

## Relation between Grade Retention and Disengagement among Primary School Pupils in Fuamah District, Liberia

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to determine the correlation between grade retention and school disengagement in some selected primary schools in Liberia using the correlational design. A sample of 246 Grade Five learners was selected from five out of 12 schools in the Fuamah District through simple random sampling procedures and a self-constructed questionnaire was the source of data. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson Correlations. The study established that grade retention was somewhat prevalent in schools under investigation as some of the learners admitted to have repeated classes. The study further concluded that grade retention influences students' disengagement with school. Therefore, it is recommended that grade retention should be avoided as it causes sad feelings to those who repeat the classes and leads to a possibility for some learners to disengage with studies. The avoidance of grade retention can be accomplished when teachers become creative in addressing specific needs of the learners, providing remedial assignments to poor performing learners as well as finding out reasons for learners underperformance and responding accordingly in a creative yet collaborative approach with parents.

**Keywords:** Grade retention; school disengagement; grade five; Liberia.

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### Introduction

When students do not really feel included, they would not participate in school activities, would not enrol, or have a low attendance rate (UNESCO, 2019). Disengagement from classroom instruction is psychologically associated with challenges to feelings of ability, self-determination and/or

relatedness to value others (Howard & Taylor, 2017). It is plausible to assume that psychological school disengagement will result in either externalized activity or internalized conduct; such boredom or emotional discomfort leads to misbehaviors like dropping out. Between 30 and 40% of elementary school-aged children in Mali,

Niger, Liberia and Senegal lack school interest (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2021).

Over 80 nations around the world have been plagued by armed conflicts and political instability and have seen an increase in the number of girls dropping out of school despite recent advancements in girls' education. These nations have far more disengaged girls than boys (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2021). In Liberia, the issue of overage girls in the early grades is particularly pressing, in part because of the legacy of disrupted school enrolment from the civil war and due to the more recent Ebola outbreak. Girls have a high risk of dropping out of school and losing the chance to become educated, independent and literate women. In 2016, only 66% of Liberian children at the elementary-level were able to read. In urban areas, 34% of primary school pupils finished elementary school but only 14% of those in rural areas were able to complete primary school (Girls' Accelerated Learning Initiative, 2020). Little over a third of pre-scholars have access to early childhood learning programs and only 54% of students (mainly boys) complete primary school (USAID, 2022). Furthermore, 67% of households responding to an inquiry reported that one of their children had quitted going school (UIS-UNICEF, 2021).

OECD (2018) asserted that repeaters' sense of self-worth and belonging at school are weakened by grade retention, which heightens their absence from classrooms and lead to lack of interest in schooling. Grade retention measures created equity concerns since they adversely impacted those who are already impoverished, such as students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or minority groups (Bastos & Ferro, 2019; Nunes et al., 2018). Grade retention and the discrepancies that follow may have an impact on students' educational routes and plans. Retention in classes may negatively impact students' perceptions of their academic abilities, which may deter them from continuing with further education. It may also increase the number of dropouts and academic failures (OECD, 2018). In nations such as Bangladesh and Senegal, grade retention has been a significant contributor to student disengagement, particularly for boys (Sabates *et al.*, 2013). According to Hares et al. (2020), Liberia has a 5 to 1 grade retention ratio, with about 40% of students surviving the primary level. One in five primary school pupils dropped out in 2019 with 69 percent of pupils leaving before the

fifth grade. Unfortunately, access to education is restricted for pupils in rural areas.

Grade retention is the practice of making pupils retake a grade if they did not meet requirements for that grade's learning objectives. It is a topic that sparks a lot of discussions (Beswick *et al.*, 2008) since retention has impact on students' goals and intention to complete high school and join further education (Fraysier *et al.*, 2020). Retained students frequently drop out of school before receiving high school certificates (Guèvremont *et al.*, 2007; Hughes *et al.*, 2017; Jimerson *et al.*, 2004). This lack of motivation in learning continues even though retained students may perform better on their homework than students who were promoted (Alexander *et al.*, 2003).

Although there are many different reasons why students could be retained, the two most common ones are not meeting expectations set by a school or being judged to be underdeveloped (UNESCO, 2021). Retention of grades is caused by inadequate learning and it is believed to be increasing the likelihood of better academic performance, yet it promotes learners' eventual disengagement from school. Repetition can demotivate students and push them to quit out (UNESCO, 2019, Hares, et al., 2020). This study therefore sought to establish the relationship between grade retention and school disengagement among primary schools in Liberia.

## **METHOD**

### **Design**

The study used a correlational design which normally seeks to establish relationships between two or more variables without the researcher controlling or manipulating any of them. It's a non-experimental type of quantitative research. The objective of this study was to find out whether there is a relationship between grade retention and school disengagement. Thus, the design was appropriate for this study.

### **Population and Sampling**

The study was conducted in Fuamah District, Bong County, Liberia. Students from 12 public primary schools in the District were preferred because the characteristics being investigated were displayed amongst them. This study targeted the population of 636 Grade Five pupils. The population was from five public primary schools which were randomly sampled out of the 12. A total of 246 Grade Five pupils was chosen using simple random sampling which provided every individual in the population an

equal chance to participate. A questionnaire was used as tool for data collection.

### Validity and Reliability

The researchers established the items' clarity and relevance to the study's objectives to ensure to content validity. Items were cross-checked with research experts to achieve this goal. The researchers used the test-retest method to determine the instrument's reliability. This happened during the piloting, when respondents filled out questionnaires for the first time. After two weeks, the same respondents completed the same questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to determine the internal consistency. The resultant Cronbach of .72 indicates that the questionnaire was reliable.

### Statistical Treatment of Data

Through the help of the SPSS, data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson Correlations.

### Ethical Consideration

Consents from respondents were obtained after informing them about the study aims. The researchers informed participants that their data would be treated confidentially and that nothing would happen to hurt them as a result of participation. Furthermore, respondents were given a room to decline at any time if they so wished.

## Results and Discussions

### Demographics of Respondents

A total of 246 grade five pupils with the age ranging from 10 to 22 participated in the study. Of these, 131 (53.3%) were females while 115 (46.7) were males. In terms of age, 87 (35.5) respondents were in the age group of 10 to 13 while 152 (61.7) were in the age group of 14 to 17 and seven (2.8) were in the age group of 18 to 22. The age differences in the

study's sample suggest a possibility for retained learners in the school system.

**Research Question 1:** To what extent does grade retention exist in schools under investigation?

This research question sought to establish the extent to which grade retention exists in schools under investigation. To accomplish this goal, an item in the questionnaire required respondents to indicate whether they had repeated a class. The results revealed that 86 (35%) respondents agreed to have repeated a class while 160 (65%) disagreed. This means that grade retention somewhat existed in schools under investigation. This finding relates with that of Njora (2010) which revealed that more than one-third of Grade 6 students reported having repeated a grade at least once in the educational systems of the Southern and Eastern Africa. Furthermore, the results of the study were consistent with those from the Digest of Education Statistics (2017) which revealed that 1.9 percent of US pupils in kindergarten through grade 12 remained in the same grade they had been enrolled in the previous school year compared to 2.2 percent in 2015. In another study, retained pupils disengaged by the time they were 16 years old because they felt overgrown for the grade level (Hughes et al. 2017). Therefore, grade retention exists not only in developing countries but also in developed countries.

**Research Question 2:** What is the perception of pupils on grade retention in schools under investigation?

The study sought to establish the perception of pupils on the existing grade retention. To accomplish this objective, a section in the questionnaire required respondents to indicate their agreement or disagreement with selected items.

**Table 1: Students' Grade Retention Perception**

SN	Statement in the questionnaire	Disagree		Agree	
		f	%	f	%
1	Repeaters in a class may have bad feeling about themselves	68	27.7	155	63
2	If I were asked to repeat a class, I would be ashamed	68	27.7	154	62.6
3	I feel discouraged among my classmates as a repeater	75	30.6	149	60.8
4	Retention is good for pupils who struggle in their lessons	75	30.5	149	59.7
5	Students who do not believe in themselves score poorly	77	31.3	144	58.5
6	It is sometimes good to retain students	72	29.3	142	57.7
7	A student forced to repeat a class will not perform well	90	36.6	138	56
8	I am ashamed to say whether or not I have repeated	84	34.1	134	54.5
9	Instead of repeating a class, I would go to another school	105	42.6	112	45.5
10	If my grades are poor, I will ask to repeat	113	45.9	107	43.5

**Table 2: Pearson Correlation between Grade Retention and School Disengagement**

		School Disengagement	Grade Retention
<b>School Disengagement</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	.630*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.011
	N	245	245
<b>Grade Retention</b>	Pearson Correlation	.630*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.011	
	N	245	246

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table one indicates that much as the majority of respondents agreed that retention is good for pupils who struggle in their lessons and that it is sometimes good to retain students, they also shared a concern that repeaters have bad feelings about themselves and if they were asked to repeat a class, they would be ashamed and they would feel discouraged. This was in line with an earlier studies by Hong and Raudenbush (2005) and Andre (2010) which supported grade retention for some reasons as it may help students who fail to make enough academic progress. Respondents further maintained that learners who are forced to repeat a class may not perform well and may be ashamed to report that they had repeated a class. These findings suggest that students considered grade retention unavoidable at some point but generally, they were not happy with the grade retention experience.

**Research Question 3:** Is there a significant relationship between grade retention and school disengagement?

This research question called for testing the existing relationship between grade retention and school disengagement in schools under investigation. To accomplish this goal, the following null hypothesis was tested using Pearson correlations as seen in table 2: There is no significant relationship between grade retention and school disengagement. The strength of correlations was interpreted as follows: Greater or Equal to 0.7 = strong correlations; greater or equal to 0.5 = moderate correlations and 0.49 and below = weak Correlations.

The Pearson Correlation results in table 2 indicates the p value of .011 which is lesser than the critical value and the correlation of .630. Therefore, the results indicate a significant and moderate correlation between school disengagement and grade retention. The null hypothesis is rejected and it is maintained that the higher the grade retention, the higher the school disengagement. Therefore, grade retention speeds out the disengagement of

pupils. The finding is in harmony with that by Giano *et al.* (2022) which established that repeating students who were in the sixth or seventh grade had the utmost probability of disengaging from school. In other words, grade retention and school disengagement are positively correlated. Moreover, the study of Hughes *et al.* (2017) discovered that retained pupils disengaged by the time they were 16 years old and therefore, grade retention positively correlated with school disengagement. Therefore, the existing relationship between the independent and the dependent variable in schools under investigation is common in some other locations.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concludes that grade retention was somewhat prevalent in schools under investigation as some of the learners admitted to have repeated classes. This conclusion is backed up by the fact that in the demographic findings, the age of learners in class five ranged between the age of 10 and 22. Much as learners considered retention to be unavoidable for those learners who score poorly, they were unhappy with the retention experience.

The existing grade retention was also found in some other countries. The study further concludes that grade retention influences students' disengagement with school. Therefore, it is recommended that grade retention should be avoided as it causes sad feelings to those who repeat the classes and leads to a possibility for some learners to disengage with studies. The avoidance of grade retention can be accomplished when teachers become creative in addressing specific needs of the learners, providing remedial assignments to poor performing learners as well as finding out reasons for learners underperformance and responding accordingly in a creative yet collaborative approach with parents.

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