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Foundation phase learners' perspectives on grade retention

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ABSTRACT

Grade retention in South Africa, as in other developing countries, is a common practice of holding back learners who have failed to meet specific promotional requirements. Despite studies that highlight the negative outcomes of scholastic retention, this practice has gained popularity in countries in Southern Africa including South Africa. Learners who struggle academically are retained in the grade if they are unable to meet specific requirements. It is sad to note that learners are not consulted before being retained; their voices do not matter. Studies have been conducted on teachers' perspectives on this topic. However, research on how learners experience retention has not been done. The main objective of this research is to ascertain how learners experience and perceive the practice of grade retention in the foundation phase. Doing research with children is critical and challenging, and this research tries to 'dip a toe' in and conduct research with children and not on children. Most schools were sceptical about allowing learners to participate in this study .but one school consented and allowed their learners to participate. The participants were selected using a number generating system so as to make sure that the sample was representative, and the participants were involved in two sets of interviews. In the first set of interviews, they drew pictures of themselves and were probed about the pictures they had drawn. In the second set of interviews, a blob tree was used as a tool for those interviewed to express their feelings. The focal point of this research was to understand the perceptions and experiences of a group and not an individual. Therefore, this qualitative research employed a phenomenographic methodology because it aims to "explore the range of meanings within a sample group, as a group, not the range of meanings for each individual within a group" (Akerlind, 2005, p. 323). This research was based on finding out how experiences of retained learners can enable Inclusive education. The findings were reported according to five key themes, namely socio-emotional outcomes, impact on learners' relationship; academic issues and stereotyping by teachers. The findings of this study revealed that the majority of learners did not enjoy being retained in a grade, but this did not affect their academic progress. Some learners were teased and bullied by peers and friends. In some cases, the teachers also teased learners about repeating the grade. The limitations of the study included the following: the time frame; the sample size; the researcher's involvement in the study; the data was collected from one school in Gauteng; the emotional distress experienced by some of the respondents; and, contradictory statements from a few of the respondents. Future research could look at broader cultural, social and economic issues that might contribute to an increased retention rate, as well as the negative emotional effects of grade retention.