

## TEACHERS PERCEPTION AND PRACTICE OF AUTOMATIC PROMOTION IN ENGLISH SPEAKING PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN CAMEROON

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**ABSTRACT:** *Differences in the perception and outcomes of automatic promotion may be due to discrepancies in its implementation. Automatic promotion was conceived in Cameroon to be accompanied by support mechanisms and it is necessary to find out teachers' perceptions and practice of automatic promotion especially against a backdrop of the inability of many primary school pupils to read and write. Teachers have a firsthand experience about the outcomes of automatic promotion. Their perception and practice may provide a basis for improving quality. Thus the study was a survey that incorporated a 15-item closed ended questionnaire and an interview. 275 primary school teachers and examiners of the First School Leaving Certificate Examination took part. Data were analyzed descriptively using frequencies and means. Findings revealed a negative perception of automatic promotion and discrepancies between the conception and implementation of automatic promotion which may explain the drop in quality. Implications and recommendations are discussed.*

**KEYWORDS:** Teacher perception<sup>1</sup>, Automatic promotion<sup>2</sup>, Implementation<sup>3</sup>, Practice<sup>4</sup>  
Primary schools<sup>5</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

Automatic promotion is the practice in primary and secondary schooling of advancing pupils from one grade to the next higher grade at the end of the school year regardless of the educational attainment of the pupils (Dictionary of Education as cited in Mehndiratta, 2000). Automatic promotion has polarized education development stakeholders along the lines of those in support and those against (Okurut, 2015). Opponents of automatic promotion state that it negatively affects the overall quality of education since it eliminates competition, de-motivates students and teachers alike hence lowering teaching and learning outcomes (Koppensteiner, 2014; Taye, 2003; and Chohan & Qadir, 2011). By contrast, grade retention is viewed as leading to an improvement in cognitive learning outcomes (Brophy, 2006; Roderick et al., 2002; and King et al., 1999). These arguments only reveal the fact that the implementation and outcomes of the automatic promotion policy may be different in various contexts. There are many instances where the scheme of automatic promotion is uniformly practiced but evaluation aimed at constant improvement of learning is either totally neglected or paid inadequate attention. As a result, children often remain weak in the basic skills of reading, writing and computation

besides other aspects of achievement improvement of learning is either totally neglected or paid inadequate attention.

### **Contextual Background**

Fonkeng, (2006) reports that in Cameroon the school system continues to suffer from inefficiency witnessed in the repetition of classes, poor pass rates in official examinations with large differences in performance between urban and rural schools. Indeed, many studies (UNICEF, 2001; Amin M.E. 1999) reveal high repeating rates (more than 40%) at the level of primary schools in Cameroon. To confront this problem, the government of Cameroon through the former Ministry of National Education initiated with the assistance of the African Development Bank, the Education project II. This project had as a main objective, to experiment on the reduction of repetition to about 10% through the introduction of compensatory or remedial education, competency-based teaching and automatic promotion in some selected primary schools in the country. Compensatory teaching within the context of Education Project II refers to any supplementary teaching outside the official school time (MINEDUC, Education Project II, 2011). The strategies in compensatory/remedial education proposed by Biehler and Snowman in Fonkeng, (2006) are as follows: Group work, individual teaching, material for extra and further teaching, provision for alternative material, re-teaching and re-education

Promotion is based on a policy upon which children change from an inferior class to a superior class irrespective of the child's average score. In Cameroon, the primary school system is divided into three cycles: Class I and II form cycle I; Class III and IV form cycle II; Class V and VI (VII for Anglophone system) form cycle III. This division into cycles is based on the fact that the curriculum of each cycle is similar and connected. Automatic promotion is conceived to be within a cycle. That is, from class I to II, class III to IV, or class V to VI or VII and not class II to III or IV to V since later promotion require changing the cycle. Weak pupils who are automatically promoted are given remedial/compensatory education to reduce deficiencies in preparation for promotion (through normal examinations) to next cycle. Repeating is thus significantly reduced because the number of promotion examinations is reduced to three

Generally, in this approach there is adjustment of learning time to the capacity of the learner. This strategy was experimented in some pilot schools and the outcome was positive. It was envisaged that should the experiment attain its objective, compensatory education, competency-based teaching and automatic promotion will be generalized to all primary schools in the country as a measure to reduce repetition. Currently, collective promotion is practiced in primary schools in Cameroon but remains a source of debate especially against a backdrop of the falling standards of basic education.

Teachers are the key players in the implementation process and their beliefs, practices and attitudes are closely linked to teachers' strategies for coping with challenges in their

daily professional life and so are important for understanding and improving educational processes. Thus the study aims at investigating teacher attitudes and practice of the automatic promotion strategy in Cameroon.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Repetition and wastage could be curbed and automatic promotion practiced while ensuring that learning is taking place. Mastery learning uses differentiated and individualized instruction, progress monitoring, formative assessment, feedback, corrective procedures, and instructional alignment to minimize achievement gaps (Zimmerman & Dibeneditto, 2008). The strategy is based on Benjamin Bloom's Mastery model, in which following initial instruction, teachers administer a brief formative assessment based on the unit's learning goals. The assessment gives students information, or feedback, which helps identify what they have learned well to that point (diagnostic) and what they need to learn better (prescriptive). Students who have learned the concepts continue their learning experience with enrichment activities. Students who need more experience with the concept receive feedback paired with corrective activities, which offer guidance and direction on how to remedy their learning challenge. To be effective, these corrective activities must be qualitatively different from the initial instruction by offering effective instructional approaches and additional time to learn (Centre on Instruction).

In order to curb repetition and practice automatic promotion while ensuring learning, mastery learning is essential because automatic promotion effected in isolation and in the absence of complementary and more systematic changes may diminish repetition and drop out but may not necessarily ensure learning (Torres in Taye, 2003).

Findings from a study carried out in Afghanistan by Mansory (2007a) reveal that teachers are concerned about the low level of achievement in lower primary grades due to automatic promotion which according to them is due to the high prevalence of repetition in grade 4. Bonvin et al, 2008, Witmer, Hoffman and Nottis, (2004) found out that teachers believe in retention but the authors argue that past inquires have found that teachers' beliefs about retention are influenced by peers rather than by research. Burkam et al, 2007, Cannon and Lipscomp, 2011 and Range et al., believe that this has caused teachers to recommend retention for students who have similar characteristics such as being male, minority and from low socioeconomic backgrounds. According to a study by Witmer et al. (2004) 77% of respondents who were teachers believed that grade repetition is an effective way of preventing students' future academic failure and 94% of the respondents disagree with the statement that students should never repeat.

Wynn (2010) presented findings from a study conducted among Middle School teachers in a Florida school district and tried to glean their perceptions about the practice. Survey responses of 326 teachers in five selected middle schools in Florida and ten interviews clearly indicated that teachers believe children should be retained. A majority, nearly

83% disagreed that students should not be retained. Over 65% of teachers indicated that grade retention allows students who are behind academically to catch up with peers. In addition, nearly 39% disagreed that retention is harmful to a child's self-concept / self-image. However, nearly 80% of teachers agreed grade retention affects a child's self-esteem.

Jimerson (2002) found that teachers perceived repetition as a successful educational policy for learning improvement. However, some teachers were not supporting the former view point of repetition as motivating incentive but think by repeating, children lose self-esteem and that repetition hinders students' development. However, the authors argue that most of the teachers were unaware of the research results on grade repetition. They had limited knowledge on the long term effects and based their arguments on the immediate outcomes generated from repetition. In line with this argument Pettay (2010) gathered evidence which presented a conflict of sorts. Firstly, she stated that her results revealed that the teachers' attitudes about grade retention were significantly changed when they were presented with a research-based article entitled 'Grade Retention and Promotion'

Halverstadt (2009) in her research found that teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that a student's maturity level, academic performance and date of birth are factors they used to determine whether a student should be retained. They also strongly agreed that a student's maturity level and academic performance are outcomes associated with grade retention.

Another study undertaken by Range (2009) revealed female teachers and principals agreed more strongly than males that 'Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in the next grade level. Furthermore; 58.2% primary grade teachers reported that the most important factor when considering a student for retention was, School Academic Performance. 20.4% rated 'Ability' second and 16.3% gave 'Emotional maturity' as a third reason.

Bowin as cited in Ede (2004) stated that even second grade teachers in Fribourg, Switzerland who valued achievement as a decisive criterion were also found to utilize retention if academic objectives were not met. Further to this Troncin (cited in Ndaruhutse, 2008) reported that there was a generally positive attitude to repetition among French teachers, with the view that it is a preventative measure helping children to succeed later on. This research found that teachers believe repetition has a positive impact on learning outcomes, that the negative psychological impacts on children are limited and that there are not really any alternatives.

Another study carried out by Crahay (2003) on the views of Belgian and Genevan teachers found that they had divided views on the entire phenomenon. Some teachers felt that repetition gives some children the chance to mature and be better prepared for their future schooling; others felt that making weak children repeat exactly the same

curriculum seems wasteful. The teachers didn't generally believe that repetition reflected a failure in their teaching or was an unjust practice. Additionally, the majority of primary teachers didn't think that repetition has a negative impact on children or on their confidence but rather they saw it as a way of providing remedial support to weaker students.

African teachers who were spoken to regarding retention had favourable views and saw it as an essential tool to assist weaker children by giving them a chance to improve their knowledge and be more prepared for the higher levels of schooling. (Ndaruhutse, 2008). CONFEMEN, (2003) reports that nearly 80% of Senegalese teacher thought repetition was an 'efficient' measure and 18% thought it was 'extremely efficient'. Only 2% believed that repetition was 'totally inefficient alternative to automatic promotion. It would seem that most research findings on teachers' perception on automatic promotion reveal negative perceptions.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In Cameroon like in many other countries, there is a debate on the effects of automatic promotion on the quality of basic education where many primary school leavers can neither read nor write. Even though there are many factors that may account for this, there seems to be lapses in the implementation of automatic promotion which may be affecting quality. Automatic promotion was well conceived yet changes in the school environment have not taken place to support its implementation. Teachers are key actors in the implementation process. As such they constitute a primary source of data. Research has revealed that teachers who are positive about retention are unaware of research results on grade repetition (Jimerson, 2002; Pettay, 2010). However, they have a first-hand experience. They have observed children go through automatic promotion throughout primary school and from what they practice and have observed over the years, they are in a better position to make an assessment of the outcomes of this policy. Their perception is important for policy makers as a basis to monitor, modify or change the implementation of the policy to ensure quality.

### **Purpose of the study**

The study aimed at finding out primary school teachers' perception and practice of automatic promotion in English-speaking schools in Cameroon.

### **Research Questions**

- What are the perceptions of English-speaking primary school teachers about automatic promotion?
- Does supplementary teaching accompany automatic promotion in English-speaking primary schools in Cameroon?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research incorporated a mixed method research approach which applied both the qualitative and quantitative approaches. A total of 275 primary school teachers from the

two English-speaking regions of Cameroon participated. They were selected using the purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Experienced teachers who had been selected as examiners of the First School Leaving Certificate Examination were targeted and their participation was voluntary. The study made use of a questionnaire which was administered to 260 participants and an interview involving 15 teachers. The questionnaire was a 15-item closed ended instrument where participants had to rate items on the effect of automatic promotion on a four-point scale which required them to strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree to items most of which were stated in the negative form. The interview was aimed at complementing data from the questionnaire as well as finding out from teachers about the practice of automatic promotion as well as proposals to hierarchy. Data were analyzed descriptively using frequencies and means. The cutoff point was 2.5. The higher the mean for negatively stated items, the more negative the perception of the teacher and vice versa.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

PERCEPTION	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Deviation
Collective promotion creates problems for the next class because pupils do not fulfill the basic requirements of the current class.	207	43	10	4	3.7159	.60947
Collective promotion improves students' achievement in the next class.	12	13	144	96	1.7774	.73820
Pupils who were automatically promoted catch up with their peers in the next level.	9	57	124	69	2.0232	.79207
Collective promotion enhances failure rate in the certificate examination (e.g FSCL).	121	80	41	21	3.1445	.95811
Collective promotion does not	83	123	32	19	3.0506	.86228

actually reduce repetition because pupils end up getting stuck at the end of a level.						
Collective promotion does not help the teacher in easily identifying pupils' problem areas.	97	90	47	26	2.9923	.97850
Collective promotion results to a drop in standard of education.	152	81	13	15	3.4176	.83085
Collective promotion still leads to wastage of resources because the end of levels is always crowded.	90	105	47	16	3.0426	.88333
Collective promotion encourages students to work harder.	29	38	108	84	2.0463	.95934
Collective promotion does not help students to struggle to catch up in areas where they are weak.	115	101	31	13	3.2231	.84529
Collective promotion reduces the probability of dropping out.	69	126	47	21	2.9240	.87038
Collective promotion is not the best way of improving students' achievement.	118	112	17	18	3.2453	.85071
Collective promotion does not provide enough time	143	95	20	7	3.4113	.74408



for pupils to catch up with what they have not grasped.						
The policy of collective promotion needs to be revised.	202	58	2	5	3.7116	.57776

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Perception of Automatic Promotion

Research Question One sought to find out the perceptions of teachers on automatic promotion. Out of 15 items only 1 (Collective promotion reduces the probability of dropping out) scored a positive mean. Results of the other 14 items all indicated negative perceptions leading to the conclusion that teachers generally have a negative perception of automatic promotion. Specifically, the table above reveals that automatic promotion creates problems in the next class; does not improve pupils' achievement, enhances failure in the First School Leaving Certificate Examination; does not actually reduce repetition or minimize wastage because pupils still get caught up at the end of the cycle, rendering it over crowded; it does not help the teacher of the next class in identifying students' problem areas; it results in a drop in educational standards; it does not encourage students to work harder; it does not provide enough time for pupils to catch up with what they have not learnt and the policy needs to be revised .

## FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Most of the teachers did not think automatic promotion had a positive effect on the quality of education. This finding corroborated that of the questionnaire. Eleven out of fifteen teachers expressed this view. Some of the teachers gave the following as reasons for their opinion: "Many pupils end up unable to read and write," Pupils are not motivated to work hard and teachers are tempted not to pay attention to weak students because they will eventually be promoted, whether they pass or not." So teachers generally have a negative perception of automatic promotion

Research Question 2 aimed at finding out if supplementary or remedial teaching accompanies automatic promotion. Findings from the interview reveal that there are no laid down regulations on having remedial classes or supplementary teaching outside the school hours to help slow pupils in classes 1-5 and no individualized instruction for pupils who need it. Teachers use their discretion to help slow pupils for the most part. However, after the regular sequential assessment (formative evaluation) all participants said they would revise the test but no special classes are given to slow pupils after that point. As a strategy to help slow pupils some of the teachers said, "We encourage slow learners by giving them extra work and home work and mark." Another said, "I pair the slow and fast learners in class." Therefore, generally schools do not have remedial classes or supplementary teaching for pupils who are not performing well. Only class six pupils are given extra classes to prepare them for end-course examinations. Also, there is no



provision for more material for further reading or alternative material. No changes have taken place in schools to facilitate the implementation of automatic promotion.

As far as suggestions to hierarchy are concerned, participants had the following to say about automatic promotion, “It should be supervised and monitored. Teachers must be motivated;” “The concept of the Competency Based Approach has not been mastered by many teachers and it is supposed to be a component of automatic promotion;” “Slow learners should not be promoted automatically. They should be given time to assimilate what they were taught.” “Collective promotion should only be effected if a pupil has passed in two terms.”

## DISCUSSION

There are discrepancies between the conception and implementation of automatic promotion. Automatic promotion was conceived as a package that involved remedial teaching, individualized instruction and the competency based approach. Findings reveal that these elements are not being implemented which could lead to a drop in quality. Automatic promotion effected in the absence of remedial teaching, a key component of mastery is learning may diminish repetition and dropout, but not necessarily ensure learning (Torres, 1995). Research reveals that in Cameroon a 2010 study conducted by the Ministry of Basic Education (MINEBUB) among primary school students confirms this finding: 49% of Cameroonian children in the third year of primary school struggled to read, while 27% could not read at all, demonstrating the urgent need for Cameroon to improve the quality of its education (World Bank, 2014). The fundamental goal of Basic education is for people to acquire literacy, numeracy and essential life skills and a lack of literacy and numeracy is strongly correlated with poverty – both in an economic sense and in the broader sense of a deprivation of capabilities. Literacy strengthens the capabilities of individuals, families and communities to access health, educational, political, economic and cultural opportunities and services (EFA Monitoring Report, 2006) without which Cameroon cannot attain its vision of becoming an emerging nation by 2035.

Amongst other factors automatic promotion is perceived to be a key factor. If experienced teachers who have firsthand experience have a negative perception of automatic promotion, then there is a probability that automatic promotion has negative consequences. The above perceptions are in line with some of the perceptions of teachers in literature. Arguments against automatic promotion state that it negatively affects the overall quality of education since it eliminates competition, de-motivates students and teachers alike hence lowering teaching and learning outcomes (Koppensteiner, 2014; Taye, 2003; and Chohan & Qadir, 2011). Teachers believe that grade repetition is an effective way of preventing students’ future academic failure. (Brophy, 2006; Roderick et al., 2002; and King et al., 1999). Witmer et al. (2004). However, there is also substantial research findings that contradict the above assertions.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

Automatic promotion as a policy may have positive or negative outcomes depending on its implementation. Even though many studies have addressed perceptions of automatic promotion very few have dwelled on models of automatic promotion which may affect one's perception. A closer look at how it is implemented in various contexts may provide clues to the outcomes. Many developing countries may not set the stage for the implementation of automatic promotion but anticipate successful outcomes. In Cameroon there is a discrepancy between the conception of automatic promotion and the implementation. This may account for the negative perceptions and outcomes. Changes were not made at the school level to enhance the effectiveness of automatic promotion. Even though automatic promotion is aimed primarily at minimizing wastage it also calls for a lot of investment by way of human and material resources especially in countries which are grappling with large class sizes and low socio-economic background of pupils. Therefore, a clear distinction needs to be made between the philosophy of automatic promotion and actual practice. Contextual factors must come into play and so this calls for various models of automatic promotion which can be successfully applied in various contexts

## **CONCLUSION**

Teachers' perception of collective promotion is generally negative because they believe that it negatively affects quality. However, the key factor in automatic promotion is its implementation. Automatic promotion should not be done in isolation. In Cameroon automatic promotion was conceived to be accompanied by the mastery learning approach which required remedial and individualized instruction, alternative resources the competency based approach and the new pedagogic approach, but these components are not applied for the most part and that is affecting quality. As a proposal to hierarchy on how to improve quality, participants interviewed said, it should be supervised and monitored, teachers must be motivated, the concept of the Competency Based Approach needs to be mastered by many teachers, slow learners should not be promoted automatically; Pupils should be given time to assimilate what they were taught and automatic promotion should only be effected if a pupil has passed in two terms or it could be stopped completely. Conclusively there is need for more human and material resources and a standard model for the implementation of collective promotion which is monitored to ensure quality.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Based on the discussion above, there is a need to identify models of automatic promotion of countries recording good performances against those recording poor performances in order to identify a standard model for certain contexts.

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