



Policy implications on learner retention in selected rural primary schools in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Learners' retention is a procedure in which a teacher considers it valuable to keep a learner in the same class for two successive years. This study aimed to explore the policy implications for learner retention in selected rural primary schools. The theory adopted was Tinto's learner amalgamation, as it aligned with developmental forms of learners. Tinto's learner amalgamation theory was suitable in examining learner retention, but it only accounted for a reasonable quantity of the difference in retention. The paper aimed to support primary school learners who failed the ungraded symbol. The study employed a qualitative case study approach within an interpretative research framework. It utilized convenience sampling, focusing on proximity to researchers, and involved three rural primary schools with 39 foundation phase teachers. A total of 10 teachers and three principals participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews, along with a document review. Data analysis involved content analysis, coding, and thematic categorization. The study's findings indicated that learner retention was an effective strategy, as the costs of the policy rapidly surpassed the potential advantages of retention. State the conclusion made. It was recommended that policies be created in a way that accepts all learners, especially those from rural areas, and supports the idea that the prospect of recurrence serves as a deterrent for putting in little effort, which in turn improves academic attainment. State the contribution of this study to scholarship.

Keywords: Policy implication, learner retention and rural primary schools

INTRODUCTION

Learner retention strategies are widely used in many organisations as a cost-effective way to improve performance.¹ In many countries, retention is viewed as a key approach for enhancing the academic achievement of underperforming learners, although retention rates vary significantly across different contexts.

Reducing the proportion of learners who do not develop fundamental skills in the early grades remains a top priority in South African education. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, more than half of African learners and one-third of all fourth graders nationwide are unable

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2014* (OECD, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2014-en>.

to read at even a basic level.² Retention of learners in school has been a challenge among the pastoralists in Kenya.³ Henry & Redding define retention as remaining in school until the end of a course, whereas dropping out is defined as leaving school early.⁴

The conditions may need to be provided to learners who are at risk of experiencing difficulties in accessing high-quality primary childhood education systems in order to improve the track record. Additionally, the government should assist districts in developing early detection methods that enable focused support for learners in need. Furthermore, steps should be taken to raise the standard of classroom instruction. The latter, though sometimes disregarded, is crucial considering the evidence that schools frequently assign less qualified and ineffective teachers to lower grades, which are typically not included in state accountability schemes. Policies that support the retention of learners who have not mastered fundamental reading abilities are insufficient to replace the creation of an all-encompassing plan to lower the number of struggling learners. However, according to the best available data, policies that incorporate suitable interventions for retained learners may indeed be a helpful part of a comprehensive plan.

However, given the best accessible data, policies that incorporate suitable involvement for retained learners may very well be a helpful part of a holistic plan. Bearing in mind that retaining a learner is not an easy decision and should not be taken lightly. The decision to hold back kids implies that they have not performed to their full potential and are not yet ready for the work at the next grade level. This choice in education is much more widely known than many others. The student's peers continue in class, but the retained child must start anew with new peers who are typically younger, smaller, and less advanced. Both the new peers and the new teacher are aware that the child is repeating.

The most recent available evidence appears to emphasize its negative impact on academic performance and labor market outcomes.⁵ The consistency of policy implications on learner retention is a gap that this research fills. There are various holes in the present training organizations and potentially a significant number of distinct areas for research in this study. By providing an exhaustive evaluation of previous empirical investigations that employed causal inference methods, this paper makes a significant contribution. Regarding the policy ramifications, this is essential since the potential unobservable variability associated with the non-random selection of learners into learner retention functions acts as a confounding factor that, if disregarded, would severely limit the evaluation of the retention policy.

Globally, learners with academic challenges are retained in the same grade with the intention of providing them with an opportunity to rework and master the year's content.⁶ Hence, pupils who leave school before finishing the year at a certain grade are known as dropouts. Ouma defines a dropout as a learner who quits school, either provisionally or permanently, before completing the school year.⁷ Koskei and Muchanje undertook a study in Kajiado County to establish reasons for school dropouts among boys in primary schools and discovered that it was due to the absence of parental attention, increased levels of illiteracy, and a strong leaning towards the roaming tradition, which is described for low levels of boys completing school.⁸ As stated by Haidary, the case for learner retention is supported by a growing body of research that has found, despite its widespread use in education, that learner

² Allison J. LaFave et al., "Student Engagement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP): A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Extant Research," *Educational Assessment* 27, no. 3 (July 3, 2022): 205–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10627197.2022.2043151>.

³ S. Koskei and F. I. P. Muchanje, "Parental Support and Boys' Retention in Public Primary Schools in Kenya," *Journal of Education and Practice*, November 2020, <https://doi.org/10.7176/JEP/11-31-07>.

⁴ Gary T Henry and Christopher Redding, "The Consequences of Leaving School Early: The Effects of within-Year and End-of-Year Teacher Turnover," *Education Finance and Policy* 15, no. 2 (2020): 332–56.

⁵ Bart Cockx, Matteo Picchio, and Stijn Baert, "Modeling the Effects of Grade Retention in High School," *Journal of Applied Econometrics* 34, no. 3 (April 17, 2019): 403–24, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jae.2670>.

⁶ Maureen Hadebe and Moeniera Moosa, "'I Thought I Was Going to Pass': Learners' Experiences of Grade Retention," *South African Journal of Education* 42, no. 3 (August 31, 2022): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v42n3a2054>.

⁷ J M Ouma, "Fifty Years of Boy Child Education in Kenya: A Paradigm Shift," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 5, no. 9 (2016): 53–57.

⁸ Koskei and Muchanje, "Parental Support and Boys' Retention in Public Primary Schools in Kenya."

retention has only detrimental consequences.⁹ Given the prevalence of learner retention, it may be argued that its application enjoys committed firsthand support.¹⁰ It is believed that retaining the child in the grade will facilitate concept proficiency and, in some cases, maturity. Despite the introduction of White Paper 6 started by the Department of Education, which was meant to protect learners' rights, learners who have been retained in certain grades are being retained without them being informed about the decision. The stigma attached to being retained in a grade can result in young people having difficulties in all aspects of school life.¹¹ It has been argued that grade retention does not have long-term academic benefits for learners, as it can affect their personality and outcomes, particularly in terms of behavioral difficulties, due to the presence of over-aged learners in a grade.¹² Evidence suggests that school performance declines when peer groups are disrupted, as the retention of learners separates them from their peers who have maintained the same grades over the previous years.¹³

An increase in collection arises from promoting learners to lower grades, which makes it complex for educators to teach at the right levels. Therefore, the repetition policy in South Africa already stipulates how many times a learner is to repeat a grade, currently the policy is a learner is allowed to fail once in each four year education period, for example, Foundation phase (grades 1 to 3), intermediate phase (grades 4 to 6), Senior Phase (grades 8 to 9) and Further Education and Training phase (grades 10 to 12).¹⁴ Based on this background, the research seeks to investigate the policy implications for learner retention. The study is driven by the subsequent research question: What are the policy implications of learner retention in selected rural primary schools of Christ Hani district, Eastern Cape?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner retention, defined as the practice of having students repeat a school year, is a significant educational strategy aimed at promoting academic success.¹⁵ Globally, this practice allows learners who face academic challenges to remain in the same grade, granting them additional time to revisit and master content they previously struggled with.¹⁶ In South Africa, retention refers specifically to the requirement that a learner who has completed a full year in a given grade must remain at that level to develop the competencies expected for advancement.¹⁷ Renaud further clarifies that retention serves as a means to hold learners back until they acquire the essential skills necessary for progression to the next grade.¹⁸ Overall, this instructional strategy aims to help students consolidate foundational skills crucial for their future academic endeavors.

Research by Friðriksdóttir involving 43,000 participants in Iceland revealed that students enrolled in blended learning programs demonstrated significantly higher completion rates compared to those in fully distance or self-paced courses.¹⁹ This finding highlights the significance of social

⁹ Anita Haidary, "Controversy over Grade Repetition: Afghan Teachers' View on Grade Repetition," 2013.

¹⁰ Yuko Ikematsu, Koji Egawa, and Midori Endo, "Prevalence and Retention Status of New Graduate Nurses with Special Support Needs in Japan," *Nurse Education in Practice* 36 (March 2019): 28–33, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2019.02.007>.

¹¹ Richard Rose and Michael Shevlin, "Encouraging Voices: Listening to Young People Who Have Been Marginalised," *Support for Learning* 19, no. 4 (2004): 155–61.

¹² Nomaroma Kumanda, Jane-Francis Afungmeyu Abongdia, and T N Mafumo, "Learners' Retention: A Case of Two Primary Schools in East London," *Gender and Behaviour* 15, no. 2 (2017): 8769–76.

¹³ Di Xu, Qing Zhang, and Xuehan Zhou, "The Impact of Low-Ability Peers on Cognitive and Noncognitive Outcomes: Random Assignment Evidence on the Effects and Operating Channels," *Journal of Human Resources* 57, no. 2 (2022): 555–96.

¹⁴ Department of Basic Education, *Report on Progress in the Schooling Sector against Key Learner Performance and Attainment Indicators*. (Pretoria: Department of Basic Education, 2016).

¹⁵ Andri I. Anastasiou, Eleni M. Papachristou, and Irene-Anna N. Diakidoy, "Parents' and Teachers' Views on the Psychosocial Adjustment of Students with and without a History of Early Grade Retention," *Educational Psychology in Practice* 33, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 294–307, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2017.1306490>.

¹⁶ Sara M. González-Betancor and Alexis J. López-Puig, "Grade Retention in Primary Education Is Associated with Quarter of Birth and Socioeconomic Status," *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 11 (November 16, 2016): e0166431, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0166431>.

¹⁷ Hadebe and Moosa, "I Thought I Was Going to Pass': Learners' Experiences of Grade Retention."

¹⁸ Gia A. Renaud, "Grade Retention," *Sage Open* 3, no. 2 (April 29, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013486993>.

¹⁹ Hrefna Friðriksdóttir, "Iceland," in *Eastern and Western Perspectives on Surrogacy* (Intersentia, 2019), 259–78, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781780688633.017>.

connectedness in promoting student persistence, as observed in studies by Nistor & Neubauer and Shah & Cheng. Their research shows that learners who lack a sense of belonging and minimal social interaction are more likely to disengage and withdraw from online discussions.²⁰ Additionally, a study conducted in Flanders by Lamote et al. found that while retention in eighth grade did not significantly influence language achievement, it had a positive effect on students' scholarly self-perception.²¹ However, the long-term impact was detrimental to the achievement of the mother tongue language. Similarly, Gary-Bobo et al. analyzed retention in French middle schools and found that although it had a modest positive effect on grade-level assessment scores, it generally reduced the likelihood of advancing to the next grade.²²

Ethical considerations limit the feasibility of randomized experiments to assess the effects of learner retention.²³ A key challenge in non-experimental settings is determining the counterfactual outcomes for learners who repeat grades versus those who are promoted. Various methodological approaches have been applied in the literature depending on the institutional context. One effective framework is test-based promotion, where teachers and principals are guided by clear regulations based on standardized test outcomes. The regression discontinuity design approach has proven useful for calculating local treatment impacts. Contini et al. successfully employed a test-based promotion program to measure the effects of grade repetition within the public school system, highlighting the complexities and implications of learner retention.²⁴

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research applied Tinto's student incorporation theory, which relates to learners' behavioral patterns. Tinto recommended three main settings that are essential to be encountered for constantly obtaining learner achievement; firstly, the learners ought to have contact with retaining sequencers that are intended at supporting them somewhat than institutions; additionally condition was that retaining programmes must not only concentrate on certain learner population, that is, the low-income or minority learners, but focus on all learners.²⁵ The third criterion, as proposed by Tinto, is the central idea of learning and educational community, and the ability of institutions to create educational communities that actively involve all learners in the learning process.²⁶ According to Hangedorn, successful retention programmes must provide a degree of combination for learners in communities, both socially and academically.²⁷ When building systems, it is crucial to take into account the various behavioural levels, as these levels are necessary to help users develop rule-based and skill-based behaviour, as well as the fundamental knowledge and skills at the knowledge level. Moreover, the assistance must involve the presentation of pertinent information that enables users to function at both skill- and rule-centered levels.²⁸ The repetition policy merely exacerbates the difficulties faced by low-achieving learners and is a counterproductive approach. Since the practice of learner retention varies across countries, its effects may differ across systems, and findings from one context may not always

²⁰ Nicolae Nistor and Katrin Neubauer, "From Participation to Dropout: Quantitative Participation Patterns in Online University Courses," *Computers & Education* 55, no. 2 (September 2010): 663–72, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2010.02.026>; Mahsood Shah and Ming Cheng, "Exploring Factors Impacting Student Engagement in Open Access Courses," *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning* 34, no. 2 (2019): 187–202.

²¹ Carl Lamote et al., "Is the Cure Worse than the Disease? A Longitudinal Study on the Effect of Grade Retention in Secondary Education on Achievement and Academic Self-Concept," *Educational Studies* 40, no. 5 (October 20, 2014): 496–514, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2014.936828>.

²² Robert J. Gary-Bobo, Marion Goussé, and Jean-Marc Robin, "Grade Retention and Unobserved Heterogeneity," *Quantitative Economics* 7, no. 3 (November 2016): 781–820, <https://doi.org/10.3982/QE524>.

²³ Bian Wu, Xiaoxue Yu, and Xiaoqing Gu, "Effectiveness of Immersive Virtual Reality Using Head-mounted Displays on Learning Performance: A Meta-analysis," *British Journal of Educational Technology* 51, no. 6 (2020): 1991–2005.

²⁴ Dalit Contini and Guido Salza, "Children Left behind. New Evidence on the (Adverse) Impact of Grade Retention on Educational Careers," *European Sociological Review* 40, no. 6 (November 23, 2024): 1046–66, <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcae014>.

²⁵ Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226922461.001.0001>.

²⁶ Tinto, *Leaving College*.

²⁷ L. S. Hangedorn, "How to Define Retention: A New Look at an Old Problem," in *College Student Retention: Formula for Student Success*, ed. A. Seidman (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015).

²⁸ Hangedorn, "How to Define Retention: A New Look at an Old Problem."

be applicable to others. First, there is variation in timing. Learner retention as a strategy to contrast deficient performance is more common in primary schools, in some countries, and in high schools. Moreover, in some systems, it is used at points of transition between educational cycles (e.g., between primary and middle school), with automatic promotion being the rule within cycles. Secondly, in some systems, learner retention is determined by stringent rules based on standardized test scores, while in others, school boards and teachers have ample leeway in deciding which learners should be held back.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations within their real-life contexts. Qualitative research enables the researcher to gain deep, descriptive insights into complex social phenomena that cannot be meaningfully captured through numerical data.²⁹ In this study, a qualitative design was particularly suitable because learner retention is shaped by policy interpretation, school culture, and the lived experiences of teachers and school leaders. The study was grounded in a phenomenographic approach, which aims to identify and describe the diverse ways in which individuals understand or experience a particular phenomenon.³⁰ Phenomenography allowed the researcher to explore the varied conceptions teachers and school management teams hold about the policy implications of learner retention in their specific school contexts. The research was underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences.³¹ This paradigm aligns with the study's aim to interpret how policy directives on learner retention are understood and enacted in rural primary schools.

Within the qualitative framework, a case study design was employed. Case studies enable an in-depth investigation of a bounded system, in this case, selected rural primary schools, to generate a rich, contextualized understanding.³² This approach allowed the researcher to explore the nuanced policy implications of learner retention practices as they unfold in natural school settings.

Population and Sampling

Research was conducted into two primary schools. Two selected grade 7 classes from two primary schools in the same circuit of the case study. Participants included 10 teachers, three principals, and two curriculum planners, who contributed to the policy-making process. The study examined how grade retention affects educational and work outcomes from the perspective of how educational policy is applied. To address the inherent endogeneity of the retention policy, several recent studies have proposed a causal econometric evaluation to assess the potential policy implications of learner retention. The use of a purposive sampling technique to select study participants who were considered personally relevant. Ten teachers, three administrators, and two curriculum planners from two chosen schools were the key study participants. Purposive sampling was employed to select cases with rich information.

Data gathering and Analysis

Face-to-face interviews are used to reduce and interpret the volume of data collected during data analysis. The current researcher separated the participants to allow them a chance to reflect freely and informed them that whatever they said would be kept private, as she wanted a complete reflection on how learners retained information in the lower grades and wanted to confirm the reliability. For this study, semi-structured one-on-one interviews with participants were most suitable because the current

²⁹ John Ward Creswell and John David Creswell, *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018).

³⁰ Gerlese S. Åkerlind, "The Varied Role of 'Structure' in Phenomenographic Research and the Pedagogical Value of Building a Contextual 'Relevance Structure' for Learners," *Learning in Context* 2, no. 1–2 (December 2025): 100006, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lecon.2025.100006>.

³¹ Nguyen Cao Thanh and T T Le Thanh, "The Interconnection between Interpretivist Paradigm and Qualitative Methods in Education," *American Journal of Educational Science* 1, no. 2 (2015): 24–27.

³² Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (Sage Publications, 2018).

researcher was interested in obtaining detailed information from the principals and teachers, and conducting document analyses.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The data analysis employed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, systematically coding each participant's contribution, grouping the codes into content categories, and clustering them into coherent themes and sub-themes for presentation;³³ this iterative process, echoed by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, revealed that the challenges participants identified as contributing to learner-retention difficulties closely aligned with the codes derived from their proposed improvement strategies, reflecting the dynamic interplay between perceived problems and solutions.³⁴ Consistent with Merriam and Tisdell, the categorization enabled a deeper interpretive analysis, allowing the findings to be organized thematically around participant narratives and literature-based theoretical framing on the role of education policy in retention.³⁵ For each interview question, two prominent aspects were consistently articulated and elaborated, directly addressing the research questions, emergent themes, and the overarching objective of generating contextually relevant insights. The discussion of these issues was presented in separate sections, organized by each thematic focus area.

What effects will this policy have on keeping learners in one class?

The teachers' comments on the one-on-one interview about the subject are listed below:

This practice is prohibited by the department. Due to unforeseeable and inevitable factors, age also disallows this practice; regulations must be implemented (P4)

The practice is forbidden by the Department of Education, yet teachers are nevertheless authorized to keep these learners due to uncontrollable circumstances. Acceptable and practical is the justification. (P5)

The following are samples from dialogues in which novice teachers responded to the theme:

I believe I have a serious lack of information, values, and abilities. (T7)

I do not know, I just found out when the results are released at the end of the year. (T2)

The school must offer engaging programs that foster a love of learning, and we as parents must implement circle-related programs to inspire our children. (T3)

Section three of the principals' data

The following phrases were obtained from the principals about the policy implications, which were consistent with the other tools:

Given the lack of reliable, fundamental, descriptive knowledge, I sincerely doubt that governments currently make informed policy judgments regarding any other social process. (P7)

I believe that collaboration can be beneficial, as even among subgroups with varied risk factors, learners can make significant improvements in grade-level abilities over multiple years when retention occurs. (P3)

Both P4 and P5 note that the practice is “prohibited” by the Department of Education, yet they simultaneously acknowledge that teachers are “authorized to keep these learners” when “unforeseeable and inevitable factors” arise. This paradox suggests that the policy is either poorly communicated or inconsistently enforced, leaving educators to navigate a grey area where formal rules clash with practical realities.

³³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

³⁴ M. B. Miles, A. M. Huberman, and J. Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 4th ed. (Sage Publications, 2020).

³⁵ S.B. Merriam and E.J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016).

T7, T2 express a profound information deficit. Their comments indicate that the policy's rationale, implementation guidelines, and expected outcomes have not been adequately disseminated to those who must apply it.

T3 shifts responsibility to the school and parents, advocating for "engaging programs that foster a love of learning" and "circle-related programs." While well-intentioned, this response sidesteps the policy question and highlights a tendency to address retention through extracurricular fixes rather than confronting the structural constraints identified by the department.

P7 doubts the government's ability to make "informed policy judgments" due to a lack of "reliable, fundamental, descriptive knowledge." This meta-comment underscores a systemic issue: policymakers are perceived as operating without sufficient data, which erodes trust and contributes to the perceived illegitimacy of the retention ban.

Conversely, P3 sees potential benefit in "collaboration" and "repeated years when retention occurs," suggesting that, under certain conditions, retention could improve grade-level abilities. This viewpoint aligns with the pragmatic acceptance noted by P5 but directly contradicts the department's formal prohibition.

DISCUSSION

The long-term effects of grade-retention policies in South Africa are debated, yet policy frameworks acknowledge that enhancing learner competencies can facilitate progression to higher grades. The National Policy on Progression and Promotion³⁶ emphasizes that promotion should depend on mastery of core skills rather than age alone. Evidence suggests that learners starting school later are less likely to face retention issues, highlighting age as a critical factor in academic performance.³⁷ Decisions on retention often reflect teachers' professional judgments, influenced by subjective criteria such as behavioral maturity and socio-emotional development.³⁸

Scholarly consensus indicates a need for clearer and more coherent retention policies, as existing guidelines lack sufficient detail for addressing underperformance, resulting in inconsistent application.³⁹ While there is broad support for retention policies, stakeholders agree that significant revisions are necessary to align policy with practice. Retention poses significant academic, social, and psychological challenges and may increase dropout rates, especially in under-resourced areas that lack adequate academic support.⁴⁰ Disparities in funding, teacher capacity, and access to intervention programs hinder the equitable implementation of retention policies, underscoring the need for systematic support structures to mitigate retention-related risks.

Additionally, three policy documents were analyzed to establish the use of a curriculum statement that accepts all learners from diverse backgrounds. They are as follows:

- National Protocol for Assessment
- Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement
- National Policy relevant to the program and promotion requirement of the National Curriculum Statement Grade R–12

The quotes mentioned above about the policy ramifications were taken from the policy paper and matched the other instruments. Involving policy analysis allows one to examine the aspects of a policy that are relevant to the person on whom the policy is being imposed. This demonstrates how, in

³⁶ Department of Basic Education., *Review of Progress in the Basic Education Sector to 2024: Analysis of Key Statistics* (Pretoria: Department of Basic Education, 2024).

³⁷ Servaas Van Der Berg et al., "Identifying Binding Constraints in Education," *Available at SSRN 2906945*, 2016; Nic Spaull, "Schooling in South Africa: How Low-Quality Education Becomes a Poverty Trap," *South African Child Gauge* 12, no. 1 (2015): 34–41.

³⁸ A.W. Dockery, "Adults' Recollections and Reflections on the Impacts of Grade Retention" (Georgia College & State University, 2023).

³⁹ Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, "Effective Practices for Student Success, Retention, and Completion Report," 2019, https://learn.ruffalonl.com/rs/395-EOG977/images/2019_Retention_Practices_Poll_RNL-002.pdf.

⁴⁰ Spaull, "Schooling in South Africa: How Low-Quality Education Becomes a Poverty Trap."

many circumstances, grade repetition is helpful for the pupils, especially in lower grades. This demonstrates that, in many circumstances, grade repetition is in the children's best interests.

Concerns have been raised that many decisions may be made based on subjective comments or views rather than acceptable criteria, because teachers in developing countries are typically not trained to make promotion/repetition decisions and admission decisions based on comprehensive achievement standards and aligned assessment tools. The findings indicate that learner retention is an effective strategy, as the costs of the policy could rapidly surpass the potential advantages of retention. Social promotion was temporarily suspended, which is presumably reflected in the high baseline retention rates that are not solely attributable to the educational reform movement. The learners cannot be coordinated in terms of both their ages and grade levels, a key methodological factor that could cause studies related to when academics evaluate achievement effects to diverge in their results and the attendant policy implications of their findings.⁴¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

It was recommended that educational policies be designed to accommodate all learners, particularly those from rural contexts, and to recognise that the possibility of grade repetition may act as a deterrent to low academic effort, thereby supporting improved performance. Furthermore, the limited range of policy options relating to curriculum and academic standards must be expanded to address the working conditions and challenges faced by teachers in rural schools. Historically, the decline in “social promotion” appears to correlate with an increase in baseline retention rates. However, strong retention rates cannot be attributed solely to efforts to improve learner performance; they also reflect gaps in policy design and implementation.

Revised education policies are therefore necessary to ensure that all learners can make meaningful progress without being unfairly held back. This aligns with the notion that the potential for repetition may discourage minimal effort and promote academic engagement. Schools have been encouraged to provide additional academic support to learners who display gaps in specific subject areas so that they are better prepared for the demands of the next grade. Teachers often recommend repetition for learners who are young for their grade or socially immature, arguing that an additional year may aid emotional development and strengthen future academic performance. Nonetheless, teachers’ own professional experiences with retention serve as a primary reason many continue to support it as an intervention.

Importantly, the ability to teach learners from diverse backgrounds, supported by adequate professional training, should be a requirement for all teachers. Despite these considerations, South Africa continues to record exceptionally high retention rates from Grades 1 to 9. According to the Ministerial Committee on Learner Retention, the retention challenge becomes particularly visible from Grade 9 onwards, signalling systemic issues that require urgent policy attention.

CONCLUSION

The study has revealed that learner retention is often ineffective and can be harmful. It leads to higher dropout rates, lower learner confidence, and reduced chances of pursuing higher education, especially harming disadvantaged learners and worsening inequality. Given these issues, retention is not a sustainable policy. Instead, targeted interventions, teacher development, curriculum differentiation, and formative assessments offer better support for struggling learners. Confusion surrounding retention policies leads to inconsistent practices among educators, who often rely on ad hoc solutions without clear guidance. Simply banning retention without clear procedures and training won’t solve these problems. A coherent, evidence-based policy with professional support and flexibility for exceptions is needed to align goals with classroom realities.

⁴¹ Stephan Gerhard Huber and Christoph Helm, “COVID-19 and Schooling: Evaluation, Assessment and Accountability in Times of Crises—Reacting Quickly to Explore Key Issues for Policy, Practice and Research with the School Barometer,” *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 32, no. 2 (May 10, 2020): 237–70, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-020-09322-y>.

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