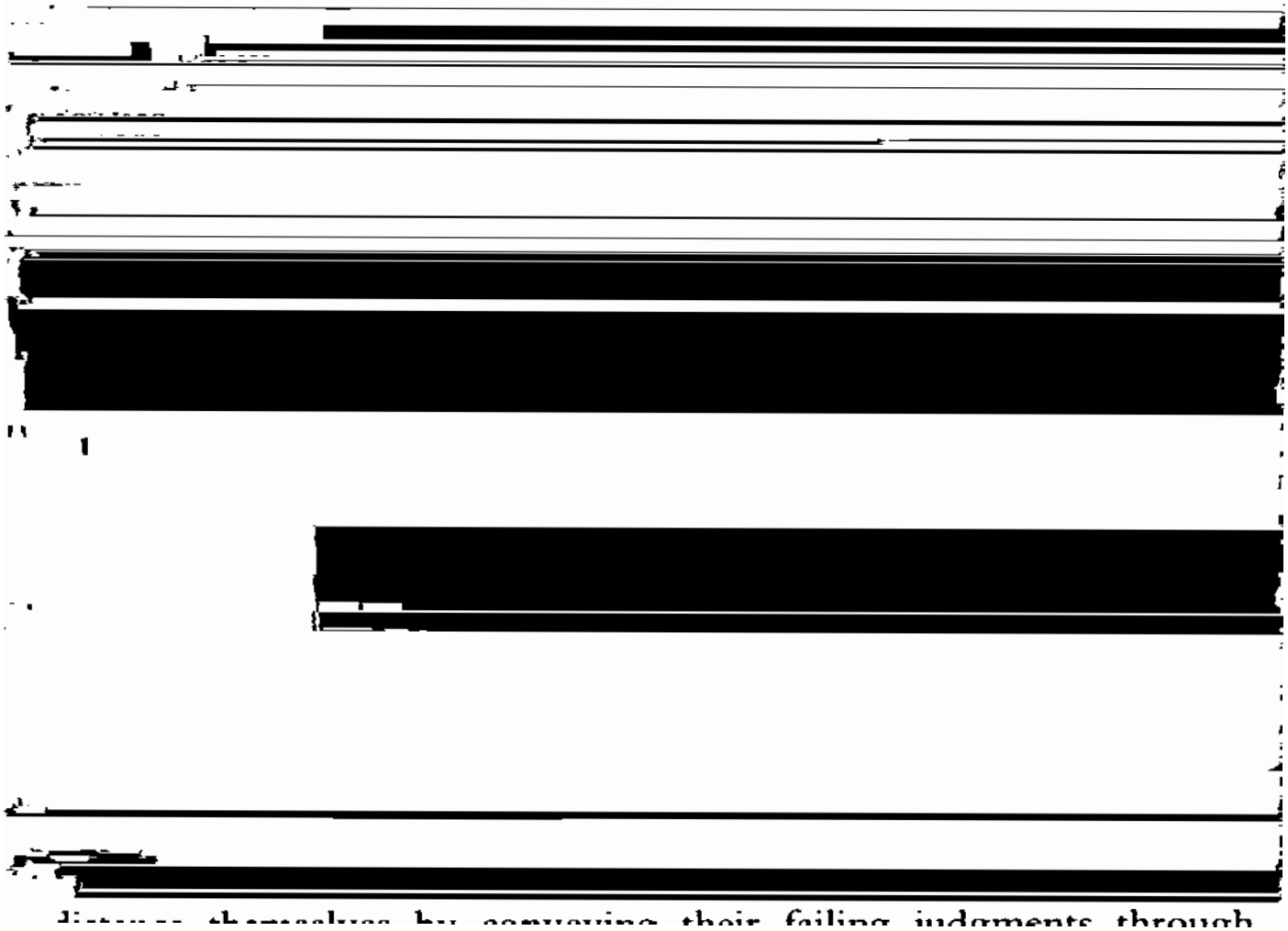
Conclusions

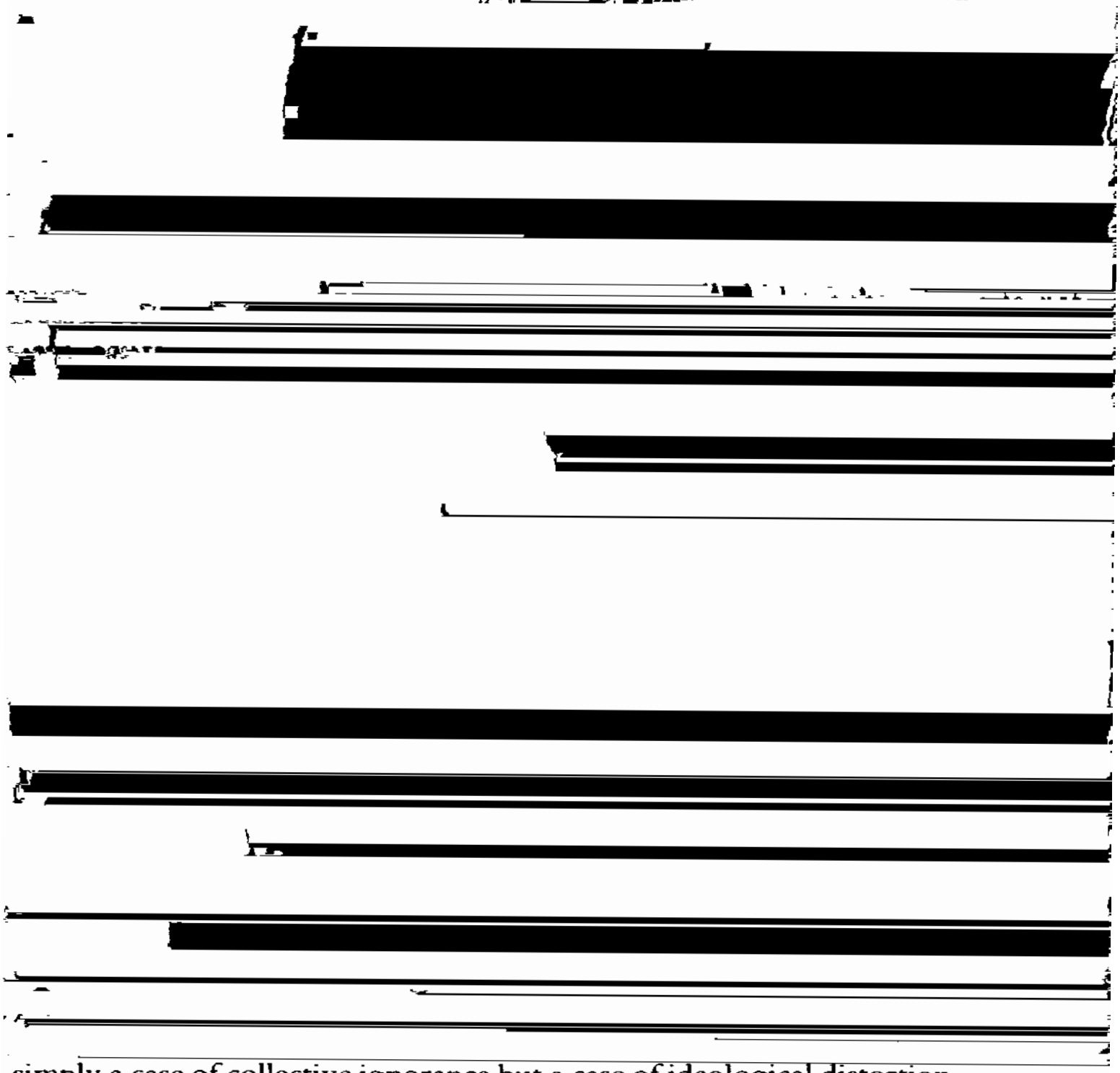
This then is the picture that emerges from the studies in this book. Students are retained in rather arbitrary and inconsistent ways, and those flunked are more likely to be poor, males and minorities, although holding students back is practiced to some degree in rich and poor [illegible]. The effects of flunking are immediately traumatic to the

is eminently ignorable. In this case, however, the evidence is extensive and unequivocal. It includes test scores, teacher ratings, parent ratings, interviews, surveys, personality and emotional adjustment measures,



students how they feel. Almost everything points in the same direction — retention is an extremely harmful practice.





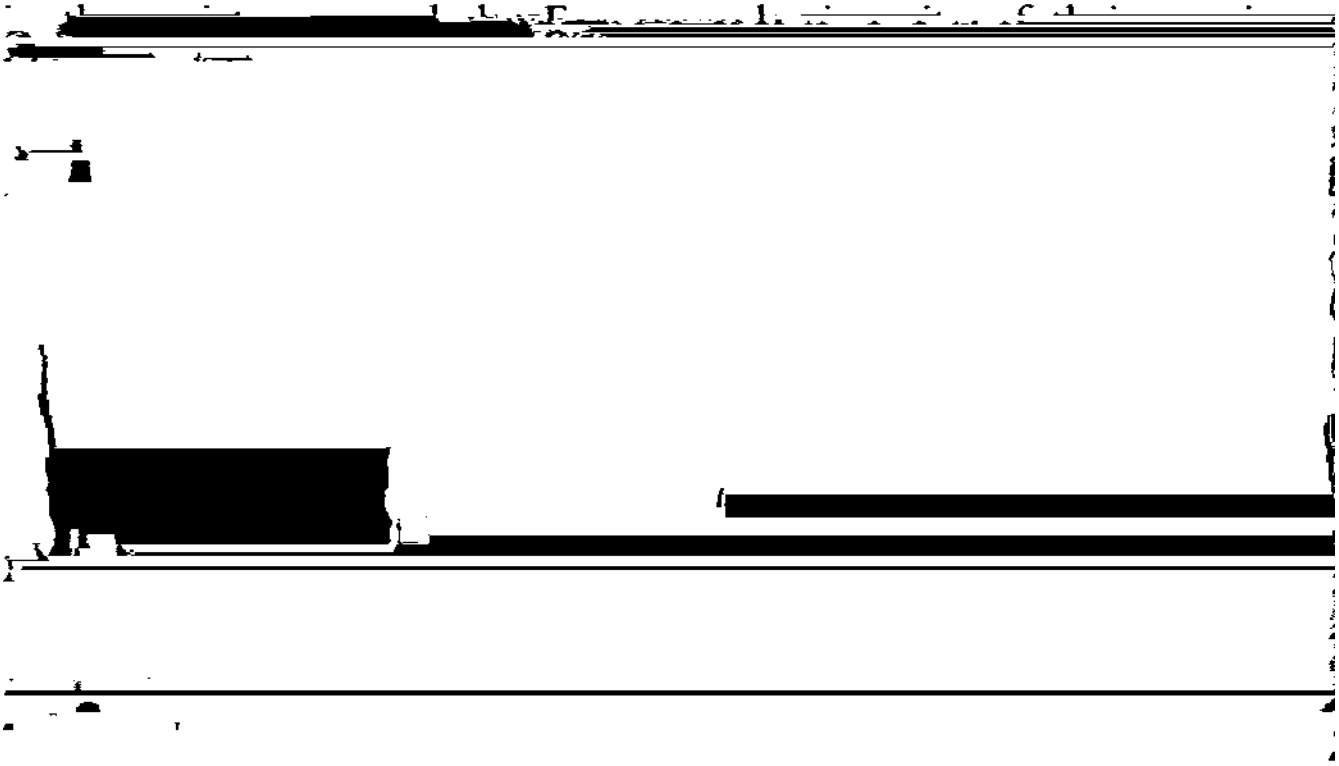
simply a case of collective ignorance but a case of ideological distortion.

I will not labor the point further other than to say that contemporary American beliefs assume that children will have approximately equal life chances and that this will be accomplished primarily though education that will provide knowledge and skills that will enable them to compete in the world. It is apparent that this equalization of life chances has not been successful for many, especially minority students. The blame is most often placed upon the students personally for not availing themselves of the educational opportunities rather than upon the social system itself. Retaining students appears to be a way of instilling the needed skills, though in reality it is a way of increasing the

Short of that, school districts should or should be required to

about the ills of this practice to prevent them from fomenting unwise policies.

I expect the effort to abolish student retention in the United States to be long and hard. It is a practice, like bleeding patients, that exists with public approval because professionals don't know what else to do with certain students and because it serves important vested interests



experience and failure with their retention program, the New York City schools have recently hired a new superintendent from Minneapolis who gained recognition for his 'Promotional Gates' program there. He is considering reinstituting such a program in New York City once again.

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Chapter 11:
Flunking Grades: A Recapitulation

Mary Lee Smith and Lorrie A. Shepard

In this volume we have presented a point of view about retention in grade. We were not always partisans. We formed this point of view as

Repeating a Grade Has No Benefits for Either School

Achievement or Personal Adjustment

promoted achieve at the same or higher levels than comparable at-risk students who have been retained and spent two years rather than one year in a grade. The negative effect (the achievement of retained students being less than that of promoted students) ranged in magnitude from one-fifth to one-third standard deviation (an effect between

kindergarten. Although they are predicated on the idea that immature

grade experience, controlled studies show that children so treated do no better than their counterparts who are promoted directly into first grade. The findings of no difference or no benefit hold whether the children were selected for retention on the basis of immaturity or low

expressed the personal beliefs that retentions, when handled properly

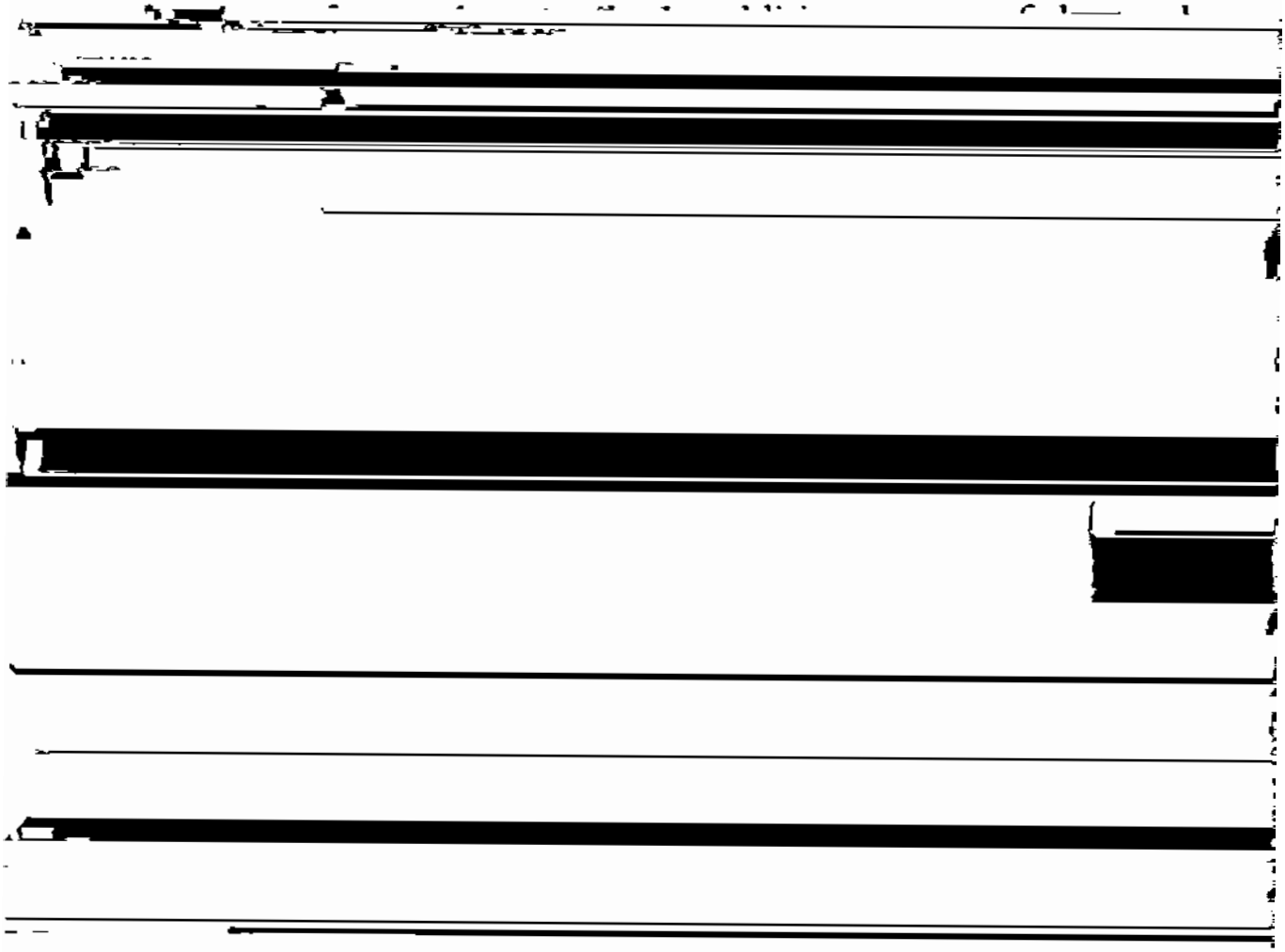
personal adjustment. For example, they believe that the retained child will be one of the top students in the class he or she repeats. Immature, frustrated and troublesome in his or her original grade, the child will be happy, confident and a classroom leader the second time through. Teachers deny the possibility that the children might be bored or careless when they encounter the same worksheets and lessons they had worked through once before. Nor do teachers pay much attention to

deficient learning skills. If kindergartners still have not mastered letter sounds in May, they need another dose of instruction before they can be taught the next skill in the sequence, such as word attack skills. According to this belief, retention for another year in grade is the conventional way to provide this extra dose of instruction. Teachers at all levels worry that, if they promote children who have not mastered grade-level skills, the next grade teachers will send the promoted but incompetent children back to them or otherwise vilify the socially promoting teachers.

Our reviewers added to our interpretations of the discrepancy

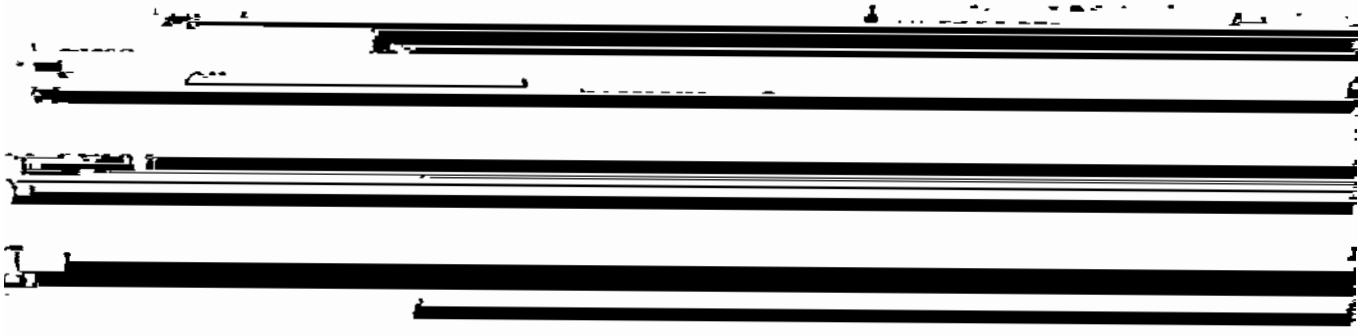
conclude that things would have been better if only he had been retained. When a low-achieving child is retained and still struggles,

ways of ensuring a more homogeneous set of entry-level skills among the kindergartners and first graders. Placement of children in transition classes restricted not only the range of abilities with which the teacher would have to cope, but also restricted the possibilities that children



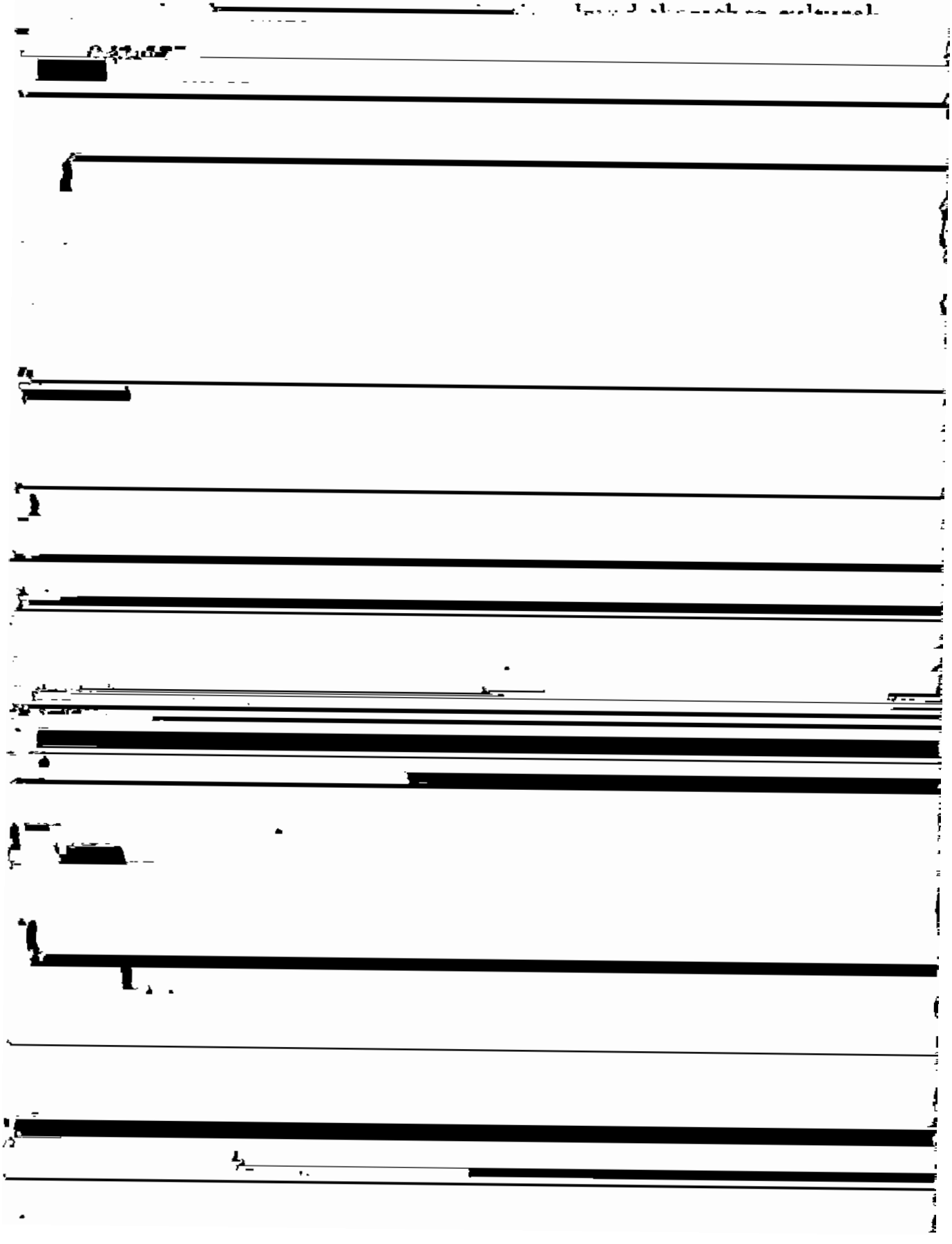
made use of within-class ability groups as the sole means of dealing with heterogeneous abilities and proficiencies.

Evidence suggests, however, that all such arrangements offer, at best, a temporary and, at worst, the contrary effect. Retaining a child in first grade means that the next year some first grade teacher will have pupils with a range of ages of well over two years, with corresponding variations in size, maturity and accomplishment. In any elementary

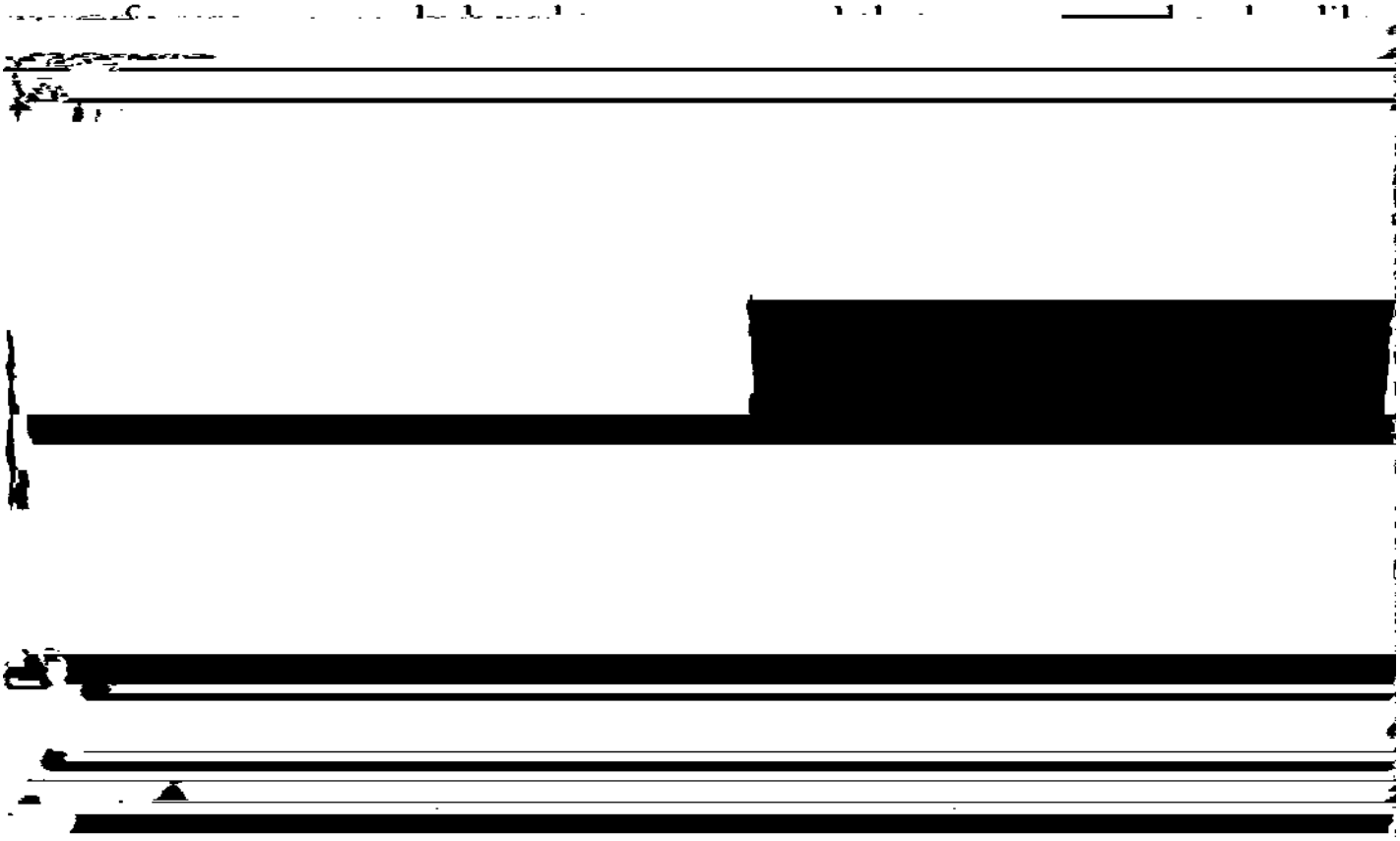


educated increased, the structure of the schools changed.

Grading was a response to two forms of pressure exerted on the

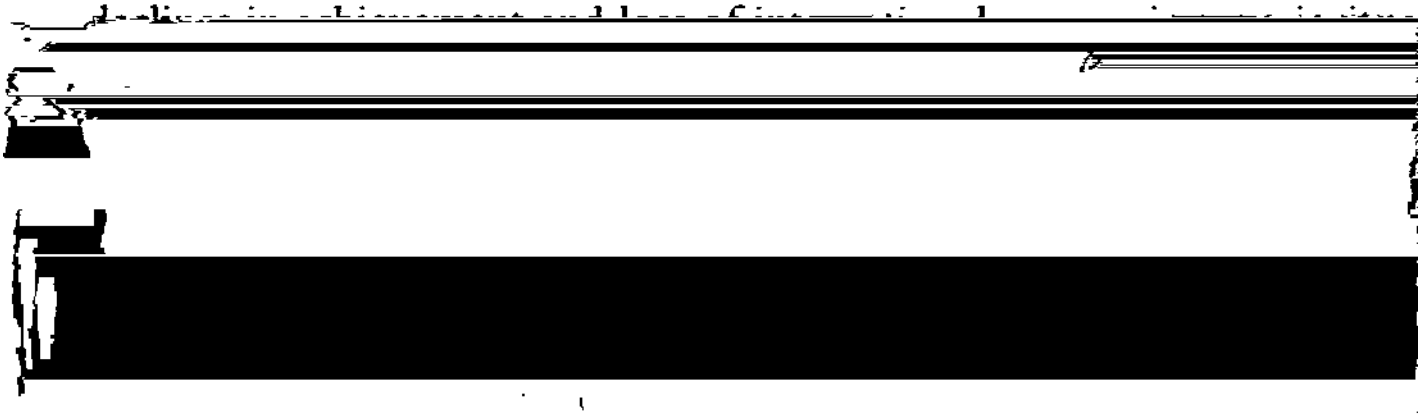


assume that low achievers are just slightly behind and will be positively motivated to avoid retention by just working harder. Yet the same

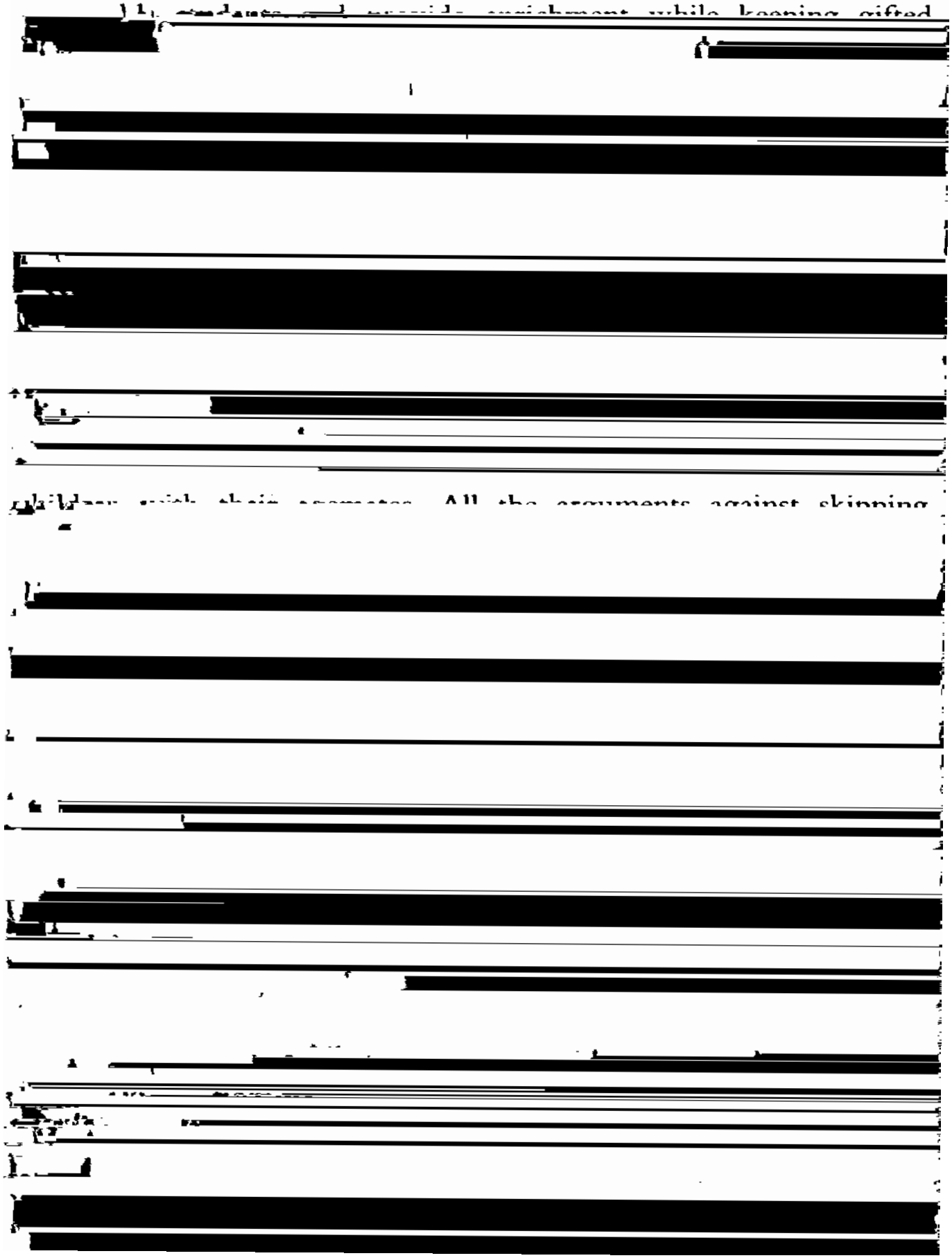


those in Chicago are five years' behind in achievement, should spend five years in eighth grade.

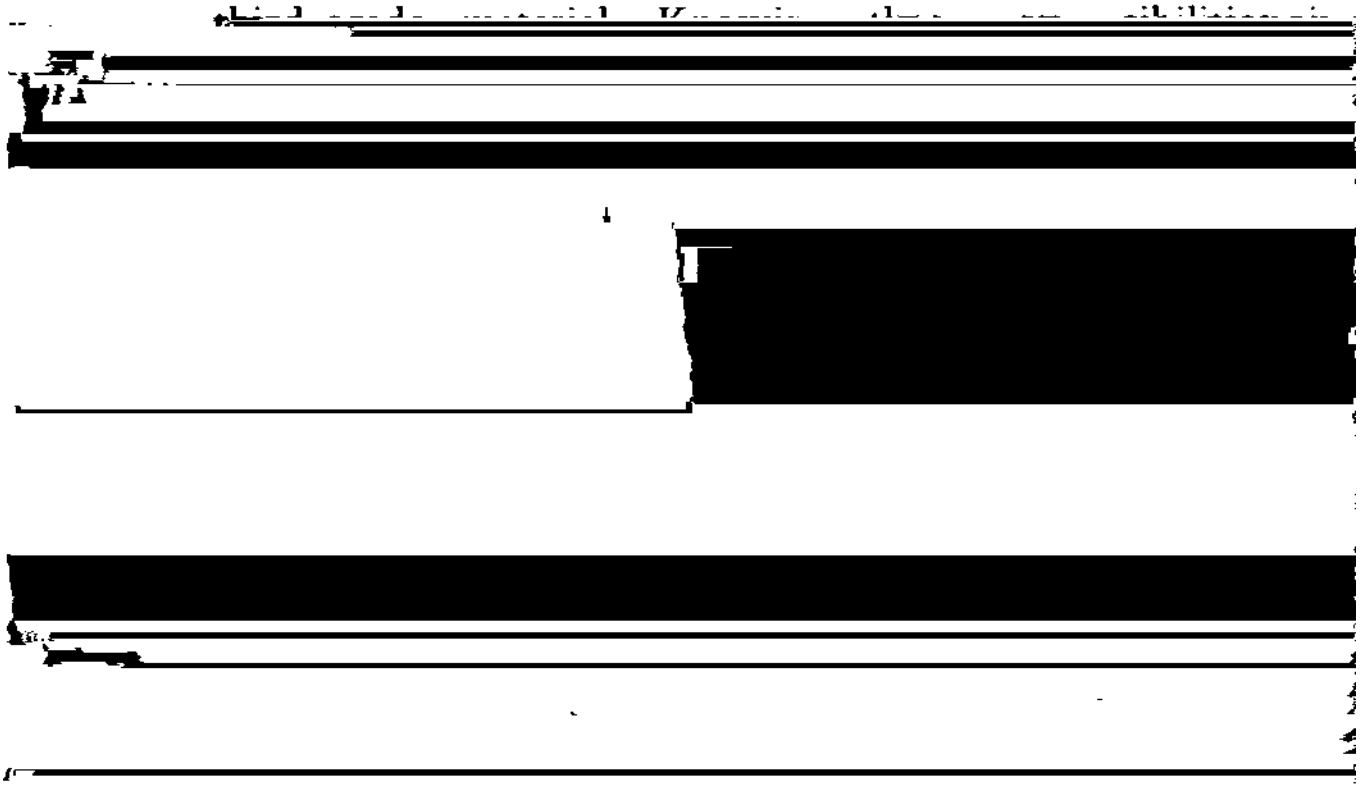
Since a true merit-based promotion system is economically impossible, retentions in practice are largely symbolic (Ellwein and Glass, chapter 8). Superintendents and policy-makers advocate promotion based on mastery of grade-level skills and, by so doing, project a tough public image and increase the support of a community worried about



ment. Nor is a child's precocity uniform in all subject areas. Today's teachers are expected to adapt instruction to accommodate the needs of

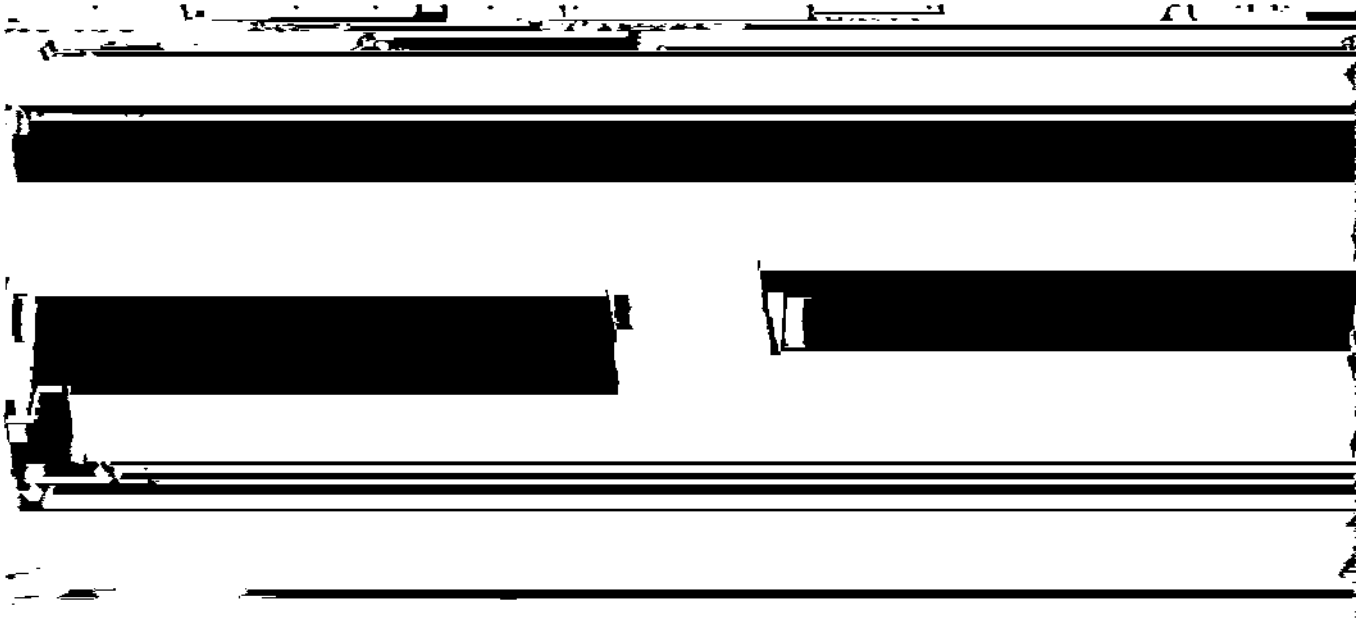


in the fall must have mastered the material prescribed by the second grade guide. This is tantamount to the raw material that comes into the manufacturing division of a factory. And like the quality control function in a factory, the third-grade teacher is held responsible for the outputs, namely, mastery of

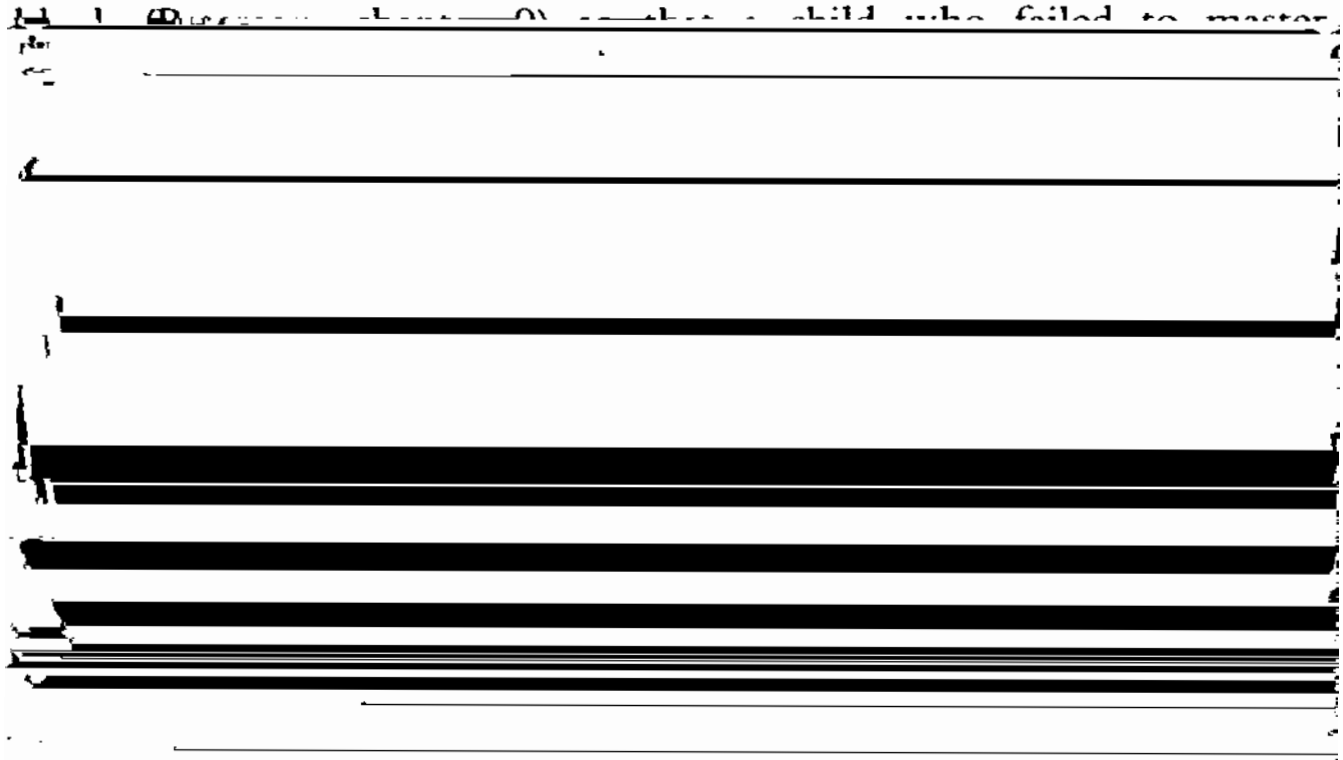


advance the third-grade teachers may reject the raw material, send it back to second grade, lest they themselves fail the accountability test nine months later.

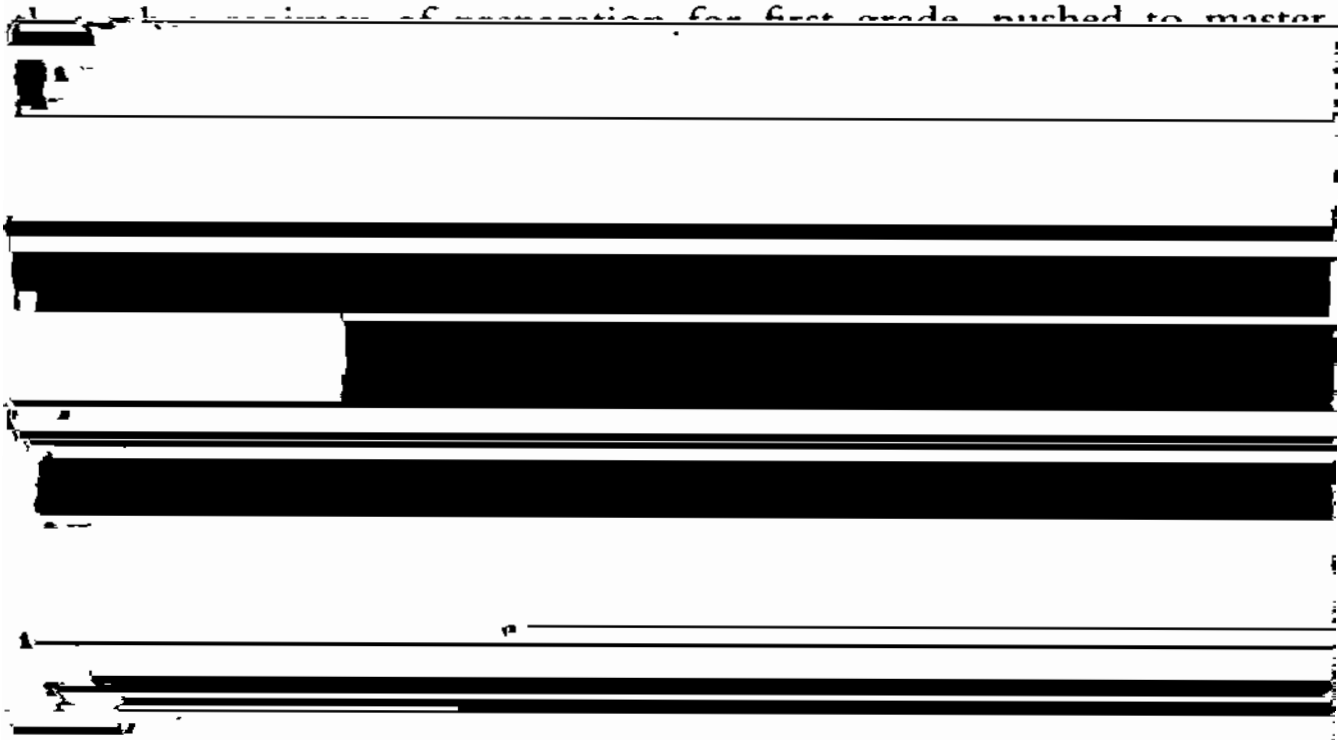
Testing for grade-level mastery is a growing trend, and such



focuses on literacy, narrowly defined. In these schools, the purpose of education is seen as instilling skills in reading and mathematics. The curriculum is seen as linear, one block resting on a previously learned



grade-level skills must be recycled before he or she can go on to the next block. Retention is a logical consequence. Second, we saw that this narrow, literacy-defined curriculum is pushed downward into kindergartens. Instead of being a time for socialization and acquiring good work habits and good feelings about school, kindergartners are put



the negative evidence on retention, suggested that educators ought to institute a diagnostic and consultative decision-making process to determine whether children should be retained in grade. This staffing process would resemble that used in special education placement. The reasoning behind such a recommendation is this. Although the effects

and 6). Instead they know directly that they failed and are teased by other children who know. Correlations of successful retention with chronological age, gender, or size are larger in teachers' minds than they are in the results of careful empirical research.

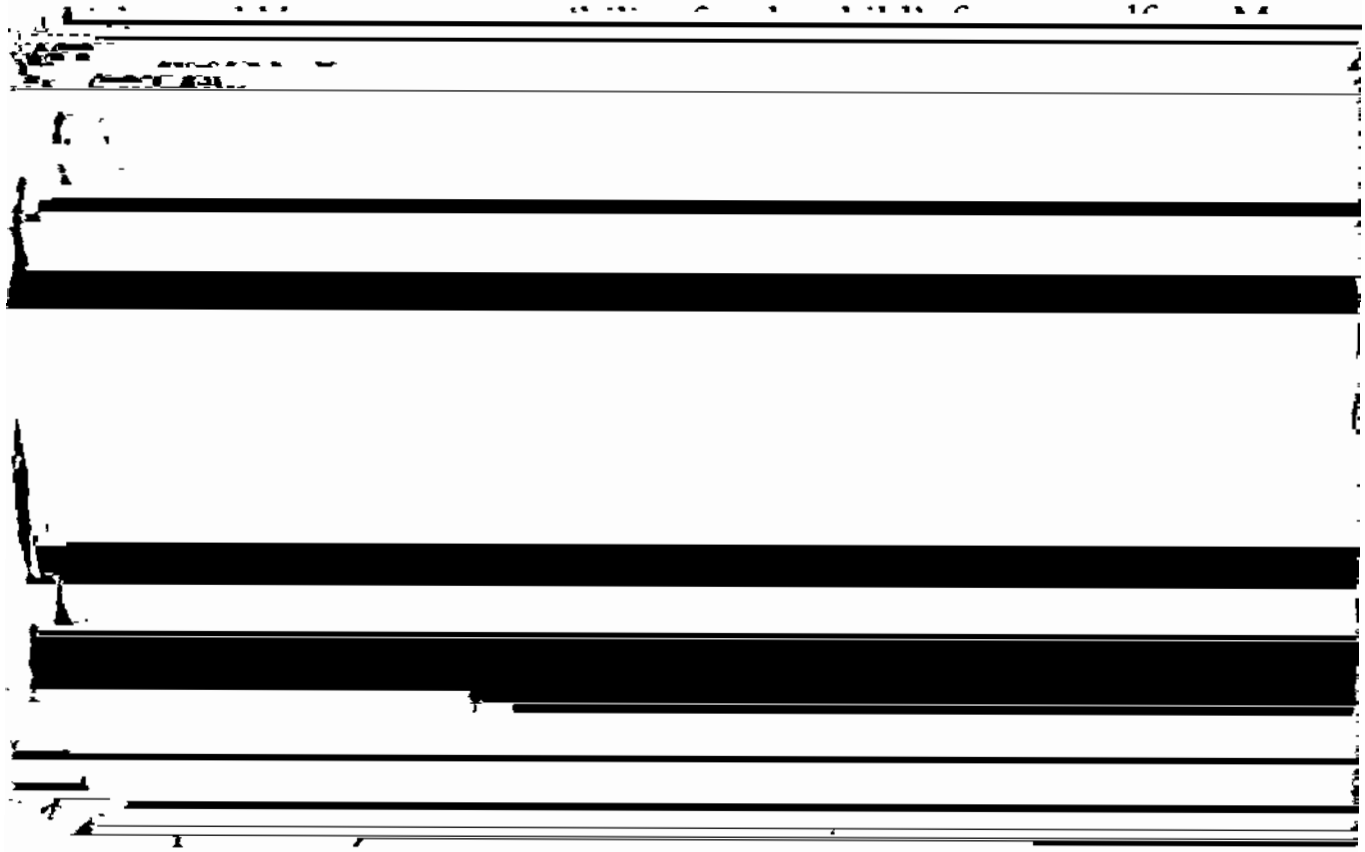
Alternatives

Dissemination and Action Research

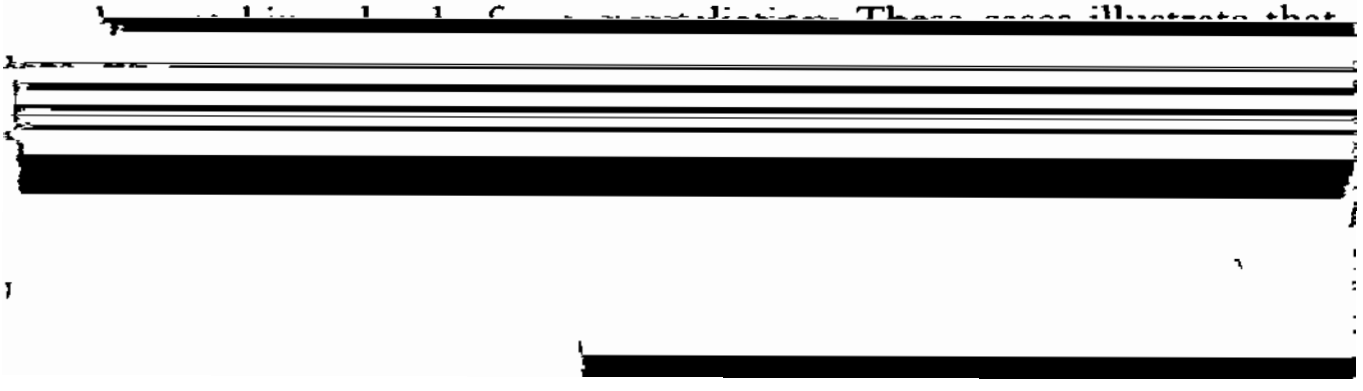
Following Peterson (chapter 9), we advocate programs in which teachers are given access to the evidence on the effects of retention. They should have time to consider the implications of this research in their own settings. In those places where the factory model does not govern schools and where teachers have some power to alter curriculum and school organization, teachers may be open to knowledge that is both new and contrary to their common sense. For example, our findings were presented to a group of teachers in a school district. They were persuaded by the results and formed study groups and eventually worked toward a new school organization that would allow for alternatives to retention. Action research, conducted by

Parental Action

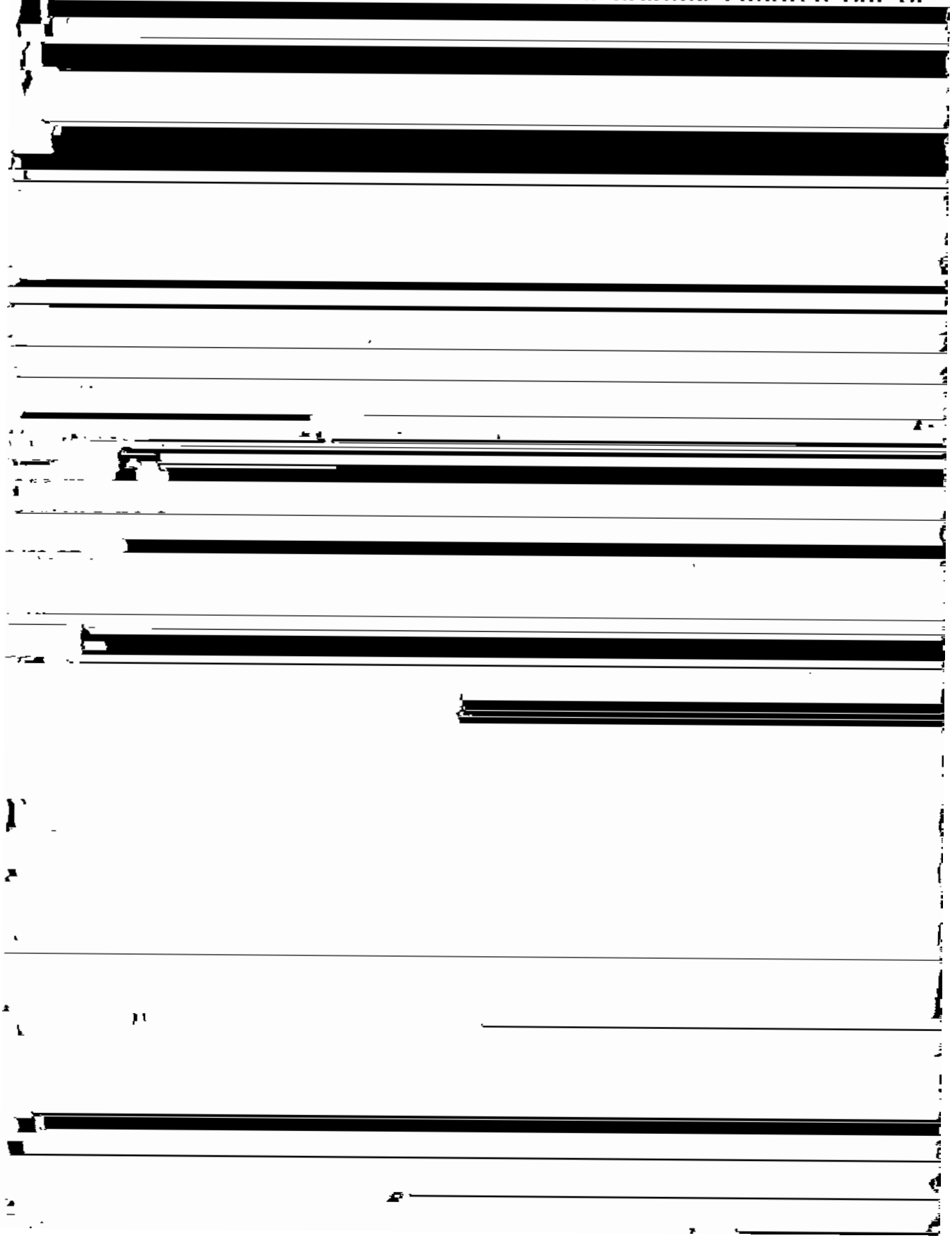
In our study, high-retaining teachers attempted to persuade parents as soon as their children became candidates for retention. Teachers promised that the children would move from the bottom of their class to the top. Teachers warned that if these children were not retained now, they would certainly fail later or otherwise come to grief. Teachers intimidated recalcitrant parents by demanding that they sign a statement that promotion was against the recommendation of the staff,



parents were convinced by the evidence or frightened into compliance. But a significant minority walked away. In many cases, they removed their children from that school into another public school or enrolled them in a private school. Some actually changed residences so that their children could be promoted with their class. Others braved the decision, keeping their children in the same school, but in the next

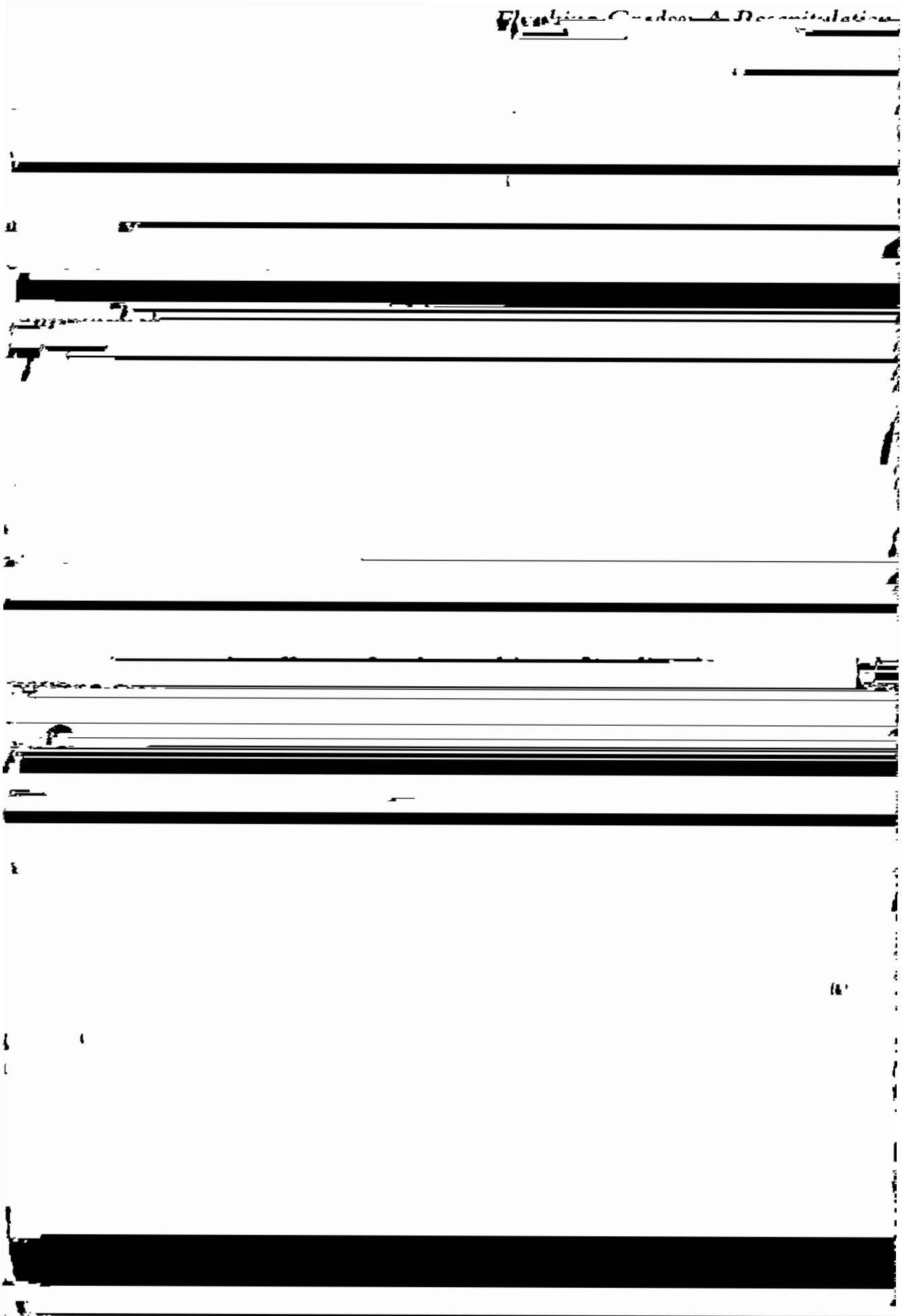


end of the third grade, however, the advantage of the oldest has disappeared, and they are indistinguishable from the rest. There is no lasting academic advantage to the practice of holding children out of



District Policy Changes

In our original policy study (Shepard and Smith 1985), we recommended to the district only that they counteract the statements made by



were not prepared to produce high average scores or year-to-year

growth on achievement tests. Teachers had the luxury of allowing individual paces for learning.

Broadening the Scope and Conception of Accountability

accountability, there will be retentions. Standardized and other competency tests are frequently used for accountability purposes when their

ease grade segregation. For example, one school developed mechanisms for moving children from one grade to another for specific instruction. Third-graders behind in reading but average in other subjects would have reading in a second-grade class and remain with their age-cohorts for the rest of the day. Some had a double dose of reading this way as

one was stigmatized for moving around. Ungraded primary organizations may serve the same function, unless the decision to retain is

material through drill-and-practice. The result is that the school experience of disadvantaged youths lacks vitality, and their slow

omit interesting applications and assignments in favor of drudgery. The premise is that students must learn fundamentals before they can be offered anything more challenging. As a

grade level production while

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