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FOUNDATION PHASE LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES ON GRADE RETENTION

Maureen Hadebe

A research report submitted to the Wits School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education by combination of coursework and research.

Johannesburg

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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.

Keywords

Inclusive Education; Grade Retention; Marginalisation; Exclusion; Voice.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this research report is my own unaided, original work. It has been submitted to the University of Witwatersrand in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.

Signature: _____

Maureen Hadebe

19th day of June in the year 2019

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EFA	Education for All
DBE	Department of Basic Education
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WP6	White Paper 6
NCSNET	National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training
NCESS	National Committee for Education Support Services
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
DoE	Department of Education
SIAS	Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

“For inclusive education to serve its mandate to promote the access and participation of all learners in quality education systems, it first needs to understand and address the exclusionary pressures that currently operate in schools and the wider education system” (Walton, 2015, p. 10).

The quotation above accentuates the essence of this study by highlighting the role played by schools in both leading and inhibiting social inequality (Walton, 2015). Many learners in schools face challenges and one of the greatest problems facing the world today is the growing number of persons who are excluded from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of their communities (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2003). South Africa has been vocal about its support for the global movement towards education for all (EFA). There is tremendous energy and excitement about extending access to education. Education is seen as being crucial to human development and a source of empowerment. However, twenty-three years after democracy, South African education is still rife with inequalities. These inequalities result in educational exclusions which have become “so common place” (Walton, 2015, p. 11) that the tendency has been to either accept or ignore them. There is a need to “know the barriers young persons have encountered in social and school participation through their own words” (Susinos, 2007, p. 117) by listening to their views and experiences of grade retention.

Inequalities in society such as, lack of access to basic services, and poverty, are some of the risk factors that expose children to marginalisation and they also contribute to learning breakdown and exclusion (UNESCO, 2003). In South Africa, inequalities resulting from apartheid and economic deprivation have had

a great impact on the education system, and especially on those learners who face barriers to learning (National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training [NCSNET] and National Committee for Education Support Services [NCESS], 1997). The schooling inequalities created by decades of apartheid are still dominant because of the low quality of education provided by schools that lack resources. There is a wide gap between achievements of learners due to different kinds of schools that are available. Some schools are highly equipped with all necessary resources and have a full staff compliment whereas in the same country some learners have little if any resources at all. Fleisch (2007, p. 2) splits the post-apartheid education system into two parts and says that the first system "produces the majority of university entrants and graduates" whereas the second one "enrols the vast majority of working class and poor children". Most poor children cannot afford the first education system but are likely to fall into the second education system. Fleisch (2007) further states that these children bring their family problems with them into the classroom and this further strains the second education system which can barely meet their education needs as compared to the first education system. The likelihood of these children accessing low quality education is very high in this case and grade repetition has been associated with low quality education (UNESCO, 2007).

The United Nations initiative for EFA is an essential element of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) so as to alleviate poverty and increase access to education. One of the MDG goals is to ensure that children complete primary education, and Ainscow and Miles (2008) state that it is "an essential step towards reducing poverty and human deprivation" (p. 16). However, despite these efforts there are so many children who do not attend school and Lewin (2009, p. 151) states that, in sub-Saharan Africa "over 32 million children remain out of school, only two thirds of children reach the last grade of primary, and many of those enrolled are failing to complete a full cycle of basic education". Kozleski, Artiles and Waitoller (2014, p. 35) also point out that, "72 million children do not yet have access to education". Therefore many children are at risk of not attending school, or of receiving sub-standard education.

There are “schooling practices that have been taken for granted as a natural and necessary part of the educational endeavour” (Florian & Walton, 2017, p. 2) which are exclusionary. These exclusionary pressures have to be understood and addressed (Walton, 2015) and grade repetition is one of them.

The “highly public” (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber 2003, p. 1) practice of keeping learners in the same grade in order to help them master the previous year’s concepts is practised worldwide. Everyone is aware of the retained learner’s predicament and as classmates proceed to the next grade, the retained learner has new younger classmates who might be even brighter than the learner repeating the grade (Alexander et al., 2003). While the proponents of grade repetition argue that retaining a learner in the same grade will help that learner to improve academically in subsequent years, (DBE, 2013) there are many sceptics who do not see “catching up”, but instead humiliation and harm” (Alexander et al., 2003, p. 1). There is an extensive literature that demonstrates the challenges of grade retention. Among the contestations about grade retention is the concern that it has been singled out as one of the factors that leads to learner drop out (DBE, 2013) and its consequence of increased educational expenditure (Alexander et al., 2003). Previous research has noted that the impact of grade retention is its “economic costs for the educational system” (Ikeda & Garcia, 2014, p. 270). Already having to deal with the idea of failing, learners have to put up with a whole year repeating the grade and it is like “the judgement of failure is almost never reversed” (Alexander et al., 2003, p. 1). Precursors of exclusion, such as grade repetition, thwart full and effective participation in curricula and go against the goals of inclusive education which seeks to reduce exclusionary pressures in schools (Walton, 2011).

Education specialists in South Africa have exclaimed at the high levels of learner retention in the country with about 52% of learners being retained at least once before they reach grade 10 (Grossen, Adelene, Grobler & Lacante, 2017). The South African grade retention rate now sits at 8% (DBE, 2014). Lam, Ardington and Leibbrandt, (2001, p. 1) assert that, “In sub-Saharan Africa, where the problem is particularly severe, repetition rates are often 20% per

grade, contributing both to low average levels of schooling and high schooling inequality". Despite the high levels of learner retention in South Africa, grade retention has been under- researched from the perspectives of the children who are affected by this policy. Discussions on exclusionary practices are necessary precursors for the "origins and 'progress' of inclusive education" (Slee, 2011, p. 39). Inclusive research in South Africa, "has given little attention to the perspectives and experiences of children and young people" (Walton, 2011, p. 83). The United Nations Convention advocates the inherent rights of all learners in a dignified manner. Children have "the right to an opinion and for it to be listened to and taken seriously" (Article 12 of 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC]). In order to dismantle exclusionary practices, research needs to recognise the rights of children and focus on embracing children and young people by actively involving them in research. In a school set-up, principles of social inequality entail establishing, uprooting and "dismantling exclusionary practices" (Florian and Walton 2017, p.1) such as grade retention.

The government of South Africa has tried to address past inequalities of apartheid by introducing new education policies like White Paper 6 which advocates for "deeper democracy in education structures and processes and greater equity to redress the numerous inequalities of the past" (Naicker, 2005, p. 230). It gave impetus to a movement away from segregation and exclusion towards "the ideal of freedom and equity as set out in the Constitution" (Engelbrecht, 2011, p. 148). Invoking equity is one of the goals of inclusive education, whereby focus is on equal access and respect for the diverse needs of learners and the "capacity to address the complex and multidimensional aspects of inequality and difference in education" (Engelbrecht, 2011, p. 149). Equitable inclusive educational participation is dynamic and it entails transforming not some but all educational spheres, one of which is grade retention. (Engelbrecht, 2011). Inclusive education endeavours to achieve equity through the identification of subtle forms of exclusion that impede learners from actively participating in the school and the curricula in general in order to meet the diverse needs of learners (Walton, 2011).

1.2 Problem Statement

One of the ways schools respond to differences in learning ability is to retain learners in a grade. Grade retention is an acceptable part of how we educate despite research indicating negative outcomes. The prevailing research that has been done does not emphasise the experiences of learners. There is limited knowledge of grade retention from the perspectives and experiences of these learners within their schools and the extent to which the way grade retention is carried out appeals to the aims and goals of inclusive education.

1.3 Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to listen to the voices of learners who have been retained in terms of their experiences of grade retention and how they perceive the practice of grade retention. Drawing on these learners' experiences this study aims to consider the extent with which retention can be seen as congruent with the aims of inclusive education.

1.3.1 Aim of this study

The aim of this study is to understand how a group of learners make meaning of the phenomenon of grade retention, rather than how individuals do so.

1.4 Research Question

How do retained foundation phase learners' experiences enable Inclusive education?

Sub-questions

i. What are perspectives of foundation phase learners' about grade retention?
ii. How might knowledge of these experiences enable more inclusive education?

1.5 Objectives of the Study

i. To listen to voices of learners who have been retained in the foundation phase in order to understand marginalisation.

ii. To understand grade retention from the perspectives of foundation phase learners who have been retained.

iii. To determine if grade retention is viewed as inclusionary or exclusionary by learners who have been retained in the grade.

1.6 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A conceptual framework is a tool that is used to analyse differences in various conditions. Camp cited in (Adom, Hussein & Joe, 2018 p. 439) define a conceptual framework as a "structure which the researcher believes can best explain the natural progression of the phenomenon to be studied". It is a way of guiding the researcher throughout the study and it justifies why the research has to be conducted. Conceptual frameworks are used as a guide to organize ideas. They can also be applied in an assortment of categories of work in order to come up with an overall picture (Adom, Hussein & Joe, 2018). Relevant concepts to this study will be defined.

1.7 Key Words

The key concepts used in the study will be described as follows:

1.6.1 Inclusive education

The term inclusive education has had many contestations as to what it is concerned with. For the purpose of this study, I will not work within a narrow special education needs approach but will focus on a broad EFA agenda. The EFA approach has been carefully selected because of its approach to education which seeks to remove "barriers to the empowerment of *all* pupils" (Rix, Nind, Sheehy, Simmons & Walsh, 2010, p. 90). Inclusive education will be defined in broad terms as "[t]he process of increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the curricula, cultures and communities of local schools". (Ainscow & Miles, 2008, p. 20).

1.7.2 Grade retention

For this study, grade retention will be approached from the inclusive education angle. "Retention" is the word used to explain the process of grade repetition in South Africa. Throughout the study, I am going to refer to grade repetition as grade retention. It is a practice that is associated with low quality of education and in sub-Saharan Africa has the highest retention rate which averages at

about 15% (UNESCO, 2007). In other countries the word retention is used to prevent dropout rates. Grade repetition will be defined as “the practice of requiring a learner who has been in a given grade for a full year to remain in the same grade ... so as to afford the underachieving learner an opportunity to master the work required of that grade” (DoE, 2008, p. 6).

1.7.3 Voice

For this research the word ‘voice’ will be used to refer to the perspectives of “insiders” (Walton, 2011, p. 84) which are the children and young people. In this case the perspectives that are important are the children referred to as the ‘insiders’, since they are the ones who experience the impact of either inclusive or exclusive practices” (Messiou, 2006, p. 306). The retelling of their experiences will be the ‘voice’ in this research.

.8 Overview of study

Chapter 1: Introduction and background

This chapter provides an introduction to the study and an overview of the key concepts within the overarching stance of inclusive education. The main aim of the study has been highlighted including the purpose statement and the research question and sub-questions.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter compiles and evaluates the relevant literature on inclusive education. It then provides an overview of inclusive education as a democratic process and the meaning of inclusive education in South Africa. Grade retention and the children’s voices are discussed and the chapter also examines the issue of marginalization and exclusion which might be possible outcomes of grade retention.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

This chapter explains the methodology of phenomenographical approach to the data collection. The data generation methods of interviewing and participant’s drawing are also discussed in this chapter. The research paradigm for this study was also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 4: Data presentation

This chapter provides a description of each child's responses to the drawing activity, and the interview using the blob pictures. This is followed by the learner's positive and negative experiences of grade retention. The data is presented in the form of tables and pie charts. The information was grouped according to themes, which were drawn from the responses of participants.

Chapter 5: Discussion of findings

Themes and categories that emerged throughout the study were discussed.

Chapter 6: Summary, conclusion and recommendations

The final chapter provides a summary of each chapter. The main findings of the study are discussed as well as strengths and limitations in the way the design of the study was executed. The chapter concludes by giving possible recommendations for schools and the department of education.

1.9 Conclusion

This section has given the background of the study. Research questions have been posed and the main aims of the study have been highlighted. The relevant terms to be used in the study have been clarified so as to provide a clear view of what the study is about. The following chapter will provide the literature basis of what the study entails.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will compile and evaluate the relevant literature on inclusive education, marginalisation, exclusion, grade retention, and the children's voice. The literature will cover broad and narrow views of inclusive education as well as inclusive education in South Africa. A literature review provides a summary, description, and a critical evaluation of scholarly articles or books that are relevant to the area of study (Hart, 1998). Arguments and ideas pertaining to grade retention will also be discussed and analysed.

2.2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is Inclusive education. Inclusive education is concerned with achieving equity through the identification of impediments to access (Engelbrecht, 2011). One of the major goals of inclusive education is to identify overt and subtle obstacles that hinder access to curricula. It also seeks to reconstruct schools as an attempt to accommodate learners with diverse needs. The experiences, perceptions, and opinions of learners towards inclusive education are relatively neglected in South Africa. In order to promote access to curriculum and advance participation in curricula, the South African government has laid a foundation for inclusive education in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) Section 29 (1) which states that "everyone has the right to basic education". Oliver and Barnes (2010, p. 556) support this idea by stating that, "inclusive education is a necessary prerequisite for an inclusive society". The educational inequalities of South Africa can be addressed through the implementation of inclusive education by viewing it as a social justice issue and through democratic principles.

In our South African context, education is framed along the human rights discourse and addresses both the physical and social levels of human beings. The rights of learners should be the first priority in the education system in order to embrace difference and have maximum participation of learners. Practices like grade retention in education can be viewed as a source of inequity. Respect for diversity and being able to tackle head-on the aspects of inequality and difference in education is a way of appealing for equity (Engelbrecht, 2011). Difference should therefore, be recognised through fair and just means. In order to realise equity, all the unfair situations and injustices in the education system should be looked into and improved, one of which is grade retention. Learners are compelled to repeat the grade when they fail to meet predefined curriculum objectives. For a transformative recognition of difference, Engelbrecht (2011) proposes the following as an integral part of equity: “Fairness, justice, and other human rights values, as well as the development of skills” (p. 149).

2.2.1 Inclusive education as a democratic process

In recent years, inclusive education has become central to the education policies of large numbers of countries in both the ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ world such that commentators have been able to describe it, without exaggeration, as “a global agenda” (Pijl, Meijer & Hegarty, as cited in Dyson 1999, p. 36). Previously inclusive education came about as a way of advocating for the rights of disabled children and the belief that the challenges children with disabilities faced made it difficult for them to learn. Of late, inclusive education has been of high priority globally such that it directly influences educational policies thereby necessitating child-centred pedagogy for the total realisation of the aims of inclusion (Dyson, 1999, p. 38). Perry (2009) tables five key concepts of democratic education that are also key concepts of inclusive education because of the way they are “firmly grounded in everyday conceptions of democracy” (Perry, 2009, p. 431). The key concepts are equality, diversity, participation, choice, and cohesion (Perry, 2009, p. 430). These concepts are not only aligned to democracy but they are also mentioned in the General Assembly of the United Nations (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Perry, 2009). The declaration

addresses education in a democratic society and it advocates education for all: “Everyone has the right to education” (Perry, 2009, p. 432). Just like the inclusive education goals, the declaration advocates equal access to education and free education for all. Unlike the previous ideas that were inclined towards the medical model of trying to fix the child, the current trend of inclusive education acknowledges differences and diversity.

Perry’s (2009) concepts advocate “freedom of expression and opinion” (Perry, 2009, p. 431), and inclusive education also advocates freedom of expression and democracy. Experiences of learners who have been retained in the grade have to be taken into consideration if freedom of expression and opinion has to be achieved. Just like the democratic theory of Perry (2009), inclusive education is about equality, acknowledging diversity, and active participation of individuals in society, the freedom of individuals, and the aspect of working together as one group. Perry (2009) states that individuals have the right to “participate” in their own governance (p. 431). The South African government has tried to address past inequalities by desegregating the school system. However, despite the desegregation of the school system, most black learners still attend township and rural schools (Grossen et al., 2017) therefore active participation is still inhibited because of deprived socio-economic contexts (Maree, 2012). These schools have large class sizes such that offering remedial activities becomes a challenge. The quality of education in most schools remains poor as compared to former whites-only schools (Magopeni & Tshiwula, as cited in Grossen et al., 2017). Research has established that it is important to improve learner performance starting in the foundation phase “(Grade 0/R to Grade Three)” (Grossen et al., 2017, p. 1).

The South African society includes extreme poverty as well as many different ethnic and language groups (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Johannesburg is viewed as the city of gold and this has seen an influx of immigrant learners, and learners who come from the rural areas in South Africa. The difference in ethnicity and the various language groups has resulted in a society that struggles to effectively tackle learning barriers because of the rapid pace of

urbanisation in South Africa. Retaining learners in the same grade can be both inclusionary and exclusionary depending on some contextual factors. These factors can be the background of the learner, the learner's ethnicity, and the language of instruction in class. Such learners are likely to be retained because of unidentified barriers to learning. EFA emphasises the improvement of all aspects of education in order to provide quality education.

2.2.2 Education for all

The EFA movement, which started in the 1990s, came about as a movement towards providing basic education to all children (UNESCO as cited in Donohue & Bornman, 2014). The EFA seeks to expand early childhood care and education, to provide free and compulsory primary education for all, to promote learning and life skills for young people and adults, and to improve the quality of education. Through the auspices of the United Nations (UN) agencies, UNESCO and the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, there has been an extensive worldwide drive to provide all people with basic learning (Florian, 2007). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the League of Nations in 1945 (Kisanji, 1999). It advocated the rights of all citizens to access appropriate education regardless of race, gender, colour and religion.

The World Declaration on Education for All states that basic education should be provided to all children, basic education services of quality should be expanded, and consistent measures must be taken to reduce disparities in the education system (Kisanji, 1999). It is a must to provide basic education for all children, and all measures must be undertaken to reduce difference. There are no clear cut measures in place on how the practice of grade retention reduces difference neither has research been carried out to see if this practice is inclusionary or exclusionary. Transformative education "calls on our ability to recognize and understand the mechanisms of exclusion" (Slee, 2011, p. 111). Organisations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank to mention a few, have developed EFA programmes under the rubric of inclusive education (Slee, 2011). However, the drive for EFA has been criticised for its "tendency to

overlook some marginalised groups of children" (Miles & Singal, 2010, p. 1). Learners who are compelled to repeat a grade fall under this category of marginalised groups of children. EFA has met with substantial problems.

Problems related to the implementation of EFA, to a large extent, are because of what Armstrong et al. (2010) refer to as cultural imperialism, whereby countries in the north dictate the pace and direction to countries in the south. Grade retention originated from the north as early as the 1860s to develop adequate academic skills in learners deemed as lagging behind. The general overview of international literature is that, "inclusive education is based on the principle that local schools should provide for all children, regardless of any perceived difference, disability or other social, emotional, cultural or linguistic difference" (Florian, 2012, p. 202).

2.3 Inclusive education in South Africa

Before South Africa attained its democratic independence learners were separated along racial lines (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001). The post-apartheid era education strategies saw a redirection of the education system towards a transformative agenda in the education system. The post-apartheid education is identified by (Fleish, 2007) as having two systems. The first system consists of independent schools and former white and Indians schools. These schools are well resourced and most of the university entrants are produced by these schools. The second system consists of non-advantaged schools (Van der Berg, Burger, Burger, Du Rand, Gustafsson, Moses, Shepard, Spaull, Taylor, van Broekhuizen, & von Fintel, 2011) which are poorly resourced and offer a "restricted set of knowledge and skills" (Fleish, 2007, p. 2). These schools offer poor quality of education and research has shown that many foundation phase children are not prepared for formal schooling. The majority do not experience home literacy or numeracy practices to prepare them for school. In non-advantaged schools, classes are too large, resources are few and many teachers are not competent in the teaching of English and Mathematics in the early years. Thus, grade retention in South Africa is applied as a response to failure which is caused by broader cultural, social and economic issues (Hugo &

Wedekind, 2013). Hugo and Wedekind (2013, p. 141) argue that “inequality is reproduced in and through education”.

Despite the “damning evidence” against grade retention, it persists as a common and acceptable practice (Hattie, 2009, p. 98). This means that the realisation of “a truly inclusive education system has been difficult to achieve and results regarding the implementation of inclusive education remain questionable” (Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit & Deventer, 2015, p. 520). As a way of trying to redress the inequalities in South Africa, there was a drive to change the education policies towards policies that embrace human rights and equality (Engelbrecht et al., 2015). The White Paper 6 was seen as a redress of the inequalities of the past and it was intended to make sure that learning barriers are overcome and learners’ rights are met (Engelbrecht, 1999). Despite having the introduction of the White Paper 6, which is meant to protect learners’ rights, learners who have been retained in the grade are retained without their consent. Learners are not given a chance to choose if they want to be retained or not.

When the White Paper 6 was launched, it highlighted very important principles of inclusive education, “including principles of social justice, equal rights and equitable access to education” (DoE, 2001). Slee (2011, p. 39) agrees with (Engelbrecht et al., 2015) and says that, “inclusive education commences with the recognition of the unequal social relations that produce exclusion”. In a similar fashion to the White Paper, approaches such as the Salamanca Statement endeavour to recognise the uniqueness of each child and their fundamental human right to education. It declared that “[i]inclusion is essential to human dignity and to the exercise and enjoyment of human rights” (Armstrong et al., 2011, p. 34). This principle advocates education for all and seeks to address the learning needs of, not some, but all children, youth and adults and it specifically focuses on those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion. Learners who have been retained in the grade might feel marginalised or excluded by the process of grade retention. Rose and Shevlin, (2004) argue that many children have been excluded both from education and

participation in daily activities because of negative labels with negative connotations attached to them. The stigma that comes with being retained in a grade can result in young people experiencing a variety of difficulties in all aspects of school life (Rose & Shevlin, 2004).

Appealing for equity entails respect for diversity, and being able to tackle head-on the aspects of inequality and difference in education (Engelbrecht, 2011). Slee (2009) argues that, where rights are not equally enjoyed, there is a “critical project for inclusive education” (p. 184). In order to realise equity, all the unfair situations and injustices in the education system should be re-examined and improved.. The rights of learners should be in the forefront of the education system, and difference of learners should be embraced so that there is maximum participation of learners.

2.4 Marginalisation

Marginalisation, like the elusive term ‘inclusive education’ (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 1998) can also be difficult to pinpoint because it may differ among individuals and according to where emphasis is given (Messiou, 2006). “Marginalization is defined as the state of being considered unimportant, undesirable, unworthy, insignificant and different, resulting in inequity, unfairness, deprivation and enforced lack of access to mainstream power” (UNDP in Messiou, 2012, p. 12). Messiou (2012) suggests that marginalisation may not always be overt and observable but can be neatly embedded in what is perceived as a normal school situation. As learners are retained in the same grade, the perception is that they are given quality time so as to catch up whereas some learners might not feel that way. Gandin (2009) argues that the practice of grade retention may send a message to learners that they do not belong in school and they might not have what it takes to succeed in the grade.

Being retained at school can result in extreme forms of exclusion and marginalisation. Messiou (2006) tables four ways in which marginalisation can be conceptualised: the first way is when a child experiences some kind of marginalisation, which is recognised by everybody including the child; secondly, when a child feels that he or she is experiencing marginalisation,

whereas others do not recognise it; thirdly, when a child is found in what appears to be marginalised situations, but the child does not view it as marginalisation; and, lastly, when a child appears to experience marginalisation, but the child does not recognise it (Messiou, 2006, p. 305). When a learner has to be held back because he or she did not meet the promotional requirements, then this can result in a situation whereby the concerned learner may feel that he or she is experiencing marginalisation. This is in line with the conceptualisation of marginalisation by Messiou (2006) who says, “a child is feeling that he/she is experiencing marginalisation, whereas others do not recognise this” (Messiou, 2006, p. 305).

Bernstein (2006) proposes three pedagogic rights which he says can be used to measure whether all students receive and enjoy equal rights or there is unequal rights to education. These rights are the right to individual enhancement, the right to be included, and the right to participate (Bernstein, 2000). The second pedagogic right which is the right to be included is pertinent to this study. With this complex right, inclusion does not necessarily mean absorption, but it entails being able to independently control one’s affairs. Van der Berg et al. (2011) argue that learners in dis-advantaged schools perform poorly in reading as compared to the ones from rich schools. This results in exclusion from life chances (Van der Berg, 2015) because of the unequal realisation of the democratic right to education in South Africa

2.4.1 Exclusion

Inclusive education is described as an “apprenticeship in democracy” (Slee, 2011, p. 15) because its major concern is the identification and dismantling of exclusionary practices in schools. However, “while inclusive education sometimes describes genuine attempts to challenge injustices in education, it can also be deployed to sustain these injustices” (Slee, 2011 p. 155). In an attempt to be all-inclusive, inclusive education can perpetuate exclusionary practices. (Slee, 2011, p. 158) argues that exclusion has “complex structure[s] and properties”. There is a strong link between grade retention and early school leaving. In our South African context, the practice of grade retention is largely

experienced by black learners coming from poor households (Strassburg, Meny-Gilbert & Russell, 2010). Black learners were the most neglected under the apartheid government and most of them still attend in deprived socio-economic contexts (Grossen et al., 2017). Because of large class sizes and poorly resourced facilities, the rate of repetition in South Africa is very high. The likelihood of learners dropping out of school is very high because of the effects of retention. Thus, Jimerson (2010) says through the practice of grade retention there is a possibility of winning the battle but losing the war. The process of grade retention might include learners through giving them time to master previous year's concept but at the same time, it might push some learners to the periphery of the education system. Tezanos (as cited in Susinos, 2007, p. 118) also points out that, exclusion and marginalisation entails, "a loss of the sense of belonging on the part of the individual, as well as the denial of certain economic, social, political, cultural and /or educational rights and opportunities".

For Slee (2013), exclusion is ingrained into the global social fabric in general and education in particular. Kearney (2011) portrays exclusion as being the most powerful in the sense that it denies learners basic resources and it is clandestinely embedded in the so called 'normal' practices, beliefs and values of society (Messiou, 2012, p. 26). A good example of such exclusionary practices neatly embedded in the so called normal practices is grade repetition which is practised as a normal and correct way of doing education, yet it excludes and includes some learners. In modern day society, learners have rights. The UN Rights of children states that children have, "the right to an opinion and for it to be listened to and taken seriously" (Article 12 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC]).

It is mandatory by law for children to be listened to when they express themselves. Jullie (as cited in Allan & Slee, 2008, p. 12) admires "the clarity which children and young people bring to inclusion and their absolute certainty that it is the 'right' thing to do". When learners who have been retained in a grade are given a chance to express themselves, this is in line with the objectives of UNCRC. This organisation advocates the rights of children and

views young children as rights holders (Clark, 2005, p. 489). The form of analysis undertaken by researchers can sustain exclusionary practices in their quest to include young children. The practice of grade retention has gained popularity in all schools despite the criticism it has amassed.

2.5 Grade Retention

Globally, children who are deemed academically challenged are retained in the same grade with the intention of granting them an opportunity to review and master the previous year's concepts (Goos, Schreier, Knipprath, Damme & Trautwein, 2012). Leckrone and Griffith (as cited in White, 2010, p. 1) state that grade retention is, "the practice of having a child repeat a grade, or the postponement entry into the kindergarten of first grade, has been practised in America for over a hundred years, and has been steadily increasing over the past decades". Such a practice may hinder maximum participation of learners in the education system. Learners who have been retained in the grade may not experience full inclusion both from an academic and social perspective.

The decision to hold back learners implies that they are not ready as yet for the following grade (Alexander et al., 2003). It is perceived that keeping the child in the grade will pave the way for concept mastery and in some cases maturity. Renaud (2013, p. 5) defines grade retention as "the practice of keeping students in their present grade because they have not mastered the skills necessary to progress to the next grade". Therefore, grade retention is used as a technique to ensure that learners master basic skills necessary for them to succeed in the preceding grades.

As a pillar of schooling, inclusive education acknowledges difference and therefore inclusion must be an expression of ethics and values. Learner retention is "an indicator of the efficiency or quality of the schooling education system" (DBE, 2011). Inclusive education advocates do not see grade retention as "catching up but instead humiliation and harm" (Alexander et al., 2003, p. 1). For the learners who have been retained, the burden of being publicly humiliated is very high. The peers who leave their friends behind in a grade wonder why they could not proceed to the next grade. This means that the

learners who were retained have to start over with younger and perhaps brighter classmates (Alexander et al., 2003). The cost of retention is another apparent pitfall of grade retention: “One obvious cost of grade retention is increased expenditure” (Alexander et al., 2003, p. 9). Many resources are channelled towards grade retention and this drains the education system. It does not only drain the DoE coffers, but it also drains the parents of the retained learners emotionally and financially.

Parents feel the pain of witnessing their children repeat the grade. The learners themselves also have to juggle the unbearable pain of being left behind by peers, and Alexander et al. (2003, p. 10) state that, retained learners may “grow to see themselves as failures or misfits”. Inclusive education advocates would prefer providing support to learners at a time when they need support, rather than to wait for them to fail and then use grade retention as a corrective measure. More can be done to ensure that grade retention promotes inclusivity. This can be achieved by ensuring that learners who have been retained in a grade have specific programmes that address their barriers directly so that they do not simply repeat what they learnt in the previous year. When coupled with strong identification and early intervention components that seek to give individualised attention to learners, grade retention can have a more positive effect on student achievement (Rose & Schimcke, 2012, p. 3). This means that early identification of learners who are struggling coupled with proper and immediate support will benefit learners who need extra academic support.

2.5.1 International views on grade retention

Grade retention originates from countries in the north. Proponents believe that giving students the gift of time will put them back on track for normal educational growth (Alexander et al. 1993). It is therefore used as an attempt to ensure that educational growth can be attained if certain specific grades have been achieved by learners. Grade retention is guided by the countries’ views and values. The fact that grade retention is applied more often in some countries than in others might be explained by the country’s educational culture in terms of public beliefs about the effectiveness of student grade retention.”

(Goos et al., 2012, p. 1). Therefore each and every country has set its own standards for grade retention. Anderson (2014) states that the indigenous learners are more likely to be retained in a grade during their early years of schooling in Australia. In Malawi's rural areas, grade repetition is associated with factors such as absence from school, large class sizes, number of meals per week, and expectations of family responsibility (Taniguchi, 2015).

In the 1980s, a bill was signed into law in California stating that students who did not meet certain performance criteria had to be retained (Jimerson, 2001). The United States of America's department of education had to determine the criteria to be used. Grade retention was implemented as a way of ending social promotion. Teachers' beliefs about the benefits of grade retention have been investigated (Goos, et al., 2013). Effort has been made to listen to teachers' voices on grade retention and how they view it, whereas children's views on grade retention have not been explored. Much research on grade retention has been done in European countries. In as much as the conclusions drawn from these European studies are applicable to African countries, we can be less certain of their relevance to our cultures, especially in South African society where we have the challenge of reconciling many different ethnic and language groups. When learners have been grouped according to academic ability, this can result in inclusion, marginalisation and exclusion of some learners. Similarly, when learners have been made to repeat a grade, this can have negative and positive impacts on their social well-being.

2.5.2 Grade retention in South Africa and the process for retaining a learner

The South African grade retention rate now sits at 8% (DBE, 2014). In South Africa, the then Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, in 2007, appointed a committee to investigate the extent of learner retention and drop out in the South African schools. The committee stated that "South Africa should be able to measure progress towards the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), using accurate measures and sound methodologies" (South African Gazette on Learner Dropout, 2011, p. 1). Therefore, the aim was to make sure that methodologies used to retain learners were measurable in terms

of a set standard putting into use feasible methodologies. South Africa has its own retention policy and the policy entails that a learner who has not met the promotional mark throughout the year cannot be promoted to the next grade. English, Mathematics and Afrikaans are the promotional subject, which means that if a learner does not pass these subjects then he or she cannot proceed to the next grade.

The Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) has a promotional schedule for all the phases, and the foundation phase, under the Curriculum Assessment Policy (CAPS) curriculum, has been amended as follows: “adequate achievement (Level 4) (50-59%) in one official language at Home Language level as in paragraph 6(2) (a); and moderate achievement (Level 3) (40%-49%) in the second required official language at First Additional Language level as contemplated in paragraph 6(2)b” (DBE, 2015, p. 8). Teachers are expected to keep an efficient record of learners who struggle academically. Learners who are at risk of being retained at the end of the year are placed on the possible retention schedule (Curriculum and Assessment Circular, 2014, p. 6). This is done in order to provide the teacher with a rough overview of the learners who are struggling and might need intensified intervention and support. The learner at risk schedule is also used to signal to the parents that their children are at risk of being retained (Curriculum and Assessment Circular, 2014). In an effort to assist the learner to grasp the concepts that would have been missed, the whole process may result in embarrassment and humiliation for the child who has to be held back.

With the current push for high educational standards, many schools use tests to determine if the child will progress to the next grade or not. This is done under the guidance of the government policy on retention. Critics of grade retention have viewed this practice as a ‘get tough’ policy to stop or reduce the automatic passing of a learner to the next grade at the end of the year (Great Schools Staff, 2015). Grade retention is a very difficult and emotionally charged decision for both the parents of the learner to be retained and the concerned learner.

Little has been done to investigate other contributory factors that might result in a learner being retained.

2.5.3 Teachers' beliefs about grade retention

Research has established teacher factors that can place learners at risk of being retained in the grade. School staff has the ability to either challenge or support the practice of inclusion (Ainscow, 2012). Children who are perceived by their teachers as having poor peer relationships, poor emotional well-being and adjustment problems, are more likely to be retained (McCoy & Reynolds,1999). In other words, there are many factors pertaining to the teachers' attitudes that can result in learners being retained. The careless staffroom talk about learners may negatively influence teachers' attitudes and in the process may affect inclusivity when it comes to grade retention. Studies have shown that the possibility of students repeating a grade increases when teachers underrate the following: the learners 'cognitive abilities; have low expectations of them; spend little time on instruction; cover lower level content topics in reading, literacy, and mathematics; report frequent behavioural problems in class; and, have a positive attitude towards grade retention (Hong & Yu, 2007; Bonvin et al., as cited in Goos et al., 2013). There is a host of factors around a teacher's views towards grade retention that can have negative and positive impact towards grade retention in schools. Florian and Walton (2017) argue that attention should be drawn to the taken for granted ways of working that create barriers to learning, and the thinking behind such practices should be challenged. Their argument is that addressing the high levels of grade repetition will need critical examination of both teachers' beliefs that sustain the practice and the habits of schools that make failure inevitable for some learners (Florian & Walton, 2017).

2.6 Children's Voice

Educational research that engages with giving 'voice' to children and young people has become a subject undergoing intense study worldwide. The trend reflects a move towards accessing the silenced voices of children and giving them voices so as to better understand childhood studies. This has resulted in a

drive towards research with children and not on children (Clark, 2005). The current lenses of viewing children as proposed by Clark (2005) emphasise the idea of children as rights holders and children as 'beings' not 'becomings'. Children can be seen as social actors who are actively involved in constructing their childhood when viewed as 'beings' whereas the 'becomings' aspect views children as adults in the making (Clark, 2005). In order to develop inclusive practices that appeal to the diverse nature of children's experiences, careful scrutiny of these discourses can aid the way concepts and conceptions of child and childhood are researched.

Research that draws on children's experiences about inclusion can promote a deep approach to inclusive practices which can guide the teaching and learning processes (Spyrou, 2011). When research is conducted with learners and not on learners, it can boost the self-confidence of these learners. Listening to children's voices facilitates the reflection upon how future developments may be channelled towards affording greater opportunities to those who have been previously denied access (Rose & Shevlin, 2004). As a way of providing an opportunity in education, inclusive education's growth can be enhanced through the recognition of the voices of the learners that have to be included. In order to facilitate the development of more inclusive classrooms, Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (1998) suggest that children can be viewed as hidden voices whose dialogues involve decisions which will affect them and influence the recommendations upon which actions have to be taken. For instance, the practice of grade retention directly affects learners who have been retained in the grade; therefore engaging with these learners can guide future policy implementations.

Focusing on the children's voices and the youth can help research to achieve one of the key objectives of inclusive education which is to root out discriminatory and exclusionary practices at an early stage. Children are insightful human beings and it is important to listen to their voices about issues that directly or indirectly affect them. Messiou (2008) states that listening to children's views is important, because it is children who experience at first-hand

the impact of inclusive or exclusive practices. Learners who have been retained in the grade are the ones who know the experiences of being retained in the grade and how it feels to be retained. Dialogue and any form of consultations should place more emphasis on the idea of children as valued persons to minimise or avoid infringing their rights.

Inclusive research in South Africa “has given little attention to the perspectives and experiences of children and young people” (Walton, 2011, p. 83). In order to dismantle exclusionary practices, research needs to focus on embracing children and young people by actively involving them in research. Therefore, there is a call for research that is participatory and emancipatory (Walton, 2011). This can be achieved through listening to the voices of children in research. As children participate in research that is not on them but with them, they are bound to benefit from it. This is achievable if it is research that exposes their perspectives about schooling. As children actively engage in research, they gain self-confidence through “the belief that their views are important and can bring about change” (Fleming, 2010, p. 10). In a way, as they gain self-confidence, they feel empowered and it will also improve their self-esteem.

For the successful growth of inclusive research the issue of voices and whose voices are heard or not heard is of paramount importance if we are to root out issues of marginalisation in research. By “ engaging with students’ voices we can reflect on what we offer to them and what they experience, and, more importantly, think of ways to make changes to improve these experiences” (Messiou, 2012, p. 19). Therefore, for a more meaningful and holistic understanding of inclusion and exclusion in education, voices of children and young people have to be listened to. Messiou (2013) advocates the engagement of all children’s voices as a productive way of addressing marginalisation. For research to be able to contribute towards the development of inclusive practices, students’ views have to be engaged with through giving voices to the invisible and the voiceless children. Walton (2012) stated that the involvement of children in research helps researchers to understand how young children “think about and experience inclusion” (p. 4). Therefore, understanding

exclusion and difference may help us understand exclusionary pressures and practices and so promote inclusion in schools (Walton, 2012). Getting the information from the horse's mouth would be an ideal thing to do, but there are a lot of contestations around the doing of research with children particularly the use of the children's 'voice'. Voice in this instance means determining the points of view and "experiences through the words of those who are …excluded" (Susinos, 2007, p. 121). 'Voice' is "the meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community" (Hadfield & Haw, 2001, p. 487). It is about being able to speaking for oneself and feeling heard by all others.

2.6.1 Contestations on using voice research with children

There are many challenges associated with research in the context of inclusive education, and, due to these challenges, the knowledge produced by such research is to some extent highly contestable. Pickering (2008) argues that there is a link between a person's subjective experience and his or her social arrangements. In order to understand how people make sense of things in their cultural context, Pickering (2008) says that knowledge does not simply derive from experience and neither does experience validate what is said. He continues to argue that there is a need to question experience, because experience does not only pertain to what happens to people but is also what people choose. Arnot and Reay (2007, p. 313) contend that voice is based purely on experience and this renders knowledge derived under such circumstances as unscientific, with no basis in reasoning. They argue that knowledge constructed under these circumstances "constructs only a weak knowledge edifice" (Arnot & Reay, 2007, p. 313). They criticise the epistemological position of voice research and describe it as untenable. Moore and Muller (1999, p. 191) share the same view and state that voice research lacks 'credibility'. Central to the critique by Moore and Muller (1999) is that all experiences are privileged. Sociology implies that, all experiences are seen as perceptively privileged, differentiated only in terms of their authenticity as expressions of their own subject hood (Moore & Muller, 1999). They share the view that apart from being unscientific, knowledge based on experiences lacks

trustworthiness and dependability. On the other hand, Young (2002) challenges Moore and Muller's (1999) refutation of debunking of dominant knowledge claims by maintaining that it is essential as it encourages the younger generation to position themselves in society.

Despite these challenges, it is imperative to listen to voices of children and young adults because of the valuable first-hand information that they provide as they are directly involved and affected by what is researched about them. The focus on voices is critical, because it is important in research to know whose voice is heard and on what grounds. "We would do well to incorporate the voice of children and young people in that construction intentionally, by facilitating their participation in the discourse" (Walton, 2011, p. 90). It is important to identify the silenced voices, "particularly those who are at risk of experiencing marginalisation" (Adderley, Hope, Hughes, Jones, Messiou, & Shaw, 2015, p. 108). Nowadays, using children's voices is used to promote inclusion. Hall, Collins, Benjamin, Nind and Sheehy (2004, p. 801) state that inclusion "involves all learners participating in the learning". Similarly, Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (as cited in Adderley et al., 2015, p. 108) argue that all schools should endeavour to develop avenues of "increasing participation and broad educational achievement of all groups of learners' particularly those who are at risk of experiencing marginalisation". Some learners who have been retained in the grade fall into this category of learners who experience marginalisation. Listening to their voices can aid future developments in the inclusive education arena and, in turn, improve the practice of grade retention in future.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored ideas pertaining to grade retention, and the process of retaining learners was also discussed. International views of grade retention were also surveyed in order to compare them with views on grade retention in the South African context. The idea of listening to voices was also examined by considering the benefits and the contestations of this approach. In the literature review, issues of exclusion and inclusion were also explored issues. The meaning of these two terms was also discussed in relation to the study. There is

little research in South Africa that has been conducted with learners who have been retained in order to understand their views and experiences of grade repetition. In the following chapter, the methods and ways in which the data was collected are discussed. This chapter also explains the research design, the instruments, the research procedure, and the research sample used in this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of how the research was conducted in a logical sequence. The various issues to be discussed in this chapter include the following: research design; research method; data collection; the research site; sampling and participants; data analysis; the limitations of qualitative research; credibility and trustworthiness; ethical considerations; and, the conclusion to this chapter.

3.2 Research Design

For the purpose of this study, a phenomenographic approach was chosen in order to listen to the lived experiences of a group and not individuals (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The terms phenomenology and phenomenography are sometimes confused in research and I will briefly distinguish between the two terms for the sake of clarity. A phenomenological study is concerned with the lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2013). Unlike phenomenography which is concerned with a collective meaning of how a group of individuals relate to a phenomenon, phenomenology seeks to describe individual experiences about a phenomenon (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The term phenomenography made its first appearance around the 1950s. Phenomenography is a fairly new research tool. It was labelled as the good-for-nothing brother of phenomenology (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997). It has Greek origins and can be broken into two parts to refer to appearance and description. When research goes beyond “the description of categories to the detection of underlying meaning, it is recognisably phenomenographic” (Entwistle, 1997, p. 127). Phenomenography is premised on the idea that different ways of experiencing a phenomenon are logically related to one another inclusively in a hierarchical manner (Akerlind, 2005). This research project will follow the phenomenographic path, 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). The experiences of individuals do not exist in isolation, but are viewed as being interrelated and have a collective meaning rather than individual experience (Entwisle, 2006). However, phenomenography has been criticised for thwarting individuality. In the process of looking for a collective picture of people's experiences, individuality is lost.

3.2.1 Research paradigm

The research paradigm used in this study is an interpretivist paradigm. An interpretive paradigm is based on understanding the world in its natural form through listening to subjective experiences of individuals and it is an approach that is people centred (Scott, 2013). The participants were interviewed in order to understand their experiences of grade retention from their own perspectives in their natural settings. The interpretivist approach allows for a diversity of perspectives and gives equal status to all participants (Scott, 2013). It is also characterised by interviewing different participants and finding common ground in the given responses.

Ontological approach

In research ontology focuses on our beliefs about the world (Anol, 2012). In this study the learners have multiple realities of what is happening to them and these realities are socially constructed by them. So for this study learners beliefs about retention is the key ontological focus.

Axiological approach

Axiology refers to the researcher's values and beliefs and the researcher acknowledges that the research is value-laden and biases are present (Creswell, 2013). As the researcher, I made my values known in this study.

Epistemological approach

Epistemology is concerned with gaining knowledge through understanding participants' subjective lived realities and experiences (Anol, 2012). As a researcher I was able to interact with the participants and I was able to listen to their experiences of grade retention. From this experience I was able to gain more understanding of the experiences and perspectives of learners who have been retained in a grade.

3.3 Research Method: Qualitative Research

This research project employed a qualitative methodology. Its aim was to listen to the learners' voices of those who have been retained at a school. This included hearing how they experienced grade retention as well as how they perceived the practice of grade retention. Drawing on these learners' experiences, this study aims to consider the extent to which grade retention can be seen as congruent with the aims of inclusive education. Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldwide view, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social problems or human problems (Creswell, 2009) which suggests that behaviour is studied in its natural settings without interference.

Through qualitative research, in-depth studies of small groups of people can be used to guide and support the construction of a supposition. By the term 'qualitative research', "we mean any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Creswell 2009, p. 10). Qualitative research focuses on providing illumination and understanding of complex psychosocial issues and are most useful in answering questions such as 'why?' and 'how?' (Marshall, 1996). This kind of research allows the researcher to explore complex human issues where human behaviours can be investigated within specific contexts as they are occurring. By exploring the learners' perspectives and experiences about being retained in a grade, this research aims to provide insights into problems that are neatly imbedded in grade repetition and to uncover trends in learners' thoughts and opinions about this issue.

3.3.1 Limitations of qualitative research

Qualitative research analyses data that relates to the social world, therefore "qualitative research usually involves relatively small numbers of participants, and this can mean that it is less likely to be taken seriously by other academic researchers or by practitioners and policy makers" (Griffin, 2010, p. 10). It relies on understanding and interpretation of what a sample suggests. Unlike quantitative research which uses a more rigid style of eliciting and categorising data, qualitative research allows researchers to study behaviour in its natural setting. Because data is obtained directly from the source, there is a greater probability of getting "detailed narratives that provide in-depth understanding of behaviour" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 321

3.3.2 Delimitations of the study

This study was executed in one school because most schools were not willing to allow their learners to participate. This was a very sensitive study therefore it had to be conducted where the researcher was known to both parents and participants. Due to time constraints the scope of the research had to be limited. A total of twelve participants were interviewed. The research only focused on learners who had been retained in the Foundation phase. Views of learners who have not been retained could be listened to but for reasons of practicality, learners who had not been retained in the phase were avoided.

3.4 Research Site

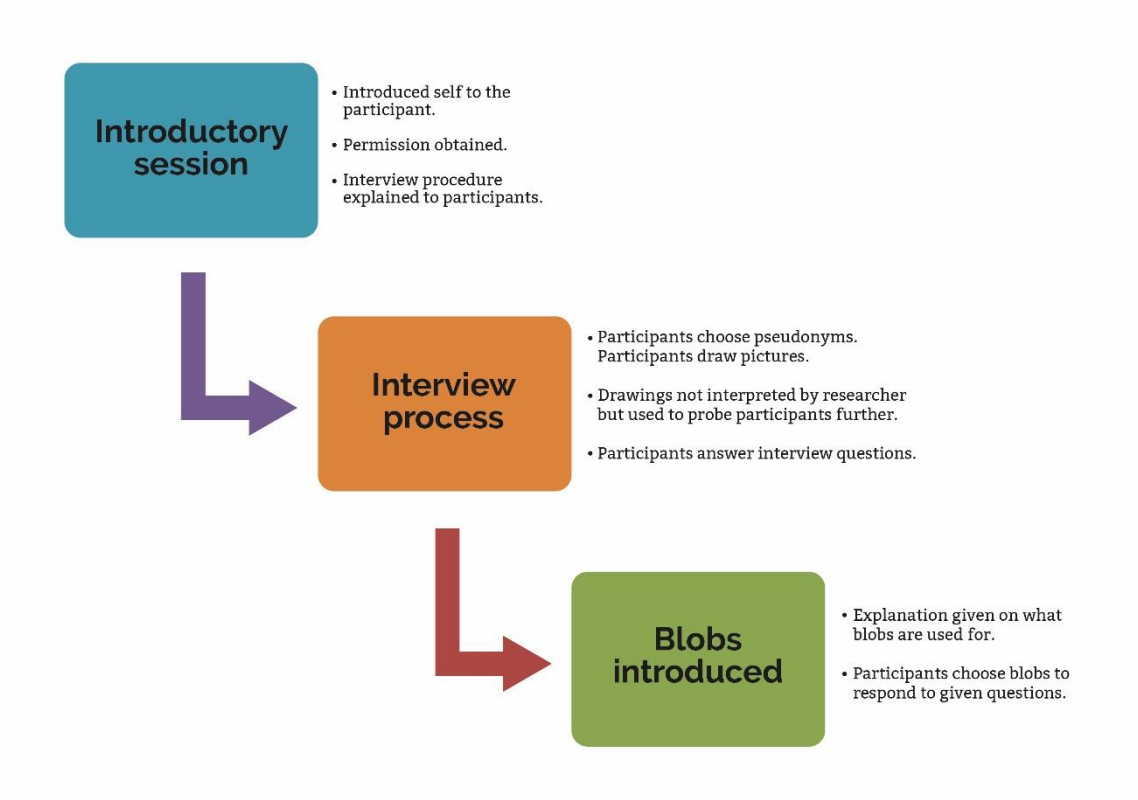
The research was conducted in one of the schools in Johannesburg East, which is in the province of Gauteng. This school is situated on the periphery of the city of Johannesburg. Most of the people who live in this area struggle to find decent accommodation. Some of the learners live in Soweto whereas others live in the famous George Goch hostel and nearby shacks. There is overcrowding in this area, because most people probably want to live as close to town as possible. The school was previously a whites-only school, but now it multiracial and it accommodates black, coloured and Indian learners. This site was selected in order to help the researcher to understand the central phenomenon of the study (Creswell, 2010), because qualitative researchers seek a site that is mostly

likely to yield rich data in settings where the phenomenon being studied exists (Strydom & Delport, 2005).

3.4.1 Data collection

The data for this research was collected through semi-structured interviews in conjunction with drawings (Appendix J). For the purpose of this study, each participant was given an opportunity to draw a picture of him or herself. The drawings were not interpreted by the researcher, but they were used to probe the participants' answers further so as to solicit rich data. Care was taken not to restrict the views of the participants (Creswell, 2012). If a participant displayed evidence of severe distress, then the sessions were put on hold and the participant was referred to the school's social worker for assistance (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2011). In the second set of interviews, the "Blob tree" (Appendix I) was used because it allowed for the inclusion of a range of people. Blobs are simple visuals, yet they deal with deep issues and each picture is a means to a conversation (Adderley et al., 2015). The blobs displayed a variety of characters and the participants were asked to choose blobs in response to the questions they were asked. Their answers were also probed further in order for the participants to explain in depth why they had chosen a particular blob. Each blob was allocated a number, which made it easy for the participants to select one of them, as they did not have to struggle to point out the chosen blob. In the first set of interviews, the participants resorted to monosyllabic responses. But when the blobs were introduced after the first set of interviews, most participants were able to enthusiastically participate in the interview process. Most of the participants were unable to speak English fluently; but the blobs came in handy. In the first set of interviews participants were expected to answer direct questions and this produced limited data because participants only gave one word answers. Some of the participants struggled to engage in a smooth-flowing conversation with the researcher. A flow chart that summarises the data collection process follows:

Figure 1: The process of data collection



3.4.2 Data collection process

During the introduction process, the participants were informed about the study and written consent was obtained from them. They were given an opportunity to choose pseudonyms and they were assured that the researcher would preserve their confidentiality and anonymity. The participants were asked to draw pictures of themselves and one-on-one interviews were carried out. These drawings were used to probe the learners' responses further. In the second set of interviews, blob visuals were introduced. The reason for this change was that the researcher struggled to get rich data from the first interviews. Blobs deal with deep issues using primary languages that are learnt from infancy and they are useful when conducting research with young children (Clark, 2005). Eleven of the participants were second language English-speaking learners. During the interviews, I had to code switch to a language that the participants were able to understand if they showed signs of struggling to comprehend the questions in English. Unfortunately, one of the twelve participants was Congolese speaking and code switching was not possible as I did not speak her language.

Some of the participants struggled to express themselves verbally in English, because of a language barrier and the blob visuals enabled them to share their feelings with the researcher. The use of these visuals also allowed the researcher to probe the participants' answers as to why they had chosen particular blobs.

3.4.3 Sampling and participants

Sampling "refers to the method used to select a given number of people (or things) from a population" (Mertens, 2005, p. 307). Purposive sampling was used in this research, because it allowed the researcher to select "particular elements from the population that will be "representative of informative" about the topic of interest" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 138). Learners who were repeating a foundation phase were used in the sample. Sample sizes, which may or may not be fixed prior to data collection, depend on the resources and time available and they also depend on data collection strategies and the research problem (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In this sample, twelve learners were interviewed in the foundation phase from grades 1 - 3. Four learners per grade took part in the research project, as approximately three to four learners are retained per class in each grade at this school. Grade retention is therefore not new to the participants, as it was practised at this school. The participants were interviewed at a time when it was convenient for them, although the interview process did not interrupt contact time at the school, because interviews were carried out immediately after school between 14:00 and 15:00 hours. The participants were sampled using a computer generated numbering system. The participants live in the vicinity of the school so it was convenient for them to stay after school.

3.4.4 Data collection instruments

Interviewees were chosen to allow me to obtain rich, in-depth data of highest quality for the purposes of my research. "Interviews resemble everyday conversations, although they are focused (to a greater or lesser extent) on the researcher's needs for data (Patton & Cochran, 2012, p. 11). They occur when the researcher asks the participant one or more open ended questions

(Creswell, 2012). The interactive nature of interviews allows the interviewer "great latitude in asking broad questions in whatever order seems appropriate" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 206). Although interviews are a very popular tool for collecting data, "[s]ome concerns have been expressed as to their appropriateness as a tool for listening to young children" (Clark, 2005, p. 492). This concern did not affect this study, because most of the grade one participants were aged seven: "Once children have reached the age of 7, it is possible to use both individual and semi-structured interviews with children" (Scott, as cited in Christensen & James, 2008, p. 90).

During the first interviews, the participants were asked to draw pictures of themselves, and these pictures were used as a prompt to probe the learners' answers further, because "[d]rawing and other art activities have been used as another avenue for young children to express their views and experiences" (Clark, 2005 p. 496). All the participants were engaged in art activities and drawings so as to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences of grade repetition. The creation of "visual images, such as drawings, collages and posters by children and young people, can lead to rich individual and collective narratives that enhance differing approaches to research" (Leitch, as cited in Thompson, 2008, p. 37).

During the drawing session, participants were audiotaped so as to capture "the interaction/narrative taking place during the drawing process, the finished drawing and the description of the completed work" (Coates, as cited in Lewis, Kellet, Robinson, Fraser & Ding, 2004, p. 25). The self-talk episodes were also audiotaped so as to allow for some of the participants' behaviour to be displayed freely without any interaction with the researcher. These participants were asked to use the blobs to express their feelings. This approach was time consuming (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010), and the researcher employed the assistance of an audio recorder to make sure that all the interviews were recorded verbatim. For the second interview, where the blob visuals were used, the participants were given an opportunity to choose a blob or blobs in response to the questions asked. The blob tree displayed a variety of characters and the

participants were given an opportunity to choose how they felt about grade retention using the blob visuals.

3.4.4.1 The limitations of interviews as a research tool

This research involved interviewing minor children and Gollop (as cited in Clark, 2005, p. 492) warned against interviewing young children on their own as it was “not appropriate in some cultural groups”. During the first set of interviews, the participants resorted to one word answers and it was a challenge to solicit rich data from them. This difficulty was also highlighted by Tizard and Hughes (as cited in Clark, 2005, p. 492) where they stated “young children being questioned may become mono-syllabic”. This limitation was alleviated by the introduction of blobs as a research tool. Interviews are also said to be costly and time consuming (Macmillan & Schumacher, 2010). The latter point was evident in this research, because most of the interviews had to be carried out later in the day and some of the participants looked exhausted, which had a negative impact on their participation during the interviews. According to Clark (2005, p. 492), “[c]hildren may also try to second guess what adults hope they will say” , and this was shown by two of the participants who gave only positive answers and stated that they had no complaints at all about grade retention. This response could have been the result of unequal power relations, where the adult is viewed as an authoritative figure, and they tried to please the researcher by giving only positive answers.

3.5 Data Analysis

Analysing qualitative data entails an understanding of texts and images to form answers in response to the research questions (Creswell, 2012). In this research, I used the thematic method of analysing data. It is considered to be a very useful method as it helps a researcher to capture patterns of data and their meanings (Akerlind, 2005). By using an inductive approach, l identified themes or patterns linked to the data that l had collected. The inductive approach involved the transcription of data, which was obtained through the interviews to form general “codes and themes” (Creswell, 2012, p. 238). This approach allowed the researcher to condense raw data and to summarise it, in order to

find the links between the research objectives and the findings obtained from the collected data. It also helped to establish the underlying structure of experiences or processes which were evident in the raw data (Thomas, 2006).

The first step was to transcribe the data verbatim. Then the transcripts were emailed to my supervisor who listened and checked them for a second time. This led to a review of the purpose of my study and tentative themes and ideas to pursue were identified (Merriam, 2009). Similarities and differences in the transcripts were categorised and compared, then the data was coded. Merriam (2009) defines this process as a way of assigning a shorthand way to easily access the data whenever needed. To make sense of my data, l revisited my research questions to establish if my categories were responsive to the purpose of my research (Merriam, 2009), in conjunction with a review of the literature.

3.6 Trustworthiness

For Merriam, (2009, p. 213) credibility deals with the question “How congruent are the findings with reliability?” To address issues of credibility and trustworthiness, my supervisor was requested to review the transcripts of the interviews. This assisted in correcting any mistakes that could have been made during transcription. From a traditional perspective, reliability relates to the consistency of the research findings or whether the findings of a study can be reproduced (Pitney, 2004). The help of my supervisor was sought to verify and cross check the data, so all transcriptions and audio recordings of interviews were taken to her to ensure trustworthiness. Establishing trustworthiness was of paramount importance to ensure that the findings of the research were not fabricated, but that they described human experiences as perceived by the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is also essential to establish how credible the research methods used are in order to produce an authentic reflection of the phenomenon being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.6.1 Credibility

Data was collected by using an audio recorder to record the interviews, which ensured that the data collected was accurate and credible. The audio recordings were also sent to my supervisor for validation purposes.

Triangulation can be used as an alternative to validation, because it "increases[s] scope, depth and consistency" (Flick, as cited in Seale, 1999, p. 475). Creswell (2012) concurs with Flick (1992), by stating that triangulation does not only ensure accuracy, but it is also important for ensuring the credibility of the study. The technique of member checking could not be used in my research, because of the sensitivity of the research. However, the blob tree was used to increase the scope and depth of the study and to check if there was consistency between the participants' responses to the blob tree as well as their responses during the first interview. Credibility was ensured through the validation of the audio recordings with my supervisor, as "[r]esearchers may also ask a person outside the project to conduct a thorough review of the study and report back, in writing, the strengths and the weaknesses of the project" (Creswell, 2012, p. 260). My supervisor constantly offered constructive feedback and this impacted positively on my research.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This section concerns the safeguarding of the research participants' interests in terms of ethical issues in a qualitative research, because doing research with children is very problematic and there are many challenges. Lewis (2005) states that issues of confidentiality and trust are a problem when conducting research with young children, as the researcher might be perceived as intruding in their social lives. A letter of permission to conduct the study was sent to the ethics committee at the University of Witwatersrand (Appendix H). In addition, a letter requesting permission to conduct the research at the school was sent to the principal, the school's governing board (SGB) chairperson and the parents of the participants. The researcher first obtained permission from the children's parents or guardians before interacting with the participants. A letter of consent, which stated the purpose of the research and requested the participants' permission to participate in the research, was also given to them before the research was carried out. This letter contained assurances that the data collected during the research would be stored in my password-controlled laptop. This showed that all necessary ethical considerations were undertaken to ensure the participants' protection.

3.7.1 Confidentiality

The purpose of the research was clearly outlined and confidentiality was guaranteed. Pseudonyms were used to protect the school and the participants were allowed to choose their own pseudonyms so that they were able to exercise their right to privacy. Throughout the study, the participants were addressed using pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted individually after school in a secure place. The participants were also provided with refreshments after the interviews.

3.7.2 Anonymity

Anonymity was maintained in the recorded interviews and any detail that might identify a participant or the school was omitted in the event of any future public reports or verbal academic presentations.

3.7.3 Informed consent

In this study, the gatekeeper was the principal of school at the research site. Permission was sought from the relevant authorities for the proposed research before the commencement of the study. My supervisor's contact details were put in all the letters so that if anyone had a query about my study, then they could contact my supervisor directly. An information letter was sent to the principal as well as an acknowledgement form to be signed if the principal granted permission for this study to be conducted at the school (Appendix B). Thereafter permission to conduct the study was sought from the SGB chairperson (Appendix C). After getting the written consent from the principal and the SGB chairperson, a request was sent to the GDE. Permission to conduct the research was sought and granted by the DoE (Appendix D). Since the participants needed for this study were all under age, it was essential to obtain parental consent, so a letter was sent, which gave details about the purpose of study, the duration of interviews and it requested their permission to invite their children to participate in the research. The participants' parents were required to sign an acknowledgement of information sheet (Appendix E). After permission was granted by parents or legal guardians, then I approached the participants individually to invite them to participate in my study. Each

participant received an invitation letter, which gave a detailed account of my study. Information in the participants' consent form was simple and written in a language that was appropriate for the participants' level (Appendix F).

3.7.4 Withdrawal

In the letter, emphasis was placed on the learners' participation being entirely voluntary and that there would be no negative consequences or institutional sanctions for non-participation in this research study. The participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process, with no negative consequences or penalties for the participants. The participants were also reminded of their right to decline to answer any of the questions asked during the interview.

3.8 Conclusion

This section has outlined the chronological sequence of the methodology adopted. In conclusion, qualitative researchers are interested in "understanding the meaning people have constructed and how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). Two sets of interviews will be carried out to listen to multiple voices of learners who have been retained in a grade. All ethical considerations requested by the ethics committee were adhered to. The following section will present the data which was collected from the individual interviews and the blob interviews.

CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents data collected using semi-structured interviews (Appendix G). The data will be presented in the form of tables and a pie chart. The information has been grouped according to themes which were drawn from the responses of participants. The phenomenographic approach was chosen in order to both listen to the voices and have an understanding of the collective experiences of learners who have been retained in the foundation phase.

4.2 Aims of the Study

This study aims to listen to the perspectives and experiences of learners who have been retained in a grade in order to:

- understand marginalisation by interviewing learners who have been retained in the foundation phase
- understand the effects of grade retention from these learners' perspectives
- determine if grade retention is viewed as inclusionary or exclusionary by learners who have been retained in the foundation phase.

This study also wishes to ascertain how issues of marginalisation and exclusion are neatly embedded in the practice of grade retention. The study also wishes to establish if learners who are repeating a grade perceive themselves and how they are treated by others who are not repeating a grade.

4.2.1 Research question

The overall research question was:

How do retained foundation phase learners' experiences enable Inclusive education?

Sub-questions

- What are foundation phase learners' perspectives on grade retention?
- How might knowledge of these experiences enable more inclusive education?

4.2.2 Participants

The participants chose their own pseudonyms to be used for this study. They were randomly selected from a list of learners who have been retained in the foundation phase so as to allow for unbiased data; and were selected using the following criteria:

- They must have been retained in the foundation phase;
  Their ages were between 7- 10 years old;
- Their willingness to participate in the research project.

4.2.3 Biographies of participants

All participants were foundation phase learners who have been retained in the foundation phase. The table below indicates the participants' demographics. One participant withdrew from the research after the first set of interviews. The table below shows the participants, their grades and ages.

4.2.4 Participants' information

Table 1: Participants' ages and grades

Participant	Pseudonym	Grade	Age	Gender
Participant 1	Barbie Girl	1	Seven	Female
Participant 2	Jerry	3	Ten	Female
Participant 3	Bontle	3	Ten	Female
Participant 4	Cinderella	3	Nine	Female
Participant 5	Emmanuel	1	Seven	Male

Participant 6	Max	2	Eight	Male
Participant 7	Ronaldo	2	Eight	Male
Participant 8	Nicky Bella	3	Ten	Female
Participant 9	Zorro	1	Seven	Male
Participant 10	Philani	2	Eight	Male
Participant 11	Sophia	2	Eight	Female
Participant 12	Sandie	3	Nine	Female

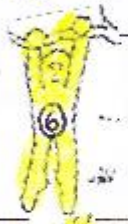
The biographical information shows that the sample was a mixture of both boys and girls. Their ages range from seven to ten years old. The number of males and females differ, as there are seven females and five males. Participants 1, 5, 7, 8 and 11 are not South African nationals, because they are from different countries in Africa. Participants 2, 3, 7 and 12 started grade one in other schools and only came to their current school in grade 2.

4.3 Description of the Blobs

The following table describes the nature of the blobs used in this research. They provided a method for the participants to respond to the interview questions. The participants were asked to explain why they had chosen particular blobs to express their feelings.

Table 2: Description of the blobs

	other blobs.	
Blob number 16	Held comfortably in the arms of blob number 17	
Blob number 17	Holds blob number 16 in his or her arms.	
Blob number 18	Sits on a branch and happily waves hand.	
Blob number 19	Crying blob reaching out to blob number 14 who is falling down.	
Blob number 20	Stands up straight and is happy at the top of the tree.	
Blob number 21	Sits alone with arms folded and looks sad.	

Blob number	Action displayed	Picture of blob
Blob number 1	Stands alone, not happy	
Blob number 2	Holds tightly to rope whilst swinging on a tree with a sad face.	
Blob number 3	Lies flat on the ground and is very sad.	
Blob number 4	Is trying to climb on a tree and is reaching out to the next blob presumably for assistance.	
Blob number 5	Is helping the 4th blob that is trying to climb the tree.	
Blob number 6	Swings on a tree with a sad face.	
Blob number 7	Climbing on a tree and reaching out to blob number 8	

Blob number 8	Clinging on to a tree and reaching out to blob number 7	
Blob number 9	Sits alone and gives his back to all blobs.	
Blob number 10	Sits on a branch hugging blob number 11	
Blob number 11	Sits on a branch hugging blob number 10	
Blob number 12	Looks on and sits alone arms folded with a sad face.	
Blob number 13	Stands comfortably on a plank with a happy face.	
Blob number 14	Falls from a tree. Has a sad face.	
Blob number 15	Happily stands with two	

4.4 Synopsis of the participants

A synopsis of each of the participants is given in this section.

4.4.1 Participant 1: Barbie Girl

This seven-year-old girl was repeating grade 1.She chose to be addressed as Barbie Girl. In the first part of the interview, this participant made it clear that she was not happy about doing the same grade for the second time. When asked to draw a picture of herself, she drew a picture of a sad girl. Upon further questioning about the picture of a sad girl, Barbie Girl responded by saying that she hated the fact that others were now in grade 2, and she had been retained in grade 1. She said, *"Ma'am, I do not like to repeat grade 1". She then said: "Grade 1 makes me feel sad because I failed Afrikaans and English".* Her friends from the previous year have stopped playing with her, which troubled her. When asked to choose a picture that represented her, she chose a happy person, and said she wanted to be happy like the person in the picture.

During the second set of interviews using blobs, Barbie Girl chose blob numbers 3, 21, 12, 14 and 6, all depicting sadness. Her response to the interview question on classmates and coming to the class everyday was: *"I feel sad because I don't like that class … I do not like the children in that class … they make me sad and they treat me like a baby".* According to her, sometimes the other learners spoke rudely to her and said *"Hey you, put your head down".* This made the participant very sad. Younger classmates were class monitors, and Barbie Girl did not like the way they were interacting with her. Her family was very worried and they were not happy that she was repeating the grade.

4.4.2 Participant 2: Jerry

This ten-year-old girl is repeating grade 3, and chose to be addressed as Jerry. During the first set of interviews, Jerry was asked how repeating a grade made her feel, and she responded by saying, *"Sometimes when I look at that class I feel like crying, because all my friends went to grade 4 and left me behind".* During the interview she was almost in tears, so she was given an opportunity to relax and calm down, but this did not help. Because she was so distressed and angry, the interview session was stopped, and a counselling session was

organised with the school's social worker. During the interview, she drew a picture of herself, and said she felt confident that she was going to pass at the end of this year. When asked to choose a picture that represented her, Jerry chose a picture of a smiling girl, and said she hoped to smile like the girl in the picture when she passes at the end of this year. Her parents were devastated when they were told that she was going to be retained, but they eventually accepted the school's decision.

In the second set of interviews, Jerry was happy about repeating the grade, and she chose blob number 20 which illustrated her happiness. When asked why she had chosen a happy blob, Jerry said, *"I am happy just now because I am a junior leader and I am a class monitor and ma'am does everything for me"*. Jerry explained that she had a strong support base from peers and her family. She chose blobs 15, 16 and 17 to show the support she was enjoying from her family. Jerry stated that her family was very supportive, even though they were disappointed when she failed the grade. She also stated that her family understood that she failed, because she came from school X, a neighbouring, private school. Jerry felt that coming from another school could have contributed to her being retained, but she seemed to have accepted the decision.

4.4.3 Participant 3: Bontle

This ten-year-old girl chose the pseudonym, Bontle. She was retained in grade 3. In the first set of interviews, Bontle said that she was sad about repeating the grade, and said, *"Repeating grade 3 is sad, because your friends are going to grade 4 and you are in grade 3".* Nevertheless, she stated that she was still friends with her previous classmates, and had also managed to make new friends in the current grade. However, Bontle was concerned about being left behind by friends. When asked about the reason why she repeated the grade, she responded by saying, "*I didn't know English nicely*". Bontle said that she was still struggling with English, which is one of the promotional subjects. If a learner does not pass this subject, then he or she will be retained in the grade. Bontle was asked to choose a picture from a magazine that represented her.

She chose a picture with someone placing a finger to his/her mouth. She explained that this meant that she wanted people to keep quiet and not to talk about her repeating the grade, because the grade 4 learners were talking about this. Then she drew a picture of a sad girl, and stated that she was sad because people were laughing at her, and she was also being teased by her peers about repeating the grade. She also stated that the news of being retained had disturbed her family.

In the second set of interviews, Bontle chose blob number 6 showing a sad face and swinging on a tree to describe how she felt about repeating the grade. She reiterated how sad she was that people were laughing at her, because she was repeating the grade. When asked about her relationship with friends she chose blob number 14 that shows a falling blob, as "*they are busy teasing me and laughing at me … because I'm repeating the grade".* Bontle was happy about her teacher and she chose blob number 20, which stands up straight and looks confident. For Bontle, in a similar way to participant 2, repeating the grade was helpful because they were doing the same work as they did the previous year, and she was able to score everything correctly. Bontle chose blob number 18, which is a happy blob waving a hand, to describe how she felt about herself repeating the grade. When the researcher probed her answer, she replied that she chose blob number 18, because she was now coping with class work and felt confident.

4.4.4 Participant 4: Cinderella

Cinderella is a nine-year-old girl who has been retained in grade 3. She transferred from another school at the end of grade 2. Cinderella said she was retained because she had failed Mathematics and Afrikaans, and was sad to be repeating the grade. This was shown when she drew a picture of herself looking sad. Later in the interview, she also chose a picture of a sad girl form a magazine to represent her. She reported that she felt sad about repeating the grade but had accepted her situation. She said, *"I want to go to grade 4 next year and I will work hard … I don't like repeating the grade because some of my friends laugh at me and I will never like that … it makes me feel sad".* In the

second round of interviews, Cinderella mentioned how much she appreciated the help that she got from her new friends. She chose blob numbers 10 and 11 to describe their support, and she reported that her friends made her feel happy and cheerful. Cinderella reported that her family had accepted that she was repeating the grade, although it took them time to do so. She stated that they always put pressure on her to work hard and pass. She chose blob number 21 to describe the way her present teacher treats her. This was a sad blob and she became tearful during the interview. As a result, she was referred to the school's social worker to attend a counselling session.

In the second set of interviews, Cinderella chose blob numbers 10 and 11 to describe her relationship with classmates. She said that repeating the grade was helpful to her, so she chose blob number 20 which was confidently standing at the top of a tree. Cinderella stated that she had chosen this blob, because she had learnt a lot in the current grade and was ready for the next grade. Blob number 13 was chosen to explain if repeating the grade had changed the way she sees herself or not. Cinderella responded by saying*, "I see myself as happy, strong and comfortable".* In other words, the participant felt that repeating the grade had actually helped her regain her self-confidence.

4.4.5 Participant 5: Emmanuel

Emmanuel is a seven-year-old boy who has been retained in grade 1. The participant said he felt bad about being retained in grade 1. He drew a picture of himself with big arms, and said, *"Sometimes if I find some friends they don't want to play with me".* Emmanuel felt rejected by his peers when he tried to reach out and make friends with them. He chose a picture of a sad person to describe how he felt about being retained, and Emmanuel was unhappy about the seating arrangement in his class, and he stated that a boy who sits next to him keeps on asking for assistance with the school work from him. When asked why he repeated a grade, he responded by saying, "*I didn't know anything in grade 1 and I felt bad …other kids are busy saying I failed".* He added that even the teacher told others that he had failed the grade, which made him feel uncomfortable. When asked to choose a picture from a magazine to represent

himself, he chose a picture of a man in a suit, but could not explain why he did so beyond stating that he liked the picture.

Emmanuel was worried that he had lost his friends from the previous year. When asked what he liked about repeating the grade, he responded, *"I don't like it … I want to be in grade 2 with Sipho and … it makes me sad".* Emmanuel added, *"I feel bad too much"*. When he was asked if repeating a grade helped him or not, Emmanuel replied, *"It didn't help me, because every day when I always do my work, sometimes I don't feel like doing my work".* However, Emmanuel acknowledged that doing the work for the second time enabled him to correct his mistakes.

In the second round of interviews, Emmanuel chose blob number 9, and gave the following reason for his choice: *"Because I'm feeling sad I'm repeating the same grade".* He responded by saying he was sad, because he failed everything, the previous year and looked despondent about having had to repeat the grade. Emmanuel chose blobs 10 and 11, which showed both blobs hugging one another, to describe the relationship he enjoyed with friends who helped him at school during contact time. He chose blob 16 (held comfortably in the arms of blob 17) to describe how his family felt about him being retained in the grade. Emmanuel mentioned that his father supported him by helping with both homework and speeches for school assessments. When asked about his relationship with his teacher, Emmanuel chose blob number 1 (which stands alone and is not happy) to describe the relationship he enjoys with his teacher. He said that although he was not happy about repeating the grade, teacher gave him stars to reward him for the following reasons: *"I do all of my work and I give the teacher names of people who are stealing in class".*

Emmanuel chose blob numbers 2 and 13 to express how he felt now about attending class every day and the treatment he got from classmates: *"When I go to class I feel happy some kids they make me happy … some they help me and some they treat me happy".* He chose blob number 5 to describe the help he was getting from his group: *"My group helps me … they help me a lot".* However, the participant also felt that repeating the same grade was not helping

him at all, so he chose blob number 6, which has a sad face. When the researcher probed further to establish if he was struggling in class, he denied that he was and chose blob number 20 (a happy blob). This blob was chosen, because he said that at first he felt hopeless about repeating the grade, "*Because when I did the same grade, I was so sad and cross".* Children are the ones who experience the impact of inclusive or exclusive practices (Messiou, 2006), and Emmanuel's voice has been muffled.

4.4.6 Participant 6: Max

Max is an eight-year-old boy who was retained in grade 2. Max was unhappy about repeating the grade, "*Because it's not fine that I must repeat the grade*". Max drew a picture of himself repeating the grade, with a bubble from his mouth that said *"Help me!"* He said that he did not want to repeat the grade, which is why he wrote the caption. Max also said that he did not want to repeat the grade, because *"it is boring … it is boring and they are copying me".* He stated that the reason he repeated the grade was due to failing Afrikaans.[1] However, Max was happy that he still had friends from the previous year, and he had managed to make friends in the current grade too.

Max liked that he was doing the work for the second time, as he was finding it easy. He said, *"Because the work is easy, I am getting everything correct.*" He added that some people were boring him. Max was feeling overwhelmed, because his peers in the class were relying on him to help them with their class work. He chose a picture of a man from a variety of magazines provided to him. According to him, he felt that he was smart and clever just like the man in the picture.

For the second round of interviews, Max chose blob number 20 (which was standing alone), and said he was happy he was able to do all the work in class, although he did not like the idea of repeating the grade. Next, he chose blob number 3, (sad blob, sleeping on the floor) to describe the way his old friends

[1] As Afrikaans is a promotional subject, it means that learners have to pass it to proceed to the next grade. If they pass all their other subjects, but fail Afrikaans, then they are not allowed to proceed to the next grade. The three promotional subjects that learners are not allowed to fail are Mathematics, English and Afrikaans.

treated him. Max explained that he felt sad that they were now in grade 3, while he was still in grade 2. However, Max was happy about the treatment he was getting from his present teacher, and chose blob numbers 10 and 11 (blobs are hugging each other) to describe the relationship he shared with her. The reasons he gave for choosing these blobs were *"because the teacher loves me … she helps me … she takes care of me … she shows me love".* Max said he enjoyed support from his teacher, and also his mother and father.

4.4.7 Participant 7: Ronaldo

Ronaldo is an eight-year-old boy who has been retained in grade 2. Ronaldo was happy about being retained in the grade, and said, *"I get to finish all the work that I didn't finish last year".* The participant drew a picture of himself smiling and explained: "*It's smiling like me because I get to finish all my work that I didn't finish last year and I get to have new friends that I also had, that are also happy with me … they help me every time and then they give me colours (colouring pencils) if I do not have".* Ronaldo said that he failed the grade, because he struggled to see work on the board.

When asked how he felt about doing the same grade for the second time, his response was *"I feel like all pumped up and ready"*. Ronaldo felt accepted by both new and old friends and he was happy with his relationships. He chose a picture of a man from the magazine, because he was bold and confident, which is similar to the way he felt about himself. Ronaldo said that repeating a grade had helped him, because he was now able to spell difficult words for his friends. He also said repeating the grade had helped him pass term one and term two and all his reports stated that he had achieved everything and was ready for the next term.

In the second round of interviews, Ronaldo was asked about how he felt about repeating the grade, his tone changed, and he said, "*I feel sad*, *because I do not understand how I failed last year's grade".* He maintained that he had a good relationship with his new friends: *"I choose number 20* (happy blob), *because they make me feel like a super star" My friends comfort me and it make me forget the bad things that I did last year".* Ronaldo was also happy

about the support that he was getting from his family, and he chose blob number 16 (held comfortably in arms of blob 17) "*because it's standing with his family, they are always on his side".* Ronaldo chose blob number 13 (stands comfortably on a plank with a happy face) to describe the way he felt about coming to class every day. Friends made him feel like number 13 because everything was okay; there was nothing bad that was going on. Yet he also chose blob number 7 to describe how classmates treated him, he responded by saying because it was having problems to climb up the tree. The participant said he was having problems with some classmates who were bullying him and said: *"They always do rough things to me that I didn't ask for"*. A follow-up was made with the social worker to address this issue, and the interview was postponed to another time.

When asked if repeating a grade had changed him or not he chose a sad blob (number 21) as he said that he felt sad about repeating the grade, because of the grade 3 learners' bad attitude regarding his repeating of the grade. However, his friends in the current grade made him happy, and he chose blob number 11(blobs that are hugging each other. Ronaldo felt a sense of belonging in the current grade, which he did not get from the learners in his previous year.

4.4.8 Participant 8: Nicky Bella

Nicky Bella is a ten-year-old girl who has been retained in grade three. She was very sad about repeating the grade, because *"some of my friends went to grade 4 and they left me".* Nicky Bella drew a picture with a bubble coming out of her mouth, which said: "*Help me please God*". When asked why she wrote that statement her response was *"so he can help me to pass the grade that I failed".* Nicky Bella blamed herself for failing, and said she failed because she did not listen. When asked to choose a picture that represented her from a magazine, she chose a picture of a sad girl. Nicky Bella did not lose friends from last year and she managed to make new friends in the current grade. She was not happy about repeating the grade, although she found learning the same work as the previous year made life easy for her. She was not happy with the treatment from some peers, as she said, *"Some people like to tease me and it makes me*

feel sad". Her friend in grade four occasionally comes to talk to her. She chose a picture of a happy girl from the magazine, and said she liked it because she hopes to be like the person in the picture when she grows up and is happy.

In the second round of interviews, Nicky Bella chose blob number 9 (blob sits alone gives its back to all blobs) because she felt angry about repeating the grade. However, she was happy about her relationship with her friends, and chose blob numbers 10 and 11, *"because ma'am I see people hugging to show that they are friendship, they care about each other".* Nicky Bella chose blob number 3 to describe how her family felt, because they were upset when told that she had to repeat a grade. They said: *"We are worried about you repeating a grade … then I said this term I will pass".* Nicky Bella was unhappy about the way her present teacher was treating her, and showed this by choosing blob number 21 *"because I feel angry and sad*". She chose blob number 1 to describe how she felt about coming to class every day, as she knew that sometimes she would be shouted at by the teacher and it worried her. However, Nicky Bella chose blobs 5 and 6 to describe the treatment that she got from her classmates, *"because they help me with some things and care about me".* She was happy about the seating arrangement in class.

4.4.9 Participant 9: Zorro

Zorro is a seven-year-old boy who has been retained in grade 1. He said he felt bad about repeating the grade, because other learners were noisy in the classroom, yet the teacher accused him of making a noise. Zorro drew a picture of himself and his friend repeating a grade and he reported that he was happy about his new friends. He chose a picture of a soccer player to represent himself and stated that he wanted to play soccer when he grows up. He also reported that *"In class people steal things then my friends call me to fight for them".* Zorro said he had lost friends from last year, because they had made new friends, but he had managed to make new friends in the current grade. He said he did not like repeating a grade, because of the punishment that he was getting for talking in class. Zorro felt that his friends from last year who was not repeating a grade was very happy because he was now in grade 2. In addition,

Zorro said repeating the grade had helped him, because he was now able to get full marks, unlike last year when he used to get zeros. When asked why he repeated a grade he said it was because his pencil used to break a lot, so he ended up not writing down his work.

In the second round of interviews, Zorro maintained that he was not happy about repeating the grade, "*Because they give us hard work*". However, he was happy about his friends and used blob number 1to describe his relationship with his friends. At first he said his friends made him feel happy, then he changed his mind and said they make him sad, *"because they like laughing at me".* Zorro said his family was not happy that he repeated a grade, so he chose blob number 21. He said his family was unhappy "*because I failed."* He was happy about his teacher because she gave him play dough and some sweets, and blob number 1 was chosen to describe this relationship. He was, however, again, not happy with his classmates because he said, *"Ma'am they make me angry…they make me angry then I start fighting them"*. When asked why they made him angry he said they say funny stuff to him and they like swearing at him. Zorro used foul language to describe what his friends were saying to him. This was a red flag and a counselling session was arranged with the school's social worker. He felt that doing the same grade was not helping him at all and he chose blob number 2.

4.4.10 Participant 10: Philani

Philani was retained in grade 2. Philani drew a picture of himself and said he was happy about everything. When asked to choose a picture that represents him, he chose a picture of a smiling man from a variety of magazines. He chose blob number 13 because he said that he was happy about repeating a grade. Philani stated he was receiving support from his friends, so he chose blob numbers 10 and 11, which showed (blobs hugging each other)?, because his friends made him feel happy. He had this to say about his friends, that "t*hey are always kind to me and they play with me*". According to Philani, his family was very kind to him and they were happy that he is able to do things he previously could not do. Further, he stated that his teacher was helping him to read. Blobs

4 and 5 were chosen to describe the relationship that he enjoys with his teacher. Philani had positive answers only. He was very happy about coming to class because he enjoys reading, writing tests, and passing in that class.

Philani admitted that not all his classmates made him happy, because some of them were bullying him. He chose blob number 9 to describe how he felt about the bullying. Philani felt that repeating the grade was helpful for him, because he was now able to read as compared to the previous year when he struggled with reading. Repeating the grade had not changed his perception of himself; he felt confident because he was now able to do most of the things that he struggled with the previous year.

4.4.11 Participant 11: Sophia

Sophia was retained in grade 1. When asked what grade she was retained in, she said grade 2, then she self-corrected, and said grade 1. Sophia felt good about repeating the grade, t because she was now able to do homework which she could not do the previous year. She drew a picture of herself repeating the grade, and said she was happy. However, when she chose a picture from a magazine to represent herself, she said she was sad about repeating the grade. Sophia said, "*I've chosen this picture because I like it*". When asked why she liked the picture she said, "*Because I chose this picture."* Sophia reported that she failed Afrikaans, but she was now able to do it. She insisted that she felt good about repeating the grade, and she said *"I report myself".* When asked what she meant, she replied, *"Report is like I pass".* It was impossible to code switch with Sophia, because her mother tongue is Lingala, which is a Congolese language. This meant that there was a language barrier between the participant and the interviewer which made the interview challenging for me and her.

Sophia changed her mind in the second round of interviews and said repeating the grade had helped her to understand things that she did not understand last year. She stated that she did not have any problems with school work last year. When asked why she was repeating the grade since she did not have problems with school, she said, "I do not know". Initially, she had said that she understood

Afrikaans, but she changed her mind and said, "*No*", which suggested that she did not understand this language. Sophia struggled to converse smoothly, because of the language barrier, which might have had an impact on her failing grade 1.

4.4.12 Participant 12: Sandi

Sandi is a female grade 3 learner who was retained in the phase. Sandi drew a beautiful picture of herself. However, Sandi said that she felt bad about repeating the grade. Her response was: *"People always tease me that I failed and it makes me feel bad because I don't like people teasing me*". When asked why she repeated the grade, she responded by saying, "*Because I was a newcomer, I didn't know anything*". Sandi said what she learnt at the previous school was different to what she was learning at her current school. Repeating a grade did not affect her relationship with either previous or current friends. The participant said that the things she liked about repeating the grade was that she learnt new things. However, Sandi said she did not like repeating the grade, because it was her first time that she had failed. Sandi chose a picture to represent her from a magazine and said it made her feel special. She also stated that it made her forget that she was repeating the grade. She sounded embarrassed about being retained.

In the second interview, Sandi said that repeating a grade helped her, because she was now able to read, although she was still struggling with English and Afrikaans. She chose blob number 1 as she was happy about repeating the grade, *"Because repeating the grade makes me feel sad".* Blob number 6 was chosen to describe the relationship she shares with her classmates, as she said some classmates made fun of her: *"My friends make fun of me because I failed … it makes me sad and I study hard".* Sandi chose blob number 5 (which helps another blob to climb up) to show how her parents feel about her repeating a grade. She explained that her parents were not happy and they told her to work hard. Sandi chose this particular blob because she felt it meant that she must work hard.

She was not happy about her relationship with her teacher, and she chose blob number 9, a sad blob. Sandi said, "*I feel bad because my teacher always shouts at me".* However, she enjoyed a good relationship with peers and chose blob numbers 10 and 1. She said her friends made her happy and they gave her things. For the seating arrangement, blob number 19 was chosen because the participant was not happy that she was shifted to sit next to the teacher's table. Sandi was unhappy, because the teacher did not allow her to talk or play in class.

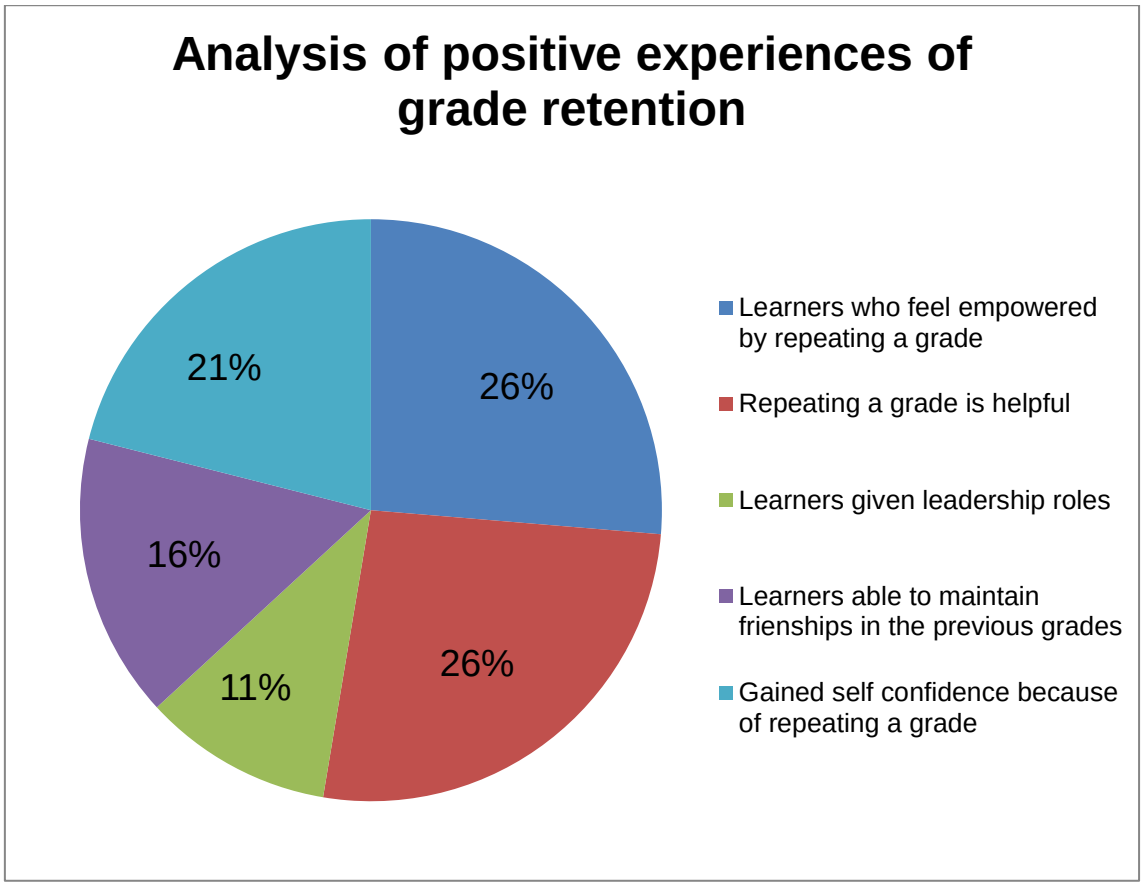
4.5 Responses to Grade Retention

4.5.1 Positive responses

The two participants who said they liked being retained in the grade mentioned that work was easy for them, because it was exactly the same work they had done the previous year. Philani and Ronaldo are the ones who gave the most positive responses about grade retention. Sophia was unsure if she was happy or not, because she struggled to respond to interview questions. However, she chose happy blobs to respond to these questions. Jerry was happy because she had been given a junior leader position, and seemed to be the teacher's favourite. Jerry experienced the practice as empowering because it enabled her to attain competences she did not manage to attain in the first year.

The following chart shows positive (inclusive) experiences of grade retention.

Figure 2: Analysis of positive experiences of grade retention

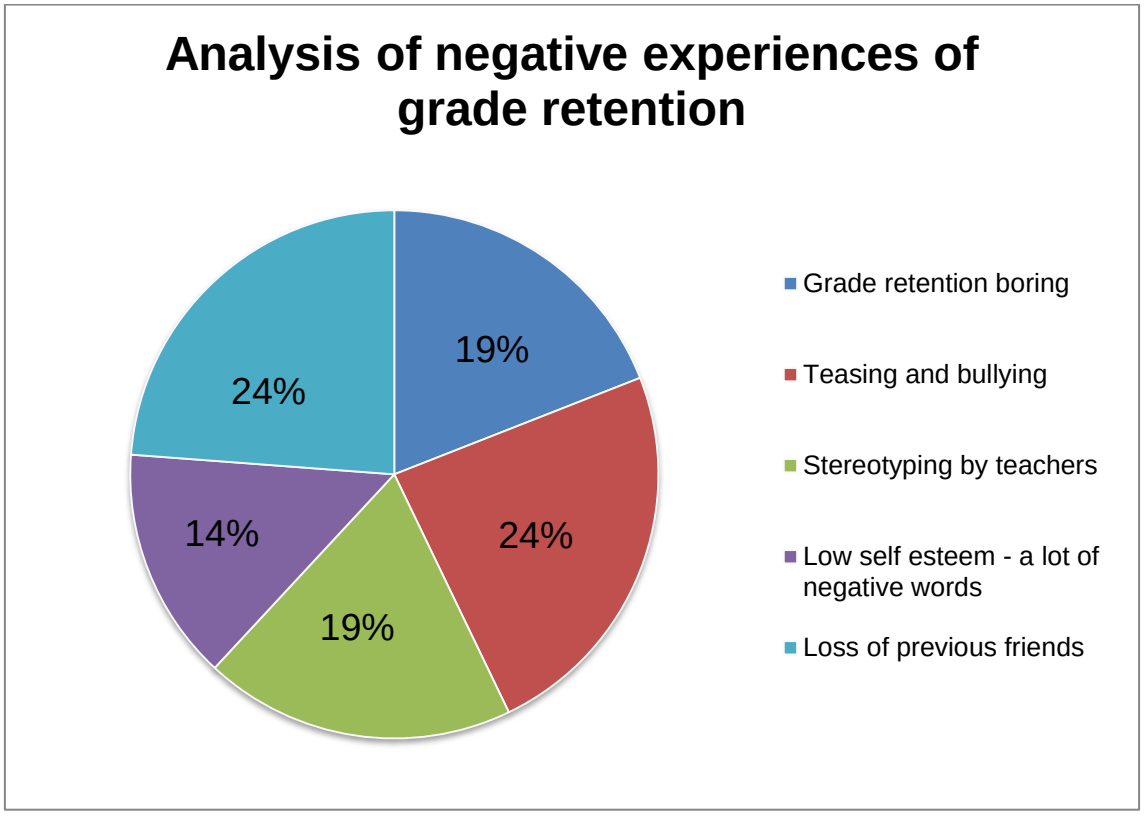


4.5.2 Negative responses

Ten participants were unhappy about repeating the grade. They used words such as, "*Makes me feel bad, angry, worried, sad, I don't like it*". These participants expressed concern about being teased and laughed at by their peers who were not repeating the grade. They reported that they felt sad, because they were left behind by peers who had moved to the next grade. Three of the participants were upset, as their teachers shouted at and scolded them. Max, Nicky Bella and Barbie Girl stated that they found grade retention boring, because they were doing the same work. However, Ronaldo said, *"I am happy, I am confident and I'm pumped up and ready for the next grade*".

The following chart shows negative (exclusive) experiences of grade retention.

Figure 3 Analysis of negative experiences of grade retention according to learners



4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the data found, as a result of the interviews conducted during the research. Each of the participant's responses was summarised. The main findings were that the majority of the participants did not like repeating a grade. Three were bullied and teased by peers. Some participants were shouted at by teachers whereas the rest of the participants enjoyed a good relationship with their teacher. A few participants stated that their parents were not happy about them repeating the grade. Points pertinent to this study in relation to the literature review will be analysed and discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

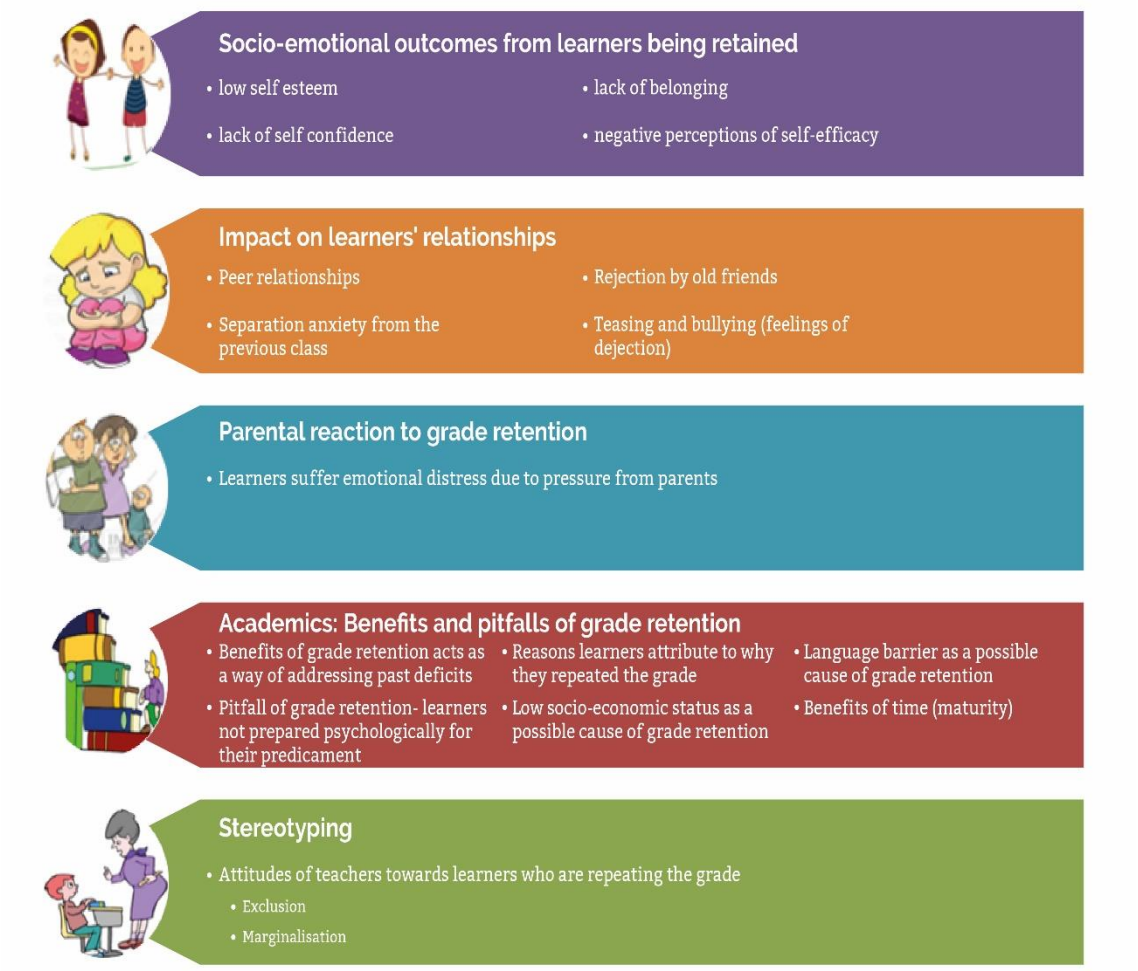
5.1 Introduction

This chapter will present a discussion of the themes and categories that emerged throughout the study. The main categories which will be discussed are socio-economic outcomes, impact on relationships, parental reaction to grade retention, teachers' attitudes towards grade retention. A table that summarises the experiences and perspectives of learners will be followed by a discussion of each category. The tables that summarise the concepts and themes are not an attempt to take sides with or against the value and practice of grade retention in schools, but are a way of unambiguously presenting the findings with regard to the learners' perceptions.

5.2 Concepts and Themes

The following figure depicts the common themes that emerged from learner's perspectives on grade retention. In this section, the main categories and sub-categories will be discussed. Tables for the discussion of each category will be drawn.

Figure 4 The themes, categories and subcategories that emerged from the data during the study.



5.2.1 Social emotional outcomes of grade retention based on the experiences of learners: Included or excluded

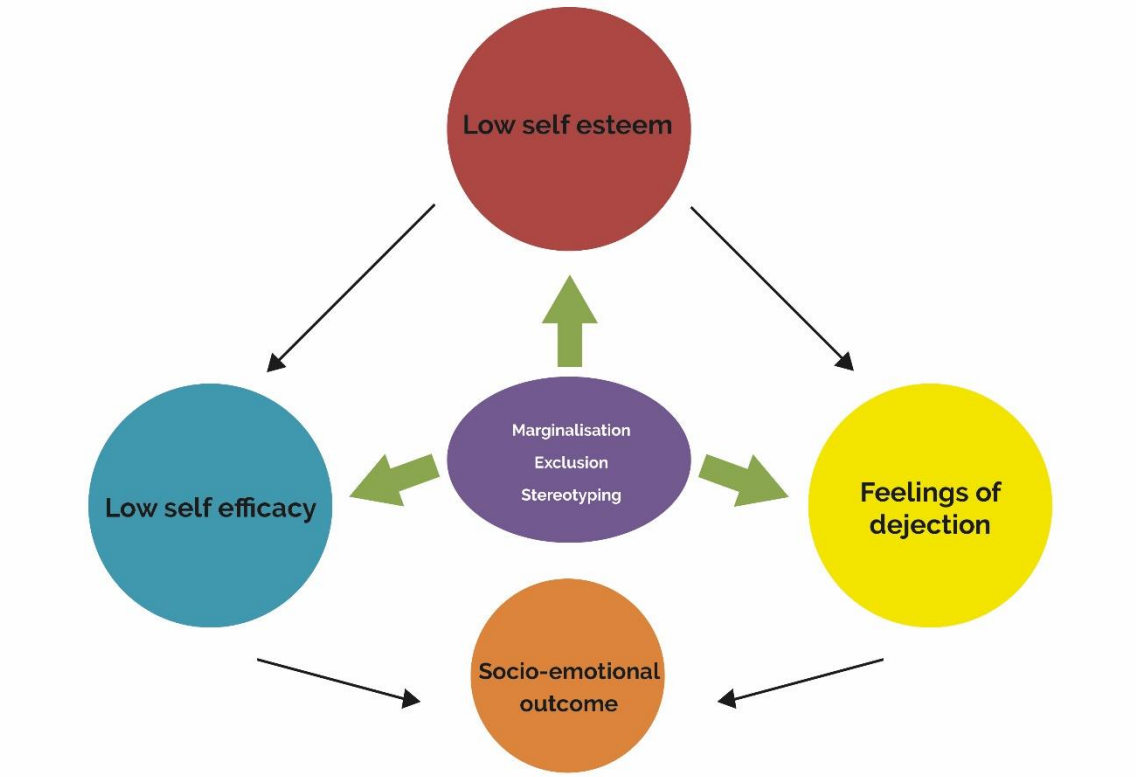
Being designated as different in school contexts can result in extreme forms of exclusion and marginalisation. Kearney (2011) portrays exclusion as being the most powerful in the sense that it denies the learners access to basic resources and it is clandestinely imbedded in the so called 'normal' practices, beliefs and values of society (Messiou, 2012, p. 26). The process of grade retention can include or exclude learners depending on the feelings it evokes in learners. Exclusion is a direct infringement on the learners' rights as postulated by Bernstein's (2000) pedagogic rights of children. His second pedagogic right is the right to be included. With this complex right, inclusion does not necessarily mean absorption, but it entails being able to control one's affairs independently. Most of the learners were unaware that they were going to be retained in the same grade. In some interviews, learners expressed their surprise that they were not progressing to the next grade, as they thought that they had passed their current grade.

On the other hand, participants 4, 7 and 10 felt good about repeating the grade, and Ronaldo said *"repeating a grade has made me feel confident".* This example showed that despite the negative social effects proclaimed about grade retention in the literature, it does not necessarily follow that all learners felt marginalised. However, this example contradicts Gandin (2009) who says that when learners are retained it sends a message that they do not have what it takes to succeed at school. Participant 7 said he was happy about repeating the grade because he was taught things that he did not learn the previous year. It is important to reiterate that during interviews, some children do not state anything negative to discuss about grade retention (Adderley et al., 2015). There are a number of reasons that could be attributed to this kind of response: the child might be genuinely happy or the adult gaze could be influential.

The diagram below explains one of the aims of this research, which is to listen to learners' voices that were retained in the foundation phase in order to

understand whether they have experienced marginalisation. This diagram shows how marginalisation, stereotyping and exclusion influence each other and lead to socio-emotional outcomes.

Figure 5: Interplay between marginalisation, stereotyping and exclusion leading to socio-emotional outcomes



5.2.2 Subtle forms of marginalisation in grade retention according to the experiences of the learners who have been retained in the grade.

Being reprimanded by a younger peer can result in poor self-esteem and desponded feelings in a learner who is being reprimanded whereas the perpetrator will be unaware of the exclusionary practice conducted. One of the participants felt belittled by a younger classmate who commanded her to put her head down. She said, *"They make me feel sad … they treat me like I am a baby … sometimes they say, 'Hey you, put your head down'".* This incident relates to Messiou's (2006) conceptualisation of marginalisation where a learner feels he or she is experiencing marginalisation, but others do not recognise it. Participant 1 only chose a happy blob for the first time when asked to talk about her teacher. For the blob interview, adjectives like helpful or unhelpful were used in relation to specific questions "in order to explore inclusion" (Adderley et

al., 2015, p. 111). Barbie Girl said repeating a grade was unhelpful for her, because she was still struggling in class and failing Afrikaans

Table 3: Peer relationships

Peer relationships	**Positive**	**Negative**
	• Nine learners did not struggle to make friends in the current grade.	• Most friends from the previous grade were not interested in maintaining a friendship with the retained learners. Emmanuel stated that despite trying to reach out to his old friends, they rejected him.
Making and keeping friends.	• Eleven learners said friends in the current grade were supportive.	• Barbie Girl felt disrespected by peers younger than her and treating her like a baby in the current grade. • Ronaldo was teary because friends from the previous year were bullying him.
Teasing and bullying due to the fact that one is repeating a grade.	• Some peers were supportive and	• The majority of learners reported that they were either

	assisted during group work.	bullied, laughed at or teased, because they were repeating the grade. This aroused feelings of dejection among the retained learners.

Some of the participants were unaware that they were going to be retained. One of the participants, Jerry, said, *"Because I thought I was going to pass and at the end I was told I'm not going to pass".* It came as a shock to her when she was told that she was not going to pass, as she came from school X. It seemed that coming from a neighbouring school was almost a curse associated with repeating a grade. This extract also highlighted the subtle ways in which marginalisation featured in the lives of learners who were repeating a grade. Messiou (2006, p. 305) explains this form of marginalisation whereby "a child is found in what appears to be marginalized situations but does not view this as marginalization". Parents were made aware of the possibility that the child might be retained, but there was no attempt to prepare the learners psychologically for this event. The learners were told that they were going to be retained at the very last minute.

5.2.3 Learners' attitudes towards their peers

In this chapter, it emerged that interpersonal relationships were of paramount importance to children. Most of the participants complained about losing friends and being teased because they are repeating the grade. Adderley et al. (2015) argues that the impact of these seemingly small issues can make children feel scared, powerless, left out, lonely and unsure of where to turn to.

5.3 Impact on Relationships

Friends form an integral part of any learner's life, as acceptance and belonging forms part of the development of relationships. When learners repeat a grade then they tend to be rejected by peers from the previous year. Making new

friends is difficult, because learners are either bullied or teased as a result of having to repeat a grade. Teaching and learning is the main focus in schools, but it is a well-known fact that the "social and peer group environment is also part of what learners are or could be 'included' into" (Walton, 2012, p. 1173). Allan (1999) and Messiou (2002) also highlight the importance of social relationships at school. Sandie said, "*Because when I come to class I am always with my friends and I am happy.*" Blobs 4 and 5 were chosen to represent the kind of relationship that she has with her classmates. She said, "*They are helping me. We do homework everyday with them."* Friends come in as a strong emotional and academic support base for participant 3 just like participant 2. Friendship has a positive effect on a person and the way in which they perceive themselves (Fordham & Stevenson-Hindle, 1999). Friends act as an emotional support and to be separated from friends must be devastating for retained learners. Their sense of connection to one another and their relationships with each other appear to be of great significance (Adderley et al. 2015). Therefore, children's sense of feeling included is not only contained in a classroom setting.

5.3.1 Bullying and teasing by peers

Participant 3 said, *"They are laughing at me"*, which showed that the participant was being teased by peers about repeating the grade. There was a stigma attached to being retained and learners struggled emotionally when they were kept behind (Florian & Walton, 2017). Participants 2, 3 and 4 all shared the same sentiments about being rejected by friends because of grade repetition. Learners were bullied and teased, which and caused them emotional distress. Research on grade retention has shown that it was associated with lowered motivation among repeaters (Brophy, 2006). Emmanuel was asked further as to why he did not feel like writing his work and he said he was bored: *"Because if I repeat again I stay like, sometimes I like seeing Sipho with his friends are playing and I'm asking to play with them and they do not want"*.

One of the participants stated that his friends sometimes made him feel sad because, "*They tease me and they beat me*". Ronaldo was referred to the social

worker because he was being bullied by his friends. Bullying is a complex form of exclusion which is often invisible to teachers and is neatly embedded in the social environment of the school (Walton, 2012). Therefore there is a need to interrogate some of the current practices in the education system that give rise to and sustain marginalisation and exclusion in schools (Walton, 2012).

5.4. Parental Reactions

Nikki-Bella chose blob number 19 to describe how her family felt about her repeating a grade. Blob number 19 was crying and trying to reach out to a falling blob. When asked why she had chosen a crying blob she said, "*Because they don't want me to repeat another grade… my mother was crying that I repeated a grade and I was sad"*. Blob number 3, which was sleeping on the floor and had a sad face, was chosen by participant 4 to describe the way her parents felt about the fact that she was repeating the grade. She said her parents were worried that she was repeating the grade, just like the blob which was sad and worried.

Max said his family was sad about him repeating a grade. According to him, "*They feel sad because they know that in the class I was playing*". According to a study, "children in the early grades are often retained on the grounds of behavioral problems stemming from socio-emotional immaturity" (Hanover Research, 2013, p. 8) and the additional year is considered as a way of allowing the child to reach the maturity level required for academic success. Max seemed to be very confident and was bored. The fact that he was able to do all his work meant he could have been retained because of behavioural problems and not that he needed additional academic support.

There was a possibility that Ronaldo was also detained because of behaviour problems. He chose a picture of a man whom he identified as quiet, so it appeared that he assumed that he would pass because he was quiet. It seemed that maybe Ronaldo was talkative and struggled to concentrate on his school work, and that was the reason why he was retained. In a study conducted by Florian and Walton (2017), it was established that 6.3% of the responses

showed concern that grade repetition was associated with negative behaviour. Most teachers complained about the bad attitude of learners.

However, most learners expressed the view that their parents were very supportive and blobs 10 and 11were chosen to explain the kind of relationship they enjoyed with their parents.

Table 4: Parents' attitudes towards learners being retained

Subcategory	Positive perceptions	Negative perceptions
Parents' reaction to learners who had been retained.	• Six parents were very supportive and understood the situation. • These participants expressed how supportive their parents were and chose blobs that supported this view.	• Some parents were not happy that their children had to be retained according to the learners.
Learners suffering emotional distress due to pressure from parents.	• One participant said she felt motivated to work hard when speaking to her parents about retention.	• Three participants were worried about their parents' concerns. One participant mentioned that her mum cried when she learnt that the child was going to be retained.

		• The other parent told the child that she was “worried” that the child had failed the grade.

5.5 Language Barriers

The aspect of spoken English as a concern cropped up in this study. Eleven participants are not English first language speakers. Two of the participants struggled to answer interview question in English and the entire interview was conducted in isiZulu, a South African language. The LOLT of the school is English, which meant that if learners struggled to answer interview questions in English, then there was a possibility that they were retained because of a language barrier. When Bontle was asked why she was retained, she replied, *“I didn’t know English nicely*”. She struggled to read class readers and code switching was done for her to understand the interview questions. Another participant, Sophia also struggled to answer the interview questions. She provided contradictory statements and the interview process did not flow smoothly. For example, when Sophia was asked what she liked about repeating the grade, she responded, “*Repeating grade two”.* She had to be reminded that she was repeating grade one not two. During the course of another interview, Bontle got stuck and she was given an opportunity to speak in Zulu, but she refused and preferred to continue the conversation in English.

Participants 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9 all struggled in Afrikaans and English. They were retained because they did not pass these language subjects, which were part of the promotional requirements for their respective grades. Ten of the participants struggled to converse smoothly in English. This school’s medium of instruction is English, which means that all subjects are taught in English. If learners

struggle to converse in English, then the possibility of them failing the subject is very high.

The second round of interviews was carried out in an innovative manner. Participatory tools allowed for the inclusion of different people, “some with different languages or levels of literacy allowing for diversity within groups and across generations and so forth” (Chambers, Cornwall and O’kane) as cited in (Adderley et al., 2015, p. 110).The use of blobs allowed participants with different levels of literacy to participate in the study.

5.6 Teachers’ Attitudes

The teacher-child relationship also emerged as an important aspect in this study. Some learner perceived their teachers as being unfair whereas others enjoyed a conducive relationship with their teachers. Jerry and Max expressed how happy they were about being retained and they stated how grade retention had contributed positively towards their education. These four learners stated that repeating the grade had not only benefited them in improving their academic performance, but also their own understanding of the work. Others felt a sense of belonging and acceptance in their new classes. Participant 2 stated how she felt appreciated by her new teacher and how excited she was to be in that teacher’s class. This could be due to the fact that the child’s self-esteem could have been boosted by the new teacher. In Pillay and Di Terlizzi’s (2009) study it was found that learners’ self-esteem had increased and that learners’ success in their academic work was due to their receiving praise for their academic progress. Perhaps the teacher’s approach and style of teaching appealed to the retained learner, so she felt good about repeating the grade. In the first set of interviews, participant 2 stated how pained she was by the fact that she was repeating a grade, *“just because I thought that I was going to pass that’s when I got to know that I’m not going to pass because I was coming from school X* [School name removed for ethical purposes]”. This is consistent with Slee’s (2011, p. 104) explanation that, “how we describe the world reflects certain understandings and it determines how we reproduce the world”. This

means that probably the learner had heard many negative comments about (school X), as coming from that school automatically meant that she would be retained. In the interview, she stated that coming from school X made her repeat the grade, meaning somebody might have explained that to the learner. According to the following researchers Goos et al. (2013), studies have revealed that when teachers underrated the cognitive abilities of their learners and had low expectations of them, then the possibility of those learners being retained in the grade was high.

Jerry responded by saying, "*because when I came to this school I was new, I didn't know anything".* These were the same sentiments echoed by participant 2 that when she came into this school she knew nothing. It was noted that a school's staff had the ability to either challenge or support the practice of inclusion (Ainscow, 2012). Negative attitudes could be as detrimental to the process of inclusion as a lack of resources or support. Careless staffroom talk about learners might influence teachers' attitudes negatively and in the process this might affect inclusivity when it comes to grade retention. Participant 5 was not happy that the teacher sometimes told his classmates that the participant failed the grade. (Adderley et al., 2015, p. 113) stated that "positive relationships between teachers and children are underpinned by respectful communication". When a child was constantly made uncomfortable by being reminded that he or she failed the grade, the experience was unpleasant. This resulted in low self-esteem when the learner was embarrassed in front of peers by an adult. However, another participant had positive things to say about his teacher. Participant 7 said his teacher was proud of him. When asked why he felt that way, his response was, *"Because my teacher is making me do all the things that I wasn't supposed to do last year and my teacher is making me finish all the work that I didn't finish*".

Debates about grade repetition should consider the 'equity issue', where fairness and justice form integral parts of the concept of equity (Engelbrecht, 2011). In this regard, equity should not only entail equal educational opportunities, but also the full participation of learners in an education system

that “embraces difference and acknowledges the concepts of rights” (Artiles et al., 2011, p. 149). Ronaldo was denied full participation in the classroom, which was a direct infringement of his rights. Participants 8 and 12 were not happy about the treatment they were getting from their teacher. Participant 8 said, “*Ma’am they shout at us and punish us”*. This is in line with Messiou’s conceptualisation of marginalisation, whereby a child experiences some kind of marginalisation that is recognised by almost everybody including himself or herself (Messiou, 2006).

Table 5: Teachers’ attitudes towards learners who were retained

Subcategory	Positive perceptions	Negative perceptions
Attitudes of teachers towards retained learners.	• Eight participants reported that their teachers were supportive and assisted learners. • Participant 7 said the teacher was proud of him. • Two participants described their teachers as loving and caring. • Teachers gave exactly the same work as the previous year and the work was easy.	• Four learners said teachers teased learners and told the whole class that they had failed the grade. • Some teachers were harsh and they shouted at learners causing the learners unnecessary stress and pressure. • Learners coming from other schools were told that they were not going to pass the grade because of the school they came from.

5.7 Challenges of Research with Children

Conducting research with young children is crucial (Lewis, 2005), because “by listening to their voices we have much to learn (Messiou, 2008, p. 27). However, this kind of research can pose problems as it might mask important conceptual and epistemological problems such as authenticity and diversity in children’s experiences (Spyrou, 2011). A lot of reasons can be attributed to Barbie Girl’s about turn towards the end of the interview session and an explanation for this behaviour might be the general talk about the negativities of being retained as well as the power relations between children and adults. Research with children is critical, yet it can be challenging: interviews are one of the best tools for gathering data however “some concerns have been expressed as to their appropriateness as a tool for listening to young children” (Clark, 2005 p. 492). Children are potentially more vulnerable to unequal power relationships with an adult researcher than other groups (Clark, 2005). The possibility of power inequalities between the participant and the researcher cannot be ruled out, which might have been the cause of Barbie Girl’s monosyllabic responses throughout the rest of the interview. Although listening to views of young children is an extremely important part of the inclusive practice, it can be very challenging because some children might be immature and struggle to engage in a meaningful dialogue with an adult.

Another factor that could have contributed to Barbie Girl’s confusion could be societal views on grade retention. There could be negativity expressed about being retained by the broader society, which then created ill feelings about being retained in the same grade by an individual learner.

5.8 Contradictory Statements from Participants

Participant 4 said she was not happy about the way the teacher treated her. This was in contradiction to what she had said in the first set of interviews where she said the teacher was helping her. Her response was as follows “*because ma’am my teacher shouts at us and she scolds us … it makes me feel sad*”. The change of heart could be because the learner had had a fall out with the teacher before the second interview or she had decided to open up about how her teacher behaved.

Participant 4 was confused as to whether repeating the grade had helped her or not: at first she said no and then changed her mind. She said it did help her, because she was learning things that she should have learnt the previous year and that the teacher was helping her to pass to go to grade 4. She said she liked coming to her class and upon further questioning on what actually made her happy she said: *"It's because I am not repeating the grade and I know everything".* This statement was quite confusing and participant was requested to explain what she meant when she said she was not repeating the grade. Her response was *"I love the class and I have learnt a lot from my teacher".* Initially she had said that her teacher did not treat her well, as she shouted at the participant. Yet, she sounded confused as to whether the relationship between her and the teacher was positive or negative.

The exploration of young children's perceptions can be very challenging. However, Article 13 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1998) moves towards engaging with children's views in a respectful manner which promotes their entitlement to being considered as persons of value and a moral perspective on the role and status of children which respects and promotes their entitlement to being considered as persons of value and persons with rights" (Adderley et al., 2015, p. 108). Ideas of children and their contributions are seen to be a "challenging starting point for the creation of more inclusive practices within schools" (Messiou, 2006, p. 314)

5.9 The Importance of the Learners' Voices

For research to be able to contribute towards the development of inclusive practices, it means that the learners' voices have to be engaged with and heard. The question of voices is critical because it is important in research to know whose voice is heard and on what grounds. But it is equally important to identify the silenced voices "particularly those who are at risk of experiencing marginalization" (Adderley et al., 2015, p. 108). During the first set on interviews, Barbie Girl stated categorically how doing the same grade did not benefit her at all, because she was still struggling in Mathematics and Afrikaans. Her response was, *"Ma'am it's not helping me with passing".* When asked if

repeating the grade helped her understand work that she did the previous year, she said it did not help. However, towards the end of the interview session she changed and said repeating the grade was helping her because she was now able to do Mathematics and Afrikaans. Listening to the voices of young participants can be affected by their development and level of maturity.

5.10 Conclusion

When teachers shouted at learners and ridiculed them in front of their peers, this impacted negatively on the learners' performance in class. A child may be shouted at in class and at home and this can "potentially marginalize children for whom such encounters evoke negative aspects associated with their home lives" (Adderley et al., 2015, p. 114). Despite the complaints about being retained, most of the learners felt that it helped them improve academically. There are a number of problems associated with the practice of grade retention. Bullying, teasing and low self-esteem are some of the problems that emerged in this study. Low economic status has been identified as one of the factors that result in poor academic performance. Having said all the above, there is an urgent need to listen to the educational experiences of young people through their voices in order to further develop inclusive practices in schools (Adderley,et al., 2015). In the next chapter a summary of these findings will be presented and recommendations will be made too.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter foundations of the study will be revisited in order to answer the main research question and its sub-questions. The aim of the research project was to listen to the voices of learners who have been retained with regard to how they perceive the practice of grade retention. This chapter will summarise the core findings of the research, and discuss recommendations, strengths, limitations of the study and the conclusion.

6.2 Summary

In summary, this study has listened to the voices of retained learners in the foundation phase. An overview of the main findings in relation to the research questions are summarised below.

6.2.1 Research question:

How do retained foundation phase learners' experiences enable Inclusive education?

6.2.2 Sub-questions:

- What are foundation phase learners' perspectives on grade retention?
- How might knowledge of these experiences enable more inclusive education?

6.3 Chapter 1

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 highlighted the negative outcomes of scholastic retention, this practice has gained popularity in countries in Southern Africa including South Africa. Learners who struggle academically were retained in the grade if they could not meet specific promotional requirements. It was sad to note that learners were not consulted about being retained; their voices did not matter. Studies have been conducted on teachers' perspectives on this topic. However, research on how learners experienced retention has not been done. The main objective of this research was to ascertain how learners experienced and perceived the practice of grade retention.

6.4 Chapter 2

This chapter explored the relevant literature on inclusive education, marginalisation, exclusion, and grade retention, the importance of the children's voice and the value of listening to their voices. In our South African context, as stated in the literature review, education was framed along the human rights discourse. Grade retention rates were high in the foundation phase, but little was known about the learners' experiences who had been retained in the phase. Slee (2011) viewed inclusive education as an apprentice to democracy and one of its main agendas was to identify and dismantle practices that were viewed as exclusionary in schools. Despite the on-going debate on the effects of grade retention and its drawbacks, this practice has continued to be used in most schools in South Africa. Alexander et al. (2003) stated the conundrum on whether the practice of grade retention was beneficial or not would continue to be debated for many years to come.

6.3 Chapter 3

The study was conducted using a phenomenographic research design in order 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 approach understood the collective experiences of learners who were retained in a grade through listening to their voices. Individual interviews were carried out in order to collect data; twelve participants drew pictures of themselves and selected blobs to express how they felt about their experiences.

The interview questions sought to understand how learners who have been retained in the foundation phase experienced the practice of grade retention.

6.4 Chapter 4

In this chapter, a summary of the each participant's views was presented, which included their experiences and perceptions of grade retention. Tables were drawn to summarise the responses of the participants. For the purposes of this study, each participant was given an opportunity to draw a picture of themselves repeating a grade. The drawings were not interpreted by the researcher, but they were used to probe the participants' responses further so as to solicit rich data. Therefore, the drawings were not used as a data collection instrument, but as a way of encouraging the participants to converse creatively. For the second part of the interviews, blobs were used because they illustrated a variety of characters expressing different feelings. Each blob was a means to encourage a conversation. Blobs are simple visuals and they deal with deep issues using the primary languages learnt from infancy. Tables of the results were drawn to see how learners experienced the practice of grade retention.

6.5 Chapter 5

The findings revealed that some retained learners might have been marginalised in the previous year by their teachers because of their academic challenges. One participant stated that he was now able to do work that he was not allowed to do the previous year. Another participant stated that doing of something that they were familiar with made them feel included. They also felt supported by the teacher when they were asked to assist their peers with the work. However, most of the participants reported that they were not happy about repeating the grade. There was evidence of lower motivation among most of the participants (Brophy, 2006). A few of the participants were sent for counselling sessions, as they displayed emotional distress when discussing their feelings about being retained in a grade during the interviews.

The emotional distress of grade retention came mainly from the social stigma attached to being retained. The majority of the participants seemed to be

embarrassed about being retained. Children were bullied and teased by peers because they were repeating a grade and this made them struggle emotionally. Bullying and teasing was one of the major causes of emotional distress that the retained learners experienced. What made matters worse was that some of the teachers also teased these learners and shouted at them. This pushed some of the learners further into feelings of marginalisation. If a learner is belittled in front of their peers, then it resulted in the learners feeling inferior and losing their confidence. This was related to the view which stated that when learners were labelled, then the tendency was to focus on the label and not the individual (Messiou 2012). Inclusive education is about acknowledging each learners' uniqueness and understanding that regardless of their differences, they have a right to learn and should be given support.

6.6. Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study included the following: the time frame; the sample size; the researcher's involvement in the study; the data collected from one school in Gauteng; the emotional distress experienced by some of the respondents; and, contradictory statements from some of the respondents. These limitations will be discussed below.

6.6.1 Time frame of conducting the study

The research project was conducted in a short space of time; more time would have facilitated a richer and more comprehensive research project. Arrangements had to be made after school to interview the respondents, and it was often difficult to get hold of them. For example, they sometimes had to leave when their transport arrived. Some of the respondents were tired, because the interviews were carried out at the end of the day. Most foundation phase learners have a very short concentration span, and by the end of the day, they will be exhausted. As evident in the first set of interviews, most respondents resorted to monosyllabic answers and seemed disinterested. However, in the second set of interviews, they seemed to participate attentively and scrutinised the blobs in order to choose their responses. The blob tree interview seemed to captivate their attention.

6.6.2 Sample size and researcher's involvement in own study

The scope of the research was limited, because this research was carried out in only one school. Most schools were afraid of the ethical implications that surround working with young children and they were sceptical about trusting their young ones with a researcher whom they did not know. Therefore, this research had to be conducted at a school familiar to the researcher. Some of the interview processes went well probably because the respondents were with an adult that they knew and trusted, and in some instances the researcher was able to use a familiar language with them. However, the possibility of respondents trying to please the researcher cannot be ruled out because two of the participants gave positive answers throughout their interviews. Although the sample size was small, the findings provided some insight into grade retention and how it was viewed by learners who were repeating a grade.

6.6.3 Limited scope of the research

One of the limitations of this study was that data was collected from one school in Gauteng. Because the scope of the study was limited, the findings of this research cannot be generalised to all foundation phase learners who have been retained and firm conclusions cannot be drawn from them. However, these findings have revealed how grade retention can be viewed as exclusionary by the learners who experienced it. This study has afforded learners who were repeating a grade an opportunity to share their views with a wider audience. Not all learners felt marginalised or excluded, but for those who experienced some form of marginalisation, they were able to talk about their experiences and perceptions in a relaxed atmosphere.

6.6.4 Emotional distress experienced by some of the participants

The participants were expected to re-live or explain experiences that they might have viewed as painful or unfair and this caused distress, fear and anger in some of the participants during the initial stages of the interviews. It therefore took longer to gather data because some interviews had to be halted so as to allow the participants some time to calm down and deal with the emotional stress that had been evoked. The affected respondents were referred to the

school's social worker in order to help with the emotional distress that they were going through. One of the respondents withdrew from this study. The reason she gave was that she lived far away from the school and could not stay after school to be interviewed. At times, the noise levels after school were unbearable during the interviews. This impacted negatively on the respondents, because they were distracted, and transcribing from a voice recorder was also a challenge.

6.6.5 Lack of prior research with young children in South Africa

Little research has been carried out with young children in South Africa, because of the ethical concerns that this research raises. Most research with children is conducted with teenagers, but hardly any within the age range of between 7-10 years of age. This means that there is little research in South Africa that has been conducted with learners who have been retained in order to understand their views and experiences of grade repetition. Therefore, this area of study is not well documented, and it was sensitive research, because of dealing with minor children. All ethical procedures were followed in order to prevent damage or harm. Unfortunately, there was no previous research to refer to, which was a challenge for me. De Vos et al. (2011, p. 300) argue that, "by knowing what other researchers have already said about your topic, you are in a better position to come up with a well-thought-out research plan"

6.7 Recommendations

Traces of various forms of exclusion cannot be ruled out in the practice of grade retention. Learners revealed that they were bullied by classmates; some were teased by their peers and teachers as well. Some of the learners lost friends and struggled to make new friends in the current grade. This study revealed that a considerable number of participants were rejected by their peers. Some of the learners were not consulted prior to being retained, which is an unfair situation and it infringes on the learners' right to freedom of expression and opinion (Perry, 2009) The schools should take cognisance of the learners' feelings before retaining them. Half of the participants revealed that they were only informed that they were going to be retained at the end of the year. This meant

that throughout the year, there was little done to enlighten them of what it meant to be retained in a grade and the possibility that they might be retained in a grade. It would be an important step in the retention process to consult learners earlier and find out how they feel about retention. Learners could be given an opportunity to say how they would feel about being retained and with a psychologist's help, the learners could be prepared emotionally to accept that they might need an extra year in a grade. Learners struggle emotionally when they are left behind from their peer group.

This study also revealed that most participants were doing the same work that they had struggled with in the previous year. A recommendation to the curriculum department would be to have an individualised programme for each of the learners who were retained. The CAPS curriculum is rigidly fixed in terms of how it is paced. Teachers are given a deadline as to how long they should take when teaching a concept. Due to the content-intensive curriculum, teachers are forced to cover the content within the stipulated time in order to finish the syllabus. The DoE allocates the time in minutes and hours for each content area (DBE, 2011). This becomes problematic for learners in the reception years, because the majority of them experience no home literacy or numeracy practices to prepare them for formal schooling. This fast-paced, content-intensive curriculum can be a stumbling block to the mastery of numeracy and literacy skills in the foundation phase with the result that failure to master these skills is almost inevitable for some of the learners. It is recommended that in the reception years, pace should be informed by a learner's mastery of concepts and not content coverage. It was revealed that some of the teachers teased the retained learners, and embarrassed them in front of their peers. Some of the teachers shouted at these learners, which could be the result of frustration on the part of the teachers. The DoE must establish whether all foundation phase teachers are competent in the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills to young learners.

Remedial intervention strategies should be implemented earlier in the year and a holistic approach should be taken when administering them. This would mean

consulting psychologists and social workers to establish why a learner is struggling academically. The Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) assessment should be done by a psychologist and not teachers, because they are not qualified to administer those tests. Furthermore, broader cultural, social and economic issues should be explored before retaining learners who do not achieve the required competencies of meeting the required promotional standards.

Having said the above, using the knowledge of learners' experiences, future research can focus on eliminating subtle ways of marginalisation and exclusion that are perpetuated by the practice of grade retention. Inclusive education is viewed as a way of transforming education systems so that these systems can positively respond to the diversity of learners. Retention has a social and emotional aspect to it and in the absence of teachers being aware and addressing these aspects, learners will continue to feel excluded. In cases in my research where teachers were cognisant of the emotional and social aspects of retention learners felt included and positive about the experience. Teachers should be developed on effects of stereotyping on children and they should be encouraged to be inclusive education activists in their own classrooms. In other words, both teachers and learners should feel comfortable with diversity and be able to holistically embrace inclusionary practices in the learning environment.

6.8 Conclusion

This study has provided feedback on the learners' experiences and perceptions about being retained in the foundation phase. The majority of the learners did not enjoy being retained in a grade, but it did not impact negatively on their academic progress. They seemed to have accepted that they had been retained. Perhaps other alternatives to grade retention can be explored so as to improve learner performance in the foundation phase, because "[y]oung people offer different perspectives, challenge us and our language" (Sabo Flores, as cited in Fleming, 2010, p. 10). The active involvement of children and young people could help with the contribution of new ideas about grade retention and they also challenged the researcher to view this research in a new light

(Fleming, 2010). It is therefore imperative to engage the learners who have been retained in a dialogue in order to tap into their experiences of grade retention. It is envisaged that understanding their experiences will contribute positively towards reducing tendencies of exclusion and marginalisation that are subtly embedded in the practice of grade retention.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND ETHICS COMMITTEE LETTER OF APPROVAL

Wits School of Education

WITS UNIVERSITY

27 St Andrews Road, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2193 Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa. Tel: +27 11 717-3064 Fax: +27 11 717-3100 E-mail: enquiries@educ.wits.ac.za Website: www.wits.ac.za

22 May 2018

Student Number: 717909

Protocol Number: 2018ECE007M

Dear Maureen Hadebe

Application for Ethics Clearance: Master of Education

Thank you very much for your ethics application. The Ethics Committee in Education of the Faculty of Humanities, acting on behalf of the Senate, has considered your application for ethics clearance for your proposal entitled:

Foundation Phase learners' perspectives of grade retention.

The committee recently met and I am pleased to inform you that clearance was granted.

Please use the above protocol number in all correspondence to the relevant research parties (schools, parents, learners etc.) and include it in your research report or project on the title page.

The Protocol Number above should be submitted to the Graduate Studies in Education Committee upon submission of your final research report.

All the best with your research project.

Yours sincerely,

M Mabeta

Wits School of Education

011 717-3416

cc Supervisor - Dr Moeniera Moosa.

APPENDIX B: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM TO THE PRINCIPAL

Wits School of Education

The Principal [Date to be filled in]
(School name)

Re: Request to conduct research at your school.

Dear Principal

I am conducting my Masters research within the field of Inclusive education. My project is concerned with Foundation Phase learners' perspectives on grade retention. The title of my research is **Foundation phase learners' perspectives on grade retention.** I intend to find out foundation phase learners experiences and views on grade retention by interviewing them. The interview process will be accompanied by pictures and drawings done by the learners which will not be interpreted by me but will be used as prompts for our discussions so as to gather data. The targetted age group is between 6 to 9 years of age and will comprise of learners who have been retained in grade 1, 2 and 3. It is my hope that understanding grade retention from the experiences of learners will help to determine if knowledge of these experiences could enable more inclusive education. It is also my hope that this research will indirectly benefit learners by giving them a chance to express their feelings about grade retention and give them an opportunity to have their voices heard and shared with a wider audience.

Your school's involvement in this study is of vital importance but it is however completely voluntary and there are no negative consequences or institutional sanctions for non-participation. If you allow me to conduct my study, I would ask for your assistance in securing the names of learners who have been retained in the Foundation phase from grade 1 to 3. I will use the given list to randomly select four learners from each grade, who I will then invite to participate in my research. Should learners choose to participate, they have the right to withdraw from participation at any time during the research process, with no negative consequences or penalties. They also have the right to decline to answer any of the questions asked in the interview. Participation in this study will require that learners, with their consent as well as their parents, guardians or caregivers' consent, agree to allow me to interview them at a time that is convenient for the learner and will not impact on their school time. Learners will be asked to draw pictures as part of the interview process and tell a story about their drawings. They are also going to be asked to choose a picture from a magazine

that best describes repeating a grade and telling me about the picture chosen. With the learners' consent I will audio tape and transcribe the interview which is most likely to last between 30-40 minutes.

The results of the research will be used for academic purposes only and may be published in academic journal articles, books and conference presentations. In any of these publications, I and my supervisor guarantee the participants' right to anonimity, and no personal names, institution or organization names or any other identifying information will be used. There are no forseeable risks in participating in this study. There are also no direct benefits for the learners should they participate in this research project but it is our hope that participation in the research would indirectly benefit learners by giving them a chance to express their feelings about grade retention and give them an opportunity to have their voices heard and shared with a wider audience. We also hope that the results of the study will help to make inclusive education more inclusive. The child's individual privacy will be safeguarded by giving learners fake name so that no one will be able to recognise the learners in any publication or presentation arising from the research. I Mrs Hadebe, do guarantee that all data collected (including electronic and hard copies of interview transcripts) will be stored at Wits School of Education and will be destroyed by shredding or deleting after a period of three to five years.

If you are willing to give permission for research to be conducted at your school, please would you sign at the bottom of this form and return to me as soon as possible. Should you require further information throughout the course of the research, please do not hesitate to contact me on 073 596 6715 / (011) 972 1817 or via mrnhadebe4@gmail.com Alternatively, you may contact my supervisor, Dr Moeniera Moosa at 011 717 3085 or via the following email address; moeniera.moosa@wits.ac.za

Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours faithfully,

Mrs Hadebe.

Wits School of Education

Principal: Acknowledgement of information sheet and proposed research study

Foundation phase learners' perspectives on grade retention.
It would be greatly appreciated if you could please acknowledge receipt of the information sheet requesting permission to conduct research in your school.

You will be acknowledging that:

-Participant's involvement is voluntary and selected participants may choose not to participate or to withdraw their consent at any given time without negative consequences.
-You have read and understood the contents of the information sheet and acknowledge its contents
-The school's name and participant's information will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used so as to ensure anonymity.
-Consent will be obtained from learners' and their parents' / guardians/ caregivers' before data is collected.
-The data collection process will not interfere with learners' contact time nor will it interfere with the day to day running of the school.
-It is envisaged that the research findings will be used for academic purposes including books, journals and or conference proceedings.

I, _____ (Principal's full name) acknowledge the information stated above and grant permission for Mrs Hadebe to conduct research within _____ (school's name) in 2018.
Please provide your details should you wish to receive an electronic summary of the research findings.
E-mail address: _____

Principal's Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM TO THE SCHOOL GOVERNING BOARD CHAIRPERSON

Wits School of Education

The Chairperson [Date to be filled in]
(School's name)

Re: Request to conduct research at your school.

Dear SGB Chairperson

I am conducting my Masters research within the field of Inclusive education. My project is concerned with Foundation Phase learners' perspectives on grade retention. The title of my research is **Foundation phase learners' perspectives on grade retention.** I intend to find out foundation phase learners experiences and views on grade retention by interviewing them. The interview process will be accompanied by pictures and drawings done by the learners which will not be interpreted by me but will be used as prompts for our discussions so as to gather data. The targetted age group is between 6 to 9 years of age and will comprise of learners who have been retained in grade 1, 2 and 3. It is my hope that understanding grade retention from the experiences of learners will help to determine if knowledge of these experiences could enable more inclusive education. It is also my hope that this research will indirectly benefit learners by giving them a chance to express their feelings about grade retention and give them an opportunity to have their voices heard and shared with a wider audience.

Your school's involvement in this study is of vital importance but it is however completely voluntary and there are no negative consequences or institutional sanctions for non-participation. If you allow me to conduct my study, I would ask for your assistance in securing the names of learners who have been retained in the Foundation phase from grade 1 to 3. I will use the given list to randomly select four learners from each grade, who I will then invite to participate in my research. Should learners choose to participate, they have the right to withdraw from participation at any time during the research process, with no negative consequences or penalties. They also have the right to decline to answer any of the questions asked in the interview. Participation in this study will require that learners, with their consent as well as their parents, guardians or caregivers' consent, agree to allow me to interview them at a time that is convenient for the learner and will not impact on their school time. Learners will be asked to draw pictures as part of the interview process and tell a story about their drawings. They are also going to be asked to choose a picture from a magazine that best describes repeating a grade and telling me about the picture chosen. With the

learners' consent I will audio tape and transcribe the interview which is most likely to last between 30-40 minutes.

The results of the research will be used for academic purposes only and may be published in academic journal articles, books and conference presentations. In any of these publications, I and my supervisor guarantee the participants' right to anonimity, and no personal names, institution or organization names or any other identifying information will be used. There are no forseeable risks in participating in this study. There are also no direct benefits for the learners should they participate in this research project but it is our hope that participation in the research would indirectly benefit learners by giving them a chance to express their feelings about grade retention and give them an opportunity to have their voices heard and shared with a wider audience. We also hope that the results of the study will help to make inclusive education more inclusive. The child's individual privacy will be safeguarded by giving learners fake name so that no one will be able to recognise the learners in any publication or presentation arising from the research. I Mrs Hadebe, do guarantee that all data collected (including electronic and hard copies of interview transcripts) will be stored at Wits School of Education and will be destroyed by shredding or deleting after a period of three to five years.

If you are willing to give permission for research to be conducted at your school, please would you sign at the bottom of this form and return to me as soon as possible. Should you require further information throughout the course of the research, please do not hesitate to contact me on 073 596 6715 / (011) 972 1817 or via mrnhadebe4@gmail.com Alternatively, you may contact my supervisor, Dr Moeniera Moosa at 011 717 3085 or via the following email address; moeniera.moosa@wits.ac.za

Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours faithfully,

Mrs Hadebe.

Wits School of Education

SGB Chairperson's: Acknowledgement of information sheet and proposed research study

Foundation phase learners' perspectives on grade retention.
It would be greatly appreciated if you could please acknowledge receipt of the information sheet requesting permission to conduct research in your school.

You will be acknowledging that:

-Participant's involvement is voluntary and selected participants may choose not to participate or to withdraw their consent at any given time without negative consequences.
-You have read and understood the contents of the information sheet and acknowledge its contents
-The school's name and participant's information will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used so as to ensure anonymity.
-Consent will be obtained from learners' and their parents' / guardians/ caregivers' before data is collected.
-The data collection process will not interfere with learners' contact time nor will it interfere with the day to day running of the school.
-It is envisaged that the research findings will be used for academic purposes including books, journals and or conference proceedings.

I, _____ (SGB Chairperson's full name) acknowledge the information stated above and grant permission for Mrs Hadebe to conduct research within _____ (school's name) in 2018.
Please provide your details should you wish to receive an electronic summary of the research findings.
E-mail address: _____

SGB Chairperson's Signature: _____Date: _____

APPENDIX D: GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL

GAUTENG PROVINCE
Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	23 July 2018
Validity of Research Approval:	05 February 2018 – 28 September 2018 2018/195
Name of Researcher:	Hadebe M.
Address of Researcher:	19 John Street
	Birchleigh Ext 5
	Kempton Park, 1621
Telephone Number:	011 972 1817 073 596 6715
Email address:	mmhadebe4@gmail.com
Research Topic:	Foundation Phase learners' perspectives on grade retention
Type of qualification	Masters
Number and type of schools:	One Primary School
District/s/HO	Johannesburg East.

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

1. *The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s concerned must be presented with a copy of this* 24/07/2018

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management
7th Floor 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001
Tel: (011) 355 0488
Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za
Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

APPENDIX E: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM TO THE PARENTS/GUARDIANS

Wits School of Education

Dear [Parent / Guardian / Caregiver] [Date to be filled in]

My name is Maureen Hadebe and I am a Masters student at the Wits School of Education. I am conducting my research within the field of Inclusive education. My project is concerned with Foundation Phase learners' perspectives on grade retention. The title of my research is **Foundation phase learners' perspectives on grade retention.** I intend to find out foundation phase learners experiences and views on grade retention by interviewing them. The interview process will be accompanied by pictures and drawings done by the learners which will not be interpreted by me but will be used as prompts for our discussions so as to gather data. The targetted age group is between 6 to 9 years of age and will comprise of learners who have been retained in grade 1, 2 and 3. It is my hope that understanding grade retention from the experiences of learners will help to determine if knowledge of these experiences could enable more inclusive education. It is also my hope that this research will indirectly benefit learners by giving them a chance to express their feelings about grade retention and give them an opportunity to have their voices heard and shared with a wider audience.

If you grant me permission to conduct my study with your child, I will invite your child to participate in my research. Should your child choose to participate, they have the right to withdraw from participation at any time during the research process, with no negative consequences or penalties. They also have the right to decline to answer any of the questions asked in the interview. Participation in this study will require that learners, with their consent as well as their parents, guardians or caregivers' consent agree to allow me to interview them at a time that is convenient for the learner and will not impact on their school time. Learners will be asked to draw pictures as part of the interview process and tell a story about their drawings. They are also going to be asked to choose a picture from a magazine that best describes repeating a grade and telling me about the picture chosen. With you and your child's consent I will audio tape and transcribe the interview which is most likely to last between 30-40 minutes.

The results of the research will be used for academic purposes only and may be published in academic journal articles, books and conference presentations. In any of these publications, I and my supervisor guarantee the participants' right to anonimity, and no personal names, institution or organization names or any other identifying information will be used. There are no forseeable risks in participating. There are also no direct benefits for the learners should they participate in this research project but it is our hope that participation in the research would indirectly benefit learners by giving

them a chance to express their feelings about grade retention and give them an opportunity to have their voices heard and shared with a wider audience. We also hope that the results of the study will help to make inclusive education more inclusive. The child's individual privacy will be safeguarded by giving learners fake name so that no one will be able to recognise the learners in any publication or presentation arising from the research. I Mrs Hadebe, do guarantee that all data collected (including electronic and hard copies of interview transcripts) will be stored at Wits School of Education and will be destroyed by shredding or deleting after a period of three to five years.

If you are willing to give me permission to invite your child in my research, would you please sign the consent form and return it to me via your child's class teacher as soon as possible. Should you require further information throughout the course of the research, please do not hesitate to contact me on 073 596 6715 / (011) 972 1817 or via mrnhadebe4@gmail.com alternatively, you may contact my supervisor Dr Moeniera Moosa at 011 717 3085 or via the following email address; moeniera.moosa@wits.ac.za

Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours faithfully,

Mrs Hadebe

Parent/ Guardian / Caregiver's: Informed consent for individual interviews

I, _____ (*parent / guardian / caregiver's full name)* **Give consent / Do not give consent** for my child to participate in the research project and be interviewed by **Mrs Hadebe**.

I acknowledge that:

- I have read and understood the information sheet.
- My child's participation is completely voluntary and my child may choose not to participate or choose to withdraw from the study at any given time without there being any negative consequences or punishment.
- My child will not be advantaged, disadvantaged or remunerated for participating in the interview process.
- The researcher will keep my child's identity and all information strictly confidential in all academic writing including books, journals and conferences by using a pseudonym (fake name).

Parent/ Guardian / Caregiver's: Informed consent for audio-taping and transcribing interviews.

I, _____ (*parent / guardian / caregiver's full name)* **Give consent / Do not give consent** for my child to be audio-taped during the interview process and I give the researcher permission to transcribe the interviews.

I acknowledge that:

- I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that there are no negative consequences should my child choose not to participate in this research. **Yes/No**
- I know that the researcher will keep confidential any information about my child and the name of the school will not be revealed. **Yes/No**
- I know that my child is not compelled to answer all the questions and he or she may withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. **Yes/No**
- I know that my child can ask not to be audiotaped. **Yes/No**
- I know that all data collected during this study will be kept in a secure place and will be destroyed within 3-5 years after completion of the project. **Yes/No**
- I know that results of the research will be used for academic purposes (including books, journals and conference proceedings) **Yes/No**

Parent/Guardian/Caregiver's signature: _____

Date: _____

Circle your choice of answer

APPENDIX F: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS (LEARNERS)

Wits School of Education

Dear [Participant's full name] [Date to be filled in]

My name is Mrs Hadebe and I am a Masters student at the Wits School of Education. I am doing my research within the field of Inclusive education. I would like to find out how you feel about repeating the same grade. I am inviting you to take part in my research. Please note that you are allowed to refuse to participate in this research project if you are not happy about it. If you accept this invitation, I would like to interview you for about 30-40 minutes at a time when you will be free and your class time will not be disturbed.

Remember, you are allowed to stop the process if you are unhappy about it. Sometimes the questions about repeating a grade might make you uncomfortable or unhappy. You may stop me from asking you any more questions and I will refer you to the school Social Worker if you need to talk about the sad feelings that might arise when you talk about repeating the same grade. If you and your parents, guardians or care givers allow me to go ahead with the interview process, with your permission and your parents, guardians or care giver's permission, I will interview you and use a tape recorder to record the interviews so as to make sure that I get accurate information.

Please kindly note that your participation is very important. This is not a test and no marks will be given so if you agree to take part you will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way. Remember, even though your parents have been asked to permit you to take part in this study, it is your choice whether you want to be part of it or not.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions on 073 596 6715 / (011) 972 1817 or via mrnhadebe4@gmail.com alternatively, you may contact my supervisor Dr Moeniera Moosa at 011 717 3085 or via the following email address; moeniera.moosa@wits.ac.za

I look forward to working with you!

Yours faithfully,

Mrs Hadebe.

Wits School of Education

Consent Form: Foundation phase learners' perspectives of grade retention.

Learner's: Informed consent for audio-taping and transcribing interviews.

Circle the face that you agree with or circle Yes / No to respond to the following questions.

- I am  /  to allow Mrs Hadebe to ask me questions about repeating a grade.

- I know that Mrs Hadebe is going to use an audio recorder to record what we will be talking about. **Yes / No**

-I know that agreeing to take part will not put me into trouble or any danger. **Yes / No**

-I know that my name or the name of my school will not be used in this project. **Yes / No**

- I know that taking part in this study will not affect my school work. **Yes / No**

-I know that this is not a test and I will not score marks. **Yes / No**

-I know that I am allowed to stop Mrs Hadebe from interviewing me anytime I feel I do not wish to continue with the interview. **Yes / No**

Learner's signature: ----------

Date: _____

APPENDIX G: SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Wits School of Education

Introduction

I am glad that you have agreed to be interviewed. My name is Maureen and I am a student at the University of Witwatersrand. I will give you fifteen minutes to draw and thereafter we will do a 30 minute interview that will be transcribed by me and also recorded with your permission. We are going to focus on your drawing and you will tell me how you view grade retention. I am also interested in knowing about your experiences of grade retention and how you feel about being retained in the Foundation Phase.

Remind the learner's about the interview protocol:

- The interview procedure.
- Their right to withdraw from the study any time
- Allow learners to select a pseudonym.
- Re-assure them of confidentiality
- Their right to refuse to answer questions that they do not want to answer.

A. **General information**:

1. How old are you?

2. What grade have you been retained in?

B. **Proposed Interview questions**

1. How does repeating the grade make you feel? Draw a picture or make a picture collage of how repeating the grade makes you feel. (Learners will be asked to make **one drawing**. I am going to probe them further using their drawings to see if they feel included or excluded by the process of grade retention.

2. Please tell me about why you repeated the grade?

3. How do you feel about repeating the grade? (Depending on learner's answer, I will probe further).

4. Did repeating a grade make your friends stop playing with you or you are still friends with them? (Learner will be probed further depending on given response).

5. Do you have new friends in the current grade? Are they friendly or not friendly to you? (Questions will be asked to see if the learner feels accepted by the current peers or rejected)

6. What do you like about repeating a grade?

7. What don't you like about repeating a grade?

8. Do you have a friend who is not repeating a grade? Tell me about him or her. Do you think he or she is happy or sad?

9. Choose a picture from a magazine that best describes you repeating a grade and tell me about the picture you have chosen.

10. Has repeating the grade helped you to understand the work that you were struggling to understand last year or not? Which subject gave you problems? Depending on learner's response I will probe further to see if they benefit and feel good or not about doing the same work for the second time.

Thank the learner for allowing me to interview him or her. Answer any questions that the learner might have for me.

APPENDIX H: LETTER TO THE ETHICS COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSON REQUESTING ADDITIONAL PERMISSION

Maureen Hadebe

Student number: 717909

Ethics protocol number: 2018ECE007M

Research Topic: Foundation phase learner's perspectives of grade retention

Dear Dr Goldschagg

I have a challenge with the data that l got from the interviews with my participants. Most of the participants gave me one word answers hence the data that l have is scanty. After a thorough discussion with my supervisor, I have decided to do a second round of interviews using one picture instead of pictures from magazines. I would like to use a blob tree to try and generate rich data from the participants. Blobs are simple and they deal with deep issues and each picture is a means to a conversation (Adderley, Hope, Hughes, Jonnes, Messiou and Shaw 2015). They display a variety of characters and it is my hope that through the selection of a Blob it will be a snap-shot of how the participant feels about grade repetition.

The participants will be given an opportunity to choose blobs in response to the questions asked. I will first explain to my participants that blobs can be used to express feelings. For example if participant is happy about repeating the grade, a happy blob can be selected. I will then probe my participants further to explain why they have chosen a particular blob. Participants will be given an opportunity to choose different blobs in on order to respond to the interview questions. Please find attached an example of a blob tree that l intend to use. Each blob will be allocated a number so that it will be easy for participants to select using numbers and not having to struggle pointing to the chosen blobs.

I intend to conduct the blob interviews as follows:

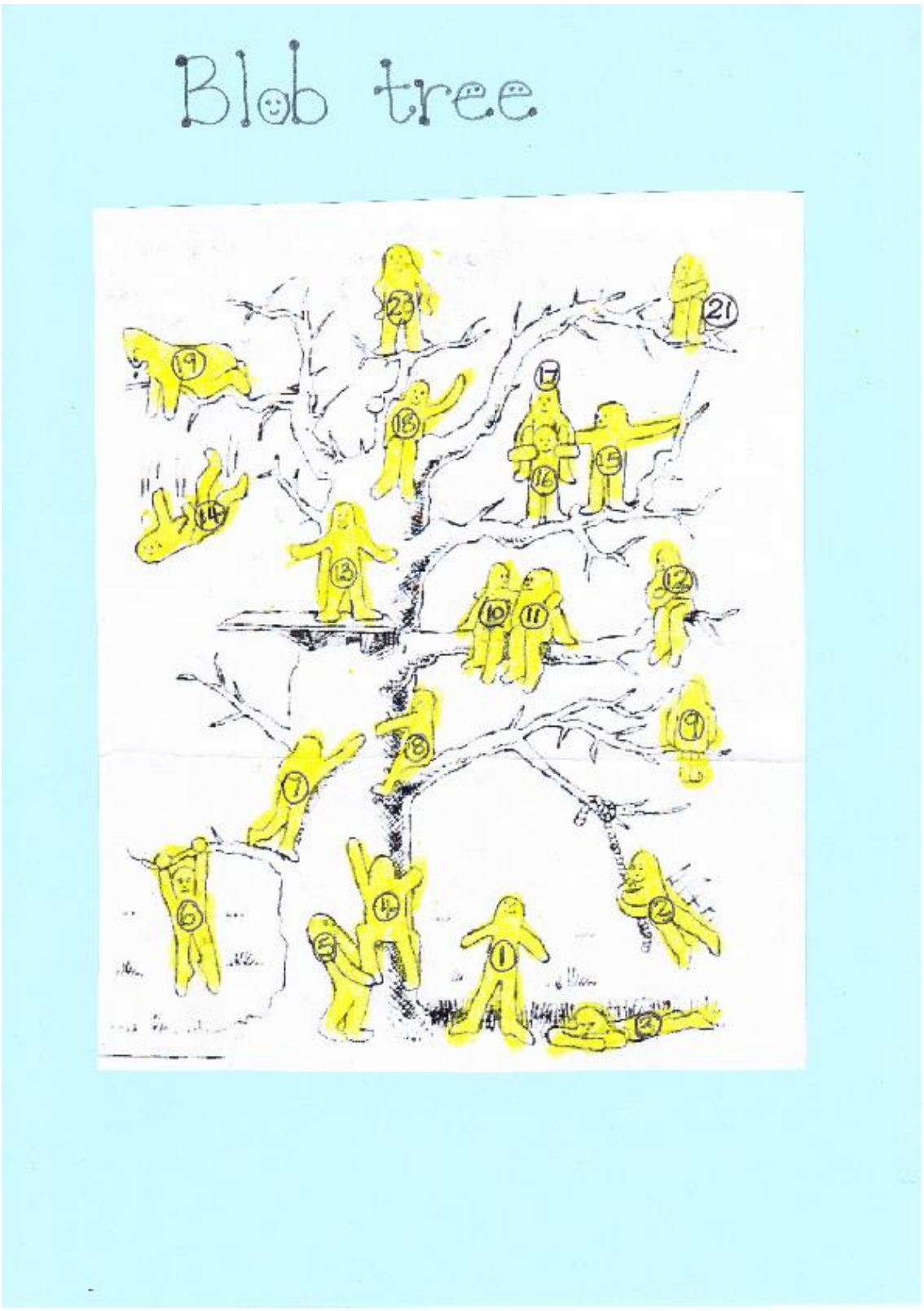
1. Choose a blob to show me how you feel about doing the same grade for the second time. (probe further) Are they feeling isolated or marginalized?
2. Choose a blob to show me how your friends make you feel because you are repeating a grade? (Probe further)
3. Choose a blob to show me how your family feels about you repeating a grade? (Probe further).
4. Choose a blob to show me how your teacher treats you in class. (Probe further, is it the same teacher from last year or not if not choose a blob to show me your previous teacher).
5. Choose a blob to show me how you feel about coming to this class every day? (Probe further). If happy, what exactly makes you happy? If sad what exactly makes you sad?
6. Choose a blob to show me how your classmates treat you. (probe further)

7. Are you happy about the seating arrangement in classroom? (Choose and blob to show me how you feel about the classroom arrangement) (probe further)
8. Is doing the same grade helpful or unhelpful to you? Choose a blob that shows if doing the same grade again is helping you or not helping you.
9. Choose a blob to show if repeating the grade has changed the way you see yourself or not? (Probe further).

Yours faithfully

Maureen Hadebe

APPENDIX I: BLOB TREE



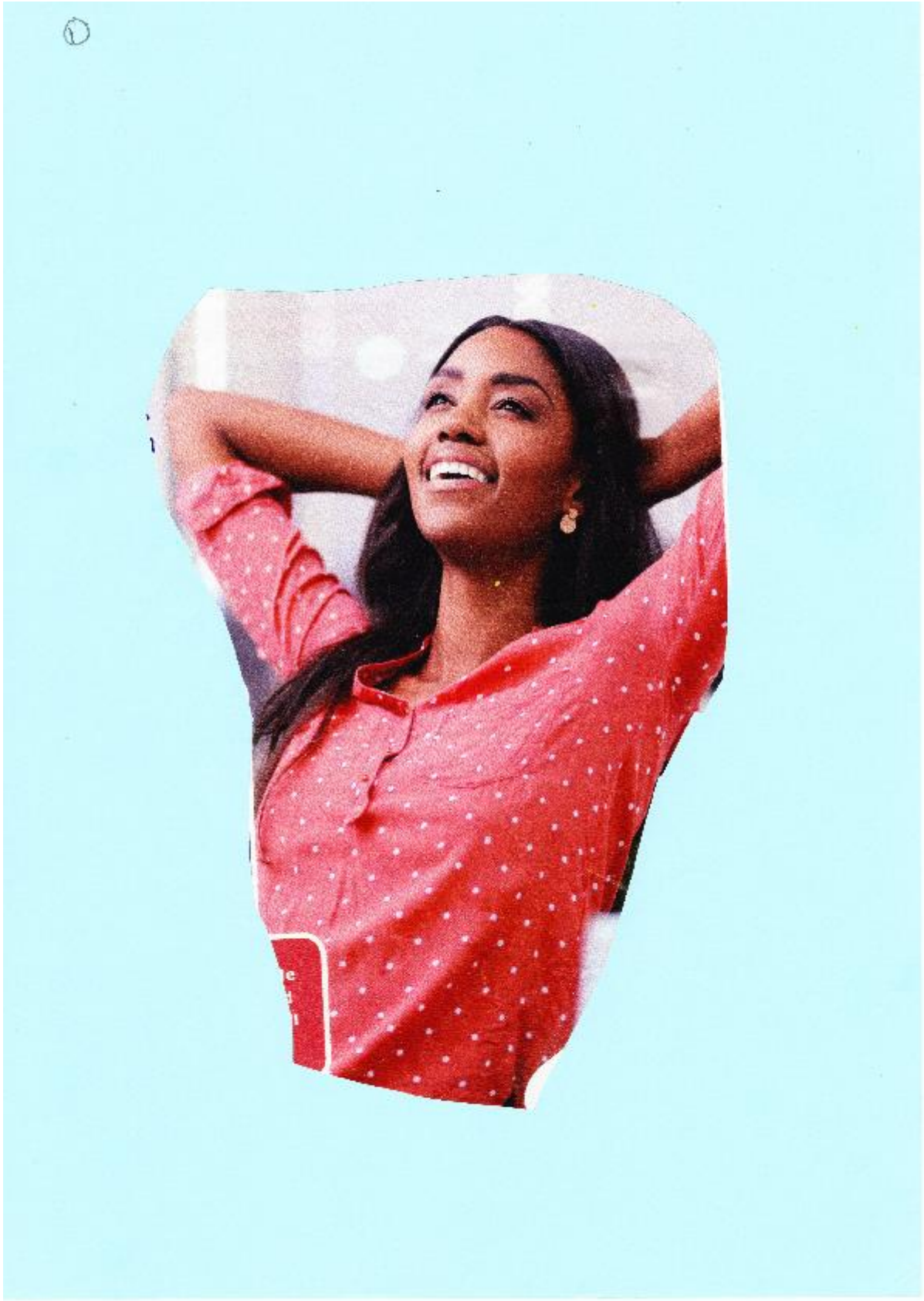
APPENDIX J: PARTICIPANTS' DRAWINGS AND PICTURES FROM MAGAZINES DESCRIBING THEMSELVES

KEY:

Pseudonym	Drawing number	Picture number
Barbie Girl	1	1
Jerry	2	2
Bontle	3	3
Cinderella	4	4
Emmanuel	5	5
Max	6	6
Ronaldo	7	7
Nicky Bella	8	8
Zorro	9	9
Philani	10	10
Sophia	11	11
Sandie	12	12

Myself ①



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②


3



(4)




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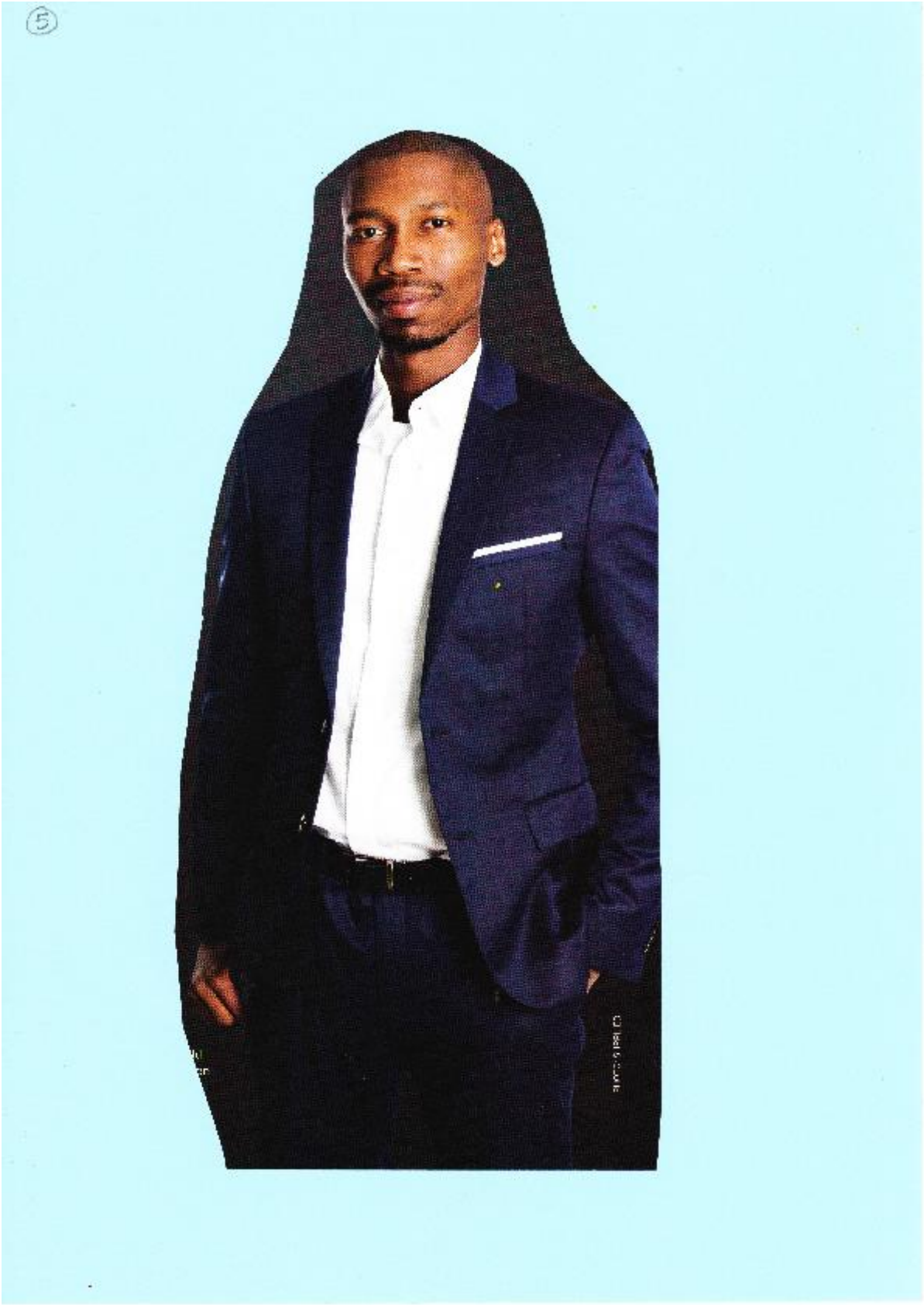
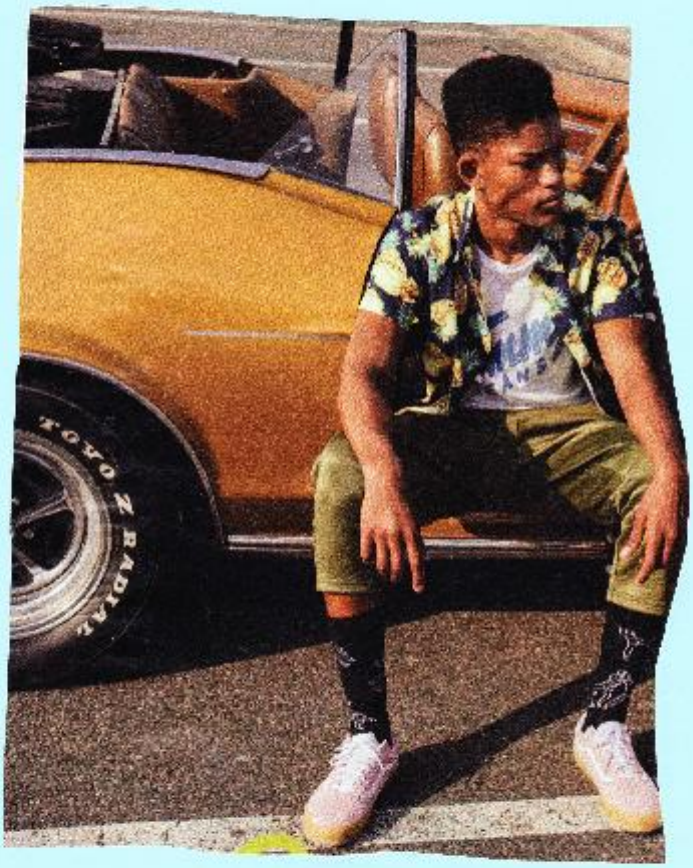

5

(b)







Guy Little has created an exceptionally tasteful space in his Morningside apartment.

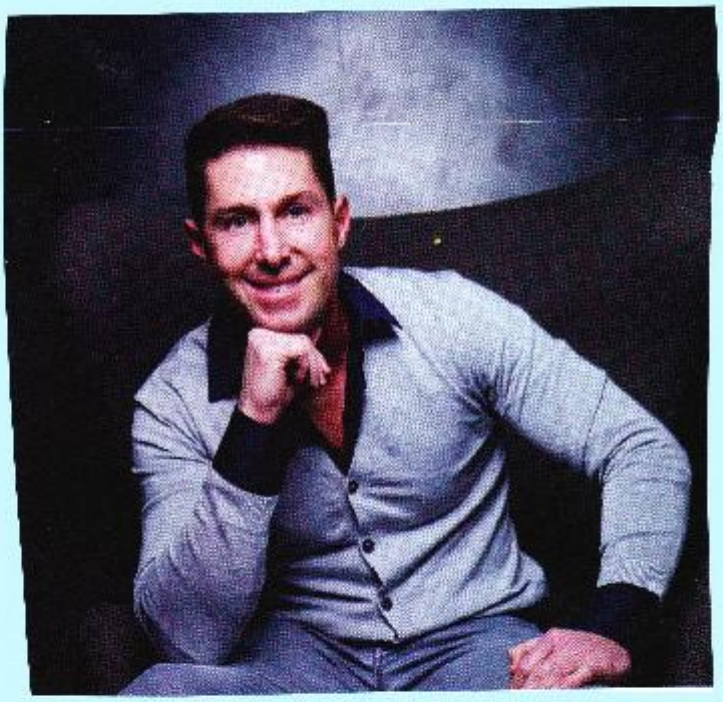

Help me Please!
God


F(
W


Zoro


MTN


10
I
love
School

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11


12


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