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# Smooth and rough roads to academic achievement: Retention and race/class disparities in high school<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Educational and psychological researchers have long debated the relationship between retention and achievement. However, quantitative research on achievement trajectories has neglected this important variable. Given that retention policies are being institutionalized in schools, it is important to understand the relationship between retention and achievement trajectories. We examine the National Education Longitudinal Study, 1988–1992 to determine if reading and mathematical achievement trajectories for black, white, poor, and nonpoor high school students vary by their experiences with retention. Utilizing growth modeling, we illustrate that an awareness of students' past promotion patterns through school (i.e., experiences with retention) helps us better predict achievement trajectories. Moreover, by analyzing the

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cojoined effects of race and class, we reveal disparate costs of retention. In fact, we find that poor, white retained students are particularly disadvantaged by experiences with retention. We interpret this finding in light of recent cultural explanations of race and class educational disparities and the historical and institutional stratification processes from which they derive.  
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*Keywords:* Retention; Achievement; Race; SES; Education

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## 1. Retention and race/class disparities in high school

A structural perspective on learning, as notably advanced by Aage B. Sørensen (1987); Maureen T. Hallinan (1991), and Alan C. Kerckhoff (1993), stresses the importance of schooling mechanisms that shape learning opportunities for students. These mechanisms, most notably ability grouping, sort students and either constrain or enhance their learning opportunities. Ability grouping in English schools, according to Kerckhoff (1993, p. 215), “creates inequality” in society and “exacerbates” the inequalities that already exist. Sorting mechanisms in US schools are presumed to have comparable effects to those Kerckhoff found in England, as Sørensen (1987) and Hallinan (1991) propose. These effects, however, are more difficult to isolate because policies and procedures vary greatly across schools.

Retention is a sorting mechanism that is even less uniform and standardized than ability grouping. The decision to retain a given student is frequently made at the school level in the absence of standardized guidelines, giving the teacher and school administrator broad discretionary power. As Hallinan (2000) indicates, this raises concerns as to whether racial minorities or poor students are at greater risk of being retained. Recently, more school systems are adopting retention practices in conjunction with end-of-grade testing (Heubert and Hauser, 1999; Roderick et al., 2000). Therefore, it is important to understand the consequences of these practices.

In this paper, we examine the high school learning trajectories of retained and continuously promoted students, comparing white with black students and poor with nonpoor students. We ask whether the learning trajectories of students are comparable and whether retention’s association with achievement trajectories is race- and class-neutral. Our results are counter to conventional wisdom; white students are more adversely affected by retention than black students. The purpose of our research is to account for trajectories in academic achievement, namely, reading and mathematic learning, following retention and to examine how trajectories vary for black and white students and for low and high socio economic status (SES) students. These counterintuitive results offer support for Blau’s (2003) cultural interpretation of racial differences in schooling outcomes.

### 1.1. Retention and achievement

The relationship between retention and academic achievement is ambiguous. Some find that retention lowers grades and test scores after experiencing retention

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