Teacher beliefs about grade repetition: An exploratory South African study

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Abstract

Inclusive education is described as an 'apprenticeship in democracy' as it is concerned with the identification and dismantling of exclusionary practices in schools. One such practice is grade repetition, which is known to result in school disaffection and early school leaving. In South Africa, grade repetition is disproportionately experienced by black and poor learners, resulting in the unequal realization of the democratic right to education. The rate of grade repetition in this country is high, but little is known about teachers' beliefs about the practice. This article presents the results of a self-administered questionnaire in which Johannesburg teachers described what they regarded as the benefits and drawbacks of grade repetition. The data showed that teachers believe that the additional time spent in a repeated year compensates for immaturity, allows learners to 'catch up', and be better prepared for the subsequent grade. Teachers do acknowledge negative emotional and behavioural consequences of grade repetition, but many see no drawbacks to the practice. These beliefs are discussed with reference to the context in which they are engendered, with particular focus on the strong teacher and curriculum control over the pace at which knowledge acquisition is expected. It is argued that addressing the high levels of grade repetition will need critical examination of both the teacher beliefs that sustain the practice, and the habits of schools that make failure inevitable for some learners.

1. Introduction: Grade repetition, inclusive education and democratic citizenship

Inclusive education has found its way into the policy and discourses of most education systems across the world. It is an idea that has been beset with contestations as to what it is or should be, how it should be realized in different contexts, and whether its conceptual repository is sufficient to account for the perpetuation of various forms of educational exclusion. Its language, according to Slee (2010: 14), has been 'dulled' and its concerns reduced to pragmatics – resources, strategies and policies (Slee 2011). In offering an alternative to a 'tamed' version of inclusive education Slee (2009, 2011, 2014) refers to Bernstein's (2000) 'announcement' of the rights that constitute the conditions of effective democracy. These rights, by which education can be measured, are those of enhancement (which is a condition of confidence at an individual level), inclusion (which is a condition for communitas at the social level) and participation (the condition for civic practice at the level of politics) (Bernstein 2000: xx–xxi). In the light of this, Slee (2014: 224) argues that, '[…] inclusive education is not an end in itself. It ought to be conceptualised and pursued tactically as a means for achieving an education in and for democratic citizenship'. Where rights are not equally enjoyed, there is a 'critical project for inclusive education' (Slee 2009: 184). Part of this critical project is an examination of schooling practices that are taken for granted as a natural and necessary part of the educational endeavour, but which are exclusionary in effect. Instead of engaging critically with these exclusionary practices, much research attention in the field has been given to the attitudes of teachers and others to the idea of inclusive education itself (see, e.g., Savolainen et al. 2012; Sharma et al. 2008). The result is that we know what teachers think about inclusive education itself, but we know less about what beliefs sustain exclusionary practices within 'inclusive' education systems.

This article reports on a segment of a larger project that explores the beliefs and thinking of South African teachers and education managers to a variety of practices that schools employ as they respond to differences among learners. The work is located within a critical education paradigm that seeks to 'illuminate the ways in which educational policy and practice are connected to the relations of exploitation and domination […] in the larger society' (Apple et al. 2009: 4). The project follows Ainscow and Miles (2011) who suggest that the starting point in an inquiry is tackling taken-for-granted assumptions, drawing attention to ways of working that create barriers and challenging the thinking behind existing ways of working. The focus of this section of the research is on the practice of grade repetition and the

argument presented here is that Bernstein's (2000) concept of framing helps to interpret South African teachers' general belief in the necessity and even benevolence of grade repetition, despite their being able to identify some of its deleterious effects. The article begins with a discussion of grade repetition with an emphasis on the South African literature, after which a brief account of Bernstein's concept of framing is offered. Then the research methodology is described, and the results are presented and discussed. The conclusion argues for greater recognition of the 'architecture' (Slee 2011: 171) of the South African education system that may contribute to the prevalence of the practice of grade repetition.

2. Grade repetition

The practice of making learners repeat a year is one that is not unfamiliar in education systems across the world. Previously known as 'failure', it is now euphemistically referred to as 'learner retention' or 'grade repetition'. These more palatable terms do little to obscure the fact that the practice sends a message to learners that they do not have what it takes to succeed at school, and that they do not belong there (Gandin 2009). Grade repetition is a practice associated with low quality of education, and Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of grade repetition, averaging about 15% (Unesco 2007: 52). South Africa has a primary school grade repetition rate of 8%. When high school repetition is added to the South African picture, the overall percentage of learners attending schools repeating a grade climbs to 12%, with 22% of learners repeating grade 10 and almost 20% repeating grade 11 (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2014: 25). There is a significant international body of literature that shows that grade repetition is problematic for a number of reasons. At a macro-level, it represents systemic inefficiency with the state having to pay twice for a learner in a particular grade, often without discernible benefits (Hattie 2009). The research on grade repetition shows that it is associated with lowered motivation among repeaters (Brophy 2006) and early school leaving ('drop out') (Hunt 2008; Lewin 2009). Grade repetition should thus be regarded as a potentially exclusionary practice that denies young people their right to education. Schools are known to use grade repetition to boost their results in school leaving examinations (e.g. in Kenya [Hungi and Thuku 2010] and South Africa [Motala et al. 2009]). However, there are studies that suggest that the negative impact of the practice may have been exaggerated and that more rigorous research into the effects is needed (Cham et al. 2015). This confirms the prediction by Alexander et al. that, 'This particular debate [about grade repetition] will continue for many years to come' (2003: 15).

The 'equity issue' (Alexander et al. 2003: 13) in debates about grade repetition must be considered. Just as minority groups are overrepresented in special education (McCall and Skrtic 2009), grade repetition is disproportionately experienced by those already disadvantaged and deprived in schools and societies. In Australia, it is indigenous learners who are more likely to repeat grades in the early years of schooling (Anderson 2014). In rural Malawi, grade repetition is associated with factors like school absence, large classes, number of meals per week and expectations of family responsibility (Taniguchi 2015). Grade repetition in South Africa follows some of the fracture lines that signal social and economic disadvantage. Black children are six times more likely to repeat a grade than white children and the probability of repeating increases with a decrease in socio-economic status (Social Survey-CALS 2010). Lam et al. found that particularly among black African high school learners, there is a weak link between grade progression and learner ability, leading these authors to say that high school is something of a 'lottery' (2011: 21). This mirrors international trends, with Hattie (2009: 99) noting that grade repetition happens in 'arbitrary and inconsistent ways'. Bernstein (2000: xxv) reminds that

> […] social class is a major regulator of the distribution of students to privileging discourses and institutions. If we are going to talk about democracy, culture and education […] then we have to consider the constraints and grip of class regulated activities.

This article argues that grade repetition as it is unequally applied and experienced in South Africa needs to be seen as one of the threats to the realization of citizens' equal right to education within a democracy.

Concerns have been raised that in pursuit of citizenship rights, there has been a focus on interventions to address schooling issues like access, retention and achievement, rather than the wider social conditions in which schooling occurs (Dillabough 2016). In South Africa, grade retention and its disproportionate experience by poor, black learners, must be seen as a challenge to the vision of an inclusive education and the realization of the democratic rights of all citizens. While the 1994 settlement legally ended institutionalized racial discrimination and instituted full citizenship rights to all South Africans, the realization of the benefits of these rights are 'differentially distributed' (Soudien 2016: 584) as the inequalities of the past persist. Fleisch (2007) identifies post-apartheid education as having two 'systems'. The first

is generally well-functioning, made up mainly of former white and Indian schools, and independent schools, which together produce most of the country's university entrants. The second system, mostly serving poor learners from deprived communities, offers a 'restricted set of knowledge and skills' (Fleisch 2007: 2) compared with what is offered in the first system. Learners in richer, advantaged schools perform significantly better in reading and mathematics than their counterparts in poorer, non-advantaged schools (van der Berg et al. 2011) The poor quality of education available in non-advantaged schools results in exclusion from life chances, including access to higher education and the labour market (van der Berg 2015: 29). This means that grade repetition (and the early school leaving that it predicates) must be seen as both contributing to, and resulting from the unequal realization of the democratic right to education in South Africa.

This study is motivated by Hattie's (2009: 98) question of why grade repetition persists in the face of 'damning evidence' against the practice. Whereas other studies have sought to describe the impact of grade repetition on learners, and to profile repeating learners, this study is concerned with teachers' perceptions about the practice. Beliefs about grade repetition in schools and societies have been shown to be an important explanatory factor in the rate of grade repetition in different countries (Goos et al. 2013). It is thus expected that this work will give an indication of what South African teachers believe about grade repetition as a contribution to understanding why the practice persists.

3. Framing

Classification and framing are concepts developed by Bernstein (2000) to describe pedagogic practice. The two concepts are 'dialectically linked' (Hoadley 2006: 18) and not easy to separate for empirical purposes. However, for the purpose of understanding how teachers view grade repetition in this study, the concept of framing is foregrounded. Bernstein uses the term framing to describe 'who controls what' (2000: 12) in pedagogic communication. Pedagogic practice is constituted by the selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of knowledge (Bernstein 2000). This study highlights sequencing (what is taught first and second) and pacing (the expected rate at which the content will be acquired). Framing can be stronger or weaker, depending on whether the transmitter (the teacher or other agency) or the acquirer (the learner) has control. Stronger framing means that sequencing and pacing is controlled by 'agencies […] that determine the timeframe within which the knowledge can be appropriately acquired […] and in what order' (Moore 2013: 129). Framing, says Bernstein,

governs both the regulatory and the instructional discourse. The hierarchy and expectations in a pedagogical relationship constitute a regulatory discourse. This means 'that an acquirer can be seen as a potential for labels' and 'Which labels are selected is a function of the framing' (Bernstein 2000: 13). Instructional discourse refers to selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation and is embedded in the regulatory discourse. As I will show, the practice of grade repetition reflects both a regulatory and instructional discourse.

The school year in South Africa is strongly framed, particularly with respect to the instructional discourse and a focus on pacing. Control over the pace of learning is held by the teacher, who reflects the control over curriculum coverage that is determined by the national curriculum. The case of Mathematics in the foundation phase (Reception year until grade 3, i.e. 5–9 year olds) is illustrative. Each content area (e.g. numbers and operations, geometry) is broken down by topic and is given the 'recommended' number lessons per term. The time in hours and minutes for each content area is allocated (DBE 2011). This is a fast paced and content intensive curriculum, which means that although the document makes 'recommendations' for the 'average' time to cover the content, teachers will not finish the syllabus if they do not adhere to these timeframes. In some cases, teachers follow scripted lesson plans, and are visited by curriculum advisors who look for evidence of curriculum coverage. These measures entrench strong 'transmitter' (i.e. teacher and curriculum designer) control over pacing. While the reasons for these measures may be found in South Africa's dismal educational outcomes, partly attributable to poor content and pedagogical knowledge (Taylor et al. 2013), they also secure the curriculum as rigidly fixed in terms of how it is paced. The sequencing of the content knowledge is also prescribed, term by term by the curriculum document. This means that each academic year has its subject content specified, with each year presuming mastery of the previous year's content. This strong framing means that learners do not control 'the rate of expected acquisition' (Bernstein 2000: 13).

4. Methodology

The project as a whole is using a mixed-method sequential exploratory research design (Ivankova et al. 2006). The first phase collects data by means of a survey questionnaire that is used to provide a broad understanding of the research problem. The second phase collects additional data through individual interviews to explain and elaborate on the findings of the first phase. This second phase is not reported in this article. A self-administered questionnaire was designed that asked teachers about a variety of school practices that respond to learner

diversity. Learner diversity was presented in three sections for ease of focus: the first was titled 'Responding to learners who experience academic and learning difficulties', the second was 'Responding to learners who are academically talented and successful' and the third was 'Responding to learners who are not yet proficient in the language of teaching and learning'. These are clearly not unproblematic distinctions, as they assume crude distinctions among learners in ways that may support deterministic 'bell-curve thinking' (Florian and Walton 2018). The research process may thus unwittingly reinforce, rather than challenge, oppressive ways of categorizing learners. The sections do, however, focus teachers' attention in the questionnaire on learners whose learning needs may be neglected. In each section, various practices were presented, and the teachers were asked to indicate whether they had encountered this practice in their experience as teachers, and if so, to explain briefly what they regarded as the advantages/benefits and disadvantages/drawbacks of the practice. The practices presented in each section of the questionnaire included streaming (also called tracking or setting), referral to special schools or classes, curriculum differentiation, gifted and talented programmes, and grade repetition. The instrument was field tested first with a group of post-graduate students who helped to refine the wording, and then piloted with a small group of teachers at a professional development event. This confirmed that the instructions and questions were understandable, which is important for a self-administered questionnaire (Bryman 2012).

A self-administered questionnaire was deemed an appropriate data collection tool for the first phase of the project. The advantages were that opinions could be solicited from participants dispersed across a relatively wide area in a short space of time (Bryman 2012; Robson 2011). The disadvantages of not being able to prompt or probe are offset in the individual interviews that follow in the second phase of the study. The choice of open ended questions was to solicit a range of perceptions about the practices, rather than to present options among predetermined responses to closed questions. Range et al. (2012) also used a self-administered survey to ascertain the beliefs of teachers about grade repetition. However, these scholars used The Teacher Perceptions about Retention Survey (TPARS), which was not deemed culturally appropriate in the South African context. With ethical clearance from the University Ethics Committee, and permission from the provincial education department, the survey was delivered to 450 teachers in the greater Johannesburg area. The method of delivery was via student teachers attending schools on a practicum, and each student was asked to give the questionnaire to his or her supervising teacher, and return either the

questionnaire and consent for participation, or an indication of non-consent. 300 questionnaires were returned with consent for use (i.e. a 67 per cent response rate overall), but not all teachers answered all the questions. The sample thus has elements of randomness, in that the researcher could not control which schools or teachers would receive a questionnaire. There are, however, more students studying secondary teaching, so the questionnaire would reach more secondary teachers, and the schools selected for practicum placement are more likely to be well functioning schools. These factors are acknowledged as likely to limit generalizability.

The data from the section where teachers responded to the questions on grade repetition were analysed first through thematic coding (Robson 2011). This was done manually through a successive process of sorting and categorizing the responses on the benefits and drawbacks of grade repetition. The process was completed when no fewer categories could be distinguished in the data, and all responses were accounted for. These categories were confirmed, with minimal adjustment by a peer reviewer (Creswell 2013). Using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 23, descriptive statistics were generated, which showed frequencies of the different categories of response. A Pearson product-moment (Pearson r) was calculated (McMillan and Schumacher 2001) to see if there was any relationship between teachers' beliefs about retention, and their years' teaching experience, and the phase in which they teach.

5. Findings

95 teachers answered questions on grade repetition in the questionnaire and are considered as the sample for this study. 24.1% of these teachers had been teaching for less than five years, 14.9% had been teaching between six and ten years, 32.2% had taught between eleven and twenty years and 28.7% had more than twenty years' experience. This distribution of years' experience is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Respondents' years of teaching experience.

Years experience		Frequency	Per cent	Valid per cent	Cumulative per cent
Valid	0–5 years	21	22.1	24.1	24.1
	6–10 years	13	13.7	14.9	39.1
	11–20 years	28	29.5	32.2	71.3
	20 years +	25	26.3	28.7	100.0
	Total	87	91.6	100.0	
Missing	0.00	8	8.4		
Total		95	100.0		

Only 1.2% of the respondents to this section of the questionnaire were pre-school teachers, 20.9% identified as primary school teachers, 57% identified as secondary school teachers and 20.9% identified themselves as both primary and secondary school teachers. This distribution of phases (i.e. pre-primary, primary, secondary or both) is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Grades (phases) taught by respondents.

Phases taught		Frequency	Per cent	Valid per cent	Cumulative per cent
Valid	Preschool	1	1.1	1.2	1.2
	Primary school	18	18.9	20.9	22.1
	Secondary school	49	51.6	57.0	79.1
	Primary and secondary	18	18.9	20.9	100.0
	Total	86	90.5	100.0	
Missing	0.00	9	9.5		
Total		95	100.0		

These percentages cannot be accurately matched to the statistics of teacher distribution in the wider system, because the categories for reporting are different. It is clear, however, that where this sample reflects a majority of secondary school teachers, the system itself is comprised of a majority of primary school teachers (DBE 2016: 19). No further biographical details were solicited.

5.1   *Benefits of grade repetition*

Six categories of benefit were identified from the data. These are presented in descending order from the most frequent. The first, which accounts for 22.1% of the response, is expressed in terms of 'The benefits of time'. Answers in this category referred to the idea that learners benefitted from grade repetition, simply by having more time to mature. The repeated year itself was not shown to offer anything different to the learner, with additional time being seen as what is needed. Typical of this response is the comment that 'Learners are stronger the following year. And more matured'. The second category, with 18.9% of responses suggests that there are benefits in the repeated year, but usually these benefits are unspecified, as in 'For whatever reason, the learner might need the repetition of work'. In some cases, remedial interventions are expected in the repeated year, described as, 'It [the repeated year] allows for all possible interventions to be applied'. The third category is retrospective and sees the benefits of the repeated year in addressing past deficits, expressed by one participant as 'Learners have a second chance to master concepts they struggled to grasp the previous year'. Another says 'It [grade repetition] assists slow learners to catch up'. 16.8% of the responses saw the benefits of grade repetition as addressing these past deficits. A similar percentage (15.8%) of the respondents looked to the future and saw grade repetition as necessary to prepare learners for the future. A typical response in this category is, 'I give learners the opportunity to master the knowledge they need for them to move to the next grade'. Motivation is the fifth category, representing 11.6% of the responses. These respondents suggest that grade repetition motivates the retained learner to be more diligent in the second year, for example, one says that grade repetition '[…] helps these learners to redefine themselves and start working hard in fear of failing again'. The threat of retention in the grade is also seen as a motivating factor, as in 'Learners are motivated to perform in order to be promoted to the next grade'. The final category reflects the view that grade repetition results in improvement and understanding. There is no indication of the mechanisms by which this occurs, but is seen as a benefit by 9.5% of respondents. An example of this view is a teacher who said that grade repetition ' […] helps them understand the work better of a certain grade in which they are retained and in some cases it benefits them because their work and level of understanding improves'. 5.3% of respondents said that there were no benefits to grade repetition. These frequencies are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Frequencies of responses to the benefits of grade repetition.

Benefits of grade repetition					
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid per cent	Cumulative per cent
Valid	Addresses past deficits	16	16.8	16.8	16.8
	Prepares for the future	15	15.8	15.8	32.6
	Repeated year benefits	18	18.9	18.9	51.6
	Motivates	11	11.6	11.6	63.2
	The benefits of time	21	22.1	22.1	85.3
	Improvement and understanding	9	9.5	9.5	94.7
	No benefits	5	5.3	5.3	100.0
	Total	95	100.0	100.0	

A statistically significant relationship exists between beliefs about the benefits of grade repetition and years of experience (significant at the 0.05 level on the one-tail test [Pearson Correlation Coefficient]). Teachers with 0–5 years' experience are most likely to see benefits in the repeated year itself and do not imagine that there could be no benefits to learner retention. Teachers with above twenty years' experience are more likely to see that time/maturity is what makes the difference in the benefit of the repeated year. Possible explanations for these differences in opinion by years of experience are being explored in the second phase of the study. No relationship was found between beliefs about the benefits of retention and the phase in which participants teach.

5.2   The drawbacks of grade repetition

Six categories of response to the drawbacks of grade repetition were found. The first, and most prevalent (representing 34.7% of responses) was that of the affective effect of repetition. These answers all pointed to the negative consequence of grade repetition in terms of its emotional effect on learners. A typical response is that 'children struggle emotionally being kept back, there is a stigma attached to retention'. Bullying and teasing contribute to the distress learners experience, described by one respondent as, 'Learners mock them and label them as "stupid", also, if they don't see it as just, they start doubting themselves'. It was frequently noted, however, that the learners soon get over the emotional distress caused by grade repetition such that this should not deter the practice. 15.8% of the respondents said in

some way that the drawback of repetition is that it does not achieve the desired effect, as in 'This process becomes a drawback if learners does not become committed and repeat the same behaviour of non-commitment'. A third category of response was a concern that learners become overaged in comparison with their age cohort, resulting in their spending more years at school. This view was held by 10.5% of respondents. The impact on the school or family is the fourth category. Here respondents (7.4%) expressed concern with the fact that repeaters cause class size to increase, that it represented an additional administrative burden on teachers who had to motivate for repetition or that it meant an additional year of schooling costs for the family. 6.3% of the responses showed concern that grade repetition was associated with negative behaviour. One respondent expressed this as, 'Bad attitude of the learner. Disinterested in participating on the class activities. Bunking off lessons'. The final category is that repetition leads to early school leaving. Only 3.2% of the respondents noted this as a drawback, with one saying, 'Learners lose hope and confidence. Some drop out of school'. 22.1% of respondents said that there were no drawbacks to the practice at all. These frequencies are displayed in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Frequency of responses to the drawbacks of grade repetition.

Drawbacks of grade repetition					
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid per cent	Cumulative per cent
Valid	No effect	15	15.8	15.8	15.8
	Negative behaviour	6	6.3	6.3	22.1
	Affective effects	33	34.7	34.7	56.8
	Overage	10	10.5	10.5	67.4
	Dropout	3	3.2	3.2	70.5
	School/family impact	7	7.4	7.4	77.9
	No drawbacks	21	22.1	22.1	100.0
	Total	95	100.0	100.0	

No relationship was found between teacher beliefs about the drawbacks of learner retention and their years of teaching experience, or the phase in which they teach.

6. Discussion

Johannesburg teachers responding to this questionnaire appear to view grade repetition as a necessary response to a mismatch (Horn 2007) between the 'internal logic of the pedagogical practice' (Bernstein 2000: 12) and the learner. Learners whose rate of content acquisition has been shown not to match the expected rate are seen by the teacher participants as the ones who benefit from repeating the year. The academic school year continues its inexorable progress, with learners who experience difficulties in content mastery at the expected pace labelled (cf. Bernstein 2000) as 'immature', 'slow' and needing to 'catch up'. Linear time emerges as a key motif in teachers' beliefs about the benefits of retention. Their retrospective view gives a sense of the deficits of the past, which can be addressed in the present through repeating a grade, to avoid future difficulties. Thompson and Cook (2017) engage with issues of temporality in schools, with a particular focus on teachers' experiences in Australia. Here too, teachers are concerned with time. Teachers are reported as feeling that they do not have enough time to ensure both deep learning and the curriculum coverage required by standardized testing. They also have a sense of arrhythmia, or being 'out of time' as their temporal habits have been disrupted by the testing regimes in that country. Thompson and Cook conclude that 'we are yet to fully understand the impact that multiple temporalities have on the culture of teaching, even more so when the beats of these temporalities cannot align' (2017: 35). The South African teachers in this study are also aware of misaligning temporal beats, but in contrast, they believe there to be a mismatch between the linear time of the curriculum, and learners' personal developmental trajectory. Nothing in the data (in this first phase) suggests that the teachers themselves feel concerned by time poverty in relation to the demands of curriculum coverage. Instead it is the 'slow learner' who 'needs more time'.

Two concerns arise from the teachers' focus on the dis-synchronous learner. The first is evidence of many teachers' belief in cognitive development simply being the result of learner maturation over time. This is reflected in the first category responses that suggest that additional time leads to a 'maturity' that is somehow beneficial to learning. This situates learning difficulties in a deficit notion of learner immaturity, which is seen as a sufficient account for not meeting expected curriculum outcomes. South African studies have shown that teachers operate within a medical or deficit paradigm that locates barriers to learning as intrinsic to learners (Engelbrecht et al. 2015). Bernstein (2000: xxiv) comments on the fact that school 'failure is attributed to inborn facilities', which individualizes failure and legitimizes inequality. The importance of the quality of teaching and the learning

environment is thereby diminished. The second concern is that learners are seen to benefit from the repeated year because they get a second chance to be exposed to the concepts taught, which is seen by the teachers as leading to 'improvement and understanding'. But without teachers actively interrogating and addressing the reasons for initial mis-understandings (Grossman et al. 2005; Shulman 1987), mere repetition of the concepts is not necessarily going to lead to effective learning. During the second year of doing a grade, responding teachers indicate some expectation of remedial intervention, but no teachers indicate that this could/should have been applied as soon as the learner experienced difficulties in learning. Instead, grade repetition is viewed as an indicator of the need for learning support, and specialist support personnel (if available) are directed to repeating learners. Here teachers do not see themselves as responsible for this learning support, but expect it to come from elsewhere. This is corroborated by other research in South Africa that shows teachers' lack of confidence in their ability to teach learners with learning difficulties, and their preference for referring them to better qualified professionals (Engelbrecht et al. 2016).

Teachers also believe that learners should not be promoted to the next grade if it is felt that they are 'not yet ready' to 'cope' with its conceptual demands or its pace. Here too, teachers reveal their awareness of a strongly framed pedagogical practice that will not cede control of pace or sequencing to learners. With the knowledge that learning support is not likely to be offered to learners doing a grade for the first time, teachers seem to be reluctant to expose 'weak learners' to the demands of the subsequent grade, and feel it their duty to retain them so that they can be adequately 'prepared'. This rationale for grade repetition must be seen in the light of the documented trend in South Africa of retaining some learners in grade 10 or 11 so as to prevent them from writing the grade 12 matriculation examination. In efforts to improve schooling outcomes, there is considerable pressure on schools to improve their pass rate. One way to do this is to prevent learners who may compromise the pass rate from writing by gatekeeping in the years before grade 12 (Meny-Gibert and Russell 2012). This trend has been acknowledged by the education department, with efforts made to enable certain grade 11 learners who do not meet the promotion requirements to progress into grade 12 and to attempt the school leaving examination.

Responding teachers are aware of the negative emotional effects that grade repetition has on learners but this is not seen as a sufficient reason to discontinue the practice. All respondents

who expressed the drawbacks of repetition in terms of some kind of affective trauma also described advantages of repetition (i.e. these respondents did not suggest 'no benefit' to the practice). This suggests that while teachers are concerned about the negative emotional effect of grade repetition on the individual learner, the non-negotiable demands of the curriculum appear to be a more pressing concern. Many Johannesburg teachers' views of the benefits of grade repetition are directly contradicted by research – it does not have a positive effect on achievement (Jimerson and Brown 2013), nor is it a practice that motivates learners (Brophy 2006). The 'threat' effect of grade repetition that is seen to motivate learners is also unsupportable (Belot and Vandenberghe 2014). However, there is evidence to confirm the respondents' reports that repeating learners have a negative attitude towards school (Ikeda and García 2014) and the correlation between grade repetition and early school leaving is supported by research, with Gandin (2009: 348) noting that 'The majority of students who drop out are the ones who had multiple repetitions'. A very small percentage of respondents identified early school leaving as a drawback of the practice. It is not known the extent to which teachers are aware of the research on the impact of grade repetition, and whether they are acting in spite of, or in ignorance of the research. This is being explored in the second phase of the study.

It may be easy to see teachers' beliefs in the benefits of grade repetition as a possible answer to Hattie's question of why the practice persists, but it is also important to consider what engenders and sustains these beliefs. Slee (2011: 13) says, 'Schools are governed by conventional wisdom, by the sequential assemblage of habits, traditions, beliefs, practices and organizational preferences'. This means that teachers' beliefs about grade repetition cannot be understood apart from the contexts that give rise to them. The combination of strong control over pacing in the school year, the assumption of within-learner causes of poor educational outcomes, and teachers' beliefs that they are not able to address learning difficulties as they arise, makes grade repetition seem necessary to teachers with its benefits outweighing its drawbacks. The practice is then normalized by its ubiquity, by the policies that guide its processes and by its repeated use, and so it becomes 'conventional wisdom', which is impervious to challenges by research.

7. Conclusion

Exclusion, says Slee (2011: 158), has 'complex structure[s] and properties'. This complexity can be seen when focusing on grade repetition in South Africa. The link between grade

repetition and early school leaving clearly signals grade repetition as a practice with exclusionary effects and, as such, a practice that needs dismantling in the pursuit of a more inclusive education system. It can also be argued that strong framing of the curriculum is necessary to address the exclusionary effects of apartheid's legacy in South Africa's educational system, with Wheelahan (2010: 55) arguing that 'Knowledge that is strongly classified and framed provides students from disadvantaged backgrounds more access'. Weakening the framing of the instructional discourse is thus not necessarily a solution that should be considered. Nor is it helpful to rehearse the lament of poorly trained and unresponsive teachers. Instead, grade repetition needs to be seen as phenomenon occurring at the confluence of a number of systemic problems that arise from the architecture of post-apartheid education. This small study indicates that work needs to be done to foster a critical interrogation of taken-for-granted practices (like grade repetition) and commonly held beliefs about learner ability and performance, and a consideration of how these beliefs and practices become mutually reinforcing. If South Africa is serious about realizing the equal right to education that every citizen has, alternatives to grade repetition need to be found and need to become the habit of schools.

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