

Grade retention and its effects on academic performance in selected grant-aided secondary schools in central province, Zambia: pupils' and teachers' perceptions

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Abstract

The study aimed at establishing pupils' perceptions towards grade retention and its effects on academic performance in selected grant-aided secondary schools in Central province of Zambia. The study used a case study research design which combined qualitative and quantitative techniques of data collection and analysis. The target sample comprised all pupils, guidance and counselling teachers and deputy head teachers of the selected grant-aided secondary schools. The data were collected through questionnaires, interview schedules and analysis of pupil's progress record cards. Qualitative data were analysed thematically through identification of themes that emerged from data. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 20.0) was used to generate descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages or tables. The study revealed that most of the pupils in grant-aided secondary schools perceive grade retention as something that is good. The positive perception can mainly be attributed to the high levels of awareness among pupils about the existence of the policy, parental involvement and vigorous counselling programmes among other factors. Based on the findings, the study recommended that School authorities in grant-aided secondary schools should encourage teachers to enhance studying of pupils in mixed ability-groups as a strategy to foster sharing of knowledge.

Keywords: Grade retention, Perception, Academic performance

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

Grade retention is one of the education interventional strategies that grant aided secondary schools have been implementing in order to maintain a good academic performance (ZEC, 2014) [31]. According to Jere (2006:6) [10] grade retention "...occurs when students are held back in the same grade for an extra year rather than being promoted to a higher grade along with their age peers". It is estimated that over 2.4 million (5-10%) students are retained every year in the United States (Anderson, Jimerson and Whipple, 2005) [1]. The percentage of pupils retained has shown a steady increase over the last 25 years to about 40% (Rafoth and Knickelbein, 2008) [27]. On the rise for the past twenty-five years, grade retention today is estimated to cost over 14 billion dollars per year to pay for the extra year of schooling (Kathleen, 2012) [15].

A study by Jere (2006) [10] which was conducted in many developing African countries, further reveals that grade retention is more common in developing countries than in developed countries and it is especially common in remote rural areas. In the case of Zambia, it is typical for grant-aided secondary schools to operate in remotest parts of the nation. Another study by Eisenmaon and Schwille (1997) [5] reported high rates of grade retention in developing countries. The study furthermore revealed that the highest rates were found in the Sub-Saharan African countries where each year, about 22% of primary pupils and 21% of secondary pupils were retained. These figures are statistically large enough to suggest that grade retention, as an education interventional measure for pupils' academic performance, is a growing concern that requires urgent attention.

However, other studies such as the one done by Pijanowski, Holt, and Young (2012) [26] indicated that educators and principals differed in their views on grade retention. The study

revealed that for those who supported grade retention, the two most common reasons were that it prevents future failure and maintains standards. Few other studies further did not underscore grade retention as a bad practice (Hong and Yu, 2008; Gleason, Kwok and Hughes, 2007) [9, 6]. However, NASP (2003) [23] argues that such studies failed to look at grade retention over time and did not substantiate the benefit of grade retention as the gains tend to be lost over the years. The study further indicated that effects of grade retention on academic performance were negative. In the same study, the 6th grade pupils for example, found grade retention to be the third most stressful event after losing a parent and going blind.

Furthermore, the study by Anderson (2002) [2] found grade retention to be the 10th most stressful life event to the 1st grade pupils. Third graders found it to be the 5th most stressful and sixth graders found it to be the most stressful life event even worse than losing a parent or going blind. The study by Jere (2006) [10] equally indicated and singled out grade retention as one of the major causes of dropping out of school, depression, low self-esteem and suicide committed by adolescent pupils in secondary schools. Jimerson (2001) [11] observes in his study that by practicing grade retention, a heavy amount of stress is put on pupils for a practice that has an 80% non success rate. The national academy of Education (1991: 53) [22] put it this way: "Research conducted in recent years on grade retention has led educators to make the connection that holding young people back in schools holds them back in life". It is clear that the outcome of these studies paint a gloomy picture about grade retention as they all point to the fact that grade retention is a bad educational intervention practice that should be abandoned. However, one may ask a question, despite such empirical evidence about the bad effects of grade retention on pupils' social, economic and academic performance, why is it

that these grant-aided secondary schools in Zambia still insist on implementing such a policy? What about the pupils themselves, how do they perceive grade retention policy? These and many more questions prompted this paper to institute a study aimed at generating dependable answers.

2. Statement of the problem

There is overwhelming evidence from research studies that pupils' academic performance from grant-aided secondary schools is better than those from government schools (ZEC, 2014; Malambo, 2012; Jere, 2006) [31, 17, 10]. Among many measures that grant-aided secondary schools have put in place to improve pupils' academic performance is by implementing strong school academic policies (Kakupa, 2014) [12]. Grade retention is one of the academic policies being practiced in grant-aided secondary schools aimed at improving academic performance of pupils. Despite grant-aided secondary schools implementing grade retention policy, pupils' perceptions towards grade retention and its effects on academic performance in Central Province have remained unknown, hence the need for this study.

3. Purpose

The purpose of the study was to establish pupils' perceptions towards grade retention and its effects on academic performance in selected grant aided secondary schools in Central province.

4. Objective

To establish pupils' perceptions towards grade retention in grant aided secondary schools in Central province.

5. Research question

What are the perceptions of pupils towards grade retention in grant aided secondary schools in Central province?

6. Rationale

The study has generated information on pupils' perception towards grade retention and its effects on academic performance in grant aided secondary schools in Central province of Zambia. Further the findings of this study will help grant-aided secondary schools adopt best practices of implementing grade retention policy such as the inclusion of ICTs in the whole process of executing the policy. Policy makers, ministry of education and other educational organisations such as UNICEF will benefit from the out of this study by adopting interventional measures such as grade retention to help improve academic performance of pupils whose learning outcomes are usually below average. The outcome of the study may trigger further research on grade retention thereby providing more insights on the implementation of the policy which is aimed at enhancing the academic performance of learners in grant aided learning institutions. The findings and recommendations may be replicated by non grant-aided schools in order to help struggling pupils improve in their academic achievement.

7. Theoretical framework

The study was guided by Hebb's theory of perception. Theories have a great inspiration powers to human thought which should be promoted and these include but not limited to hypothetical thinking, imagination, creativity and probabilistic

thinking. The importance of theory in any research cannot be overemphasised as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana correctly observed: *'theory without practice is hollow; and practice without theory is blind'*. It therefore follows that *theory illuminates practice and practice illuminates theory* (Omari, 2011) [25]. Hebb was a Canadian Psychologist who did a lot of work on the understanding of perception. His work was mainly reconciliation between the extremist positions taken by behaviourists and Gestalt theorists as regards to formation of perceptions in people.

It may be argued that perceptions are developed not only from long periods of learning but also as a result of long periods of practice. Grant aided secondary schools have been in existence since the coming of the missionaries. It therefore follows that grade retention has been in place since the establishment of grant-aided secondary schools in Zambia. It may further be argued that pupils who access their secondary education from grant-aided schools are likely to develop certain perceptions due to long periods and experiences on how grade retention is been implemented. Further, perception is not simply determined by stimulus patterns but rather it is a dynamic searching for the best interpretation of the available data as suggested by Gregory (1996) [7]. Hence the need to conduct this study which explored pupils' perceptions towards grade retention unlike depending on the outcomes based on studies that only investigated parents' and teachers' perceptions towards the policy.

8. Research Methodology

8.1 Research design

The study used a case study research design to establish pupils' perceptions towards grade retention and its effects on pupils' academic performance in grant aided secondary schools in Central province. The case study design was used because offers an opportunity for the researcher to consider a situation, individual, group, organisation or whatever is appropriate as the object of study. Kasonde-Ngá ndu (2013) [14] also contends that among the advantages of using a case study research design is that it provides in-depth study of a phenomenon in its real life context through the use of multiple sources of evidence

8.2 Data collection

Questionnaires, scheduled interviews and pupil's progress record cards were used to collect data. The questionnaires were self-administered to pupils at each particular selected grant-aided secondary school. These were numbered according to the desk numbers for each pupil. The purpose of numbering questionnaires according to numbers that appeared on the pupils' desks was to enable the researcher with the help of guidance and counselling teachers identify and follow up some of the pupils who were once retained. The questionnaires were collected immediately after completion. Out of 94 questionnaires which were distributed to the pupils, 90 of them were successfully answered and collected giving a distribution return rate of 96%. This exercise was followed by interviewing deputy head teachers, guidance and counselling teachers and pupils especially those who once faced grade retention from the same grant-aided secondary schools. Later on respondents' responses especially from pupils were verified using pupil's progress record cards. Out of those (90 pupils) who answered the questionnaires, the researcher followed 30 pupils out of all

those who indicated that they were once retained with interviews. In other words, some of the pupils who experienced grade retention were also interviewed in order for the researcher to gain more insight and understanding mostly about the perceptions pupils had on grade retention. The claims made by pupils from the questionnaires and interviews were later on compared with what was written on their specific and individual progress record cards. This exercise was made easy because in grant-aided secondary schools, they are very particular and up to date with record keeping.

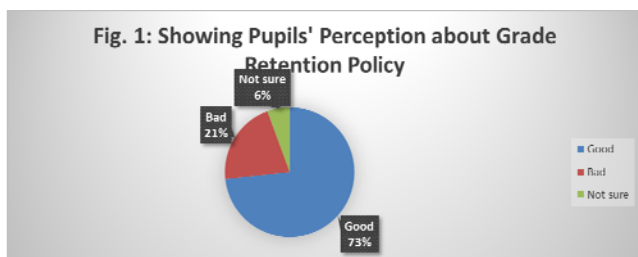
8.3 Data analysis

In this study thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data especially data generated from interviews, pupils' progress record cards and some questions from the questionnaire which were open-ended. Further, qualitative data was categorised in order to examine emerging themes. On the other hand, quantitative data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 20.0 version) which helped to generate frequencies, tables, percentages and graphs.

9. Findings

Pupils' perception towards grade retention in grant-aided secondary schools

The study wanted to find out how pupils in grant-aided secondary schools perceived grade retention policy. The results are as shown in the figure below:



The above pie chart shows pupils' perception about grade retention policy. The majority of the pupils 66(73 %) viewed grade retention policy as being good. However, 19(21 %) of the pupils were of the view that grade retention policy was bad. Nevertheless, 5(6 %) of the pupils were not sure whether grade retention policy was good or bad.

Common responses from various respondents who were interviewed on how they perceived grade retention had this to say

One of the pupils revealed the following

...grade retention policy is very good because it has helped me in my academic performance... This policy is testimony enough that mission schools care for us pupils unlike in government secondary schools where they don't care about our academic performance...

The Deputy Head Teacher from one of the grant-aided secondary school which participated in the study indicated the following

..For me grade retention is a very good practice because it has really helped us mission schools not only to maintain good academic standards and provide quality education but also to help struggling pupils academically realise their potential...

One of the Guidance and Counselling Teacher observed

...this policy is good depending on how it is implemented. For mission schools it helps us to sieve so that only fully baked pupils are allowed to proceed and write the final examination. In fact it helps us maintain standards unlike in government schools where they are just interested in quantity but not quality as you know...

10. Discussion of the Findings

When pupils were asked about their perception towards the grade retention policy, an awe-inspiring majority of the total respondents viewed the policy as being good. Only a small number of the respondents regarded the policy as being bad. In addition, a tiny number of respondents were unsure whether the policy was good or bad. Accordingly, as argued by Shepard and Smith (1988) [29], perceptions are formed by people in several different ways and as such suggest two types of knowledge that influence peoples' perceptions being propositional and practical. Statistically speaking, this research study has unearthed facts due to pupils' own experiences about the policy. Hebb's theory on perception indicates that perception is influenced by several factors which among others include past experiences, attitudes, long periods of learning and long periods of practice. Hebb concluded in his theory that although certain characteristics are innately determined there is however certain other characteristics that can be proved to be the result of learning and long periods of practice (Kuppuswamy, 2012). [16] As observed, pupils from grant-aided secondary schools were likely to develop certain perceptions toward the practice as a result of long learning and experience they have had in such schools. The outcome of this study indicates that the majority of the pupils from grant-aided secondary schools perceive grade retention positively. This is contrary to studies done by Jere (2006) [10] and DelConte, (2011) [4] whose outcome showed that pupils had negative perception towards the policy of grade retention.

The differences in the outcomes between this study and other research studies like those done by Jere and DelConte as already noted above were attributed to variations in the perceiver's factors (i.e. attitudes, experience, interest and expectations), target's factors (i.e. motives, background, proximity and similarity) and the factors in the situation such as social setting, time and working setting as indicated by the study conducted by Nzuvu (1999) [24].

As Malim and Birch (1998: 150) [18] observe: "perception is the process whereby the brain makes sense of the information received from senses." It may be argued therefore that perception is the subjective interpretation of sensations in the light of experience, motivation and emotion and contextual factors. Gregory (1996) [7] equally noted that perception is not simply determined by stimulus patterns but rather it is a dynamic searching for the best interpretation of the available data. Based on the findings of the present study, one may therefore deduce that the majority (73%) of pupils from grant-aided secondary schools who participated in the study developed positive perceptions towards grade retention based on their experiences and interpretation of how the policy had been implemented.

Malim and Birch (1998) [18] furthermore argue that our past experience play an important role in the way we perceive things or issues. For instance an individual who was once involved in a car accident may apprehensively perceive heavy

traffic for some time at least. A burnt child may equally perceive fire with fear. In a similar way pupils who were once retained or observed a friend being retained in these grant-aided secondary schools perceived grade retention either positively or negatively depending on their experiences, observations and how the implementation of the policy was done as earlier on mentioned.

As argued by Karen (2011)^[13], Hebb (1949)^[8], Gregory (1996)^[7], Malim and Birch (1998)^[18] perceptions are selective and largely determined by the condition of sense-organs and the nervous system, past experience, immediate attitude and formation of stereotypes. This can be confirmed by different views by pupils from grant-aided secondary schools on how they perceived grade retention. Responses from various categories of respondents who were interviewed further confirmed these variations in perceptions but those who perceived grade retention positively were more than those who said that it was a bad practice.

Further, the outcome of this study which generally indicates that pupils from grant-aided secondary schools had a positive perception towards grade retention contradicts the findings from the study done by Jere (2006)^[10] within most of African countries with similar learning conditions as Zambia and Anderson (2002)^[2] conducted from the United States of America. These studies by Jere, Anderson and others indicated that the third graders perceived grade retention negatively and regarded it as the most stressful life event...even worse than losing a parent or going blind. These differences are mainly due to the fact that in grant-aided secondary schools they put much emphasis on counselling, parental involvement and proactively preparing the minds of the would be retained pupils, hence the positive perception. Additionally the use of policy-Networks approach model greatly assisted bringing pupils on board in order for them to accept and appreciate the policy of grade retention.

As theorists in network analysis, Marsh and McConnell (2010)^[19] correctly observed that policy implementation is not only about one particular group but it involves a series of different sectors or actors of the society who need to find a common cause to the problem and hence its solution. Sabatier (1986)^[28] further contends that there are major risks for policy failure during the implementation stage such as lack of commitment, lack of support from the affected interest groups among others. These factors can bring about failure of what the policy is intended to achieve. Realising that parents and pupils are stake holders in the successful implementation of grade retention policy, grant-aided secondary schools deliberately involve them as a strategy to make policy implementation a success story. Moreover, as Jean Piaget rightly postulated children are active explorers and thinkers who are constantly trying to find ways of adapting to the environment around them. It is important therefore to actively engage the pupils in the implementation of grade retention policy.

Counselling was another critical component that helped the majority of learners in grant aided schools to perceive the policy positively. Ndhlovu (2015:59)^[21] define counselling as "...a mutual helping relationship between a person in need (client) and a trained counsellor". Moloney (2013)^[20] argues that counselling is an important component in enabling young people to take more responsibility for their lives by helping them to deal increasingly with their own issues and by empowering them. He also observed that many academic

difficulties which led to pupils being retained have their origins in the family background of the pupils and the attitude and expectations of parents. He argues that the inability to concentrate in studies and lack of motivation often have their source in relationship issues, worries about changes and some strong academic policies like grade retention which the schools usually put in place as a strategy to help improve pupils' academic performance.

Ndlovu (2015)^[21] and Stephen (2012)^[30] seem to similarly agree with Moloney (2013)^[20] that even half an hour of good listening by a trusted counsellor can bring significant changes in attitudes which later on influence perceptions towards learning. This shows how critical counselling is to the successful implementation of grade retention policy which grant-aided secondary schools vigorously embraced thereby influencing pupils' positive perception toward the practice.

Thus, in trying to establish pupils' perception toward grade retention policy, this study has shown that the pupils, who are the major stakeholders in the grade retention policy, view the policy as being good. This is a clear indication that the existence of this policy in grant-aided secondary schools is good and acceptable. This is because the percentage of pupils who stated that the policy is good significantly outweighs those who stated that it was a bad policy. There were other factors that could have contributed to the majority of the pupils in grant-aided secondary schools to positively perceive grade retention. One of them was that pupils were aware and knowledgeable about grade retention policy. For instance, when asked whether they were aware of the existence of grade retention in grant-aided secondary schools 84 (93%) out of 90 pupils said they were knowledgeable about the policy. The high knowledge levels among pupils were attributed to an effective communication of the policy by the school authorities to pupils and parents. In this regard, the policy of grade retention was effectively communicated to all stake holders through among other medium acceptance letters, newsletters, PTA meetings and open days.

11. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of the study revealed that most of the pupils in grant-aided secondary schools perceive grade retention as something that is good. The pupils' positive perception towards the policy of grade retention was mainly due to the following factors: 1. High levels of knowledge awareness among pupils about the existence of the policy. 2. Parental involvement. 3. Effective communication of the policy by the school authorities to the pupils, parents and other stake holders through acceptance letters, newsletters, PTA meetings and open days, etc. The following recommendations emerged based on the findings of this study: 1. School authorities should encourage teachers to enhance studying of pupils in mixed-ability groups as a strategy to enable pupils to learn from each other. 2. Teachers should offer individualised attention to pupils earmarked for grade retention so that they can improve in their academic performance.

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