2030 READING PANEL

Advisory Note 2 • 24 February 2026

The impact of early grade repetition on learner marks in South Africa

2

Ros Clayton (RESEP)[1]

1 Ros Clayton is a researcher and PhD candidate at Research on Socio-economic Policy, Stellenbosch University.

1. Introduction

Grade repetition in South Africa is commonly used as a remedial policy, aimed at helping learners mature and reinforce their academic foundations. Repetition rates are high compared to neighbouring countries, with repetition accounting for between 8 and 12% of the education budget annually (van der Berg et al., 2019). However, international evidence on whether grade repetition improves academic outcomes is mixed and remains the subject of ongoing debate (Valbuena et al., 2021). In South Africa, officials within the Department of Basic Education have in recent years explored the possibility of removing repetition in the Foundation Phase (grades 1-3) to ease class size pressures (Department of Basic Education, 2024; Department of Basic Education, 2025). Understanding the impact of repetition in South Africa is key to informing this debate and, in the case that repetition is beneficial, to evaluating its cost-effectiveness.

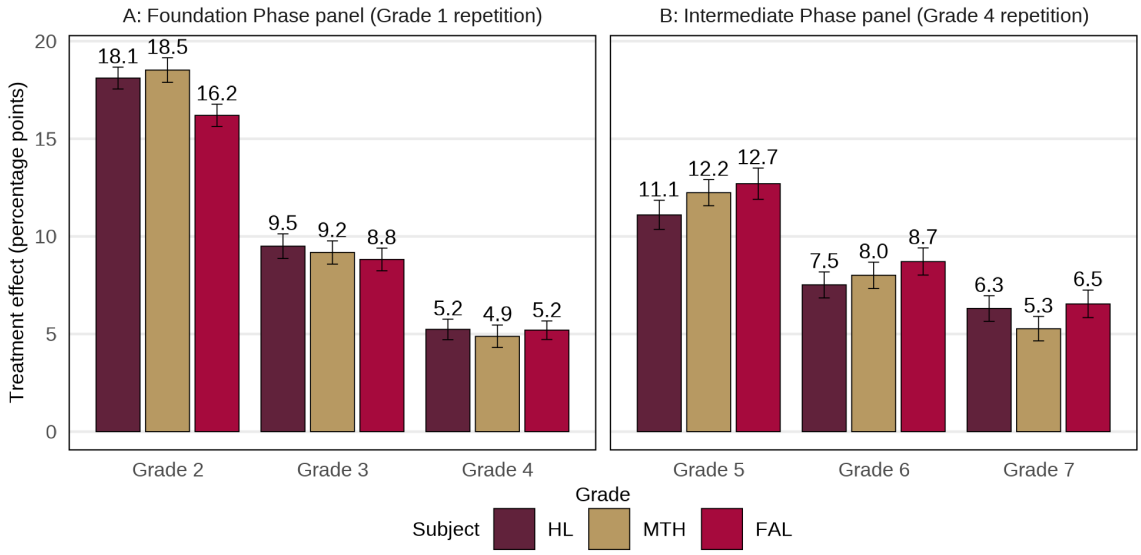
Identifying the causal effect of grade repetition is challenging because repetition is not random. Learners who repeat often differ in unobserved ways – such as ability, motivation, or home environment – that also influence later achievement. The analysis underlying this advisory note overcomes this challenge by using a regression discontinuity design (Thistlethwaite & Campbell, 1960). This method uses published grade promotion thresholds (Department of Basic Education, 2011) (such as the requirement that learners must achieve at least 50% in their Home Language subject) to compare outcomes for repeaters who scored just below the threshold with promoted learners who just passed. Because these learners are expected to be alike in all respects other than their repetition status, subsequent differences in outcomes can be attributed to the experience of repetition rather than to pre-existing differences between learners. Outcomes are measured when repeaters and promoted learners are in the same grade; as a result, repeaters are typically one year older and have had an additional year to mature. This age and maturation difference is therefore embedded in the estimated effect of repetition when impacts are defined in this way.

2. Key findings

1. Grade 1 and Grade 4 repetition cause higher marks after four years

Figure 1 shows the effects of repeating Grade 1 and Grade 4 on end-of-year performance in subsequent grades, for those learners whose marks are just below the promotion thresholds. Learners who repeat Grade 1 see their Home Language (HL) scores increase by 18.3 percentage points in Grade 2, 9.5 points in Grade 3, and 5.2 points in Grade 4. Although the effect of repetition declines over time, it remains substantial and statistically significant through Grade 4. Mathematics and First Additional Language outcomes follow similar patterns and magnitudes. When standardised for improved comparability, the Grade 2 effect size is two to four times larger than that of the most effective literacy remediation interventions (Wills, 2025). While not directly comparable, these interventions – which do not involve repetition – provide a useful benchmark for interpreting the size of the effect.

Figure 1. Estimated effect of repetition on learner marks, by subject



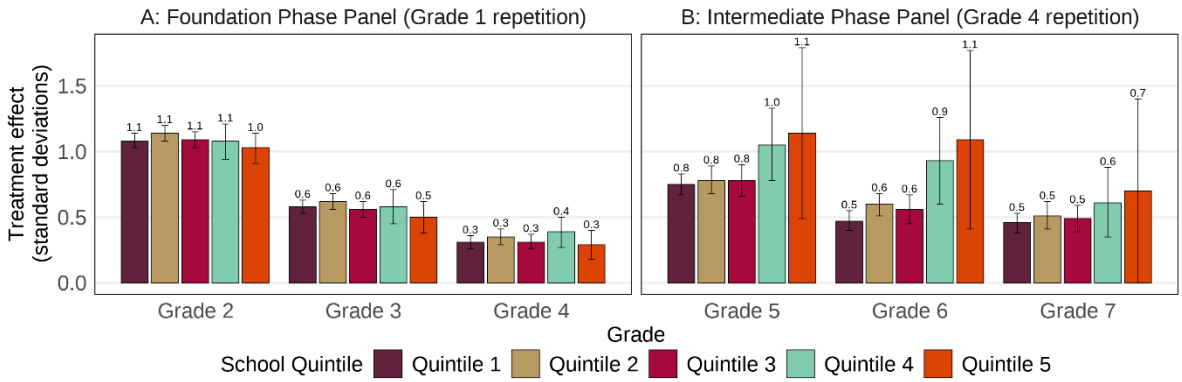
Source: Own calculations from a longitudinal sample of DDD data from 2017 to 2023. Notes: Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. HL = Home Language, MTH = Mathematics, FAL = First Additional Language.

Repeating Grade 4 also produces significant gains across all three subjects. Home Language scores for repeaters just below the cutoff are expected to be 11.1 percentage points higher in Grade 5, 7.5 points higher in Grade 6, and 6.3 points higher in Grade 7. Although the immediate effect of Grade 4 repetition is smaller than that of Grade 1 repetition, its benefits are more sustained over time, resulting in a comparable overall impact three years later.

2. The effect of repetition is similar across quintiles and provinces

To compare the impact of repetition across quintiles, it is necessary to use an outcome measure that is standardised across quintiles (since raw learner marks are not). I therefore standardise the results within each quintile such that the mean within each quintile is zero and the standard deviation is 1. Figure 2 presents the results using this standardised outcome, for Home Language (HL) only, since results are similar across subjects. The impact of Grade 1 repetition (Panel A) is consistent across quintiles: it increases Grade 2 HL marks by about 1 standard deviation, Grade 3 by 0.6 standard deviations, and Grade 4 by 0.3 standard deviations, irrespective of school quintile. Grade 4 repetition (Panel B) perhaps has a slightly larger impact in Quintiles 4 and 5 compared to Quintiles 1 to 3, but the former are very imprecisely estimated.

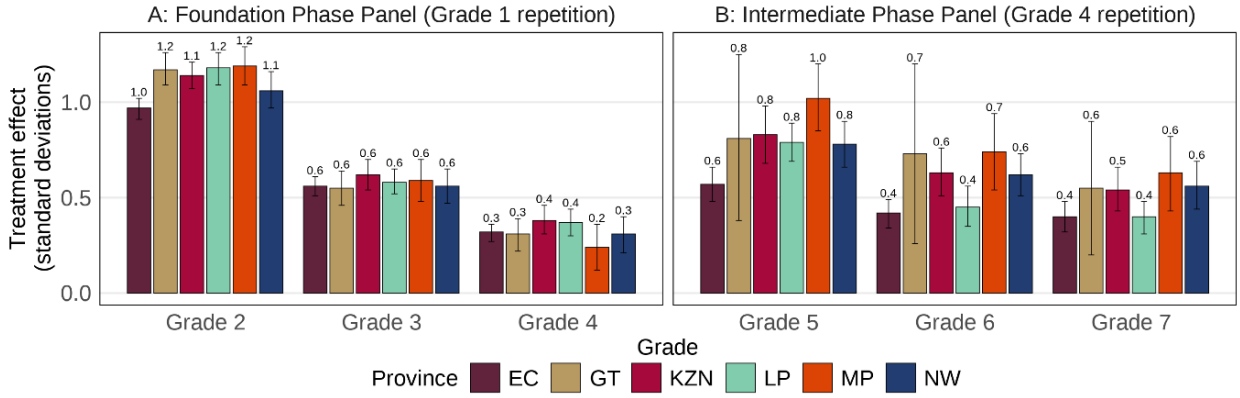
Figure 2. Estimated effect of repetition on learner Home Language marks, by school quintile



Source: Own calculations from a longitudinal sample of DDD data from 2017 to 2023. Notes: Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. HL = Home Language, MTH = Mathematics, FAL = First Additional Language.

The impact of repetition was also estimated separately for each of the six provinces included in the study. Results show a highly consistent positive effect of Grade 1 repetition across provinces. In contrast, the effects of Grade 4 repetition are less precisely estimated and appear to be slightly weaker in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo than in the other four provinces.

Figure 3. Estimated effect of repetition on learner Home Language marks, by province



Source: Own calculations from a longitudinal sample of DDD data from 2017 to 2023. Notes: Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. HL = Home Language, MTH = Mathematics, FAL = First Additional Language.

3. Concluding remarks and recommendations

1. Grade 1 and Grade 4 repetition cause large improvements in marks for learners who just repeat, compared to those who just scrape through

The sizes of the impacts – 1 standard deviation in Grade 2 (Grade 1 repetition), and 0.8 standard deviations in Grade 5 (Grade 4 repetition) – are large in relation to local interventions (Besharati et al., 2021) and international repetition effects (Valbuena et al., 2021). These findings lend support to existing repetition guidelines and to the practice of allowing repetition in the early grades.

2. Repetition rates should not be allowed to increase further

However, this is not a call to increase repetition rates (by, for instance, ending the practice of progressing some learners whose results do not meet promotion thresholds). Grade repetition

increases class sizes, which are already very large in Grade 1 (Gustafsson & Mabogoane, 2012). Without additional teachers to maintain class sizes, further increasing repetition rates in the early grades could be harmful. Furthermore, the results of this study apply only to learners around the repetition threshold, and do not apply to the very weakest learners. Additionally, repetition carries risks (such as potentially increasing dropout in later grades) which could not be evaluated in this study due to limited years of data.

3. Alternative remedial strategies should still be considered

Most learners who repeat Grade 1 do so because they fail their Home Language subject, indicating that repetition is often used to remediate early language weaknesses. Policymakers should therefore consider the costs and benefits of repetition as a remediation strategy relative to alternative language support interventions, such as structured pedagogy (Stern et al., 2024). These interventions may have smaller positive impacts compared to repetition, but they can typically be implemented at a fraction of the cost and are not associated with the high individual costs that come with repeating a grade.

4. References

Besharati, N. A., Fleisch, B. & Tsotsotso, K. 2021. Interventions to improve learner achievement in South Africa: A systematic meta-analysis. Systematic Reviews of Research in Basic Education in South Africa. African Sun Media:27–67.

Department of Basic Education. 2011. National policy pertaining to the programme and promotion requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R - 12. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.

Department of Basic Education. 2024. Department of basic education: Annual report 2023-2024. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.

Department of Basic Education. 2025. Strategic plan 2025–2030. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education. https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2025/2025-2030%20DBE%20Strategic%20Plan_Compress.pdf

Gustafsson, M. & Mabogoane, T. 2012. South Africa's economics of education: A stocktaking and an agenda for the way forward. Development Southern Africa, 29(3):351–364. https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2012.706033

Stern, J. M. B., Jukes, M. C. H., Cilliers, J., Fleisch, B., Taylor, S. & Mohohlwane, N. 2024. Persistence and emergence of literacy skills: Long-term impacts of an effective early grade reading intervention in South Africa. Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness:1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2024.2417288

Thistlethwaite, D. L. & Campbell, D. T. 1960. Regression-discontinuity analysis: An alternative to the ex post facto experiment. Journal of Educational psychology, 51(6):309.

Valbuena, J., Mediavilla, M., Choi, Á. & Gil, M. 2021. Effects of grade retention policies: A literature review of empirical studies applying causal inference. Journal of Economic Surveys, 35(2):408–451.

van der Berg, S., Wills, G., Selkirk, R., Adams, C. & van Wyk, C. 2019. The cost of repetition in South Africa. WP13/2019. Stellenbosch: Research on Socio-Economic Policy, Stellenbosch University. www.ekon.sun.ac.za/wpapers/2019/wp132019

Wills, G. 2025. Gender and equity in South African education. Stellenbosch: Research on Socio-Economic Policy.