



Primary school teachers and parents' views on automatic promotion practices and its implications for education quality



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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the practice of automatic promotion in primary schools of Ethiopia. It uses interview and survey data to examine teachers' practices and parents' views and synthesise its implications on quality of education. In light of the international literature and the education and training policy (ETP), the study investigated whether the Ethiopian school context promotes the basic premises of automatic promotion—providing universal primary education and maintaining the value of education through improving its quality. The study reveals that tutoring is the major type of teachers' support to improve academic performance of students. Although some parents and teachers appreciate the importance of promoting students, automatically promoted students face difficulty to meet the standards required in the next grade level, which in turn decrease their interest and motivation to learning. The absence of a systematic and consistent implementation guideline on automatic promotion produced inconsistent practices among teachers and schools. The study also uncovers that the practice of automatic promotion may have contributed to educational wastage when its undesired spillover effect (low interest, low effort, and poor attendance) has spread to students who could have attended classes regularly and demonstrated better learning outcomes. It is concluded that promoting low achieving students in the absence of appropriate support system results in low interest to attend classes and poor learning which eventually leads to drop out from schooling.

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1. Conceptual and empirical basis of the study

There are two basic practices that have been used for students who have failed to meet the academic standards required to move on to the next grade. One is the concept of social or automatic grade promotion (Picklo and Christenson, 2005). Automatic promotion allows students who have failed to meet standards to pass on to the next grade with their peers instead of completing the requirements (Brophy, 2006). On the other hand, the practice of grade retention requires a student, who failed to meet academic standards in a given grade level, to remain at that level for a subsequent school year (Jackson, 1975; Brophy, 2006).

Policy makers and researchers, as well as practitioners, have long debated the relative benefits of automatic promotion versus grade retention (King et al., 1999), as there are mixed results

regarding the efficacy of the two policies. School officials often decide to adopt either grade repetition or automatic promotion policy based on the presumed effects on academic achievement, school attitudes, adjustment and completion as well as on classrooms, schools, and school systems (Brophy, 2006).

A number of studies have examined the relative effectiveness of these two policy options; for example, by studying the impact of repetition on students' academic achievement and socio-emotional outcomes (Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001a). However, the confluence of results, from studies that compare the achievement test scores and socio-emotional outcomes of retained students to a matched group of promoted counterparts fails to demonstrate academic achievement advantages and increased personal adjustment for retained students when compared to low-achieving promoted peers (Jimerson, 2001b). In addition, longitudinal studies that compare the long-term outcomes for retained students, promoted but low achieving counterparts, and a control group also revealed evidence that retained students had low academic and employment outcomes (Jimerson, 1999). Finally, analysis of the socio-emotional outcomes also does not support the retention of students as it has been found that they display poorer

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social adjustment, more negative attitudes towards school, less frequent attendance, and more problem behaviors when compared to a similar group of students that were promoted (Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001a).

Meta-analysis studies that systematically pool hundreds of research results also did not reveal significant academic gains for non-promoted students (Holmes, 1989; Holmes and Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001b). For the studies that indicated slightly positive achievement advantages in the repeated school year (Holmes, 1989), the progress was attributed to the additional special support the retained students received, not to grade repetition in itself (Jimerson, 2001b). Whether the outcome is achievement or adjustment and whether the reason for the retention was low academic performance or immaturity, students who had been retained for a second year in a grade were not better off than initially equivalent children who have been promoted (Smith, 1989). The findings indicate that retained students did not maintain the initial academic improvements in subsequent years, but rather the changes continued to diminish and finally disappear. Repetition is also associated with and found to be a powerful predictor variable for subsequent dropout rates of students who were retained (Jimerson, 2001b). Thus, the empirical evidence puts in question the efficacy of repetition as an early intervention to improve academic and socio-emotional outcomes.

Automatic promotion is thus considered as an alternative to grade repetition in order to address the issue of repetition and dropouts because it is believed to be less costly in terms of educational and socio-emotional outcomes (Picklo and Christenson, 2005). Proponents validate the use of automatic promotion in primary education by citing the significant negative effects (Brophy, 2006) repetition has on subsequent academic achievement and adjustment of students. They argue that repetition negatively impacts students' self-esteem when they lag behind their peers, increases dropout and does not improve students' learning (Jimerson et al., 2006). From this perspective, the major role of primary education is socialisation rather than gains in academic knowledge.

The debate over the pedagogical aspect of grade repetition versus automatic promotion has also different areas of focus across diverse school contexts. In the developed countries, the discourse has mostly centred on whether grade repetition (with no additional special help provided) is the most effective way to help weak students improve their academic levels of attainment (Smith, 1989). The availability of resources and educational support has allowed the emphasis to be focused on improving individual student's learning and achievement. Whereas in the developing country context, the pedagogical focus in grade repetition research does not extensively treat the effects of repetition on individuals but rather examines repetition in terms of educational quality and internal efficiency (N'tchougouan-Sonou, 2001). Thus, the focus of educational policies and practices in developing countries is mainly to improve the efficiency of the educational system by addressing the grade repetition and dropout that have long been obstacles in the effort to universalise primary education (Fiske, 1998).

In developing countries, policies that support the use of retention have an impact that goes beyond the student that has been retained. Retention has been found to consume education budgets and negatively impacts schools that have limited capacity to house students within available classrooms. Retained students occupy spaces that could have been used by other students (Brophy, 2006; Carifio and Carey, 2010). For example, a UNESCO commissioned study by Fiske (1998) found that 16% of the resources allocated to education each year in developing countries are wasted due to repeaters and dropouts from grade 1 to grade 4. In addition, the report indicates that students who leave the

system prematurely will be functionally illiterate and discourage others from entering school. On the other hand, proponents of repetition policy indicate academic gains for retained students, the maintenance of academic standards, and the development of high expectations for learning and success as its major benefits (Frey, 2005). Carifio and Carey (2010) report that automatic promotion policies have been criticised for lowering parents' and students' expectations and making classroom management even more demanding.

2. Overview of primary education in Ethiopia

Primary education in Ethiopia lasts for eight years, divided into two cycles. The first cycle is from grades 1 to 4 (lower primary) and the second cycle lasts from grades 5 to 8 (upper primary). The education policy states that the purpose of primary education is to offer basic and general primary education to prepare students for further general education and training (MoE, 1994). As part of a twenty year plan that translates the policy statements into practical actions, Ethiopia launched a series of five year Education Sector Development Programs (ESDP) within the framework of the education and training policy (ETP). The main focus of the ESDPs is to improve educational quality, relevance, efficiency, equity and expand access to education with special emphasis on primary education (MoE, 2005). In addition, the focus was to achieve the MDGs and meet the objective of National Development Plan through supplying a qualified and trained work force (MoFED, 2006). Approximately two decades ago, Ethiopia had a very low enrollment rate of 22% (MoE, 2005, 2010a). Following the implementation of the policy and efforts to universalise primary education, the primary grades gross enrollment ratio has reached 95.3% in 2013 (MoE, 2013a). It is also important to note that the disparity between boys and girls in school enrollment has decreased (MoE, 2013a). Access to primary education has also increased for children in rural areas and disadvantaged groups. However, high dropout and repetition rates remain a problem, decreasing the number of students that continue from the first cycle into grades 5 through 8 (MoE, 2013a). The gross enrollment and net enrollment rates for grades 5 to 8 are 62.9% and 47.3% respectively.

In a document titled "The Education and Training Policy and Its Implementation" the Ministry of Education introduced automatic promotion for grades 1 to 3 (MoE, 2002a), with the assumption that students are much more likely to complete primary school education if they complete the early primary grades. Further, it was believed that automatic promotion would reduce repetition and dropout, with little or no additional cost (MoE, 1998). International conferences such as the Education for All (EFA) in Dakar (UNESCO, 2000) and Jomtein (UNESCO, 1990) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations, 2000) have shaped the relationship between education and poverty, which in turn appears to contribute enormously towards the adoption of access-oriented policies such as automatic promotion. In addition, research results of the World Bank (2002) cited in Dereje (2003) supported the belief that primary education promotes the achievement of seven of the eight millennium development goals. As a result, one-hundred and eighty countries were encouraged to pledge support the goal of universal primary education by 2015 and thereby achieve sustainable development. Ethiopia was one of the countries that embraced the goal of primary education.

Despite the commendable progresses made in access and equity of primary education, Ethiopia's education sector faces great challenges (World Bank, 2005). Achievements in access have not been accompanied by adequate improvements in education quality. Students' achievement in national learning assessment is also unacceptably below the required level and does not show any reliable trend of improvement (MoE, 2000, 2004b, 2008a,

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