

Art. #2054, 10 pages, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v42n3a2054>**“I thought I was going to pass”: Learners’ experiences of grade retention****Maureen Hadebe**  and **Moeniera Moosa** School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
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Grade retention is the practice of holding back learners who have failed to meet specific promotional requirements as stipulated by policy, in the same grade. The main objective of the research reported on here was to determine Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3) learners’ experiences and perceptions of grade retention. The theoretical framework used was Messiou’s (2006) conceptualisation of marginalisation. In this study we employed a phenomenographic, qualitative research approach. Twelve participants who had repeated grades in the Foundation Phase at a school in Johannesburg, South Africa, were purposively selected. Data were collected by means of one-on-one interviews, “blob trees”, drawings, and collages from participants about their views and experiences of retention. The findings of this study reveal that learners were not psychologically prepared to be retained. Most learners experienced being bullied by their peers and teachers due to being retained, which led to them feeling excluded and marginalised. A correlation was found between parents’ and teachers’ views of retention and learners’ experiences. Future research should focus on learners’ experiences of retention at different schools and in different school phases in South Africa.

Keywords: exclusion; foundation phase; grade retention; inclusion; inclusive education; learner’s voice; marginalisation

Introduction

The “highly public” practice of keeping learners in the same grade to help them master the year’s concepts is practised worldwide (Alexander, Entwistle & Dauber, 2003:1). Grade retention is guided by a country’s views and values. The fact that grade retention is applied more often in some countries than in others might be explained by the fact that “educational systems worldwide deal differently with such early difficulties” (Goos, Van Damme, Onghena, Petry & De Bilde, 2013:323). This would then imply that no globally standardised criteria for grade retention exist, which result in inconsistency with regard to how grade retention is practiced. In countries such as Portugal, Spain and France grade retention is common practice, whereas in countries like Finland, Poland and Greece, grade retention is practiced only in exceptional cases (Goos et al., 2013). In countries like Norway, Iceland and the United Kingdom, grade retention is not allowed (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency [Eurydice], 2011).

On the African continent, grade retention is popular in Ethiopia (Eyasu, 2017). In Zimbabwe the government is neither pro or against grade retention (Stella, 2017). In Malawi’s rural areas, grade retention is associated with factors such as absence from school, large class sizes, number of meals per week, and expectations of family responsibility (Taniguchi, 2015). It has been argued that grade retention in South Africa is applied as a response to failure caused by broader cultural, social and economic issues (Hugo & Wedekind, 2013). Education specialists in South Africa have expressed concern at the high levels of learner retention in the country as about 52% of learners are being retained at least once before they reach Grade 10 (Grossen, Grobler & Lacante, 2017). Hugo and Wedekind (2013:141) assert that “inequality is reproduced in and through education” because many disadvantaged schools are flooded with exclusionary practices and cultures neatly embedded in the education system. Despite the “damning evidence” against grade retention, exclusion persists as a common, acceptable practice in South Africa (Hattie, 2009:98). Efforts have been made to listen to teachers’ voices (Goos et al., 2013) on grade retention and how they view it, but learners’ views on grade retention have not yet been explored. It remains unclear why grade retention from the perspectives of the learners who are affected by this policy has been under-researched despite the drive towards research **with** children and not **on** children (Clark, 2005).

To promote access and advance participation in curricula, the South African government has laid a foundation for inclusive education in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (1996:s.29(1)), which states that “everyone has the right to basic education.” In South Africa, education is framed within the human rights discourse and addresses both the physical and social levels of humanness. The rights of learners should be foregrounded as a priority in an education system in order to embrace learner difference and enable maximum learner participation. White Paper 6 (Department of Education [DoE], 2001) was seen as a redress of the educational inequalities of the past, and it intended to ensure that learning barriers are overcome and learners’ rights are met (Engelbrecht, 2011). Oliver and Barnes (2010:556) support this idea by stating that “inclusive education is a necessary prerequisite for an inclusive society.”

Inclusive education is concerned with achieving equity through the identification of impediments to access (Engelbrecht, 2011). One of the major goals of inclusive education is to address overt and subtle obstacles that hinder access to curricula. It also seeks to reconstruct schools in an attempt to accommodate learners with diverse needs. Inclusive education advocates would prefer providing support to learners at a time when they need support, rather than to wait for them to fail and then use grade retention as a corrective measure.

With this study we aimed to consider the extent to which Foundation Phase learners' experiences of retention are congruent with the aims of inclusive education. As such, the purpose of this study was to listen to the voices of Foundation Phase learners who have been retained in Grades 1, 2 or 3 at a school in the east of Johannesburg. We wanted to understand how these learners had experienced and perceived the practice of grade retention. We wanted to specifically explore the experiences of learners in Grades 1, 2 and 3 as there is a dearth of research on grade retention from Foundation Phase learners' perspectives. Yet, from our own experiences of a school context grade retention seemed to be more prevalent in the Foundation Phase. As teachers, we noted that a belief existed that learners would benefit academically if retained in the earlier years of their schooling. As such we wanted to give Foundation Phase learners who have been retained in Grade 1, 2 or 3 an opportunity to voice their experiences.

Literature Review

The concept of grade retention

Grade retention is the practice of requiring learners to repeat a grade (Anastasiou, Papachristou & Diakidoy, 2017). Globally, children who are deemed academically challenged are retained in the same grade with the intention of granting them an opportunity to review and master the previous year's concepts (Gonzalez-Betancor & Lopez-Puig, 2016; Goos et al., 2013). In South Africa, grade retention is defined as "the practice of requiring a learner who has been in a given grade for a full year to remain in the same grade ... so as to afford the underachieving learner an opportunity to master the work required of that grade" (Arrow, Howie & Mabizela, 2008:6). Renaud (2013:3) defines grade retention as "the practice of keeping students in their present grade because they have not mastered the skills necessary to progress to the next grade." Therefore, grade retention is used as a technique to ensure that learners master basic skills necessary for them to succeed in the next grades.

The process of retaining a learner in the same grade in South Africa

The Gauteng Department of Education has a promotional schedule for all the phases. To pass, learners need to attain at least 50% in the Home Language, and at least 40% in the First Additional Language and mathematics (Department of Basic Education [DBE], Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2015:8). Teachers are expected to keep an efficient record of learners who struggle academically. Learners who are at risk of being retained at the end of the year are placed on a retention schedule (Gauteng Department of Education, 2015:6). This is done to provide the teacher with a rough overview of the learners who are struggling and might need intensified intervention and support.

Arguments for and against grade retention

Grade retention originated from countries in the Northern Hemisphere. Proponents believe that giving learners more time will put them back on track for normal educational growth (Alexander et al., 2003). Grade retention is used as an attempt to ensure that educational growth can be attained if learners have achieved certain specific outcomes or grades.

Globally, children who are deemed - academically challenged - are retained in the same grade with the intention of granting them an opportunity to review and master the year's concepts (Goos et al., 2013). The decision to hold learners back in the same grade thus implies that they are not yet ready for the following grade (Alexander et al., 2003). It is perceived that keeping the child in the grade will pave the way for concept mastery (Renaud, 2013) and, in some cases, maturity. The inclusionary or exclusionary implications of retaining learners, however, are rarely considered.

Despite the introduction of White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001), 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 (Rose & Shevlin, 2004). It has been argued that grade retention does not have long-term academic benefits for learners as it affects their self-esteem and results in some behavioural problems because of over-aged learners in a grade (Kumanda, Afungmeyu Abongdia & Mafumo, 2017). Rose and Shevlin (2004) argue that many children have been excluded from education and participation in daily activities because of labels, with negative connotations, attached to them. As such, grade retention can be viewed as an unfair and possibly humiliating practice which does not consider influential factors such as poverty, language barriers, child-headed families, social and academic adjustments to new school contexts, to mention but a few.

While proponents of grade repetition argue that retaining a learner in the same grade will help that learner to develop academically in subsequent years (DBE, RSA, 2013), sceptics do not regard this practice as assisting a learner with "catching up, but instead humiliation and harm" (Alexander et al., 2003:1; Bowman, 2005; Martin, 2011). An extensive review of literature demonstrates the challenges associated with grade retention (Bowman, 2005; Hattie, 2009; Hugo & Wedekind, 2013; Hwang & Cappella, 2018; Martin, 2011; Rose & Shevlin, 2004). Among the contestations about grade retention is the concern that it has been singled out as one of the factors that leads to learner drop-out (DBE, RSA, 2013).

Previous research has noted that an additional impact of grade retention is its "economic costs for

the educational system” (Ikeda & Garcia, 2014:270). Precursors to exclusion, such as grade repetition, thwart full and effective participation in curricula and go against the goals of inclusive education which seeks to reduce exclusionary pressures in schools (Walton, G 2011). This means that the realisation of “a truly inclusive education system has been difficult to achieve and results regarding the implementation of inclusive education remain questionable” (Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit & Van Deventer, 2016:520). To tackle the inequalities in South Africa, there was a drive to change the education policies towards policies that embrace human rights and equality (Engelbrecht et al., 2016).

The harmful consequences of grade retention, which may carry into adulthood (Tafreschi & Thiemann, 2016), outweigh the perceived benefits of maturation and development. For learners who have been retained, the burden of being publicly humiliated is heavy. Learners who are retained often have to start over with younger and possibly more-abled classmates (Alexander et al., 2003). The “increased expenditure” (Alexander et al., 2003:9) of retention means that many resources are channelled towards grade retention, and this drains the education system. It does not only drain the departmental coffers, but it also drains the parents of retained learners emotionally and financially because they are required to pay for an extra year of schooling for their child, often in addition to extra support such as an educational psychologist, occupational therapist, tutoring, and so on. The learners themselves also must cope with the pain of being left behind by peers and may “grow to see themselves as failures or misfits” (Alexander et al., 2003:10), which may perpetuate exclusionary practices.

Teachers’ beliefs about grade retention

Many factors pertaining to teachers’ attitudes can result in learners being retained. It has been argued that teachers often rely on the short-term gains with regard to learner retention in that many learners exhibit immediate success following a retention decision, thus reflecting positively on the teachers’ abilities (Fine & Davis, 2003). Careless staffroom talk about learners may negatively influence teachers’ attitudes and in the process may influence teachers’ perceptions about certain learners. Studies have shown that the possibility of learners repeating a grade increases when teachers underrate the learner’s cognitive abilities; have low expectations of them; spend little time on instruction; cover lower-level content topics in reading, literacy, and mathematics; report frequent behavioural problems in class; and have a positive attitude towards grade retention (Hong & Yu, 2007). Retention is also deemed as “appropriate when children do not get support from home, show immaturity in class, or

have low achievement in math” (Young, Trujillo, Bruce, Pollard, Jones & Range, 2019:113).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this research was Messiou’s (2006) conceptualisation of marginalisation. According to Messiou (2012:12), “marginalization is defined as the state of being considered unimportant, undesirable, unworthy, insignificant and different, resulting in inequity, unfairness, deprivation and enforced lack of access to mainstream power.” Messiou (2012) suggests that marginalisation may not always be overt and observable but can be neatly embedded in what is perceived as a normal school situation. Thus “a child is feeling that he/she is experiencing marginalisation, whereas others do not recognise this” (Messiou, 2006:305).

Messiou (2006) tables four ways in which marginalisation can be conceptualised: (1) when a child experiences some kind of marginalisation, which is recognised by everybody including the child; (2) when a child feels that he/she is experiencing marginalisation, whereas others do not recognise it; (3) when a child is viewed as marginalised by others, but does not view it as marginalisation; (4) when a child experiences marginalisation, but does not recognise it.

All four of Messiou’s (2006) ways of being marginalised are relevant to learners’ experiences of grade retention. Being retained at school can result in extreme forms of exclusion and marginalisation. Firstly, the practice of grade retention may send a message to learners that they do not belong in school, and they might not have what it takes to succeed in the grade (Fischman & Gandin, 2009). Secondly, when a learner must be held back because he or she did not meet the promotional requirements, this can result in a situation in which the learner concerned may feel that he or she is experiencing marginalisation. Thirdly, because grade retention has become such a commonly acceptable practice internationally and locally, learners could be marginalised but regard this process as normal and hence do not perceive the practice as an example of marginalisation. Lastly, learners might have many emotions and opinions about being retained. The fact that Foundation Phase learners are rarely given the opportunity to express their views could lead to them experiencing various forms of marginalisation but not being able to recognise those. This framework has been used to guide the analysis of the data and to discuss the findings.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative research design buttressed by a phenomenographic (Åkerlind, 2005) approach in an interpretivist paradigm underpinned the process of this research. This research was led by the research question, What are Foundation Phase learners’

perspectives and experiences of grade retention? We acknowledge that learners have multiple realities of what is happening to them and that individuals socially construct these realities together. By exploring the learners' perspectives and experiences of retention, we aimed to provide insights into the challenges that are embedded in grade repetition from the learners' perspective, and to uncover trends in learners' thoughts and opinions about this matter. We note that the pitfall of using qualitative research is that it "usually involves relatively small numbers of participants" (Griffin, 1999:10), which means that the findings cannot be generalised. Various data collection techniques were used to augment the small sample size.

The research was conducted in one multiracial school with 1,200 learners situated on the eastern

periphery of the city of Johannesburg, South Africa. The Foundation Phase consisted of about 450 learners. Purposive sampling was used because it allowed us to select particular representative elements from the school population (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010) who were knowledgeable on the topic of interest. Twelve learners who were repeating grades in the Foundation Phase were invited to participate in this research (see Table 1 for demographic information). Three of the participants were repeating Grade 1, four were repeating Grade 2, and five were repeating Grade 3. Of the participants seven were female and five male. Three participants were 7, four were 8, two were 9, and three were 10 years old. The participants were selected using a computer-generated numbering system.

Table 1 Participants

Pseudonyms	Barbie Girl	Emmanuel	Zorro	Sophia	Max	Ronaldo	Philani	Cinderella	Sandie	Jerry	Bontle	Nicky Bella
Grade	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3
Gender	F	M	M	F	M	M	M	F	F	F	F	F
Age	7	7	7	8	8	8	8	9	9	10	10	10

Note: F = female, M = male.

The data were collected using two sets of semi-structured interviews in conjunction with drawings. For the first set of interviews, the participants were asked to draw pictures of themselves after which one-on-one interviews were held. The drawings were not interpreted by the researchers, but they were used to probe the participants' answers to solicit rich data. During the drawing session participants were asked to draw a picture or create a collage that showed how they felt about being retained in a grade. A researcher was present during this process and audio recorded the participants self-talk explanation and discussions of what they had opted to include in their drawing. Care was taken not to restrict the views of the participants (Creswell, 2012). If a participant displayed evidence of severe distress, the sessions were put on hold and the participant was referred to the school's social worker for assistance (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont, 2011). The researchers noted that during this process participants gave monosyllabic responses which did not provide a holistic view of how they felt about being retained. A second set of interviews was held during which the blob tree (Wilson & Long, 2020) was used because it allowed participants to use predetermined visuals to articulate their experiences. When the blobs¹ were introduced during the second interviews most of the participants were able to participate more comprehensively in the interview process. Some of the participants struggled to express themselves

verbally in English, because of a language barrier. We noted that the blob visuals enabled them to share their feelings with us more than during the first interview sessions. The use of the blob trees also allowed us to further probe the participants' answers by asking them why they selected specific blobs. Each blob was allocated a number, which made it easy for the participants to select them, as they did not have to struggle to point out the chosen blob.

Data were analysed by following the six-phase approach to thematic analysis as stipulated by Braun and Clarke (2012). By using an inductive approach, we identified "codes and themes" (Creswell, 2012:238) linked to the data that were collected (Thomas, 2006). Similarities and differences in the transcripts were categorised and compared, after which the data were coded.

To ensure trustworthiness, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure that conversations were transcribed accurately. The technique of member-checking could not be used in this research, because of the sensitivity of the research. However, the blob tree was used to increase the scope and depth of the research and to check if there was consistency between the participants' responses to the blob tree and their responses during the first interview. All ethical protocols were followed, which included acquiring informed consent and assent from participants and their parents. Participants could choose their own pseudonyms in order for them to exercise their right to privacy.

Findings

Learners' Views on being Retained

Learners' views on being retained were sought on two occasions: during the first and second half of the school year. What was evident was a shift in some of their views over time. During the first interviews two learners, Philani and Sophia, said that they felt "good" and "happy about repeating ..." the grade. The other 10 learners all felt "bad about repeating the grade ..." and it made them feel "sad."

During the second interviews, when the blob trees were used, five learners indicated that they were happy about being retained and seven learners still maintained that they were not happy. Hence, by the second half of the year an additional three learners indicated that they were happy to having been retained. The seven learners who remained "sad" were Barbie Girl, Bontle, Emmanuel, Ronaldo, Nicky Bella, Zorro, and Sandie. In addition, learners also indicated that they were "angry" as they "do not understand how [they] failed ..." the previous year. They had also started experiencing social challenges as their "friends make fun of [them] because [they] failed" and that learners in their classes were "busy teasing ... and laughing" at them, hence they "don't like [being in] that class." We noted from the learners' responses that their unhappiness about being retained was driven by a lack of understanding of why they were retained and by being socially excluded by their peers.

Philani and Sophia remained positive and "happy" about being retained and Max, Jerry and Cinderella also felt more positive about repeating by the second half of the academic year. Their reasons for being happy were that "they are pass[ing]" and that "... the work is easy ..." because they are "getting everything correct", and therefore, "repeating a grade has made [them] feel confident." Jerry specified that she was happy because she was made "a junior leader" and "a class monitor." The reason why some learners' views on being retained had shifted was because they were given more responsibilities in the class; they were able to complete the tasks assigned to them; they had developed an improved sense of confidence. The aspects of achieving academically and being given social status made learners feel more included in the learning process and less marginalised, despite being part of the minority "repeaters" group in their classes.

Learners' views showed that despite the negative social effects proclaimed about grade retention in the literature, it does not necessarily follow that all learners felt marginalised. As such, these learners' positive experiences contradict Gandin (2009, as cited in Florian & Walton, 2017) who says that when learners are retained it sends a message that they do not have what it takes to

succeed at school.

Reasons for Being Retained

Ten of the learner participants could cite reasons for being retained. These reasons included language barriers, being new at the school and hence "didn't know anything", not completing tasks given to them or physical barriers to learning. Barbie Girl, Bontle, Cinderella and Max all indicated that they had repeated the grade because they failed "English", "mathematics" or "Afrikaans." Sandie, Jerry and Emmanuel stated that they "didn't know anything ..." because of "... coming from another school..." Nicky Bella said that she had failed because she "did not listen ..." in class. Zorro believed that he had repeated because his "pencil broke so [he] didn't write down [his] work", whereas Ronaldo felt that he had repeated because he was struggling "to see work on the board." Two learners, Philani and Sophia, stated that they "do not know" why they had been retained.

From the findings above, it can be surmised that coming from a different school, language barriers, physical barriers and an inability to complete tasks because of inadequate stationery were directly associated with repeating a grade. What was also evident from the data was that participants rationalised their failure at a macro and micro level. For some participants a pattern of events (like coming from a new school; not listening in class) were reasons for retention, while others took a micro-level view by linking their retention to aspects like "my pencil broke, and I could not write my work."

This highlighted the subtle ways in which marginalisation featured in the lives of learners who were repeating a grade. Messiou (2006:305) describes this form of marginalisation as "a child is found in what appears to be marginalized situations but does not view this as marginalization." Parents were made aware of the possibility that the child might be retained, but there was no attempt by the school or parents to psychologically prepare the learners for this event.

Being designated as "different" in school contexts can result in extreme forms of exclusion and marginalisation. Kearney (2011) portrays exclusion as being a powerful tool in the sense that it denies the learners access to basic resources and is clandestinely embedded in the so-called "normal" practices, beliefs, and values of society. In the above scenarios, being retained evoked feelings of marginalisation and of being different. In some interviews learners expressed their surprise that they had not progressed to the next grade, as they thought that they had passed the grade. It was only at that point that some of them were informed by their parents of the reasons for being retained.

Themes and Sub-themes that Emerged about Experiences of Grade Retention

Table 2 Themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data during the study

Overarching theme	Sub-theme	Categories	Overall effects of being retained
Socio-emotional outcomes of retention	Peer relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejection by peers • Teasing and bullying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low self-esteem • Lack of belonging
	Parental reactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive parents • Pressure from parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of self-confidence • Negative perceptions of self-efficacy
	Teachers' attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive and encouraging • Unfair treatment 	

Socio-emotional outcomes of grade retention

From the data analysis it was noted that participants had indicated challenging peer relationships, parental reactions to them being retained, as well as stereotypical views from teachers (see Table 2 above).

Impact on learners' peer relationships

Regarding peer relationships, participants indicated positive and negative experiences. The positive experiences for nine learners were that they were able to make new friends in their current class. Eleven learners said that their friends in the current grade were supportive, and two said that their peers assisted them during group work. An example of this was cited by Sandie who said that she was happy *"because when I come to class I am always with my friends and I am happy."* She further stated in her second interview that, *"they are helping me. We do homework everyday with them."*

Negative experiences included that most of the learners' friends from the previous year were not interested in maintaining a friendship with them. Emmanuel stated that despite trying to reach out to his old friends, they rejected him. Barbie Girl felt disrespected by peers younger than her who treated her like a baby because she had repeated. Ronaldo was teary because friends from the previous year were bullying him because he had been retained. Most of these learners reported that they were either *"bullied"*, *"laughed at"* or *"teased"*, because they were repeating. This aroused feelings of dejection, exclusion, and marginalisation among the retained learners.

Friends form an integral part of any learner's life, as acceptance and belonging form part of the development of relationships. Teaching and learning is the main focus in schools, but it is a well-known fact that the "social and peer group environment is also part of what learners are or could be 'included' into" (Walton, E 2013:1173). Friendship has a positive effect on people and the way in which they perceive themselves (Fordham & Stevenson-Hindle, 1999). The experiences of these learners were that they tended to be rejected by peers from the previous year. Making new friends was difficult for them, because they were either bullied or teased because of having to repeat. Their sense of connection to one

another and their relationships with each other appeared to be of great significance (Adderley, Hope, Hughes, Jones, Messiou & Shaw, 2015). Therefore, children's sense of feeling included lies not in the teaching and learning space.

Learners were bullied, which caused them emotional distress. Bullying is a complex form of exclusion which is often invisible to teachers and is neatly embedded in the social environment of the school (Walton, G 2011). Therefore, there is a need to interrogate some of the current practices in the education system that give rise to and sustain marginalisation and exclusion in schools (Walton, G 2011).

Parental reactions as reported by learners

Regarding parents' reactions, learners expressed positive and negative experiences. Six learners (Jerry, Cinderella, Emmanuel, Max, Ronaldo and Philani) indicated that their parents were supportive when they found out that they were going to be retained. They had indicated that their *"family [is] ... standing with [them] ... they are always on [their] side."* Even though his family was supportive, Max indicated that his family was *"sad because they know that in the class I was playing"* [sic]. Three learners (Barbie Girl, Zorro and Sandie) stated that their family was *"unhappy because [they] failed."* Bontle and Nicky Bella mentioned that their parents were *"worried about [them] repeating a grade...."* Nicky Bella stated that her parents *"don't want [her] to repeat another grade ... [her] mother was crying that [she] repeated a grade and [Nicky Bella] was sad."* Sophia did not respond to this question as she was unable to articulate the answer.

What was interesting to note from the data was the correlation between the parents' views on their children being retained and the learners' experiences of being retained. Four learners (Jerry, Philani, Ronaldo and Cinderella) who were happy to repeat the grade, had supportive parents. Nicky Bella's, Zorro's, Sandie's, Barbie Girl's and Bontle's parents were all unhappy about them repeating and so they were too. Emmanuel's and Max's parents were supportive about them repeating yet they were not happy about it. From the above information it can be claimed that there may be a correlation between parents' and learners' views about being retained.

Teachers' attitudes as perceived by learners

In this study, the teacher-learner relationship also emerged as an important aspect. Some learners perceived their teachers as being unfair towards them, whereas others enjoyed a warm relationship with their teachers. Five learners (Cinderella, Emmanuel, Sandie, Nicky Bella and Zorro) felt that their teachers were treating them unfairly. These experiences included that the "*teacher always shouts at*" them and "*punish[es]*" them. In addition, Emmanuel stated that he was not happy that the teacher sometimes told his classmates that he had failed the grade. When a child, as in this case, is constantly being made to feel uncomfortable by being reminded that he or she failed the grade, the experience is unpleasant and likely to lead to decreased confidence in their own academic abilities. This resulted in low self-esteem as an adult embarrassed a learner in front of peers. This is in line with Messiou's (2006) conceptualisation of marginalisation where a child experiences some kind of marginalisation that is recognised by almost everybody including him- or herself.

Five learners (Philani, Max, Ronaldo, Jerry and Bontle) stated that their teachers were supportive and encouraging. Max stated that he felt that his teacher was supportive and encouraging "*because the teacher loves me ... she helps me ... she takes care of me ... she shows me love.*" For Ronaldo, his teacher showed support and encouragement "*because my teacher is making me do all the things that I was not allowed to do last year, and my teacher is making me finish all the work that I didn't finish.*" Two participants (Sophia and Barbie Girl) did not provide information about their teachers: Sophia, because of the language barrier and Barbie Girl did not want to talk about her teacher.

Jerry and Philani both indicated that their teachers were supportive, and they were happy to be retained. Cinderella, Emmanuel, Nicky Bella, Zorro, and Sandie were sad about being retained and indicated that they had teachers who treated them unfairly. Max and Ronaldo stated that they had supportive teachers and parents but were still sad about being retained. The above findings indicate that teachers can either challenge or support the practice of inclusion (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick & West, 2012) by how they act and interact with learners who have been retained. Negative attitudes and a lack of support towards learners who have been retained could be detrimental to the inclusion process.

Discussion

This study has provided feedback on 12 Foundation Phase learners' experiences and perceptions about being retained. The findings reveal that some of the retained learners might have been marginalised in the previous year by their teachers because of their academic challenges. Most of the learners did not

enjoy being retained in a grade, but it did not impact negatively on their academic progress. From the data it can be claimed that for all the learners, except for Max and Ronaldo, there was a link between their experiences of retention and their perceptions of how their parents and teachers reacted to them. We note, with interest, that how parents and teachers view and support learners who are retained is crucial to learners' experiences and growth during the second year in the grade. There was evidence of lower motivation among most of the participants (Brophy, 2006).

The emotional distress of grade retention came mainly from the social stigma attached to being retained. Most of the participants seemed to be embarrassed about being retained. Learners were bullied and teased by peers because they were repeating a grade, and this made them struggle emotionally. Bullying and teasing was one of the major causes of emotional distress that the learners who were retained had experienced. What made matters worse was that some of the teachers also teased these learners and shouted at them. This highlights the enormous stigma that continues to be linked to grade retention, an aspect that promotes marginalisation. As long as teachers, parents and society as a whole continue to impose grade retention on learners, without giving them an opportunity to voice their concerns and experiences, this process will further marginalise learners who are struggling academically. As such, teachers play a crucial role in ensuring that learners who are retained feel supported and included and not even more marginalised and excluded. Furthermore, parental support and encouragement are imperative for learner success and even more so when learners are retained in a grade.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study included the sample size, data collected from a single school in Gauteng, and contradictory statements from some of the respondents. Most schools were sceptical about trusting their younger learners with researchers whom they did not know. Because the scope of the study which was a qualitative research design and limited to one school, we note that the findings of this research cannot be generalised to all Foundation Phase learners who have been retained. However, these findings have revealed how grade retention can be viewed as exclusionary by the learners who have experienced it. This study has afforded learners who were repeating a grade an opportunity to share their views with a wider audience.

Conclusion

We recommend that the practice of grade retention in the Foundation Phase be viewed more critically and that the emotional and psycho-social outcomes of this practice from the learners' perspectives, are

explored further. It is imperative for further studies to be done with learners in other schools and phases to tap into their experiences of grade retention. It is envisaged that understanding their experiences will contribute positively towards reducing tendencies of exclusion and marginalisation that are subtly embedded in the practice of grade retention. The finding of this study will assist parents and teachers to gain an understanding of the repercussions of retention seen from the learners' perspectives. In addition, the findings can also assist teachers and parents to be cognisant of their reactions and actions towards children who have been retained.

Authors' Contributions

Mrs Maureen Hadebe collected the data from participants as part of her masters' study. Both authors (Maureen Hadebe and Moeniera Moosa) reanalysed the data for the purpose of this article. Both authors wrote the article and reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

- i. Blobs are simple visuals, yet they deal with deep issues and each picture is a means to a conversation (Adderley et al., 2015). The blobs displayed a variety of characters. The participants were asked to choose the blobs that best suited their feelings and experiences in response to the questions they were asked.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- iii. DATES: Received: 25 June 2020; Revised: 12 June 2021; Accepted: 23 November 2021; Published: 31 August 2022.

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