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Advisory Note

08

2030 READING PANEL

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Reflections on early grade repetition in South Africa

Introduction

In post-apartheid South Africa, there has been a growing impetus to reduce grade repetition rates, including in the Foundation Phase (grades 1-3), for example through the implementation of repetition policy[2]. This is a response to the substantial costs of repetition including the high unit costs of retaining students and the strain it places on class sizes in early grades (Van der Berg et al. 2019).

Pre-pandemic data points to significant reductions in early grade repetition rates from around the year 2000 (Van der Berg et al., 2019). Declining repetition trends continued into the COVID years but for different reasons; namely more lenient progression in a context of cancelled examinations and limited and more lenient assessment informing progression decisions (Hoadley, 2023). In the Foundation Phase, which saw notable COVID-19 learning losses (Ardington et. al. 2021; Böhmer & Wills, 2023; Van der Berg et al. 2022), small reductions in repetition rates were observed during the pandemic despite minimal changes to progression policy. For example, between 2019 and 2020, the national repetition rate for Grade 1 decreased from 12% to 11%, the Grade 2 repetition rate decreased from 9% to 7%, and the Grade 3 repetition rate decreased from 7% to 6% (Department of Basic Education, 2023). In six of nine South African provinces, Grade 1 repetition rates in public schools declined from 2018 to 2020. Repetition rates have risen slightly in 2022 relative to a pandemic period, but they have settled at lower levels than a pre-pandemic period as seen in the General Household Survey (Wills & Qvist, 2023), and in administrative data (Van der Berg et al. 2023).

If early grade repetition is viewed as a substitute for a programme of systematic remediation – which does not exist across most South African schools – should we be concerned about declining repetition rates in the early grades? This depends on whether there are any benefits of early grade repetition relative to the high costs of repetition policy. To explore this, I examined repetition patterns and how this is linked to reading

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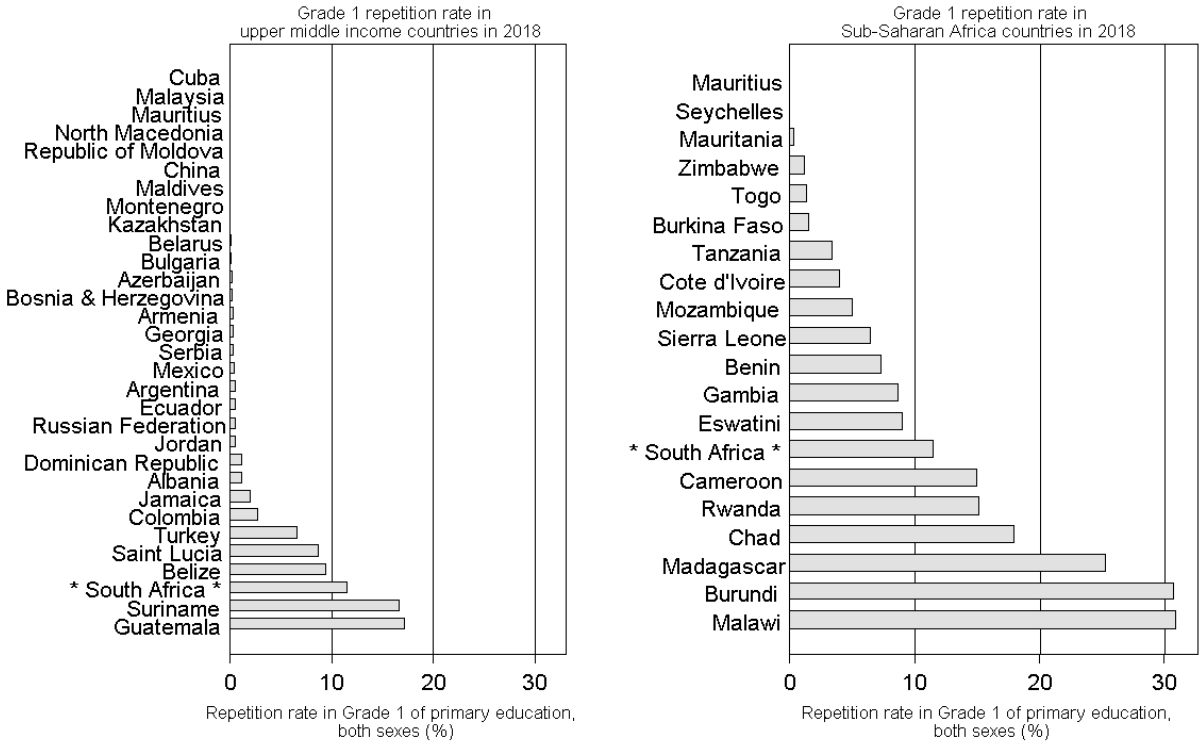
2 This limits the number of times a child can repeat to once in a school phase (Department of Education (DoE), 1998; Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2012). A 1998 guideline for repetition from Grade R-9 was "one year (of repetition) per school phase where necessary" (DoE 1998) and this was then extended to the FET phase in 2013 (DBE 2012).

improvements in a recent paper (see Wills 2023a). The analysis is based on data from the Early Grade Reading Studies (EGRS) in no-fee paying schools in two provinces (North West and Mpumalanga) (Kotze et al. 2018; Taylor et al. 2017). The key findings from this study are discussed in this advisory note.

Key findings

1. **Early grade repetition rates, particularly in Grade 1, have been too high** by middle-income country standards and relative to some other Sub-Saharan African countries as seen in Figure 1. Nationally, trends point to a reduction in Grade 1 and 2 repetition rates (see Figure 2) during the COVID-19 pandemic but even these lower pandemic era rates remain comparatively high.

Figure 1: Grade 1 repetition rates in upper middle income and Sub-Saharan African countries, UIS Statistics 2018

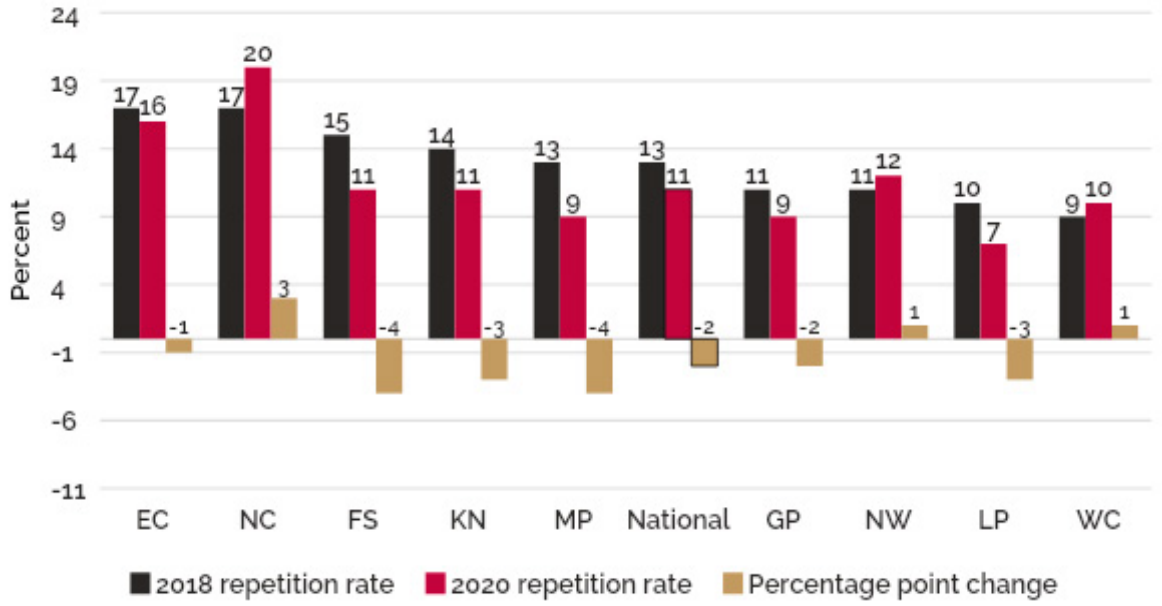


Source: Repetition rates from UIS Statistics, income and region classifications from World Bank (2023), own graph

2. **Early grade repetition decisions overall are not random or ill-informed as some might believe but are a response to a lack of school readiness**. On average, students who will repeat in grades 1-3 commence their schooling with comparatively lower levels of language and literacy skills. In the EGRS I sample, 38% of Grade 1s promoted at the end of year can't sound any letter correctly compared to 59% of Grade 1s that will be held back at the end of the year (see Figure 3). Students meeting minimum grade-specific reading benchmarks at the end of a grade are far less likely to repeat.

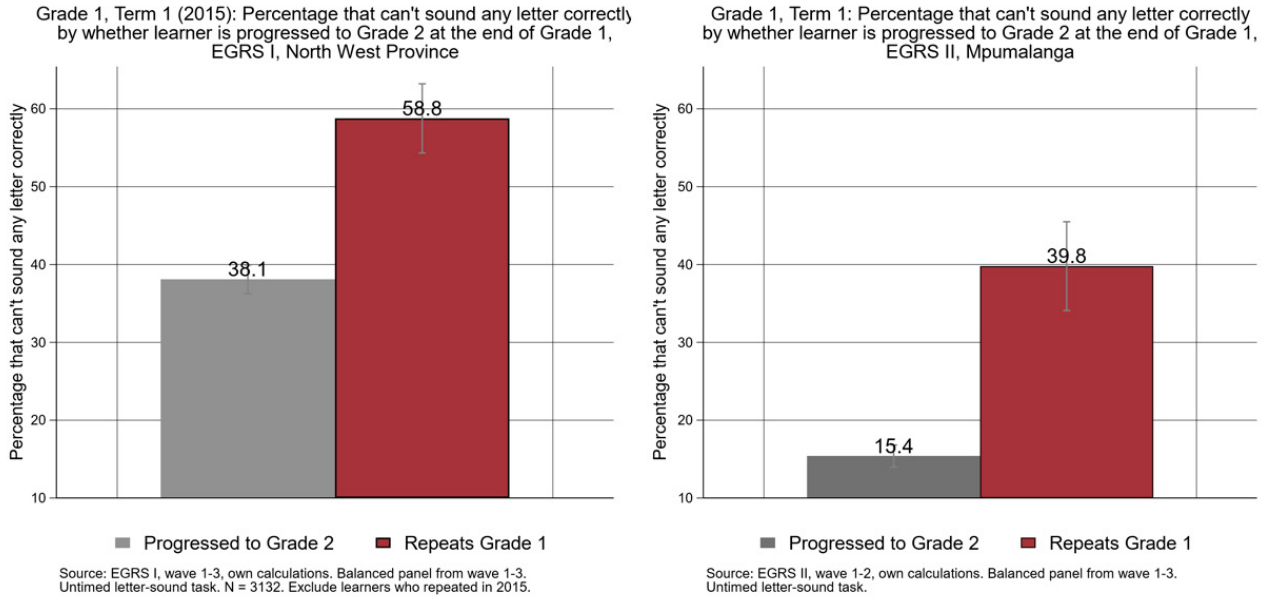
3. **However, instances of misplaced repetition do occur**. Between 2-7% of repeated students in the Foundation Phase in EGRS I and II samples should have been promoted to the next grade based on their attainment of minimum grade-specific literacy standards in grades 1-3. Conversely, a substantial percentage – ranging from a half to majority - of promoted students were not meeting these standards.

Figure 2: Grade 1 repetition rates at the end of 2018 and 2020 in nine South African provinces and nationally



Source data: DBE 2023, estimates from LURITS 2018-2019, 2020-2021.. Percentage point change between 2018 and 2020 shown.

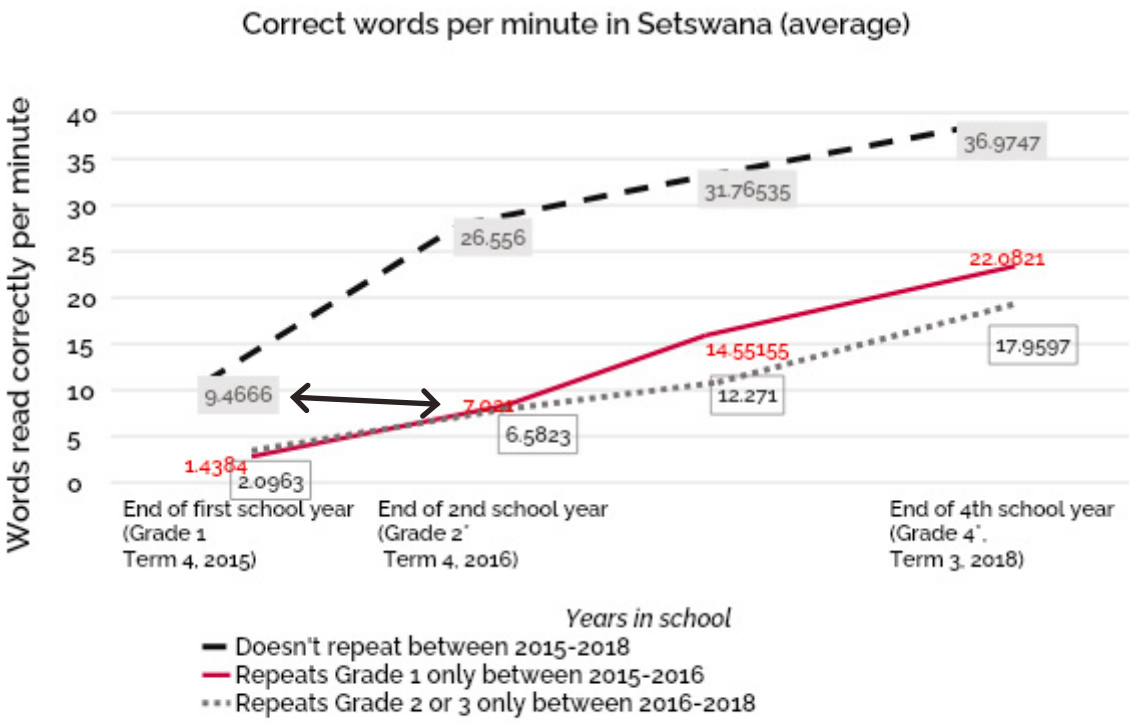
Figure 3: Alphabetic illiteracy (can't sound any letter correctly) at the start of school by students' progression status at the end of Grade 1



4. **Repetition beyond Grade 1 yields diminishing effectiveness for reading improvements**. Repeating Grade 2 or 3 appears to be less efficacious (and potentially more harmful) for reading improvements than repeating Grade 1.

5. **One should be very cautious in drawing hard and fast conclusions about whether Grade 1 repetition is harmful or beneficial for learning**. The conclusions drawn depend on the approach taken to estimate the relationship between repetition and learning outcomes. This issue is illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Foundation Phase repetition and reading trajectories in Setswana, EGRS I



*Source: Wills (2023) using EGRS I wave 2-4. Notes: Balanced panel. There are 333 repeaters at the end of 2015, 395 repeaters between 2016 and 2018, and a total of 1856 non-repeaters between 2015 and 2018. Any repeaters in 2015 are excluded. *Reflects highest grade possible if no repetition in any Foundation Phase grade. Trajectories for learners repeating more than once between 2015 and 2018 are not shown as this is a small sample (n = 43). There is no assessment point available at the end of the 3rd year of school. A linear trend is assumed between the end of 2nd year and end of 4th year assessment.*

When comparing fluency levels across a 2015 first-time Grade 1 cohort at the same point in time, promoted learners always have higher fluency levels than repeaters. Even after four years of schooling, Grade 1 repeaters lag far behind their promoted peers. In a regression model, when comparing a Grade 1 cohort of peers at the same point in time (referred to as a same-age comparison), Grade 1 repetition appears to have a negative short-run effect on decoding skills: repeating learners sound 10-13 fewer correct letters per minute and read almost 7 fewer additional words during their 2nd year of school relative to promoted peers. However, when assessing Grade 1s after they repeat Grade 1 (i.e. at the end of 2016), their fluency levels are roughly in line with the fluency levels at the end of 2015 of promoted Grade 1s as seen by the blue arrow comparison in Figure 4. This is an example of a 'same-grade' comparison which evaluates the achievement of repeated learners against promoted learners at the same grade level. A 'same-grade' regression model yields more positive results. The home language reading levels of Grade 1 repeaters surpass the reading levels of those (assessed a year earlier) who advanced to Grade 2 (without repeating) by as much as 11 correct letters sounded per minute or 4 correct words per minute. **Therefore, one cannot rule out that Grade 1 repetition could facilitate a recovery in foundational decoding skills, contributing to overall reading development.**

Concluding remarks and recommendations

Repetition is argued to be one of the most expensive educational policies that exist. As Valbuena (2021: 409) reflect in their review, "grade retention is unlikely to be an efficient policy as the costs associated to the policy can easily outweigh the potential (weak) benefits of retention". Despite this general finding, repetition has been highly prevalent in South Africa. In the early grades, repetition is a complex issue as it has been used as a response to a lack of school readiness, especially in the absence of alternate remedial options. Any potential benefits of early grade repetition should also be weighed against the costs of larger class sizes in the Foundation Phase which are too high (Wills, 2023b). Against this backdrop, four recommendations are presented.

1. **Introduce early grade remediation programmes in low-literacy contexts**. In the absence of alternative remediation methods, severely containing Grade 1 repetition could constrain available opportunities for students to catch-up in foundational reading skills. The savings resulting from reduced repetition could be reallocated to facilitate the development and implementation of early grade remediation programmes (Van der Berg et al. 2019).
2. **Enhancing the quality of Grade R and early learning programmes (ELPs)**. The quality of instruction in Grade R classes and ELPs must be enhanced to ensure students enter Grade 1 equipped with better oral language skills and improved alphabetic awareness. Large-scale research has raised concerns about the quality of grade R and early learning programmes in South Africa (Van der Berg et al. 2015).
3. **Uniform and improved assessment standards in the early grades**. Although repetition decisions on average are linked to issues of school readiness, instances of misplaced repetition that do occur highlight the need for uniform assessment standards and improved formative and summative assessment to guide repetition decisions at the school level. This includes improved assessment of early grade reading skills.
4. **Longitudinal data on reading and numeracy skills in the early grades to support further research on repetition impacts**. Given the prevalence of repetition and its costs for the South African education system, further research is needed on this topic using longitudinal data. Specifically, further clarity is needed on the short- and longer-term effects of being held back in Grade 1.

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