



# Determinants of grade repetition in primary school in sub-Saharan Africa: An event history analysis for rural Malawi



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## ABSTRACT

This study shows that students in Grades 5 and 7 in rural Malawi who have repeated a grade demonstrate lower academic achievement than those in the same institutions who have been promoted, and identifies individual, family, classroom, and school factors associated with grade repetition. Specifically, absences, sibling order, and meals per week in Grade 5, and lack of textbooks, parents' education, and household responsibilities in Grade 7 are associated with grade repetition. Also, those in larger classes seem at greater risk for repetition than peers in smaller classes. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions about educational policy regarding grade repetition.

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## 1. Introduction

Delegates to the 1990 World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, pledged to ensure access to and completion of high-quality primary education for all children. Yet by 2010 in sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion of those who had reached the highest possible grade level was only 56% (UNESCO, 2014). One reason for the low completion rate is the many instances of grade repetition.

Grade repetition, also called grade retention, is the practice of holding students in the same school grade for an additional year rather than promoting them to the next grade with their age peers (Shepard, 1994). Grade repetition rates are high in most sub-Saharan African countries. The Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) reported that more than 37.1% of Grade 6 students had repeated a grade at least once (Hungu, 2010).

Malawi is not an exception. With its *National Education Sector Plan 2008–2017*, the Malawian government aims to reduce grade repetition and increase completion rates in primary education. This challenge is formidable because the repetition rate in Malawi is the highest among the SACMEQ participating countries: More than 60.3% of Grade 6 students have repeated at least one grade (Hungu, 2010).

SACMEQ analyzed the characteristics of Malawian students who had repeated a grade, the schools the repeating students attended, and the effect of grade repetition on academic achievement (Ikeda, 2005). However, the SACMEQ cross-sectional data alone do not reveal the entire picture, having been collected at one point in time, not both before and after students repeated a grade.

An event history analysis, the distinguishing trait of this study, allows for the identification of reasons for grade repetition in a rural area of Malawi. Data were collected both before and after grade repetition to answer the three research questions: (1) Is academic achievement different between those promoted and those held back? (2) What individual and family factors are associated with increased risk of grade repetition? (3) What classroom and school factors influence grade repetition?

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on academic achievement, individual and family, and classroom and school factors shown to affect grade repetition. Section 3 describes the study methodology. The findings are presented in Section 4. The discussion is outlined in Section 5, and the final section offers a conclusion to summarize findings and suggest future research.

## 2. The causes of grade repetition

Policies on grade repetition vary among countries, especially between developed and developing countries (Brophy, 2006; Naruhutse et al., 2008). In most developed countries, where grade

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repetition is generally imposed by the school, rates of repetition are relatively low. These countries benefit from a rich research literature, for example examining the merits of automatic promotion combined with support for low achievers. In contrast, grade repetition is more common in developing countries and often precipitated by a complex interaction of individual and family matters. Moreover, because of limited research, policies on grade repetition in developing countries are tentative.

### 2.1. Grade repetition and academic achievement

Grade repetition is often considered a remedy for low academic achievement, based on the idea that automatic promotion would disadvantage low-achieving students (Hung, 2010). Yet the effect of grade repetition on academic achievement is mixed in both developed and developing countries. Many researchers have reported negative achievement effects when the children who have repeated grades are promoted to the next grade, and a few studies found a short-term positive effect of repeating that decreased and finally disappeared in later grades (Jimerson, 1999).

In developed countries, for example the United States, students must pass grade-level tests to be promoted (Brophy, 2006). In the United Kingdom and other European countries, promotion is the norm and grade repetition is relatively rare. Many developing countries, however, do not impose standard criteria for compelling grade repetition. In general, a class teacher decides who will repeat based on comparison of test results: Those with poor performance on end-of-term testing may be asked to repeat a grade. The effects of judging student achievement in the context of a small, local group, rather than a national or regional sample, are commonly called the “frog-pond effect.” Ikeda, in turn, called leaving decisions on grade repetition to the discretion of the classroom teacher the “frog effect” (Ikeda, 2005). Many teachers in developing countries have not had training for making such decisions and so use arbitrary criteria (Brophy, 2006). As a result, Ikeda found, repeating students achieved as much as those who did not repeat a grade in some schools, but in other schools repeating students did not reach the same levels of achievement as those who did not repeat (Ikeda, 2005). Ikeda's analysis (2005) was based on SACMEQ data acquired at test time, along with students' responses to questions on the number of grades they had repeated. That is, the analysis reflected the effect of grade repetition on academic achievement but did not compare academic achievement between students asked to repeat a grade and those who were promoted. To properly compare the two populations of students, we collected data on students both before and after the decision was made to hold back or promote.

### 2.2. Individual and family-level factors influencing grade repetition

Although low student achievement is a leading indicator of grade repetition, there are other related factors. In developed countries, much research has revealed that individual and family situations are associated with grade repetition. Important individual features associated with repeating a grade include gender (male) (Byrd and Weitzman, 1994; Corman, 2003; Jimerson, 1999), low birth weight (Byrd and Weitzman, 1994), a birthday in the second half of the calendar year and being born to a teenage mother (Corman, 2003), younger or older age than peers (Jimerson, 1999), ethnicity (minorities) and race (black) (Byrd and Weitzman, 1994; Corman, 2003; Jimerson, 1999), status as an immigrant (García-Pérez et al., 2014), and health or behavioral problems (Corman, 2003). Important factors associated with repeating include coming from a disadvantaged family (Byrd and Weitzman, 1994; Corman, 2003; Ferguson et al., 2001; Jimerson, 1999) and living with only one parent (Bali et al., 2005; García-Pérez et al., 2014).

Developing countries have seen far less of such research than developed countries. Although previous studies have mentioned that at the individual level, gender, age, age at school entry, previous repetition, and absenteeism are related to grade repetition, the effects of these factors on grade repetition remain controversial. El-Hassan (1998) as well as Fleish and Shindler (2009) reported that boys are more likely to repeat than girls, but Gomes-Neto and Hanushek (1994) found no significant differences in repetition by gender. Age did not emerge as significant in repetition (Gomes-Neto and Hanushek, 1994), but those who entered school at a younger age were found to be more likely to repeat a grade (El-Hassan, 1998). Moreover, Marshall (2003) revealed that previous repetition and absenteeism are consistently found to be common characteristics among students who repeat a grade.

At the family level, findings show differences between developed and developing countries. Although disadvantaged children are much more likely to repeat grades than their more affluent peers in developed countries (Byrd and Weitzman, 1994; Corman, 2003; Ferguson et al., 2001), the results for developing countries are mixed. Marshall (2003) found that parental education and household wealth have no meaningful effect on grade repetition. In similar findings, Gomes-Neto and Hanushek (1994) reported that a mother's and father's education levels were not significantly related to a child's grade repetition. However, El-Hassan (1998) showed that middle children in large families may be more likely to repeat grades, as are those from families headed by a single parent (in the latter group, up to one-third repeat a grade).

A few studies in sub-Saharan Africa have investigated factors related to grade repetition. Liddell and Rae (2001) found that low early academic achievement was a strong predictor of retention. From the SACMEQ II data, Ikeda (2005) analyzed age, gender, and socioeconomic background at the individual level and found that the results varied among countries. In some nations, those repeating a grade were older than those not repeating, but in others, no significant difference was found between age groups. In one-half of the SACMEQ countries, statistically significant data showed that fewer girls than boys repeated grades. Except in a few countries, students who had repeated one or more grades came from more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds than those who had never repeated.

### 2.3. Classroom and school-level factors influencing grade repetition

Few studies have identified classroom and school factors in grade repetition for either developed or developing countries. Apparently, individual rather than classroom and school factors, especially low academic achievement, were considered important in understanding grade repetition. However, particularly in developing countries, classroom and school conditions vary. For example, in many classes, untrained teachers instruct large numbers of students (Diyu, 2001; Hanushek, 2006). Heyneman and Loxley (1983) found that school-level factors influenced student achievement more in developing countries than in developed countries. Therefore, identification of classroom and school factors related to grade repetition seems important to understanding the causes of it in sub-Saharan Africa.

El-Hassan (1998) noted that a large percentage of the students who repeated a grade attended public schools in rural areas. Using SACMEQ II data, Ikeda (2005) analyzed school location, type, and resources, as well as teachers' subject-matter knowledge at the institutional level. Findings indicated that the numbers of urban and rural students who repeated grades varied between countries. Ikeda found significant differences in grade repetition between government and private schools in two countries, but found no

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