Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

Lead Researcher: Susy Ndaruhutse

Additional research carried out by: Laura Brannelly, Michael Latham, Jonathan Penson
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

Welcome to CfBT Education Trust

CfBT Education Trust is a leading charity providing education services for public benefit in the UK and internationally. Established 40 years ago, CfBT Education Trust now has an annual turnover exceeding £100 million and employs more than 2,000 staff worldwide who support educational reform, teach, advise, research and train.

Since we were founded, we have worked in more than 40 countries around the world. Our work involves teacher and leadership training, curriculum design and school improvement services. The majority of staff provide services direct to learners in schools or through projects for excluded pupils, in young offender institutions and in advice and guidance for young people.

We have worked successfully to implement reform programmes for governments throughout the world. Current examples include the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Programme for Gifted and Talented Education and a nationwide teacher training programme for the Malaysian Ministry of Education.

Other government clients include the Brunei Ministry of Education, the Abu Dhabi Education Council, aid donors such as the European Union (EU), the Department for International Development (DFID), the World Bank, national agencies such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), and local authorities.

Surpluses generated by our operations are reinvested in educational research and development. Our new research programme – Evidence for Education – will improve educational practice on the ground and widen access to research in the UK and overseas.

Visit www.cfbt.com for more information.

About the Author

Susy Ndaruhutse, is CfBT Education Trust’s Senior International Consultant. Her expertise lies in education policy, strategy and finance, and she has worked with a range of developing country governments, donors and NGOs in a capacity building context. She spent nearly four years working in the Ministry of Education in Rwanda helping to develop and cost the first Education Sector Strategic Plan and strengthen financial monitoring and evaluation systems. She has also undertaken short-term consultancies in Ethiopia, Ghana, Guyana and Somaliland. She is currently managing CfBT Education Trust’s joint research partnership with UNESCO on ‘Education in Conflict, Emergencies, Reconstruction and Fragile States’, including leading the research theme on ‘Donors’ Engagement in Education During and After Conflicts’. She has also undertaken research work for the company’s Trustees on a coherent evidence-based approach to national education reform in resource-poor contexts.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of CfBT Education Trust.

© CfBT copyright February 2008
All rights reserved
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronyms and Abbreviations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Literature Review</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Definition of Repetition</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Trends and Colonial Influences in the Practice of Repetition</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 The Rationale and Reasons for Repetition</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 The Pedagogical Impact of Repetition</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 The Links Between Repetition and Dropout</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 The Psychological Impact of Repetition</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 Perceptions of Repetition Among Parents, Teachers and Learners</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8 The Financial Impact of Repetition</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9 Vulnerable Groups Most at Risk of Repetition</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.10 The Impact of Repetition on the Achievement of the Education</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Specific Policy Recommendations and Case Studies</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Pedagogical Approach</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Education Management</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Reaching Vulnerable Groups</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 How to Fund These Recommendations</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Conclusion and Recommendations to Governments, Donors, Teachers and Schools</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 From Repetition to Promotion</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Recommendations</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Conclusion</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CfBT Education Trust – Publications</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Acronyms and Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABE</td>
<td>Adult Basic Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALFAA</td>
<td>Apprrentissage de la Langue Française à partir des Acquis de l’Alphabétisation (Learning the French Language from the Springboard of Literacy Skills)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBR</td>
<td>Community-Based Rehabilitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM2</td>
<td>Cour Moyenne deuxième année (sixth grade of primary school in Francophone system)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONFEMEN</td>
<td>Conférence des Ministres de l’Education des Pays Ayant le Français en Partage (Conference of Francophone Education Ministers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPD</td>
<td>Continuing Professional Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEO</td>
<td>District Education Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFID</td>
<td>Department for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Congo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBAALAN</td>
<td>Programme Expérimental d’Enseignement de Base à partir des Acquis de l’Alphabétisation dans les Langues Nationales au profit d’enfants non-scolarisés (Experimental Basic Education Programme for Acquiring Literacy in National Languages for Out-of-School Children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFA</td>
<td>Education For All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFA-FTI</td>
<td>Education For All Fast Track Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FABE</td>
<td>Family Adult Basic Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAO</td>
<td>Food and Agricultural Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FCFA</td>
<td>Franc Communauté Financière Africaine (CFA Franc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTI</td>
<td>Fast Track Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV/AIDS</td>
<td>Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus/ Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSE</td>
<td>General Certificate of Secondary Education (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GER</td>
<td>Gross Enrolment Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBE</td>
<td>Intercultural and Bilingual Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPPRI</td>
<td>The International Food Policy Research Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPM</td>
<td>Integrated Pest Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIC</td>
<td>Low-Income Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LoI</td>
<td>Language of Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDG</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MK</td>
<td>Malawi Kwacha (unit of currency)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>Mozambican Metical (unit of currency)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTE</td>
<td>Mother Tongue Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUSTER</td>
<td>Multi-Site Teacher Education Research Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASP</td>
<td>National Association of School Psychologists (United States)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODA</td>
<td>Official Development Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSEO</td>
<td>Oeuvre Suisse d’Entraide Ouvrière (Swiss NGO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASEC</td>
<td>Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Educatifs de la CONFEMEN (Analysis Programme of CONFEMEN Educational Systems)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPA</td>
<td>Planning, Preparation and Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PISA</td>
<td>Programme for International Student Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RRP</td>
<td>Repetition Reform Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACMEQ</td>
<td>Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSP</td>
<td>Shepherd School Programme (Ghana)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TTC</td>
<td>Teacher Training College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNAIDS</td>
<td>The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNSAM</td>
<td>Universidad Nacional de San Martin (National University of San Martin, Argentina)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPE</td>
<td>Universal Primary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSO</td>
<td>Voluntary Services Overseas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WFP</td>
<td>World Food Programme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

Executive Summary

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Repetition, or retention, is the practice of making learners who have not fully mastered the curriculum or achieved a certain academic standard repeat the academic year. This study reviews literature on the pedagogical, psychological and financial impacts of repetition. It finds that repetition practices are embedded within cultural and historical traditions that are not always pedagogically founded. Concluding that repetition has few pedagogical benefits (with noted exceptions) and is financially inefficient, the report then goes on to make practical policy recommendations for reforms. It argues that to tackle effectively the problems of repetition, reforms need to also address the reasons behind poor attendance, the quality and relevance of teaching, and provide sufficient support for teachers.

Chapter 1 defines repetition and gives an overview of the trends and colonial influences in the practice of repetition. Specifically, the literature review finds that Francophone and Lusophone countries tend to practise repetition, with Anglophone countries being more likely to follow a policy of automatic promotion. In 2002/03 a total of 18 countries had primary repetition rates equal to or exceeding 20% of which 15 were in Sub-Saharan Africa (12 Francophone, two Lusophone, and only one Anglophone country). The chapter continues by giving an outline for the rationale and reasons for repetition, underlining the problem unique to developing countries where many children do not attend primary school regularly, leaving them vulnerable to having to repeat due to the amount of schooling they have missed.

The chapter then examines the evidence of the pedagogical impact of repetition. The majority of the studies undertaken to explore the effects of repetition on learning suggest that the practice does more harm than good (Kelly, 1999). This includes individual country studies in the United States and France, the Programme for International Student Assessment undertaken on 15-year olds in 32 countries, and a similar analysis for 13 African countries. Bernard et al (2005, pp. 63–4) thus conclude that repeaters are learning less than promoted learners and Verspoor (2006, p. 5) states that grade repetition is not an effective way of improving learning in Sub-Saharan Africa. The literature review finds that in most countries, the selection of repeaters is undertaken by the teacher in relation to the level of the class rather than to some objective external standard for all students. Various studies across Africa (Jarousse and Surchaut 2002 cited in Bernard et al, 2005, p. 38–40) point to evidence for this, which implies that in general, repetition is not guaranteeing the selection of the weakest learners.

The chapter investigates whether there is a link between repetition and dropout. Research from both the United States and the African continent, shows that there are strong links with repeating pupils being more likely to drop out of school in later years. A study of 44 African countries (Bernard et al, 2005, p. 69) suggested that a country with a repetition rate of 20% and a primary completion rate of 60% could increase the latter to 73% by reducing repetition to 10%.

The chapter then explores research on the psychological impact of repetition. Research in France and the United States has found that learners who repeat are more likely to feel marginalised, have lower self-esteem, and to have poorer attendance. Longer-term effects on repeaters include dropping out of school, facing difficulties finding work, higher levels of mental health difficulties, substance abuse and criminal activities. In the United States, grade 6 children ranked repetition as the most stressful life event they could experience, while French children ranked it as the second most stressful life event after bereavement (Anderson et al, 2002, p. 2; Troncin, 2006).

The chapter next examines the views of teachers, parents and learners concerning repetition. A study by UNESCO (1998a, p. 39) notes that in environments where repetition is common practice, teachers are...
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

generally opposed to automatic promotion as it undermines teaching methods they have used for many years. This is supported by research from France (Troncin, 2006), Quebec (Pouliot 1998 cited in Gouvernement du Québec, 2003) a selection of African countries (CONFEMEN, 2003c, p. 76 cited in Michaelowa, 2003, p. 15), and the United States, but there are more mixed views from teachers in Belgium and Switzerland (Crahay, 2003). Among surveyed parents in France, many felt that the foundation year of schooling was critical and over 30% felt that repeating this year gave children another chance. Parents held more mixed views about the practice of repetition in other years of primary school. Moving on to the opinions of students, in France, a third of students did not know why they were repeating and many repeaters said that repetition was not talked about openly with their families and classmates. Many young people in both France and the United States considered repetition as a humiliating measure (Troncin, 2006; Byrnes, 1989, pp. 116, 120–121).

The chapter then analyses the financial impact of repetition, showing its economic inefficiency. Estimates of the cost of repetition are presented for France, the United States, various Latin American countries and a range of African countries. In 1998, nearly 40% of all resources were being wasted due to repetition and dropout in Francophone Africa, while only one quarter of all resources were wasted in Anglophone Africa (World Bank, 2002, p. 55).

Based on available studies, the chapter then investigates within developing countries, which groups are most vulnerable to poor attendance, repetition, early dropout and exclusion. The following groups are identified: the poorest in society; working children; children living in remote and rural areas; orphans and those affected by HIV/AIDS; children with physical or learning disabilities; nomadic and indigenous children or ethnic minorities; refugees, internally displaced children and those affected by conflict or natural disasters. Statistical estimates for Sub-Saharan Africa imply that the effects of repetition are felt more severely on girls, rural children, and families in the lowest poverty quintile (World Bank, 2005e, p. 31).

The chapter concludes by stating that Sub-Saharan Africa is the region that faces the greatest challenges in reaching the universal primary education target (UPE) (Naschold, 2002, p. 1): around 20 million children of school age do not go to primary school, and of all those that do, nearly a third never complete the total primary school cycle (Bernard et al, 2005, pp. 21–22). The higher the repetition rate, the fewer the children that complete primary schooling and the more likelihood there is of some children who have repeated going on to drop out. Bernard et al (2005, pp. 24–25) argue that repetition is putting a brake on UPE, with around half of the delay in Francophone countries being related to the policies and practices of repetition.

Chapter 2: Specific Policy Recommendations and Case Studies

There is abundant literature underlining how problematic repetition is and its negative impacts, but little research goes a step further in offering realistic policy recommendations on how repetition can be addressed and reduced in the specific context of Sub-Saharan Africa. Chapter 2 offers realistic and practical policy recommendations about how repetition can be addressed in Sub-Saharan Africa, reducing it where possible whilst recognising that there may be a need to offer modified approaches to the current system of pedagogical instruction provided for those children most at risk of repeating. The chapter is supported by selected case studies of successful interventions.

The policy recommendations are grouped under three main headings: (i) pedagogical approach, (ii) education management, and (iii) reaching vulnerable groups, and they address the issue of repetition principally during the primary school cycle.

The pedagogical approach recommendations focus on six main areas:

(i) improving pre-service and in-service teacher training;
(ii) providing a more relevant competency-based curriculum;
(iii) improving quality through the availability of teaching materials;
(iv) supporting weaker children and their families;
(v) providing bilingual programmes; and
(vi) offering multigrade and double shift teaching.

The education management recommendations focus on five main areas:

(i) increasing the learning capacity of children;
(ii) boosting teacher motivation;
(iii) ensuring adequate and sufficient infrastructure;
(iv) only permitting repetition between sub-cycles of primary education; and
(v) creating school networks.

The recommendations for reaching vulnerable groups focus on three main areas:

(i) addressing non-educational factors that affect attendance;
(ii) supporting specific marginalised groups (out-of-school children, children of nomadic groups and pastoralists, and children with special needs and disabilities); and
(iii) providing adult literacy programmes for parents.

The final section of chapter 2 explores how to fund these recommendations. An overview is given of how much it is likely to cost for countries to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) looking at the need for this financing to come from both domestic taxation systems and external resources. While it is clear that additional resources will be needed to help Africa reach the education MDGs, just as important as the total amount of resources is how resources are used and what they are used for. Chapter 1 included a section outlining the financial costs of the practice of repetition and this chapter outlines direct efficiency savings that can be made by reducing repetition. It also points out that efficiency savings can be made on other areas of education spending in certain countries and by reallocating financial resources between sectors where the education budget is a disproportionate amount of the national budget in other countries.

The chapter also recommends the need for certain aspects of the education budget to be deconcentrated to local community or school level so that those on the ground can decide, based on local knowledge, how best to spend these resources. This is likely to develop a school’s management competency and increase community involvement in education decision-making, creating greater ownership of children’s education among communities. This recommendation is made with the proviso that deconcentrating the finances without at the same time training administrative staff and headteachers in the basic principles of financial planning and identifying cost-effective inputs, will not ensure that increased resources will lead to better learning outcomes. Hence there is a critical need for capacity building at local level.

The chapter concludes by outlining a hypothetical cost-saving example of reducing repetition in a fictitious Francophone African country showing that whilst additional resources may be needed in the short term to raise quality, standards and relevance in the current education system, if this significantly reduces repetition rates to below the best practice target of 5% over the medium term, fewer additional resources will be needed in the longer term due to the financial economies of reducing repetition.

Chapter 3: Conclusion and Recommendations to Governments, Donors, Teachers and Schools

Chapter 3 outlines how countries with a policy that has led to high repetition rates can make the transition to a generalised system of automatic promotion with repetition maintained only in specialist circumstances. Drawing on the case studies and policy recommendations made in chapter 2, this chapter then offers recommendations to five different stakeholder groups: firstly to policymakers in African governments; secondly to donors and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) funding projects and programmes in Africa; thirdly to teacher trainers; fourthly to teachers, schools and district education officers, and fifthly to civil society. The recommendations to policymakers cover five main areas:

(i) ensuring the quality and relevance of education and teaching;
(ii) promoting indigenous languages of instruction;
(iii) addressing reasons for irregular attendance;
(iv) prioritising resources; and
(iv) adopting a once-only repetition policy for end-of-cycle children.
The chapter concludes by reiterating the fact that the research has found little evidence to show that repetition is an option which works to the benefit of children, their families, their schools or the African continent as a whole. This underlines the need for reform in those countries where repetition is particularly widespread. However, any reform will need to have a two-fold nature: firstly it will need to address the multiple issues which lie behind irregular attendance, causing the very real need for repetition due to the amount of schooling that has been missed. Secondly, it will need to focus on increasing the quality and relevance of teaching and learning and providing teachers with the necessary support to teach a mixed ability group. The research concludes with the warning that without such reform, particularly in Francophone Africa, the continent is unlikely to meet either the MDGs or the more ambitious Education for All agenda by 2015.

“...the research has found little evidence to show that repetition is an option which works to the benefit of children, their families, their schools or the African continent as a whole.”
1.1 Definition of Repetition

Repetition, or retention as it is often referred to in the literature for developed countries, is the practice of making children who have not mastered the curriculum and thus do not reach certain academic standards repeat the year while their peers are promoted to the next year. By contrast, social or automatic promotion is the act of allowing these same children to continue to the next year of study with the rest of their peer group despite not having met the minimum required standards.

1.2 Trends and Colonial Influences in the Practice of Repetition

Policies on repetition and automatic promotion vary widely from country to country. As a general rule, repetition is a practice influenced strongly by culture and linguistics. Within Europe, Anglo-Saxon cultures (Great Britain, Ireland and Scandinavian countries – Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark) very rarely use repetition as an education policy tool but instead practise automatic promotion with additional support for weaker learners. By contrast, repetition is institutionalised in Francophone countries (France and Belgium) and Lusophone countries (Portugal), although France and Belgium have seen a declining trend in its practice over recent years. Repetition is also a common practice in the United States, although no official data is collected on repetition rates. Despite this, several authors estimate it on the basis of average children in different grades (Shepard and Smith, 1989b, p. 6). Repetition is also widely practised in Francophone Canada (Quebec).

Troncin (2006) notes that in France in 1966, 60% of primary school completers were repeaters, whereas by 2005, this figure had dropped to 20%. Similarly, in 1966, 18% of pupils had repeated at least two years by the end of the sixth grade of primary school (CM2), whereas in 2005, this figure had dropped to 1%. However, Avis (2004, pp. 1–2) points out that while these downward trends have been seen, since the 1990s the percentage of repeaters has plateaued and still one out of every five pupils has repeated at least one year by CM2, with a persistence of repetition at the beginning and middle of the primary cycle. Belgium has seen a significant decline in repetition at primary school level, while at secondary level, where repetition is permitted it has to be accompanied by a specific programme of intervention to support the student (Crahay and Delhaxhe, 1993).

Developing countries which were colonised have been strongly influenced in their education policy by the systems used by the colonial administration and this pattern can generally be seen in their present-day education systems: Francophone Africa and Asia (for example Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Cambodia), and Lusophone countries (Brazil, Angola and Mozambique) all continue to practise repetition, while most Anglophone countries (including countries in the Caribbean – see UNESCO, 2002, p. 45) are more likely to follow patterns of automatic promotion except in very specific circumstances where children have missed a lot of the school year due to illness or other reasons.

Table 1 on the following page shows average primary school repetition rates for a selection of different countries with graph 1 showing a comparison of regional repetition rates in 1995 and 2002/03.

Of all countries with available data for 2002/03, there were a total of 18 with primary school repetition rates equal to or exceeding 20% – 15 of these were in Sub-Saharan Africa (Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Comoros, ...
TABLE 1: Average Primary School Repetition Rates for Selected Countries, 2002/03 or Surrounding Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continent</th>
<th>Francophone or Lusophone Country or Former Colony</th>
<th>Average Primary Repetition Rate</th>
<th>Anglophone Country</th>
<th>Average Primary Repetition Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comoros</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Congo Republic</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Lesotho</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cote d’Ivoire</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equatorial Guinea</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gabon</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guinea</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Madagascar</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Swaziland</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>United Republic of Tanzania</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sao Tome and Principe</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Togo</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americas</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trinidad and Tobago</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lao People’s Democratic Republic</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Data unavailable</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Data unavailable</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Data unavailable</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Data unavailable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNESCO, Global Education Digest 2005, pp. 64–72
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Guinea, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe, and Togo) with the remaining three being Brazil, Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Nepal. Of the 15 African countries, 12 were Francophone, two Lusophone (Mozambique and Sao Tome and Principe) and only one was an Anglophone country (Lesotho). In addition, if the rates are compared in Africa, Asia and America between Francophone or Lusophone countries and Anglophone countries, it can be seen that in nearly all cases, Anglophone countries have much lower repetition rates.

During the 1980s, Latin America and the Caribbean was the region with the highest rates of repetition and dropout in the world (Patrinos and Psacharopolous, 1992, p. 1). Schiefelbein (1992 cited in Patrinos and Psacharopolous, 1992, p. 1) found that around 29% of all primary school children were repeating with a shocking 42% repeating the first grade. However, in the past 20 years, Sub-Saharan Africa has overtaken Latin America and the Caribbean, and in 2002/03 had the highest average primary school repetition rate at 15.5%, the only continent with repetition rates in the double figures. This contributes significantly to the fact that in 2005, 40% of all children did not complete a full cycle of primary education (Bernard et al, 2005, pp. 10, 17). However, as can be seen from the data in table 1 above, the continent is largely divided on how it uses repetition as an educational policy tool, with Francophone and Lusophone countries mostly contributing to the high overall repetition rates, and Anglophone countries having a repetition rate that is at least two times less on average than that observed in Francophone or Lusophone countries (Bernard et al, 2005, p. 20). However, despite this lower rate in Anglophone countries, Michaelowa (2003, p. 15) points out that the average rate in these countries is still around four times as high as in the average Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) country.
1.3 The Rationale and Reasons for Repetition

1.3.1 Variety of Backgrounds and Experiences

When children start primary school, they come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences – some will have benefited from pre-primary education or regular pre-school attendance and may be quite advanced socially and educationally, being able to read and write, while others may not have had any of these opportunities so will appear to be struggling by comparison. In addition, some children will have special educational needs including learning difficulties and behavioural problems. Conflict, economic difficulties affecting the time parents or other carers are able to spend with children, migration, natural disasters, health and nutrition problems or other interruptions may have had an impact on children’s pre-school cognitive development. The social environment of school may also be very different from a child’s previous social experience and acclimatisation to the social codes in school may take varying times. Another contributory problem may be that the language of instruction (LoI) is often a child’s second or even third language.

1.3.2 Formative Versus Summative Evaluation

There are two main approaches to evaluating the progress of learners through an education system – a summative evaluation that involves testing at the end of a certain period and seeing if the child has reached the necessary ‘normative’ standard assuming that there is a certain standard that every child should meet; or a formative evaluation which looks more at how an individual child is responding to new educational ideas and ensuring that the child is growing in knowledge relative to his or her initial starting point, regardless of whether the child has reached the standard that another child has reached.

For those that think summative evaluation is a better approach, selection of children and who progresses from one year or level to the next is more important than ongoing development at a child’s own pace. The outcome of this approach for any child who is perceived as struggling is repetition. For those believing formative evaluation is a better approach, the focus will be on how each individual child is progressing year by year, providing additional support where an individual may need it, rather than on setting certain standards each year that have to be reached and if not, to fail the child. Thus, there is an individual dimension to learning under formative evaluation and the outcome is one in which each child receives positive feedback about at least some of their capabilities, rather than sensing they are a failure (Dechman, 2003, p. 14).

1.3.3 Pros and Cons of Repetition

The practice of repetition, in both developing and developed countries, mostly takes place in the first and last years of primary school (UNESCO, 1998a). Repetition is seen by some protagonists as being important and its practice is seen as advantageous under certain conditions:

1. where students are falling behind and do not have the expected knowledge of their peers and the necessary knowledge to be promoted to the next cycle, they will benefit from going over the material another time to bring them up to the necessary level;

2. where students are immature or very young for their year, an additional year in the same class is viewed as giving them the option to feel more secure and settled;

3. where there is a wide variety of ability in a class, it benefits the teacher and the remaining students if the weaker pupils are made to repeat, thus creating a more homogenous year group.

However, there are many who do not agree with repetition, since they argue that it has the following negative impact on children:

1. It affects their self-esteem and motivation and can give them the perspective that they are failures or bad students.

2. Children repeat the same materials that they have already studied, usually with the same teacher, which can decrease motivation.

3. It does not address the reasons behind low performance so may not improve the performance of children significantly.
...in Sub-Saharan Africa, while there may be some children who attend primary school regularly who are forced to repeat, many children do not attend primary school on a regular basis for a number of reasons, leaving them vulnerable to having to repeat – often more than once – due to the amount of schooling they have missed.

1.3.4 Factors Contributing to Repetition in Sub-Saharan Africa

Within developed countries which practise repetition, most of the students who repeat are made to do so due to low academic performance and they generally repeat only once, though there are some exceptions. However, on the whole, a large majority of these students will have attended primary school close to full-time. By contrast, in Sub-Saharan Africa, while there may be some children who attend primary school regularly who are forced to repeat, many children do not attend primary school on a regular basis for a number of reasons, leaving them vulnerable to having to repeat – often more than once – due to the amount of schooling they have missed.

In Zanzibar in 1998, 6.1% of all primary grade 6 students had repeated twice and 1.4% had repeated three times or more (Nassor and Mohammed, 1998, p. 22), while in Namibia, these figures were even higher at 16.9% and 6.4% respectively (Voigts, 1998, p. 28). Twenty per cent of Swazi grade 6 students had repeated two years of primary school (World Bank, 2006b, p. 22).

The reasons behind why children are not attending school regularly and thus may have to repeat include the following:

- **The cost of schooling:** direct costs (fees) and indirect costs (uniform, transport, materials, opportunity cost) are significant to many poorer families, influencing a family’s decision making. If a child is failing or is forced to repeat, there is a high likelihood that the family might pull their child out of school to save money. This is a particular issue highlighted in a recent study on Kenya (Nafula, 2001, pp. 3–4). As many cultures prioritise boys’ learning over girls, this factor disproportionately affects girls.

- **The remoteness of the school:** Tansel (1997, p. 843) found that living in a rural area implies a lower probability of primary school attendance and lower attainment for girls in Ghana and for all children in the Ivory Coast. A study on children’s access to schooling in the Indian Himalayas found that enrolled children only completed an average of 70% of school days due to road blockages caused by bad weather conditions (Pragya, 2006, p. 8). The World Bank (2005c, p.16) reports that, in Ethiopia, each additional kilometre from the nearest primary school reduces registration rates by two to three percentage points. In addition, insecurity along routes to school can be a problem that particularly affects girls.

- **Illness and malnutrition:** worms, malaria and HIV/AIDS lead many children to be attending school sporadically. In the case of HIV/AIDS, the child may be well but obliged to stay at home to look after ailing parents or siblings, and there may be associated issues of stigma in the community which prevent a child from functioning fully in society.

- **Lack of sanitation blocks at school:** this is a particular problem for girls as they reach puberty and then drop out of school for a week every month. This has been identified as a contributory factor to school repetition and dropout in Uganda (UNESCO, 2001, p. 18).

- **The need to work:** many children are engaged in either household, paid work or both. This is especially the case for children, particularly girls, in rural areas who are usually expected to help with daily chores such as collecting water and firewood,
cooking, looking after younger siblings while their parents or carers are working, or tending animals. It also occurs in urban areas, where children may be involved in begging, shop and factory work, hawking or prostitution. This work may be regular or seasonal and clearly affects school attendance, often leading to repetition or dropout. Bowman and Goldblatt (1984) cited in Patrinos and Psacharopolous (1992, p. 2) found in Mexico that the demand for household labour is strongly linked to overage children in school and to the proportion of children who do not complete four years of primary schooling. A study on children in the Himalayas (Pragya, 2006, p. 10) found that, on average, one child in each family in the region does not go to school due to the need to help with household chores or the family’s subsistence farming. This study also found that during the growing season and the summer tourist season which clash with the school term, children miss school to take advantage of the economic opportunities.

- **Limited access to secondary schooling**: due to the limited number of places in secondary schools, many families question the value of sending their children to primary schools, particularly in the later years if their children are already struggling and have repeated one or more years. Based on a data set for Northeast Brazil, Gomes-Neto and Hanushek (1994 cited in Patrinos and Psacharopolous, 1992, p. 3) found that the availability of advanced grades is one of the main factors influencing grade repetition levels. In Kenya, Nzomo et al (2001, p. 13) found that one of the main reasons for high repetition and dropout is the limited access to secondary school.

- **Quality and relevance of schooling**: some families, particularly in rural areas, question the relevance, value and quality of schooling especially when the schools lack textbooks and other materials, some teachers are unqualified, there are very large class sizes and many children still return to working in agriculture when they leave school therefore gaining very little economic benefit from their schooling. The educational content may be too academic, leaving students without the necessary knowledge and skills to be marketable in the local economy; and the pedagogical methods in the school may not promote the critical thinking necessary for entrepreneurship, efficiency and effectiveness. A study on educating children in the Himalayas found that 48% of parents did not believe that educating their children would help them to find jobs, so were not interested in sending their children to school (Pragya, 2006, p. 10). In addition, for families who are illiterate, they may not value education and after having tried it out for a while, conclude that it is not worth their children attending regularly.

- **Instructional time in schools**: many primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the lower cycle operate on double shifts, meaning that children are only in school for part of the day. A World Bank study found that 57% of Madagascan primary schools were only offering between two and four hours of instructional time to children each day, concluding that since instructional time is the single most important influence affecting children’s learning, the low instructional time is a key contributor to the country’s high repetition and dropout rates (World Bank, 2001b, p. 8).

- **Language of instruction**: across most of Sub-Saharan Africa, local languages and dialects are spoken at home, while there is a different, often foreign (English, French or Portuguese) LoI at school. Especially where families are uneducated, they are not able to support their children in their learning, and their children, while potentially being able academically, struggle to keep up with their learning due to insufficient knowledge of the LoI. Kane (2004, p. 8) found evidence from a World Bank study in 2002 that bilingual programmes with the local language as the LoI in the early years of primary school generally led to lower repetition and dropout rates, and higher examination scores, especially for girls.

Lockheed, Verspoor and Associates (1991, p. 183) conclude that the causes of repetition and dropout in developing countries can be categorised under three main headings:

1. Family-related factors (illiteracy or low education of parents, income of family);
2. Student characteristics (poor motivation, low ability, insufficient grasp of the LoI);
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

3. School-related factors (physical remoteness and limited access to secondary education, ineffective teaching, insufficient qualification of teachers and absence of textbooks, defective evaluation of students and promotion criteria that are too demanding).

In parenthesis are some of the reasons for repetition identified by participants at a UNESCO training session of African educationalists (UNESCO, 2000). It is important to understand these reasons, as they have significant implications for what kind of policy solutions different Sub-Saharan African countries could adopt if they seek to reduce repetition rates, some of which may be very different from those recommended for developed countries.

1.3.5 Continued Use of Repetition as an Educational Tool in Developing Countries

In addition to the family-, child- and school-related factors mentioned above, repetition is enabled by educational policy at national level. Its continued popularity in developing countries can be seen partly as a response to limited resources. Automatic promotion of children is assumed to imply a greater range of abilities in a class. This may not necessarily be true, as a child retained for an additional year might not improve even once promoted, as will be seen in subsequent sections. However, the need for differentiated resources and a teaching methodology that takes adequate account of a range of abilities in the class is clear. So too is the need for a supportive teaching and learning style, personal knowledge by the teacher of an individual child’s specific learning needs, and the ability to address those needs adequately. Even in well-resourced classes of 30 in a developed country, providing this sort of teaching environment is often considered one of the greatest challenges a teacher faces, and the debate about the benefits of mixed-ability classes remains contentious. Responses to these challenges that schools in developed countries have at their disposal include:

• the provision of specialist support in schools for children with special education needs, such as teaching assistants, peer counselling, and special educational needs advisers or units which are able to advise teachers;
• top-up support using external facilities, such as out-of-hours tuition, to enable children to keep up with their peers;
• legal instruments which aim to keep children in school, such as anti-truancy laws or laws which require parents to ensure that their children attend school, together with support services from welfare and social service institutions;
• the use of streamed or setted classes that effectively reduce the range of abilities in a class.

Few of these options are available in poorly resourced developing countries. Creating differentiated resources and activities for a class, where different ability sections of a class will be doing different activities simultaneously, is difficult to achieve where the only resource is a teacher and perhaps some chalk. The tools available to the developed country teacher, such as photocopied worksheets, computer workstations where one section of the class may work in a self-supported manner, differentiated textbooks or workbooks which students may study individually or the use of alternative spaces are not available where there is no photocopier, paper or even electricity. Even if resources were available, producing differentiated materials for a class of 80 or 90 children crammed into a limited space would be an enormous task, as would getting to know that number of children individually.

---

2 A setted class is one where children are divided into classes of similar ability for all subjects; a streamed class is one where they are divided into different classes for different subjects according to ability in each subject. In a mixed-ability class, children are not divided into classes based on ability.

3 Children can usually accept that different children have different needs, and so can accept streamed or setted classes: unless very carefully handled, putting weaker children in the same class as more-able children forces them to confront their learning difficulties on a daily basis as they compare their performance with stronger children, which can lead to low self-esteem and behavioural problems. It is essential that fair, transparent and accountable mechanisms for movement between streams or sets are in place, and that these are used. Sets or streams should be reviewed regularly, but not so often that the movements are disruptive or engender feelings of insecurity among children.
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

There may be insufficient teachers or children to allow for the setting or streaming of classes. This is not to say that it is impossible to teach large mixed-ability classes, but it should be recognised that, even if teachers have been trained in mixed-ability methodology, which is often unlikely, the practical pedagogical obstacles facing them are colossal. Similarly, differentiated classes do assume some independence of learning on behalf of the children, which assumes that they have acquired independent study skills. While it is to be hoped that they have, where rote-learning techniques remain dominant, this cannot be assumed. Any move to promotion rather than retention might take for granted a readiness on the part of the children to adapt to a different way of working which is premature.

A well-developed curriculum should be progressive and phased, meaning that later learning builds upon earlier learning. This developmental aspect of education lies behind another reason for repetition: the belief that demonstrable ‘success’ in one stage of the curriculum is a prerequisite for success in subsequent stages. This can be the case. Where a child has missed say six months of schooling, due to illness, it is clear that to force them into the next year rather than return to the year they have not completed is likely to cause them difficulties as they would not have the same level of knowledge as their peers, and would be left with the feeling that they have ‘missed out’. It would also be inappropriate to deny girls who leave school early in a school year to have a baby the opportunity to acquire that year’s learning.

A policy of repetition is understandable in these circumstances, as it appears to reduce the challenges facing teachers by apparently ensuring a smaller range of abilities in any class, as well as giving children who have missed a significant proportion of a year of their schooling an opportunity to pursue their education without unnecessary disadvantage. Policy is not, then, merely the persistence of inappropriate and anachronistic practices from the past which continue because they are familiar. Repetition may be pursued as an active policy which both creates opportunities for children to remain in or re-enter education where otherwise they might be deemed to have ‘failed’ in their educational project and which makes teaching in difficult circumstances more manageable, thereby improving quality. There is a pressing need to examine whether this is in fact the case, which will be done in the next section.

1.4 The Pedagogical Impact of Repetition

1.4.1 Academic Performance

Many studies have been undertaken over the past 20 years to explore the effects of repetition on learning, some of which are country specific, others of which compare performance across a set of countries. The majority of these studies suggest that the practice does more harm than good (Kelly, 1999).

In 1989, Holmes undertook a meta-analysis of 63 existing empirical studies in a range of districts across the United States comparing retained children in elementary and junior high school to matched groups of equally low-achieving peers who were promoted. He found that 54 of them showed that repetition had negative effects on children’s achievement, attendance record, personal adjustment in school, and attitude toward school as they went on to the next grade. The other nine studies involved programmes that took an alternative approach and gave retained children specialised support in smaller classes. The children in these programmes demonstrated greater academic progress (measured by Intelligence Quotient scores) than the average low achiever and there was very little representation of ethnic minority children among these children. These programmes reported positive, short-term effects on performance, but after three years the benefits were shown to diminish and disappear (Holmes, 1989, pp. 22, 25). This is supported by evidence from Alexander et al (1994, p.131) who found that among a group of Californian children, first grade repeaters do better the second time round but academic performance is not sustained so there is no long-term gain. Thus Holmes (1989, p. 27) concludes:

‘On average, retained children are worse off than their promoted counterparts on both personal adjustment and academic outcomes.’

www.cfbt.com
Jimerson (1999, p. 1) looked at the longer-term impact of repetition on learning in the United States and found that repeaters achieved lower levels of academic performance by the end of the 11th grade and were more likely to drop out of high school by the age of 19. When going into employment, repeaters were on lower salaries, and had lower employment competence ratings at the age of 20 when compared with a control group of low-achieving but promoted students. By contrast there were no distinguishable differences between the latter group and a control group in terms of employment outcomes at the age of 20. Troncin (2006), undertaking research on French students, found that nearly 43% of all sixth grade students who repeated grade 1 finished school without obtaining a qualification. Crahay and Delhaxhe (1993) found that where additional individualised remedial support was given to low-achieving students who were promoted, and to those who are made to repeat, the low-achieving promoted students on average made greater progress, thus nullifying the effects of repetition.

Moving to more comparative studies, a 1990 study showed that countries with policies of automatic promotion produced higher results in reading compared to those that practise repetition (Crahay and Delhaxhe, 1993). The 2000 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) undertaken on 15-year olds in 32 countries shows that levels of reading and competency in mathematics are higher in Japan, Scandinavian countries and the UK than in France and Latin American countries (Meuret, 2002, p. 45). This same study finds that of the five countries obtaining the best results (The Seychelles, Tanzania and Mauritius) generally have lower repetition rates than the other countries. The research also discovered that Mozambique, with a repetition rate of 23% and Botswana with one of less than 3% performed comparably showing that repetition does not necessarily lead to improved academic performance. Given that Mozambique is one of the poorest countries in Africa and Botswana one of the richest, one could argue that a poor country can make up the deficit in the educational quality it can provide, and for the poverty of its citizens, by introducing repetition. However, further analysis comparing the average test scores of grade 5 primary children in the Ivory Coast and Senegal who had repeated a year or more and those who had not found that repeaters on average obtained lower scores than those who did not repeat. In the Ivory Coast, average test scores (combined for mathematics and French) were 25% for repeaters compared to 37% for non-repeaters, a difference of around 12 percentage points. In Senegal, the difference was similar (pp. 62–3). This evidence led Bernard et al (2005, pp. 63–4) to conclude that repeaters are learning less than promoted children, and that repetition has become a ‘pedagogical mirage’ masking, rather than resolving, learning difficulties. From all the available evidence, Verspoor (2006, p. 5) concludes that grade repetition is not an effective way of improving children’s learning in Sub-Saharan Africa.

1.4.2 Pedagogical Selection of Repeaters

Bernard et al (2005, p. 37) point out that in most countries of the world, the selection of repeaters is undertaken by the teacher in relation to the level of the class rather than to some objective external standard for all children. They comment on a study by Grisay (1984) in Belgium that tested grade 5 primary children with a standard test and compared the results with the marks given by teachers in the class assessment. The results showed that their class teacher evaluated a group of children obtaining similar results in the standard test very differently. A similar study by Jarousse and Surchaut 2002 cited in Bernard et al, 2005, p. 38 found that for a score of 100 on the standard test in Mauritania, the average mark given by the teacher to the same
students varied from 3 to 19 out of 20. This led Bernard et al to conclude that depending on the ability of the overall class, students with similar results in objective standardised tests can be seen by some teachers as weak and needing to repeat, and by others as strong. A 1996 study in the Ivory Coast (cited in Bernard et al, 2005, p. 40) found that some students with scores above 60% were made to repeat, while others with scores of below 20% were promoted to the next class, clearly pointing out the lack of objectivity in decision making by teachers. Research undertaken in Mauritius found that 10% of the top 25% of readers had repeated a grade (Kulpo, 1998, p. 26) and in Zambia, it was around 40% (Nkamba and Kanyika, 1998, p. 26). This led both groups of researchers to conclude that either grade repetition had led to a dramatic improvement in the reading ability of these pupils, or the selection criteria for these children were totally arbitrary.

Additional research undertaken by PASEC and referred to in Bernard et al. (2005, p. 41–43) in Senegal, the Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso divided children into three-equal sized groups (high, middle and low ability) based on the scores they had attained in the standardised tests for French and mathematics, and then checked in which groups repeaters could be found. For grade 2 primary children, the majority of repeaters were in the bottom group, but between 20% and 37% were in the top or middle groups. The researchers found that this trend worsened as children progressed through the system so that by grade 4 of primary school, in Senegal and the Ivory Coast, nearly 50% of all repeaters in the sample did not belong to the bottom group yet were being forced to repeat despite not ‘failing’ academically by objective standards. Other research has shown that when teachers make decisions about which children will repeat, it is often not done objectively but rather based on teachers’ perceptions (Meuret, 2002, pp. 43–44). All this evidence points to the conclusion that decisions made on which children should repeat are often arbitrary and subjective rather than being based on clear evidence of low test scores and academic achievement, and that this result is especially true in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa.

Bernard et al (2005, p. 45) went on to discover that decisions on which children should repeat are more closely linked to their ranking in their class than objective academic achievement, meaning that if you are a weaker child in a very bright class you are more likely to be forced to repeat despite achieving a satisfactory level in the standard evaluation tests. The research found that a child in grade 2, 3 or 5 of primary school who was ranked in the last three positions in their class had between 15% and 18% higher chance of repeating than their classmates, while in Senegal, this effect stood on average at 11%. Other research has shown that decisions made about which children should repeat are often made in relation to the average level of the class and therefore put the weaker children in the class more at risk of being forced to repeat a year compared to an overall class where the average standard is lower (Meuret, 2002, pp. 43–44).

Further evidence found that the school community (headteachers, teachers and inspectors) made the decision about repetition, and that ministerial decrees or regulations about repetition seem to be having little effect on practical policy in the classroom in the three countries (Bernard et al, 2005, p. 47)1. In these same countries, it was found that the age and behaviour of children are also important factors when making decisions on which learners should repeat, with only 11% of teachers stating that they considered ranking as an ‘essential criterion’ (Bernard et al, 2005, p. 49).

This evidence has led Bernard et al (2005) to conclude that in general, repetition is not guaranteeing the selection of the weakest learners, and that as a result, there is an urgent need for teachers to be trained in objective evaluation methodologies, since 75% of teachers interviewed believed that repetition was an efficient pedagogical tool, with only

1 The same is true in Rwanda and Swaziland. In the former, while a Ministerial decree exists forbidding repetition rates in primary schools to exceed 10%, the reality in 2003/04 was that the average repetition rate was still 19.2% (MINEDUC, 2006). In Swaziland, the average primary repetition rate during 2004/05 was 16.5% despite a government policy of automatic promotion (World Bank, 2006b, pp. 19, 22).
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

3% in Senegal and under 1% in the Ivory Coast believing that it was not efficient at all. This is consistent with the findings of Troncin 2001 cited in Bernard et al, 2005, p. 50. that Senegalese and Ivorian teachers are similar to those in Belgium, France, Switzerland and America, who are ‘great defenders of the practice of repetition’. Michaelowa (2003, p. 17) thus states:

‘All in all, it can be concluded that as opposed to the perception of many teachers in Francophone Africa, repetition cannot substantially increase student performance.’

Furthermore, in Malawi, it was found that a one-percentage point decrease in the primary repetition rate (below the average rate of 16%) corresponds to a 0.2 percentage point increase in the grade 8 pass rate (World Bank, 2004, p. 76). Michaelowa (2003, p. 17) continues:

‘Since targeting low-ability students is generally not very precise, there is a considerable risk that repetition even hinders learning progress. Moreover, considering that repetition is closely correlated with early drop-out, even the sustainability of basic knowledge already acquired may be put at risk. It should therefore be a high priority of education policy to rise the awareness of this problem among teachers and all other persons involved in decisions about repetition. Moreover, a legally binding upper threshold needs to be put on repetition rates and enforced in all schools in the region.’

1.5 The Links Between Repetition and Dropout

1.5.1 Global Trends

Across the world in both developed and developing countries alike, research shows that there are strong links between repetition and dropout, with repeating children being more likely to drop out of school in later years.

American research is mostly focused on high school (secondary school) level. One study (Jermison, Anderson and Whipple, 2002 cited in Anderson et al, 2002, p. 2) states that pupils who repeat are between 2 and 11 times more likely to drop out of school than those who are promoted. Other research from Los Angeles shows that those pupils who have dropped out of school before graduating are five times more likely to have repeated one grade than high school graduates, and that a pupil who repeated either of the first two grades had only a 20% chance of graduating (Grisson and Shepard, 1989, p. 36). A further study found that grade repetition led to a 42% rise in dropout (Reynolds and Temple, 1997). A more recent review of 17 studies exploring the different factors that cause high school dropout in the United States found unequivocal evidence in all the studies that repetition was associated with later dropout from school (Jermison, Anderson and Whipple, 2002 cited in Jermison et al, 2002, p. 2).

Some may counter argue that the pupils who drop out were poor learners who could not keep up with others and were thus doomed to fail irrespective of being made to repeat. However, as has been illustrated above, many children are made to repeat without objective evaluation of their performance, and children who are weak but promoted go on to do better than those who have been forced to repeat, so this counterargument is not strongly supported by pedagogical evidence.

In the United States, Grissom and Shepard (1989, pp. 60–1) estimate, based on empirical evidence, that an increase in the annual repetition rate from 5% to 7%, leading to the cumulative repetition rate for primary education to increase by 20%, would increase dropout rates from 3% to 6%. As a practical example, they posit that a region with a dropout rate of 20% could see it rise to 25% if the annual repetition rate rose from 5% to 7% in a given grade.

Within Sub-Saharan Africa, Fredriksen (2005) points out that while around 93% of all children entered primary school in 2001, only two-thirds actually completed the cycle, with the remainder either repeating or dropping out. Only half of those completing mastered the expected basic skills. These averages hide large variations between countries, thus many children leave school either semi-literate or totally illiterate (World Bank, 2005e, p. 31).

In 1994, Malawi experienced a sudden expansion in its primary education enrolments
due to the abolition of school fees, which enabled most children to access a primary school place. However, additional classrooms, trained teachers and teaching and learning materials were not provided to schools, leading to overcrowded classes meeting under trees with underqualified teachers. This has resulted in increased repetition and dropout rates (World Bank, 2004, p. 55). The primary repetition rate is currently around 25%, with 40% of children repeating the first grade. In the early grades, dropout rates are quite low, but by the end of the sixth grade, 40% of all children have dropped out, and this figure rises to approximately 60% by the end of the eighth grade (World Bank, 2004, p. 5).

1.5.2 Decreased Repetition and Dropout Lead to Increased Retention

A study of 44 African countries (Bernard et al., 2005, p. 69) found that a 1% repetition rate on average leads to a 1.3% increase in the dropout rate, with repetition explaining around 38% of the variance in the proportion of primary school dropouts. The authors gave a hypothetical example of the practical implications of this: a country with a repetition rate of 20% and a primary completion rate of 60% could increase the latter to 73% by reducing repetition to 10%.

Empirical studies estimate that a reduction from 24% to 10% in a country’s repetition rate (such as the Ivory Coast or Benin) could lead to a 10–12 percentage point increase in the retention rate with the impact being stronger for girls than for boys (World Bank, 2002, p. 2). Mingat (2002, pp. 11–12), in a study of Sahelian countries, estimates that if this group of countries reduced their average repetition rate from 20% to 7% (the average among Anglophone African countries) the retention rate could feasibly increase from 58% to 69%. In Togo, statistical modelling suggested that a drop in the repetition rate from 27% to 10% could lead to an 8.5 percentage point increase in the primary completion rate from 78.6% to 86% (World Bank, 2003a, p. 47).

On average in Africa, statistical estimates based on data for 50 countries, imply that a 1% decrease in the repetition rate is associated with a 0.77% increase in the retention rate for that cycle (World Bank, 2005e; p. 31, World Bank, 2005d, pp. 42, 90). This result needs to be differentiated for girls and boys, as repetition rates are nearly twice as high for girls as they are for boys. Applying these overall findings to a country like Guinea means that a 5% reduction in repetition rates could raise the retention rate by 4.2 percentage points, taking the retention rate from 84% to 88% (World Bank, 2005d, p. 42).

Fredriksen (2005) concludes that one of the key policy focuses now for Sub-Saharan Africa is to reduce dropout rates and improve learning outcomes so that more children will complete a full cycle of primary school and all completers will attain certain minimum standards including basic literacy.

1.5.3 Retention Rates as an Indicator of Problems with Children Flow Management

High retention rates can be a sign of problems with the management of children’s flow from grade to grade. Analysing the structure of progression in Ethiopia, the World Bank (2005c, pp. 10, 13) identifies ineffective or unnecessary checkpoints in the flow of children through the grades. For example, there is a standardised, regional examination at the end of grade 8 which is supposed to select children who are able to progress from the second cycle of primary education to the first cycle of secondary. In practice, however, almost all children progress and so the examination fails in its purposes of setting a minimum entry floor for secondary education and of managing pupil ingress to numbers with which the system can cope, thus increasing class size and reducing quality. Conversely, the selection point at grade 10 does effectively limit the number of pupils who continue, thus reducing the increasing pressure on higher education resources. This policy is designed to limit the number of students who complete higher education only to find that there are no suitable jobs. Where there are problems in managing learner flows effectively, unnecessary repetition may ensue, and this in turn negatively affects completion rates. The acceptance of repetition can thus mask deep structural and organisational problems with student flow management.
1.6 The Psychological Impact of Repetition

Research on the psychological impact of repetition is wholly based on Western countries. However, the principal findings are still of some relevance for children in Sub-Saharan Africa, though given the high incidence of repetition, particularly in Francophone countries, repeaters are less of a small minority than in Western countries, and thus may be impacted upon less severely than Western children.

Troncin, the leading French researcher on repetition, states that ‘repetition, is the first ostensible sign of school marginalisation’ (Troncin, 2006) with very strong psychological consequences on the child (Troncin, 2004, p. 2). He cites a study by Mallet (2005) which found that third grade primary children who are repeaters tend to underestimate their actual level of competence and have a fear of failing again in the future. In his own research, Troncin (2005, p. 13) finds that repeaters live in fear of being mocked by non-repeaters and they feel sadness about being separated from friends in their peer group. Several primary repeaters stated that the only reassurance is when they are not the only repeaters from their peer group and then they have a small group of their initial classmates with them.

A significant body of research has been undertaken in the United States examining the psychological impact of repetition. Research by Holmes (1989) considered more than 40 studies looking at the socio-emotional outcomes of repetition, and concluded that on average, repeaters displayed ‘poorer attendance, social adjustment, attitudes toward school and more problem behaviors in comparison to matched cohorts’ (cited in Jimerson, 1999, p. 246). More recent research by Jimerson (2001 cited in Anderson et al, 2002, pp. 1–2) analysing 19 repetition studies undertaken during the 1990s gave evidence for lower self-esteem and lower rates of school attendance among repeaters, leading to a higher probability of future dropout. It also found that the longer-term effects on students who go on to drop out of school without a diploma are quite significant, with these students facing difficulties finding and maintaining jobs, and experiencing higher levels of mental health difficulties, substance abuse and criminal activities than high school graduates. The same research found negative effects of repetition across all areas of socio-emotional adjustment (i.e. emotional adjustment, peer competence, problem behaviours, attention and self-esteem).

Crahay and Delhaxhe (1993) commenting on research in Germany and the United States concluded that repetition has a negative impact on the self-image of children.

Anderson et al, 2002, p. 2 comments on American children’s perceptions of the stress of different life events. In the 1980s, out of 20 stressful life events, grade 6 children ranked repetition third after the loss of a parent or going blind. When he repeated this study in 2001 with some colleagues, they found that American grade 6 children ranked repetition at the top as the most stressful life event that they could experience. Troncin (2006) found that among French children, a survey has revealed that repetition is perceived as the second most stressful life event after the loss of a loved one.

All the existing research has led UNESCO to conclude that low self-esteem and a negative image of school due to children being forced to repeat can lead to delinquency and criminality (UNESCO, 1998a, p. 27).

1.7 Perceptions of Repetition Among Parents, Teachers and Learners

1.7.1 Teachers

A study by UNESCO (1998a, p. 39) notes that in environments where repetition is common practice, teachers are generally opposed to automatic promotion as it undermines teaching methods they have used for many years. UNESCO discovered that part of this opposition is because teachers feel let down when they have been promised additional resources to provide supplementary support to children who are automatically promoted but struggling academically, and these resources have never materialised.

Troncin’s (2006) research shows a generally positive attitude to repetition among French teachers, with the view that it is a preventative approach to ensuring that students who do not succeed in one year’s assessment get another chance the next year. Troncin states that ‘repetition is the first ostensible sign of school marginalisation’ (Troncin, 2006) which has profound psychological consequences for the child. He cites research by Mallet (2005) which found that third grade primary children who are repeaters tend to underestimate their actual level of competence and have a fear of failing again in the future. In his own research, Troncin (2005, p. 13) finds that repeaters live in fear of being mocked by non-repeaters and they feel sadness about being separated from friends in their peer group. Several primary repeaters stated that the only reassurance is when they are not the only repeaters from their peer group and then they have a small group of their initial classmates with them.
Crahay (2003), in researching the views of Belgian and Genevan teachers found, divided views on the benefits of repetition. Certain 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. On the whole, teachers did not see repetition as a failure in their teaching or as an unjust practice. The majority of primary teachers did not think that repetition has a negative impact on children or on their confidence, but is rather a way of providing remedial support to weaker children. By contrast, a survey among secondary school teachers has shown that repetition does have a negative impact on children’s confidence in their own abilities. In addition, just under 50% of secondary teachers surveyed believed that children could fully catch up the following year, and most teachers thought that with relevant intervention, it would be possible to avoid the majority of repeaters. Meuret (2002, p. 43) cites an alternative study involving the interviewing of 30 Belgian primary school teachers (Grisay, 1992) which found that in 45% of cases, repetition enabled children to get back on track; in 30% of cases, children showed improvement; in 18% of cases no progress was made; and that it had done more bad than good in 7% of cases.

In the United States, Crahay (2003) found that there is a pecking order in favour of repetition with headteachers supporting it most strongly, teachers less so, and parents being the least in favour. Byrnes (1989) undertook a survey on the views of American teachers, parents, children and educators on the practice of repetition. He found that 74% of principals, 85% of teachers and 59% of parents felt that children should either ‘always’ or ‘usually’ be retained for appropriate reasons. By contrast, only 9% of principals, 11% of teachers and 17% of parents felt that children should ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ be retained. Appropriate reasons included lack of basic skills, emotional immaturity, academic failure for reasons other than lack of basic skills, and excessive absences. The three most common characteristics that teachers and principals observed among repeaters were: (i) developmental immaturity, (ii) low self-esteem, and (iii) low motivation (Byrnes, 1989, pp. 111–112).

In addition, of the 62 responses to how effective retention was, 89% of teachers responded with ‘effective’ or ‘very effective’ (Byrnes, 1989, p. 128).

Research on 230 teachers in Quebec in 1996 (Pouliot 1998 cited in Gouvernement du Québec, 2003) found that 81.2% of teachers believed that grade repetition was an effective means of preventing failure in higher grades, with 89.9% believing that children who do not achieve the objectives in two of the three basic subjects (reading, writing and mathematics) should repeat. By contrast, only 8.3% of teachers believed that children should never repeat. When asked about their beliefs on the effects of repetition on children’s emotional and social status, teachers were more divided in their opinions, but over 75% believed that repetition in the early years (either kindergarten or year 1 of elementary school) had little negative impact on children’s emotional and psychological well-being, though they were more reserved about the impact of repetition in later grades. When these same teachers were asked whether they were familiar with evidence from research on grade repetition, 64% answered negatively (Gouvernement du Québec, 2003, pp. 23–25).

Discussions with teachers in a selection of African countries discovered that most view it favourably and as an essential tool for weaker children to be given a second chance to improve their knowledge and be more prepared for the higher levels of schooling. Nearly 80% of Senegalese teachers thought repetition was an ‘efficient’ measure, and 18% thought it was ‘extremely efficient’. Only 2% believed that repetition was ‘totally inefficient’ (CONFEMEN, 2003c, p. 76 cited in Michaelowa, 2003, p. 15).
1.7.2 Families/Parents

Troncin (2004, p. 11) found that 90% of parents in France felt that the first year of schooling of their children was a critical year for their future development. More than a third of families surveyed felt that repetition of this year was serious, with a further third believing that it gave young children a new opportunity. However, many families believed that getting the foundation year right was critical to the future learning of their children, with more than a third of all families accepting the decision of the teacher to make their child repeat without question. Troncin further states (p. 15) that most families did not question the competence of teachers and decisions of schools in relation to repetition, believing these decisions to be in the interests of their children. However, some families were not in agreement. Of these, around half felt disappointed about the progress their children were making at school in the medium and long term, and the other half believed that what their children had learned during the first year of primary school had not been taken into account.

‘Despite the abundance of researchers discouraging the use of retention, the favorable attitudes of many teachers, administrators, and parents toward retention (Byrnes, 1989) may be partially understood by examining the source of their information. Most educators consider how the children in their schools do the following year and possibly the year after, but do not examine the outcomes of retained children through high school. Moreover, as Shepard and Smith (1990) aptly explain, “Without controlled comparisons, retention looks as if it works, especially if you believe it does” (p. 85). If retained students display improvement the year following retention, this provides further single-subject, anecdotal evidence supporting the educator’s decision to retain, especially in the absence of comparisons with a matched group of students.’

(Jimerson, 1999, p. 265)

1.7.3 Students

Among French students, Troncin found that one third of all repeaters stated that they did not know why they were forced to repeat as it is rarely discussed at home or school. 80% of repeaters did not talk about the fact that they were repeating a year with their new classmates for fear of being mocked and out of desire to be like others. 70% of all children stated that the repeaters in their class ‘mess around’ and ‘are not kind’ and repeaters felt that their academic performance remained inferior to that of their classmates (Troncin, 2004, pp. 12–13; Troncin, 2005, p. 18). Troncin discovered that both children and young people found repetition a stressful event. While children considered it is sometimes useful and necessary, young people considered it a humiliating measure.

Byrnes (1989) undertook a survey on the view of students on the practice of repetition. Of 64 student responses, 84% centred on ‘bad’, ‘sad’ and ‘upset’ when asked how they felt or would feel if they were forced to repeat a year. In addition, when students were asked what the worst thing had been or would be about being made to repeat, 22% responded ‘being laughed at and teased’, 16% responded ‘not being with friends’, 14% responded ‘being punished’, 10% responded ‘being sad’, 8% responded ‘getting bad grades’, 4% responded ‘being embarrassed’ and 4% responded ‘doing the same work’. In addition, when asked if there might be at least something good about repeating a year, where some students said commented that they had learned more or made new friends, 21% of all students said that there was nothing good about repeating a year (Byrnes, 1989, pp. 116, 120–121).

1.8 The Financial Impact of Repetition

From a purely economic point of view, the practice of repetition is extremely inefficient. Where repetition rates are significant, it means that additional teachers and classrooms are needed to cater not only for the regular cohort of children, but also for those who repeat and spend longer in the system. Furthermore, for each additional year that a child repeats, the public purse must pay what it would not normally have to in a more efficient system. In the longer term, each extra year a child spends in school through repetition is one year less they will spend in the labour market.
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

in the future. Also, given that repeaters are more likely to drop out, school dropouts generally earn lower wages than those who leave with a diploma. Thus Alexander et al (1994, p. 8) conclude:

‘The direct excess educational cost for teaching students who repeat a year is thus in actuality only a small fraction of the long-term costs to the student and to society.’

In France in 2002, it was estimated that repeaters cost the education system an additional €2.3 billion or around a 4.7% addition in the educational budget for compulsory education (Troncin, 2004, pp. 1–2; Troncin, 2006). In the United States, it is estimated that around 2.5 million students (5–10% of the student population) repeat each year, costing around $14 billion per annum to provide the additional year of schooling (Jimerson et al, 2002, p. 1 and Anderson et al, 2002, p. 1). Thomas (2000, p. 1) cites a study by McCollum et al (1999), which states that each additional year of schooling due to repetition in the United States costs approximately $3,500 to $7,500 per child, depending upon the district.

On the Latin American continent, various studies have examined the financial cost of repetition. The cost of 10 million repeaters in ten Latin American countries was estimated at around US$1 billion per annum in 1992 (Schiefelbein, 1992 cited in King et al, 1999, p. 1) while an earlier study on Brazil found that the total cost of repetition was equivalent to the entire federal government budget for primary education (World Bank, 1986, cited in Patrinos and Psacharopolous, 1992, p. 3).

In most African countries, where classrooms are already overcrowded, the children – teacher ratios are high, and some children cannot even access a place in primary schools due to the lack of a sufficient number of classrooms and teachers, the active practice of repetition prevents many out-of-school children coming to school. Given that resources are severely limited in Africa and 42.4 million children in the 6–14 age group still remain out of school, repetition remains a costly and exclusive policy (UNESCO/UNICEF, 2005, p. 17).

There are several country case studies which outline the cost of repetition and/or dropout in Africa. In 1995, the estimated cost of repetition in Sub-Saharan Africa was US$570 million (UNESCO, 1998a, p. 25). The primary education efficiency index\textsuperscript{5} for Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa stood at 61% in 1998, indicating that nearly 40% of total resources were being wasted, while for Anglophone Sub-Saharan Africa, the primary efficiency index reached 75%, meaning that only one quarter of all resources were wasted (World Bank, 2002, p. 55). In Sahelian countries, Mingat (2002, p. 10) used efficiency indices to estimate that around one third of all resources mobilised for primary education were wasted due to repetition and dropout. The next section looks at specific countries.

1.8.1 Anglophone Countries

• In Ethiopia, 17% of public resources were wasted in 2001/02 due to repetition (World Bank, 2005b, p. 33)

• In Kenya in 1997 education was consuming 55% of the government’s recurrent expenditure, yet over half of all children failed to complete a full cycle of eight years of primary education. The total estimated cost of wastage due to the high repetition and dropout rates between 1992 and 1996 was 5.2 million Kenyan Shillings (Abagi and Odipo, 1997, p. 24)

• In Lesotho, nearly 30% of all public resources were wasted due to the 21% repetition rate, and if the repetition and dropout rates are both taken together, 43% of all public resources were wasted in 2003 (World Bank, 2005f, pp. 42–43, 3).

• In Malawi, 60% of public resources were wasted in 2000 at primary level meaning that the government was financing 20 school

\textsuperscript{5} The primary education efficiency index is the relationship between the theoretical number of pupil-years needed for a given cohort of children to complete the primary cycle (i.e. assuming no repetition or dropout) and the actual number of years that the state ends up financing this cohort to complete the primary cycle due to repetition and dropout. With no repetition or dropout, this figure would be one, but in reality, the figure is always less than one.
years to generate every graduate from primary school, when it should have been financing only an eight-year cycle if there were no repetition or dropout. 20% of all resources are wasted due to repetition which stood at 25.8% in 2000, with high dropout rates (8.2% in 2000) playing a more significant factor in the wastage of resources. In financial terms, the same study estimated that with a total primary enrolment of 3 million children, a repetition rate of 25% and a unit cost of MK 1,000 (around US$10) spent each year on a child’s primary education, an additional MK 750 million would be required to achieve the same child–teacher ratio as in a situation without repetition. This led the study to conclude that a reduction of one percentage point in the repetition rate would lead to annual savings of approximately MK 30 million (around US$ 300,000) in Malawi (World Bank, 2004, pp. 7, 56–7).

• In Swaziland, over 40% of public resources were wasted recently due to repetition and dropout rates. A model estimating the costs of achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015 found that if repetition continues at current levels, an additional 226,000 school places at primary level and 96,000 at lower secondary level would be needed compared to only 189,000 and 86,000 respectively if repetition could be totally phased out. When staffing and non-staffing recurrent costs are factored in at present levels, the same model estimated that savings of 73 million Emalangeni (US$11 million) could be made on the 2015 primary annual budget and 47 million Emalangeni (US$7 million) on the 2015 lower secondary budget (World Bank, 2006b, pp. 22, 30).

1.8.2 Francophone and Lusophone Countries

• In Benin around 45% of public resources mobilised for the primary cycle were wasted in 1998/99 with a quarter of all resources wasted purely due to repetition (World Bank, 2002, p. 55).

• In Burundi, the World Bank (2006a, pp. ix, viii) found that nearly 53% of all resources spent on primary education were wasted in 2003/04 when the country had a primary repetition rate of 29.1%.

• In the Central African Republic, 65% of all public resources spent on primary education were wasted due to repetition (the primary repetition rate was 30%) and dropout (Dorléans and Gacougnolle, 2003 cited in Gounebana, 2006, p. 206).

• In Guinea, 27% of public resources for primary education were wasted due to repetition rate and dropout combined, with 11.6% being wasted due to repetition alone in 2003/04 when the primary repetition rate was 10.5% (World Bank, 2005d, pp. 84, 92).

• In the Ivory Coast, where the primary repetition rate for 2000 was 24%, the World Bank estimated that around 19% of public funds were lost due to repetition, an amount totalling FCFA 24 billion in 2000. Between 1998 and 2000, the same study noted that around 35% of resources mobilised for primary education were wasted due to repetition and dropout combined (World Bank, 2005e, pp. xviii, 31).

• In Mauritania, 38% of public resources were wasted in 1998 due to repetition and dropout at primary school level (World Bank, 2001c, p. 23).

• In Mozambique, 42% of government resources equivalent to MT166 billion (or about US$11 million) were wasted in the first cycle of primary school (grades 1 to 5) in 1998 with over 20% of resources being wasted due to repetition which stood at 23.7% (World Bank, 2003b, pp. 4, 30–31, 41).

• In Togo, around a third of public resources for primary education were wasted in the 1999/2000 school year due to repetition and dropout, with 19% of public resources being wasted due to the repetition rate alone which stood at 27% (World Bank, 2003a, p. 43).

Education provision in developing countries frequently has associated costs not directly connected to the classroom. For example, the World Food Programme (WFP) was feeding 21.7 million children in 74 countries in its School Feeding Programmes in 2005 (WFP, 2007). Most of these programmes have a primarily pedagogical intention rather than a purely nutritional one. Reducing the number of children who repeat would directly reduce the costs of such programmes, without necessarily risking children’s health, and would
free food resources to be used to increase attendance among other children.

Given that section 1.4 has shown repetition to have very few pedagogical benefits, it would seem that the money spent on children repeating the same year could be better spent by promoting children and providing them with additional pedagogical support.

A recent study on the cost of achieving universal secondary education including the primary education Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) estimated that around US$34 billion is needed annually if expansion is to occur over the next 15 years, dropping to $28 billion if expansion were to occur over a 25-year horizon. This assumes current repetition rates and levels of cost efficiency. If however, countries reduced repetition rates and overall costs to the best-practice rates set by the Education for All Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) Indicative Framework, these costs could fall to $32 billion and $24 billion respectively (Glewwe, Zhao and Binder, 2006, pp. 35, 54). These figures are of course global averages, but where repetition rates are high, the financial savings to be made by reducing repetition, even if a proportion of the savings are spent on more targeted pedagogical interventions, are significant.

1.9 Vulnerable Groups most at Risk of Repetition

In the United States, several studies find that children who repeat are most likely to be poor, male, from a minority group (often African-American or Latino), with parents who lack high school diplomas, and that many receive reduced-price meals at school and are from single-parent households (House, 1989, p. 209; Thomas, 2000, p. 1 and Alexander et al, 1994, p. 57).

In developing countries, various studies identify the following groups as those most vulnerable to poor attendance, repetition, early dropout and exclusion:

- the poorest in society;
- working children;
- children living in remote and rural areas;
- orphans and those affected by HIV/AIDS;
- children with physical or learning disabilities;
- nomadic and indigenous children or ethnic minorities;
- refugees, internally displaced children and those affected by conflict or natural disasters.

Other factors which also have an impact on the likelihood of repetition are a child’s family situation, the gender and educational background of the head of the household (UNESCO/UNICEF, 2005), the number of children in the household, and from where the household’s main source of income is derived. In Uruguay a study by Patrinos and Psacharopolous (1992) found that repetition decreases as parents’ education and income increase.

Very generally these factors can set children apart as well as impact on their ability to access education and, once they are in school, their ability to engage with their education. Enrolment rates are typically low for these vulnerable children, but for those who do enrol in school, early dropout and repetition can occur when the education system fails fully to take into consideration the needs of these learners. Information on exact repetition rates for these groups is limited, but the following evidence highlights the pervasiveness of repetition amongst these vulnerable groups:

In Patrinos’ and Psacharopolous’ (1992) review of the literature on repetition in Latin America, for Brazil they found that there was discrimination against learners from disadvantaged backgrounds; and repetition rates were the highest among the most deprived (i.e. those whose parents had the lowest levels of education and income). Tansel (1997, pp. 848–9) found that in the Ivory Coast, the three factors in order of priority that contributed most significantly to an increase in schooling were urbanisation, improvements in the education of the father and income growth.

Statistical estimates for Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole imply that the effects of repetition are felt more severely on girls, rural children, and families in the lowest poverty quintile (World Bank, 2005e, p. 31) and that children...
from these groups are most likely to drop out of school when they have already repeated a grade (World Bank, 2005d, p. 42). Higher repetition rates also tend to be found in post-conflict countries such as Burundi, Chad, Mozambique and Rwanda (UNESCO, 2003, p. 57)

1.9.1 Repetition and Gender: Mixed Evidence

Evidence varies between countries as to whether repetition rates are higher for boys or for girls. Patrinos and Psacharopolous (1992) did not find significant differences in repetition rates by gender in Latin America. A 2001 World Bank study looking at knowledge and finance in Sub-Saharan Africa stated the following:

‘Primary completion rates and transition rates from primary to secondary education show no clear evidence of systematic disadvantage to African girls… Yet variations within and between countries are considerable, and higher repetition and dropout rates, as well as lower learning achievement, for girls have been found in several countries.’

(World Bank, 2001a, p. 46)

A 2003 UNESCO report found that the incidence of repetition was generally higher for boys, the exception being in Sub-Saharan African countries where girls repeat more than boys (UNESCO, 2003, pp. 57–8). A study by Kane (2004) on girls’ education in Sub-Saharan Africa found that in general, boys repeat more than girls, with female repeaters usually being found in Central and West African Francophone countries. She states that policies of automatic promotion have a greater negative impact on girls than on boys, since the performance of girls is often lower than that of boys (Kane, 2004, p. 51).

Looking at individual countries, the following evidence is found for gender disparities, though the evidence is mixed as to whether girls or boys are being impacted more negatively by repetition.

• In Guatemala high repetition rates and failure to complete primary school are most common amongst rural, extremely poor Ladina and Mayan females (Hallman et al, 2006, pp. 19–20, 26–27).

• In a study on Chad, Auger claims that research undertaken by Tsafak shows that repetition is not influenced by gender except in socially privileged groups where girls repeat more often than boys (Auger, 1998, p. 14).

• In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), girls scored 12 points lower in French tests than boys which, given that a reasonable command of French (the LoI) is critical to good performance in school as a whole, leads the World Bank to conclude is the main reason for higher repetition and dropout rates among girls (World Bank, 2005a, p. 100).

• In Lesotho, primary school repetition is more common among boys (12%) than among girls (9.5%), though girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys particularly in the later grades, with 11% of girls (7% of boys) dropping out of school at the end of standard 6, and 23% of girls (18% of boys) leaving the education system at the end of Standard 7 (World Bank, 2005f, p. 98).

• In Mali, repetition affects boys more profoundly than girls, with boys repeating classes on average 1.5 times more often than girls in the same age cohort. Primary school repetition rates in 1999 were 4.3% for boys compared to 2.8% for girls, and the probability of not obtaining a qualification were twice as high for boys as for girls, respectively at 25.8% and 11.5% (Diallo, 2001, p. 21). In the first cycle of primary education, high repetition and dropout rates of 18% and 5% respectively were the main reason why many families pull their daughters out of school due to weak performance or insufficient work (Diallo, 2001, pp. 49, 89).

• In Swaziland, repetition rates in primary school are higher for boys than for girls (World Bank, 2006b, p. 66).

• In Togo, the negative impacts of repetition are particularly felt by girls (World Bank, 2003a, pp. 40–41).

1.9.2 Poor Households

The opportunity cost of schooling is one of the main obstacles for poor families, who would lose the income or services derived from their children’s labour, either in the
home, in subsistence farming or in other work places. Thus, ‘school learning’ may appear as irrelevant or unnecessary in comparison to immediate needs. A study by Rosenthal (1999) describes financial hardship as causing ‘stuttering’ school attendance, resulting in long periods of absenteeism and an increased risk of repetition and dropout (Bernard, 2001, p. 7). Research by Edwards (2002) supports this finding that non-poor children are reported to have much lower repetition rates (Hallman et al, 2006, p. 9).

The issue of repetition tends to be exacerbated in poor rural households, where health problems, malnutrition, domestic demands on children’s time and seasonal demands for their labour in agriculture all impact upon attendance and therefore on learning achievement. In a recent study the number of out-of-school children in rural areas was 1.5 to 2 times higher than in urban areas (UNESCO/UNICEF, 2005, p. 39). The report’s case study of Indonesia also showed that a significant proportion of children were in a lower grade than would be expected for their age, and this trend was far more common in rural households (UNICEF/UNESCO, 2005, p. 41). A study in Guatemala found that rural 7–12-year-olds were twice as likely to cite repetition as the reason for no longer being enrolled at school as urban children in the same age range, and rural 13–24-year-olds were more than three times as likely than urban 13–24-year-olds to attribute repetition to no longer being in school (Hallman et al, 2006, pp. 30–31). Similarly, Patrinos and Psacharopolous (1992, p. 18) found that children from poorer households in Bolivia and Guatemala were much more likely to repeat, and the World Bank found this to be the case in Togo too (World Bank, 2003a, pp. 40–41, 51). In Zimbabwe, those regions with a high population of rural children had the highest repetition rates despite an official policy of no repetition (Machingaidze et al, 1998, pp. 31, 6). In the Himalayas, it was found that children miss many days of school either to help with family subsistence farming or, during the summer months, to earn money from tourist-related activities (Pragya, 2006 p. 10).

Evidence suggests that rural children receive less assistance and have access to fewer facilities than their urban counterparts. The Monitoring and Learning Achievement project in 2002 noted that: ‘with few exceptions, urban schools were found to be better equipped than rural schools, especially with respect to the supply of water and electricity. Also, the physical deterioration and general disrepair of school buildings in rural areas are frequently noted in inspection reports’ (Lakin and Gasperini, 2003, p. 91). Studies in Mexico and India have found that rural children are over 20% more likely to receive no help or supervision for their studies at home (Lakin and Gasperini, 2003, p. 92).

With increasing rural–urban migration, repetition is not necessary being resolved. In urban areas of Uruguay low enrolment rates and very high repetition rates are seen alongside high teenage pregnancy, high youth unemployment and increased violence and drug use (Baker, 2001, p. 10). Shift systems in some African schools may exacerbate poor attendance and repetition, especially in urban areas where children are left open to involvement in street gangs (The African Contexts of Children’s Rights: Section 3.2.4, cited in Bernard, 2001, p. 6). Vulnerable groups in urban areas such as street children may often be more hidden and are therefore more difficult to target.

1.9.3 Other Vulnerable Groups

1. Orphans

A joint study by the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) and the Botswana government (Bennell et al, 2001, pp. 56–57) found that repetition rates tended to be lower for learners who live with relatives, siblings, and other carers than among learners who live with both parents or one parent. The main exceptions were above-average repetition rates for primary and senior secondary school learners who live with their grandparents (28.6%) in comparison with those who lived with both parents (17.5%). A UNESCO report (Bernard, 2001, p. 38) noted a similar trend with HIV/AIDS orphans now living with their grandparents and attributed this to grandparents having limited experience of social service agencies and schools so they are less comfortable and capable to counsel these children or urge them to go to school.
The DFID/Botswana study (Bennell et al., 2001, p. 57) also found that repetition rates among double orphans at primary school were lower than among children whose parents were both alive at primary level, but they were higher at junior and senior secondary schools. However, it is far more common for orphans to stop attending school, with 15.4% of double orphans dropping out of school in Botswana in comparison with 2.9% of children who lived with both of their parents. World Bank research in Lesotho found that orphans were much more disadvantaged in repetition and dropout measures than non-orphans (World Bank, 2005f, p. 9).

The impact of AIDS can have a significant effect on children and their attendance at school. A study by Farzanegan (1998) noted that children affected by HIV/AIDS will often experience a ‘downwards spiral’ of exclusions, resulting in erratic school attendance, repetition and eventual dropout, as they face the burden of caring for infected relatives and responsibility for siblings as well as themselves (Bernard, 2001, p. 12). It was estimated in 2003 that 12.3 million children in Sub-Saharan Africa had been orphaned by HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS, UNICEF and USAID, 2004, p. 26). A study in Kenya found that in some areas 52% of children orphaned by AIDS were not in school compared to 2% of non-AIDS orphans (Bernard, 2001, p. 38).

2. Children with Disabilities or Special Needs
Little information is available on repetition rates of disabled children and children with other special educational needs. Studies have shown that early detection of disabilities, for example by screening for visual and hearing impediments, can help keep children in within the education system. Once in school, training for teachers, information to parents, and specialised resources such as reading material in Braille, can prevent early dropout and repetition (Lakin and Gasperini, 2003, p. 140).

3. Nomadic and Indigenous Children
Repetition and enrolment rates are often highest among nomadic and indigenous communities. Most of the research on this subject has been undertaken in Latin America. In Chile, Patrinos and Psacharopolous (1992) found that repetition rates were highest among indigenous populations living in remote, isolated, rural areas, with the Malleco province, with the highest indigenous population in the country, having a repetition rate that was twice the national average (Schiefelbein, 1992 cited in Patrinos and Psacharopolous, 1992, p. 2). Within Bolivia and Guatemala, children from indigenous families have a greater likelihood of repeating. Research undertaken by Hernandez in rural Peru in 1998, found that 70% of Quechua-speaking people over the age of five had never been to school, compared to only 45% of rural non-indigenous Peruvians (cited in Patrinos and Psacharopolous, 1992, p. 5). Hallman et al. (2006, p. 3) also found similarly high repetition rates and signs of discrimination in Guatemala towards the indigenous Mayan population.

Nomadic groups have attributed poor attendance and enrolment rates not only to the remoteness of their communities but also to an inflexibility of timetabling, the expense of education and lack of a relevant culturally sensitive curriculum (Basic Education Programme for Karamojong Children, 1997, cited in Bernard, 2001, p. 13).

1.10 The Impact of Repetition on the Achievement of the Education Millennium Development Goals

The MDG of Universal Primary Education (UPE) is an inclusive target for all children whatever their background or ability. By contrast, part of the rationale for repetition is based on the old colonial system of training an elite group of future administrators for the country in a very selective manner and excluding those who were not up to the relevant standard. This has led Bernard et al. (2005, pp. 21, 80) to argue that repetition is totally contrary to the objective of Education For All (EFA) which demands inclusivity, and that today Africa faces a choice of ‘Education For All’ and abandoning repetition or ‘Education

---

[6] Orphan refers to a child under the age of 18 who has lost one or both parents.
For a Few’, maintaining repetition, meaning that the UPE target remains far off, particularly for Francophone countries.

Sub-Saharan Africa is the region that faces the greatest challenges in reaching the UPE target (Naschold, 2002, p. 1). In 2002, out of 28 countries which were described as being ‘far from reaching EFA’, 16 of them were in Sub-Saharan Africa, and if the focus is narrowed to the UPE target, 24 out of 44 off-track countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2005, pp. 68, 70).

The access, quality, equity and finance challenges of UPE as well as the additional constraints of high population growth, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and conflict in many nations, mean that around 20 million African children of school age do not go to primary school, and of all those that do, nearly a third never complete the total primary school cycle (Bernard et al, 2005, pp. 21–22) often leading to illiteracy for life. In addition, Fredriksen (2005) argues that only half of those that do complete the primary cycle actually master the expected basic skills.

Repetition further adds to Africa’s constraints, as it worsens the access problem with repeating children taking up already limited places leading to the exclusion of new children or to their inclusion but at the cost of even more overcrowded classrooms. In Cameroon in the 2002/03 school year, the country was theoretically able to accommodate all primary school aged children, and had a gross enrolment rate of 105%. However, over 140,000 children were not in school, largely explained by the fact that around 25% of all children who were in school were repeaters and thus taking up these places (Bernard et al, 2005, p. 22). Given that there is little empirical evidence to support the view that repetition increases learning outcomes (see section 1.5), with more crowded classrooms and little, if any, additional support being made available to repeating learners, educational quality is not improving. Certain groups are more vulnerable to repetition (see section 1.9) and subsequently to dropping out, meaning that the inequalities among different beneficiaries of the education system worsen. Finally, repetition is very costly, as the public purse and additional family support have to pay for the additional years of schooling, whereas this money could be used more effectively in other ways to improve quality and enable more children in a cohort to complete primary schooling.

Repetition also has a significant impact on the primary school completion rate, a key component of UPE. The higher the repetition rate, the fewer the children that complete primary schooling and the more likelihood there is of some children who have repeated going on to drop out.

Bernard et al (2005, pp. 24–25) compare 45 Francophone and Anglophone African countries repetition rates and primary school completion rates in the PASEC study. In 2002, the average repetition rate for Anglophone countries was 8.5% and the average completion rate, 70.3%. By contrast, in Francophone countries, the average repetition rate was a much higher 18% and the average completion rate a significantly lower 51.3%. The authors conclude that if Francophone countries had a similar repetition rate to Anglophone countries, their primary completion rate would be around 60% rather than the current 51%. They further argue that repetition is putting a brake on UPE, with around half of the delay in Francophone countries being related to the policies and practices of repetition.

Evidence from Niger, one of the few Francophone countries that has seen a dramatic reduction in its repetition rate from a high of 17% in 1993 to a low of 5% in 2004, shows that as a result, around 255,000 additional primary pupils (around a 43% increase) have been able to attend school, thus moving Niger closer towards achieving UPE (Bernard et al, 2005, p. 76).

‘Africa now needs to further improve access: If the current level of grade repetition of 20% is maintained, the region needs a GER [gross enrolment rate] of at least 120% to enroll all children of primary school age. Africa also needs to sharply reduce high dropout rates. Whether or not the region can make this sort of progress will hinge on its success in overcoming an almost overwhelming number of shifting obstacles, such as tight budgets, weak capacity, and…’
HIV/AIDS. And the international community will need to boost aid levels and improve the effectiveness of its assistance.’
(Fredriksen, 2005)

Thus finding a way to limit repetition and dropout must be at the heart of the EFA agenda (UNESCO, 1998a, p. 5) especially in light of limited resources, and this is the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 2: Specific Policy Recommendations and Case Studies

2.1 Introduction

While much of the existing literature surveyed underlines how problematic repetition is and its negative impacts, little research goes a step further in offering realistic policy recommendations on how repetition can be addressed and reduced in the specific context of Sub-Saharan Africa in a way that contributes to improved access to and quality of primary education for all children. There is an awareness that a culture change is required in Francophone countries, but no real suggestions about how this can take place, and what additional support teachers would need to move towards a system where automatic promotion is the norm with repetition only happening in exceptional circumstances. In addition, while there is a developing literature on the provision of education to specialist groups such as the children of pastoralists, little linkage has been made to the fact that these groups are often most at-risk of repeating and dropping out of school.

Thus, a key part of this chapter is to make realistic and practical policy recommendations about how repetition can be addressed in Sub-Saharan Africa, reducing it where possible while recognising that there may be a need to offer modified approaches to the current system of pedagogical instruction provided for those children most at risk of repeating. Where appropriate, we will seek to outline what these pedagogical approaches could be. The recommendations will thus look at two distinctive groups of children: (i) those who are being forced to repeat even though they have attended regularly, due to a teacher’s policy decision on repetition or subjective judgement on a child’s performance who would actually not suffer too much educationally if they were automatically promoted and given more support in the classroom; and (ii) those who are especially at risk of repetition due to low school attendance leading to very low levels of learning (for example, children of pastoralists and rural children) and what alternative approaches can be used to increase attendance and lower the need for these children to repeat. Selected case studies of successful interventions will be presented where appropriate.

There is a concern that, in light of evidence, policymakers will just end up proposing a blanket policy of automatic promotion instead of repetition. However, quality issues have to be addressed, and automatic promotion without additional learning support to weaker children and more appropriate education for those most at risk of repeating or dropping out will not solve the basic issue of quality, thus there is no one-size-fits-all automatic promotion model that this research is recommending. Instead, the research is looking for common strands of recommendations that respond to the learning needs of each child in an appropriate manner based on the country context, whatever their difficulties in school are. Given the many reasons for repetition across Sub-Saharan Africa, it will be important to address the principal ones in a multi-faceted way.

“To promote or not to promote”, therefore, is not the question. The real issue is how to improve the level of low achievers, and ultimately how to prevent failure. The original objectives hoped to be fulfilled by repetition, namely, achievement, motivation, improved grade homogeneity, high academic standards, etc. are still valid educational concerns that need to be tackled by the development of an educational strategy based on a new set of assumptions derived from available research evidence.’

(Haddad, 1979, p. 31)

The policy recommendations outlined in the sections below come under three main headings: (i) pedagogical approaches, (ii) education management issues, and (iii) reaching vulnerable groups, and they are addressing the issue of repetition during the primary school cycle. It is important to note that in many African countries, the repetition
2.2 Pedagogical Approach

2.2.1 Improving Pre-Service and In-Service Teacher Training

A report by UNESCO (1998a, p. 33) cites several studies which show that the quality of a teacher’s teaching has a bigger impact on learning than spending more on textbooks and learning materials. Therefore, a major policy recommendation is that African countries reassess their pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes in light of the UPE agenda, to see how to make them more effective in improving the quality of schooling and in retaining more children in schools for a full cycle of primary education.

The Multi-Site Teacher Education Research Project (MUSTER) examined teacher education across five countries: Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, South Africa, and Trinidad and Tobago. Findings from this project on Ghana, Lesotho and Malawi along with findings from other research are commented on in more detail in the sections below.

1. Low Academic Standards of Teacher Trainees

Across the African sites of the MUSTER project, Lewin and Stuart (2003, pp. 58, 45) found that many students entering teacher training colleges (TTCs) barely attained the minimum academic qualifications needed, especially when it came to languages. This was a universal complaint from course tutors in Lesotho; and in Ghana, typically primary teacher trainees left school with low grades and low achievement in English with around 60% achieving only an E grade in the Secondary School Certificate of Education English examination. However, the authors note that despite this reality, tutors have not developed any pedagogical strategies such as extra support, remedial classes, or study skills classes to address these weaknesses in preparedness (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, p. 125). In Rwanda, junior secondary school leavers with the lowest examination results are automatically assigned to a TTC thus reinforcing the perception of teaching as a low-skilled occupation.

A study in Uganda shows that teachers with greater English language proficiency had a positive impact on children’s achievement in both language and mathematics (Lockheed, Verspoor and Associates, 1991, p. 63). Thus Lewin and Stuart argue that strategies need to be adopted to strengthen the academic skills and the subject and linguistic knowledge of trainee teachers.

2. Perceptions of Teaching and Learning Among Trainee Teachers

‘Smith (1989) found that one of the most important variables in whether or not a kindergarten teacher retained a student was not the teacher’s belief about the efficacy of retention, but rather the teacher’s belief about learning and development.’

(Peterson, 1989, p. 176)

The MUSTER project uncovered the perception among some trainee teachers that learning and ability in a child is innate and cannot be influenced by their teacher.

‘Ghanaian trainee teachers were much more likely than others to agree that… “Teachers cannot do much to improve the academic performance of low achieving students” with over 80% strongly agreeing or agreeing. These trainees appear not to have high expectations of their ability to improve children’s capabilities. For the
children need to be divided into ability groups to be taught well” there was general agreement across the samples except in Malawi, where less than 50% agreed. This would seem to reflect some consensus, if not a very strong one, that ability grouping was preferable to mixed ability classes.’

(Lewin and Stuart, 2003, p. 48)

However, once these teachers had completed their training, there was a general feeling that they could help those children who were falling behind in their learning and bring about changes in learning in the classroom. (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, p. 112)

3. Teacher Training Curriculum

Primary teacher training across Africa mostly occurs in TTCs which are residential and not necessarily close to schools for teaching practice. Lewin and Stuart (2003, p. 68) argue that the content of the teacher-training curriculum should include:

1. Subject content;
2. Pedagogical content and methods;
3. Education and professional studies (for example, how children learn);
4. Teaching practice.

However, it was found that training in Ghana, Lesotho and Malawi was heavily biased towards subject knowledge with little time given to professional and pedagogical components, and teaching practice being poorly supervised. The curriculum was overloaded, often outdated and very limited teaching materials were available; those that were used, were often out of date and not adapted to the local culture. Given the low academic standard of many students entering TTCs, tutors were faced with the dilemma of how to balance raising the academic level of students with teaching them how to teach, with some parts of the curricula being too academic and not matched to the students’ levels of achievement. In addition, due to low academic performance in English, many of the teachers found it difficult to learn in a language in which they did not feel very confident (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, pp. 61, 80).

The curriculum taught in TTCs was felt to be heavy on theory and light on practice with very little evidence of integration of the two. Tutors were good at talking about the importance of ‘learner-centred’ teaching, active learning methods, and new pedagogic approaches (such as group work, role play and reflective debate), but none of these things were put into practice in the way they taught their classes (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, pp. 73, 127, 172).

The authors point out that the move towards achieving the education MDGs has been seen in a global context without enough attention being paid to what this means for a country’s primary teacher education policy in terms of content, issues such as large class sizes and teaching children of a wide spectrum of abilities and achievements, resources, and finances. They state that the teacher education curricula has been slow to change and has not been fully adapted so that it is more appropriate to the needs of providing mass education with limited resources by many newly qualified or inexperienced teachers (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, pp. 183, 80, 35).

Thus the MUSTER project concludes that there is a need to help tutors to expand their intellectual horizons and apply new thinking in innovative ways. This will involve stripping down the presently overloaded curriculum, providing access to the latest thinking on teaching and learning, sharing existing good practice, and assisting students in thinking about how the curriculum can be adapted to meet the specific needs of a given school or classroom context (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, pp. 178, 189, 75, 98). This will need to include redesigning the professional and pedagogic components of teacher training to address specific issues such as preparing teachers for large classes, bilingual teaching, multi-grade teaching, and teaching a wide ability and age range. One practical approach suggested is to move towards a more modular curriculum where in addition to core modules covering essential skills and competencies, students can opt for different specialisms based on what they think they might need to know (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, pp. xvi, 187). The MUSTER project also suggests that providing trainee teachers with lots of support materials is much easier and cheaper than the mass
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

production of textbooks and is likely to have a significant impact on the quality of teaching (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, p. xxxi)

Related specifically to the practice of repetition, it is important that in TTCs, trainee teachers are presented with accurate evidence on the effects of repetition on children’s learning, and provided with adequate training on how to improve the quality of teaching and learning for children most at risk, and how to evaluate in an objective way through standardised tests the few cases where children may need to repeat (Bernard et al., 2005, p. 78).

4. Unpreparedness for Teaching in the Classroom at the End of Training

As has been mentioned already, across Africa the training that teachers have received is not preparing them adequately for the classroom. Given the need for additional teachers in almost every African country in order to reach the UPE target, Lockheed, Verspool and Associates (1991, p. 91) argue that: ‘To avoid producing new teachers with the same inadequate skills and professional commitment as many incumbent teachers, developing countries must design policies that (a) raise the level of knowledge of prospective teachers, (b) increase the pedagogical skills of new teachers, and (c) improve the motivation of all teachers.’

Pedagogical training needs to prepare trainee teachers adequately for local classroom realities and problems. There is a general concern across many African countries that the training teachers receive focuses heavily on academic theory and not enough on practice. Ghanaian trainee teachers in the MUSTER project felt that their colleges were out of touch with the reality taking place in schools, and that they had not been adequately prepared for some of these realities such as the low ability levels of children, poor understanding of English (the medium of instruction) and frequent absenteeism of children. Many of the teachers who were posted to rural areas felt a significant culture shock due to inadequate preparation, and newly qualified teachers were spending disproportionate amounts of time on training children in remedial English for which they were not prepared (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, pp. 105, 107).

5. Lack of In-Service Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development

While pre-service teacher training is important to prepare teachers for the reality of the classroom, evidence already mentioned shows that this is not currently effective in some African countries. Even where it is effective, the agenda of primary education is changing from an elite system to a mass system, requiring different skills and competencies from existing and new teachers. Thus it is critical that both existing teachers and new teachers are given ongoing support and continuing professional development (CPD) to enable them to provide good quality teaching to primary school children that enhances learning and reduces repetition and dropout.

‘…assistance directed to school level designed to improve access, retention and quality has to include support for teacher development, since it is teachers who determine, more than anything else, the quality of learning that takes place.’

(Lewin and Stuart, 2003, p. 194)

The MUSTER project found that teacher trainees received little formal induction or CPD and that the main focus was on pre-service teacher training (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, p. 177). Teachers and other education stakeholders in Rwanda (Ndaruhtse et al., 2006, p. 19) commented that in-service teacher training provided by the Ministry of Education was virtually non-existent, with no formal system being in place for the ongoing professional development of teachers. Stakeholders remarked that after new teachers are deployed to schools, there is little follow-up and these teachers often recycle the same materials for years without making any adjustments. In primary schools, there was a concern that some teachers lack sufficient subject knowledge required to teach the core primary curriculum, yet are not given any additional support by the government in the classroom to remedy this. Various non-government organisations (NGOs) were providing some support to CPD, and the umbrella group for Catholic education had a well-developed programme covering pedagogical skills and moral education that it provided for teachers in all of its schools for a period of up to one week.
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

per year usually during the school vacations. Recommendations made by the stakeholders in Rwanda regarding CPD included (Ndahutse et al., 2006, p. 21):

- ensuring stronger and more appropriate pre-service and in-service training is provided for teachers in methodology;
- providing all teachers with CPD with up-to-date resources;
- ensuring adequate supervision of student teachers on teaching practice;
- reinforcing the value of positive feedback to teachers and relevant training for the job; and
- ensuring effective communication between policy makers and teachers.

6. Teaching Methods

Teaching across many parts of Africa is based on the ‘chalk and talk’ philosophy, with the teacher’s voice and the blackboard being the main teaching tools. Teaching methods need to involve a lot more than just a teacher standing at the front instructing the whole class. New approaches should use group work, informal monitoring and evaluation, quizzes, tests and homework. Trainee teachers may not have been exposed to good teaching practice in their own educations, and will have developed strong normative ideas about what ‘teaching’ is. Thus the process of producing good teachers with appropriate teaching methods may involve enabling teachers to evaluate existing practices critically through focused training on reflective practice.

Teachers need to be shown practical ways of how to adapt the curriculum to the social and physical environment in which they are teaching, which may include very large class sizes, two shifts of children per day, multiple age groups and abilities in the same class, and teaching under a tree rather than in a proper building. This will include an understanding of how children learn and develop, how to manage classes, how to teach heterogeneous classes, and how to build effective parent-teacher and community relations so as to raise the value of education among families who do not place much value on it.

Instead of ignoring weaker children and forcing them to repeat, teachers need to be trained in how to provide each child with the optimal pedagogical approach to meet his or her needs (House, 1989). Research from Quebec has found that the training received by remedial teachers has meant that they are able to provide a different pedagogy for at-risk children based on their understanding of the difficulties these children are facing (Gouvernement du Québec, 2003, p. 48). Where weaker children are identified at an early stage, more work can be done with the class in small groups with extra support for those children who are struggling.

Thomas’ research (2000, p. 8) on retention in the United States gives some valid policy suggestions regarding teaching methods and teacher deployment for the African context. These include:

- concentrating the best qualified and experienced teachers rather than new teachers in the early years of primary schools teaching the most disadvantaged children (from poorer or rural backgrounds or the lowest achievers);
- not permitting senior teachers the ‘automatic right’ to transfer to easier schools;
- ensuring the right incentives exist between districts and regions for paying teachers so that there are incentives for teachers to teach poor and minority children.

Patrinos and Psacharopoulos (1992) review of the literature on repetition in Latin America, found that in Brazil the least qualified teachers are often found in the first grade where repetition is the highest, which is the reverse of this recommendation. In Togo it is more likely that less qualified teachers will make children repeat a grade than teachers with degrees (World Bank, 2003a, pp. 40–41, 51) showing their need for ongoing CPD and assistance with developing appropriate teaching methods for children who are struggling. Thomas (2000, p. 8) concludes:

‘Neither raising academic standards, widespread testing, halting social promotion, or mandated summer school and grade retention can elevate the academic
achievement of students if they do not have access to competent and caring teaching to guide and support them in the learning environment.’

7. Alternative Structure for Pre-Service Teacher Training

The MUSTER project found that the pre-service teacher training systems in Ghana, Lesotho and Malawi were not able to meet the projected demands for additional teachers needed for each of the countries to reach the UPE target. Each of the systems would need to expand output two to four times (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, p. 133). The authors of the project thus conclude that alternative systems to the current two- to three-year training in TTCs need to be considered at lower costs and possibly shorter duration (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, pp. ix, 166–7) but that do not compromise quality.

2.2.2 Providing a More Relevant Competency-Based Curriculum

‘…the function of the school is to provide children with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable them to cope more effectively with the environment in which they will find themselves when they leave school.’

(Bennett, 1993, p. 42)

An important question to ask in light of the UPE and EFA agendas is whether the aim of the primary curriculum is to give pupils life skills or to prepare them for secondary schooling...

An important question to ask in light of the UPE and EFA agendas is whether the aim of the primary curriculum is to give children life skills or to prepare them for secondary schooling (Moosa, 1988, p. 29). In the past, the system has been more geared up to the latter with education being provided for an elite group of people, but the UPE agenda has changed the focus to one of mass education. By contrast, the EFA agenda focuses on basic education rather than primary education, and there is a concern that even for countries aiming for UPE, the expectations of parents, children and communities are raised assuming that if children complete a full primary cycle, there will be an opportunity to continue onto secondary education that will enable them to be better equipped to find employment in the modern sector. A study on education in the high altitude Himalayas (Pragya, 2006, p. 10) on education in the Himalayas found that 48% of parents did not believe that educating their children would help them to find jobs, so were not interested in sending their children to school, and 60% of the children who had never been to school agreed with this view. This supports Pritchett’s opinion:

‘There is no question that returns to education vary widely and that in stagnant technological and economic conditions the returns to education can be very low – sufficiently low that if current labor market conditions are expected to persist then not attending school may well be the optimal decision from a narrowly drawn economic calculation.’

(Pritchett, 2004, p. 53)

Thus, assuming some middle ground is followed that enables all children to learn basic life skills, but also offers the most able the chance to continue their education at secondary level, a critical element to the learning process is ensuring that the curriculum is made relevant to the needs of the local population so as to raise the benefits of schooling and the anticipated returns to schooling which, as Pritchett (2004, p. 56) points out, are much lower than they should be in Africa today, due to stagnated growth and little transformation of the agricultural or industrial sectors.

‘A major challenge is to create learning experiences that allow the integrity of all learners to be sustained while an environment is created for students to achieve high levels of success. To accomplish this goal, schools must be places where students want to attend because they feel nurtured, valued, and challenged, and where they engage in meaningful work that make sense of their lived experiences.’

(Thomas, 2000, p. 12)

Lockheed, Verspoor and Associates (1991, p. 47) argue that this means improving the implemented curriculum rather than spending significant time, money and effort adjusting the intended curriculum but then never really changing how it is taught in the classroom. This will mean focusing on an outcomes- and competency-based curriculum relevant to the environment in which children are living, rather than an inputs-based one, and this...
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

needs to be accompanied by regular informal assessment to ensure this is happening. Alongside this, training needs to be provided to teachers on how to implement the curriculum.

In Rwanda, there was a feeling among teachers that the present curriculum is very theoretical rather than practical, and is burdensome to teach with insufficient time to cover all the topics, giving teachers little time to develop their own materials and approaches, and children little time to absorb what they are being taught. Teachers felt that they received no guidance in their pre-service training on how children should be taught.
each part of the syllabus and how much time should be spent on each area, and in-service training is minimal and not addressing this issue. Given their inadequate preparation in the TTCs coupled with the insufficient number of qualified tutors in the TTCs and limited supervision and feedback during their teaching practice, teachers did not generally feel confident in teaching the curriculum as they felt they were lacking an appropriate methodology. Teachers and other educational stakeholders suggested that the curriculum is revised with the involvement of teachers, making it more relevant and child-centred; that its content is reduced and made more topic-based; and that guidance is given through regular in-service training on how topics should be taught and the proportion of time to spend on each topic (Ndaruhurstse et al, 2006, pp. 19, 21).

2.2.3 Improving Quality Through the Availability of Teaching Materials

Lockheed, Verspoor and Associates (1991, p. 49) argue that the availability of textbooks and instructional materials has a positive effect on children’s achievement in developing countries, but they state that inputs are only important if they help children learn (p. xx) implying that textbooks and teachers’ guides need to be used effectively by teachers and children for them to contribute to the learning process. Good textbooks are those that are pedagogically sound, culturally relevant and physically durable (Lockheed, Verspoor and Associates, 1991, pp. 56–7).

Siakue (2000) comments on the rarity of pedagogical material in schools in Cameroon which he says is a threat to the quality of education. He argues that the reasons for the lack of textbooks are multiple, including the high cost of textbooks compared to the income of the local population due to the fact that most textbooks are imported from France; the limited capacity of local publishers; the near total absence of public libraries; and aggravated in the Francophone part of the country by the monopolistic behaviour of the only publishing, printing and distributing house. More generally, the lack of a secure place to keep textbooks (from vermin or theft) is a common problem in many countries.

In Rwanda, teachers commented that textbooks are not available in sufficient numbers and the few that are available are not always related to the curriculum. Teachers’ guides are virtually non-existent and teachers are not trained in how to use textbooks to enhance learning, thus teaching methods differ from school to school due to the lack of guides. Apart from textbooks, very few other instructional materials exist. Few schools have libraries, and laboratories where they exist are not well equipped, with a serious shortage of science materials to support the teaching of science. Even where textbooks have been supplied to schools in Rwanda, often they were kept locked away in a cupboard in the headteachers’ office, and were not actively used either due to a concern they would be quickly damaged or stolen, or because teachers did not feel confident using them. Recommendations made by these teachers included making curriculum-compliant teaching materials more widely available in schools and training teachers on how to use these materials effectively (Ndaruhurstse et al, 2006, pp. 19–21).

2.2.4 Supporting Weaker Children and Their Families

One of the keys to successful support to weaker children and those most at risk of repeating is early intervention. In the context of the United States, Smith and Shepard (1989, p. 230) point out that interventions like tutoring, summer schools and individualised instruction either in the classroom or for some lessons outside the classroom are more effective and less costly than making children repeat the grade. Anderson et al (2002, p. 2) found similar results, adding that interventions such as reading programmes, encouraging greater parental involvement in the school through regular meetings, training programmes and discussing behaviour management strategies in the case of disruptive children had also been successful. The United States National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) (1998 cited in Jimerson, 1999, p. 266) provides several similar recommendations as well as some additional ones: adopting age and culture-sensitive instructional strategies, enabling teachers to work with mixed-age and mixed-ability groups in a given class, implementing school-based mental health
interventions and designing interventions to deal with specific behavioural problems. Anderson et al. (2002, p. 2) concludes:

A coordinated system of comprehensive support services aimed at addressing the academic, socio-emotional, behavioral and psychological needs of the child will help promote healthy adjustment and achievement among children at risk for grade retention.’

While all of these interventions may not be possible in Africa given limited resources and an often undeveloped approach and awareness of how to teach children with special needs, improving teacher training so that teachers are more adequately prepared for teaching a wide variety of ages and abilities with appropriate methods is possible and necessary if more children are to be retained in a full cycle of primary schooling.

2.2.5 Providing Bilingual Programmes

1. Performance in Bilingual and Monolingual Settings

‘Fifty per cent of the world’s out-of-school children live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home. This underscores the biggest challenge to achieving Education for All (EFA); a legacy of non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition.’

(World Bank, 2005 cited in Heugh, 2006b, p. 138)

Where countries have large indigenous populations or multiple ethnic groups speaking a variety of different dialects and languages, the provision of bilingual education is very important and strongly related to learning outcomes. Children can only learn what they understand, so schooling remains inefficient and ineffective if children are not competent in the LoI, and these children are most at risk of falling behind and then repeating or dropping out. Lockheed, Verspoor and Associates (1991, p. 46) remark that the length of time devoted to bilingual instruction can decrease literacy levels and lead to slower progress and attainment in other subjects. While this may be the case in countries such as Rwanda, which is trying to promote trilingualism in education (Kinyarwanda, French and English), empirical evidence from a World Bank study cited in Kane (2004, p. 8) noted that bilingual education or providing the early years of primary schooling in the local language is being tested in Burkina Faso, Guatemala, Guinea, Mali, Malawi, Peru, Pakistan and Zambia, as well as some other countries, and it is generally linked to lower levels of repetition and dropout, higher attendance and better examination results in all subjects, especially for girls. Few of the programmes being tested teach only the mother tongue with no teaching in a regional or national language (Kane, 2004, p. 117).

Kane noted that using bilingual programmes in Guatemala has improved access and retention. Albo (2006) comments that rural primary schools following intercultural and bilingual education (IBE) in Bolivia repeat an academic year less often (24%) than children in monolingual schools (48%), and that satisfactory performance among indigenous children has risen from 19 to 35%.

Bilingual education has also been found to have a positive impact on gender in Guinea Bissau, Niger and Mozambique. More girls enrol in bilingual schools and stay longer in these schools than those in monolingual schools and they also repeat classes less often (Benson, 2006, September 2006).

Collier (1992, pp. 192–3) in analysing 1980s literature examining the long-term impact of bilingual teaching on achievement in the United States concluded that every study asserts that the greater the amount of mother tongue instruction provided to language-minority children combined with balanced second or national language support, the greater their achievement academically in the second or national language at each grade compared to children only being taught in the second or national language with no minority language instruction. He concludes that where no support is provided for the minority language, ‘it may take a very long time for language-minority students to reach national norms in L2 [the second or national language]’ and that while there may be other factors that influence the success of language minority learners, bilingual teaching is a key variable (Collier, 1992, pp. 205, 207).
In Burkina Faso, children taking the end of primary school examination in 1998 from the bilingual schools (écoles bilingues) with five years of instruction performed better than children who had studied monolingually in French for six to seven years. In 2002, children from bilingual schools scored an average of 85.02% in the primary school examination with those in monolingual French schools scoring only 61.81% (Alidou et al., 2006, p. 17). In Mali, children from the bilingual Ecoles de la Pédagogie Convergente also outperformed their counterparts from monolingual French schools at the end of formal basic education (a seven-year cycle) (Brock-Utne and Alidou, 2006, p. 106).

Experimental bilingual education started in Niger in 1973 and evaluations carried out in the 1985 and 1998 show that bilingual schools have superior results to monolingual schools, with 95% success rates in the 1980–85 period, repetition rates falling to 2–3% and the dropout rate being only 1% (Wolff, 2006, p. 53). In Ethiopia, learners whose mother tongue is used as the LoI at school on average scored higher in mathematics, biology and chemistry than learners whose LoI was English (Alidou and Brock-Utne, 2006, p. 93).

A study on grade 2 urban English-medium primary school children in the Cape Coast in Ghana revealed that changing the LoI from English to the children's mother tongue meant that children performed a lot better, underlining the fact that children identified as ‘low achievers’ had been incorrectly assessed on the basis of assessment in the LoI (Wilmott, 2003b, cited in Brock-Utne and Alidou, 2006, p. 109). Eisemon et al (1993, p. 141) found that in Burundi, children’s comprehension skills and knowledge of science and agriculture are measured better in Kirundi (the local language) than in French.

Malherbe (1943, cited in Heugh, 2006a, p. 67) found that students in South Africa who had mother tongue education (MTE) to the end of primary school then dual-medium Afrikaans-English secondary education...
outperformed students who had followed a monolingual Afrikaans curriculum or a monolingual English curriculum, and that the dual-medium schools were mostly based in rural areas which were less well-resourced. Between 1955 and 1975, eight years of MTE were offered, and pass rates increased. By contrast, when MTE was reduced to four years from 1976, the grade 12 pass rate dropped from 83.7% in 1976 to 44% in 1992 (Heugh, 2002, 2003 cited in Heugh, 2006a, p. 67).

Looking now at assessment, a study by Kalole (2004, cited in Brock-Utne and Alidou, 2006, p. 116) found that 18 out of 23 examination markers interviewed in Tanzania and eight out of ten officials from the National Examinations Council of Tanzania believed that secondary school examinations should be set in Kiswahili rather than English, with all of them commenting that low competency in English was the main factor influencing pupils’ performance in the national examinations. The same principle can easily be extended to primary schools where a foreign language is used as the LoI.

The principal recommendations made by Heugh (2006a, pp. 83–4) include:

- ensuring local languages are used as the primary LoI for at least six years (but ideally to the end of secondary school);
- improving the provision of the second language alongside local languages;
- tracking children’s performance ideally to the end of the primary cycle undertaking evaluations of literacy, language and education models.

2. Teachers and Teacher Training

Where there are many ethnic groups and languages, trainee teachers may come from different areas and not have the same mother tongue as the children they teach. If teachers are deployed strategically and posted to areas where they do speak the same mother tongue, this would be an efficient and effective policy. However, this does not always happen, and trainee teachers who have experienced urban life are often unwilling to return to rural areas. This has been found to be the case in Ghana and Malawi and has resulted in an official policy that states that the lower primary cycle should be taught in the local language rather than English, but a reality that is different (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, pp. 57, 41).

Lewin and Stuart’s (2003) study found that many teachers in Ghana, Malawi and Lesotho are entering TTCs with a very weak grasp of English, one of the languages they will be expected to use as an LoI. Alidou et al (2006, p. 22) argue that teachers cannot teach using an LoI in which they have not required a good level of competency, which further undermines what children can learn when they are learning in a language they are not familiar with, and the teacher is not confident in the use of that language either.

A World Bank study (Dutcher, 1982, p. 38) included a case study on the Rock Point School in the United States which provides education to Navajo children. It found that bilingual education was a key factor in its success, but that other issues also contributed including the fact that most of the teachers were also Navajo. There was an insistence on high standards of achievement, there was continuity of leadership and high parental involvement in the school.

3. Cost of Bilingual Provision

One of the major concerns about providing bilingual education is cost. Across Africa, most countries cannot afford to purchase textbooks in the national language let alone in local languages. There are not a sufficient number of trained teachers to meet the UPE targets when providing monolingual education and the training is often not very effective, yet to train teachers bilingually to an adequate standard is even more of a challenge. However, the empirical evidence showing higher levels of academic achievement and greater retention during the primary school cycle pointing to the effectiveness of teaching bilingual is unequivocal. Countries face a decision of whether to invest in a bilingual policy which is effective, or risk paying significant sums of money on providing monolingual education for all children risking that many from ethnic minorities will remain only semi-literate in both their mother tongue and the national language (Dutcher, 1982, pp. 45, 52–3) creating further greater inequities in educational achievement.
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

Aldou et al (2006, p. 22) point out that at least 55% of all children across Africa leave primary school without reaching basic minimum standards, which is not currently cost-effective nor is it giving good returns on educational investment.

Heugh (2006b, pp. 155–6) estimates that increasing the current education budget by between 1% (where orthographies and language development units already exist) and 5% (where there are no orthographies) and spending this increase on developing a bilingual education approach and investing in teacher training and educational materials will lead to these costs being fully recovered in the medium term (after about five years) due to the lower repetition rates attained in bilingual schools. In addition, there will be economic benefits from greater numbers of children achieving higher levels of education. She cites a concrete example from Mali that showed that while monolingual French programmes are annually cheaper to resource by 8% than bilingual programmes, if the wastage from repetition and dropout rates over the primary cycle from the former is factored in, the cost of monolingual French programmes is in fact 27% more. Guatemala has demonstrated similar results (World Bank, 2005 cited in Heugh, 2006b, p. 150).

2.2.6 Offering Multi-grade and Double Shift Teaching

Where primary schools are serving small, remote populations, and there are not enough children to justify having a teacher to teach each age group, one method that has been used in some developing countries is that of multigrade teaching, where a teacher teaches a mixed-age and mixed-ability group in one class, so the first three grades of primary school might all be taught in the same group. Senegal introduced this approach along with double shifting in some of its remote schools during the 1980s, and an evaluation study found that there was no noticeable difference in quality for students in double shift classes where one teacher was teaching two shifts of pupils...

In Zambia, two options have been tried since the 1980s in more remote rural primary schools where it is not possible to provide a full cycle of seven years of primary education in separate classes. The first, tried in just over 6% of all schools, is a situation where schools only take in pupils in grade 1 every other school year, with the second being a system of multigrade teaching where two or more grades are taught at the same time in the same class by one teacher. This has enabled schools to offer all seven grades without requiring additional classrooms and teachers (Little, 1995, p. 7).

One of the most famous examples of successful multigrade teaching comes from rural Colombia with the ‘Escuela Nueva’ model. Details of this are outlined on page 44.

A further example of successful multigrade teaching with an adapted curriculum relevant to rural communities comes from Cuba (see page 44).

Little (1995, p. 40) concludes from the research literature on multigrade teaching, that critical to its success is for teachers to be ‘well organised, well resourced and well trained, as well as holding positive attitudes to multi-grade teaching’, yet she points out that this is very often not the case across developing countries, with some of the least educated and least qualified teachers finding themselves in multigrade classes with little preparation.

2.3 Education Management

2.3.1 Increasing the Learning Capacity of Learners

1. School Management and Pedagogical Factors

Increasing the learning capacity of learners includes aspects of school management, pedagogical approaches, teacher training and the provision of a relevant curriculum that is taught effectively. Thus the role of the headteacher and individual class learners in creating such an enabling environment and engaging parents and learners as partners in
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

CASE STUDY Escuela Nueva programme

Target group: rural and remote communities
Approach: tailored curriculum through multi-grade schools
Country: Colombia

During the 1980s, the transition rate from primary grade 1 to grade 2 in rural areas was only 45% with an average 20% repetition rate in both years. In 1975, the Escuela Nueva model was introduced to address the needs of rural education. By 1992, there were 17,000 schools operating across Colombia. The model has four main components: curriculum, training, administration and community relations, and uses a multi-grade approach with flexible promotion where students do not repeat grades but instead progress to the next grade of work when they are ready academically. It has been widely hailed as a successful policy response to increasing access and retention in rural education as it ensures full provision of a complete cycle of primary schooling, smaller numbers of teachers teaching several grades in the same school, community involvement, participatory learning, children learning in a flexible way around the needs of the household with no repetition, affordable materials and in-service teacher training that is replicable locally.


CASE STUDY Reaching rural children through small multigrade schools

Target group: rural and remote communities
Approach: targeted funding and appropriate curriculum
Country: Cuba

The Cuban government has developed a multi-grade strategy to reach children living in isolated mountainous rural areas. Cuba has approximately 2,000 schools with fewer than ten students. Each school offers multi-grade instruction through to grade 4, for which teachers receive training in teaching in multi-grade classrooms. Comparing rural and urban schools, there is no statistical difference in primary school attainment.

The Cuban government has a targeted approach to rural schools to ensure that they are provided with adequate levels of human and physical resources as well as special features to meet their needs. In addition to ensuring that rural communities have access to the same standard of education as their urban counterparts the government has aligned its education policy with broader reform to encourage rural development and discourage rural-urban migration. As such, educational institutions have been developed in conjunction with regional plans. Infrastructure and services were developed to attract people to the region for example, along with production incentives such as co-operatives entitled to credit from the state.

Rural schools provide education that contributes to the development of rural areas, adapting the curriculum to meet the community's needs, thus motivating families, teachers and students. To ensure the stability of the teacher workforce in rural schools, the system promotes volunteer teachers who commit themselves to staying in the area for two or more years. Young teachers living in such areas are provided incentives – for example, assistance in home construction, radios and lamps. Education provision in mountainous regions also extends from pre-school to post secondary schools to encourage longevity of learning within access from their home environment.

Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

the learning process is critical. Owings and Kaplan (2001, p. 5) conclude that ‘together these factors help create a culture within the school that promotes each student’s high achievement.’

One important aspect of ensuring the learning capacity of weaker and more vulnerable children is maximised, is to place well-qualified and experienced teachers to work with these children, rather than putting in newly qualified teachers who face a shock. Too often, this practice is reversed with the most experienced and effective teachers working with the highest achievers rather than those who are struggling (Owings and Kaplan, 2001, p. 6).

Thus, teachers and headteachers have an important role in setting standards, teaching the curriculum in a relevant way, and providing additional support at an early stage to those who are struggling (Muir, 2004, p. 1).

2. Increasing Instructional Time

For a number of reasons, many primary schools across Africa do not maintain standards for providing a minimum number of hours per year in instructional time. This is due to several factors including: excessive public holidays; absenteeism among teachers due to sickness, chasing the non-payment of their salaries, or the economic necessity of working in a second job to supplement their income up to a minimum living level; and double shifting. One of the main concerns about double shifting is that it occurs most usually with one teacher teaching two shifts – one in the morning and one in the afternoon – children only receive about half the normal contact hours they should, unless school terms are made longer. Lockheed, Verspoor and Associates (1991, p. 60) argue that setting and maintaining standards for instructional time is a much more effective response to improving quality and retaining children rather than lowering class size unless classes are above around 80 children.

3. Changing the School Calendar

An alternative approach which may particularly increase the retention of children from poorer, rural backgrounds who are required to assist their families in subsistence farming, is to make changes to the school calendar to fit in around the planting and harvesting seasons, allowing children to work with their families at peak times without it affecting their schooling. Inflexibility of timetabling was one of the reasons given for poor attendance by children from the Karamojong tribe in northeast Uganda (Basic Education Programme for Karamajong Children, 1997, cited in Bernard, 2001, p. 13).

2.3.2 Boosting Teachers’ Motivation

A policy report on teachers’ motivation in developing countries (VSO, 2003) was conducted in Papua New Guinea, Malawi and

CASE STUDY

Community schools, Mali

Save the Children US started a community schools programme in the Kolondieba region of Mali in 1992. Under this programme, the school year is seven months (November until May) with classes four hours a day, six days a week with the day off corresponding to the market day. The Loi is Bambara, the local language. The programme started off as a three-year programme to provide mother tongue instruction in a flexible manner, but the curriculum has since been developed and expanded to cover a further three grades with instruction in French with the aim of enabling students to progress to formal secondary schools after completing six years in a community school. An evaluation showed that community schools have changed the community’s attitude towards education with the community now seeing education’s benefits including the application of learning beyond the classroom.

Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

Zambia. The study found that the status of teachers was declining, with teachers typically excluded by governments and donors from national education policy debates and, at worst, seen as part of the overall problem, as obstacles to change rather than as vital human resources. The study made major recommendations relating to remuneration, management, administration, monitoring, participation and representation. A later VSO study was conducted in Rwanda (VSO, 2004) and found that teachers’ motivation was affected by four main factors: (i) financial difficulties, (ii) lack of support and tools for improving professional performance, (iii) unsupportive management, and (iv) a perception that they are not valued by society. As a result, the study concluded that teachers have low self-esteem and motivation which impacts negatively upon their classroom performance. While the level and regularity of payment of their salary is a key factor in motivation, other factors were almost as important. Rwandan teachers felt that government policymakers were aware of the problem but had not taken appropriate action.

CfBT Education Trust in Rwanda followed up this study at the end of 2005 (Ndaruhutse et al, 2006) which included a stakeholder consultation workshop soliciting the views of serving teachers, teacher trainers, the teachers’ union, education providers and civil society organisations including faith-based organisations and NGOs. All groups stated that teachers’ morale was very low with the main issues accounting for this being low salaries, lack of scholarships for further training, teachers being forced into the profession, having heavy workloads, teaching in overcrowded classrooms, experiencing a shortage of teaching and learning materials, and no housing being provided. However, one group pointed out that although the salary of teachers is low, teachers are better off than the poorest in Rwanda and they do not readily quit their jobs. Since the completion of this study, there are signs that more attractive salaries are now being offered in the civil service.

As a result of the low motivation of teachers, absenteeism is a significant problem in Rwanda (estimated at around 10%) that further exacerbates quality due to the interruptions and delays it causes in teaching the curriculum and the extra workload given to teachers who are in school. Due to the unavailability of replacement teachers, there is little continuity in teaching where absenteeism is a particular problem at a school. Stakeholders commented that absenteeism was more common where teachers were trying to study to upgrade their qualifications or where they were based in remote rural areas and had to travel for several days each month to chase up delayed salary payments. Stakeholders felt that double shifting and high child-teacher ratios both have a significant bearing on the low level of teachers’ morale and that they have a negative impact on the quality of education as they prevent a teacher being able to give individual attention to children. Where class sizes are up to 70 or 80 children per shift, teachers do not have any time to get to know the children and to design and administer relevant methods of assisting them and they find it difficult to ensure control of the classroom, thus discouraging them yet further. The stakeholders outlined the following recommendations in relation to teacher morale.

- Improve conditions of service of teachers (i.e. pay teachers a decent salary related to the cost of living and pay this on time) including offering teachers ‘soft loans’ for housing (non-salary benefits).
- Reward teachers’ services at the same level as that of other civil servants.
- Reduce the workload of teachers and the size of the classes.
- Eliminate double shifting.
- Give bonuses to the best teachers.
- Have floater teachers to cover when teachers are absent.

Research by Lockheed, Verspoor and Associates (1991, p. 102) on the quality of education in developing countries found the following factors affecting the attendance of teachers and teacher attrition: low salaries (absolute and relative to other similar professionals), irregular payment of salaries, poor working conditions, few opportunities...
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

A study in Nigeria found that the construction of neighbourhood schools in walking distance of communities enabled children to be available for work rapidly after school.

for professional development, and inadequate supervision. They concluded that finding solutions to retain teachers was critical and should include hardship allowances or in-kind supplements to attract teachers to rural areas, and performance-based promotion for career advancement and the CPD of teachers (pp. 108–9).

2.3.3 Ensuring Adequate and Sufficient Infrastructure

Across Africa, particularly in rural areas, classrooms are often either overcrowded or groups of children meet to study under trees or sheeting as classrooms are either non-existent or in a bad state of disrepair due to lack of funds or conflict damage. Many schools lack a water supply for drinking and cleaning, and there is often inadequate provision of sanitation facilities with no separation of toilets for girls and boys.

While building classrooms alone is not a sufficient solution to increase quality and retain learners in schools (Pritchett, 2004, p. 27), certainly inadequate facilities (classrooms, sanitation blocks and water supply) definitely contribute to the disincentive for children to remain in school during the rainy season, for girls to attend school regularly as they approach puberty, and for children from poorer families to feel any sense of value of education in classes of 80–100 in some situations, thus raising the likelihood that children will repeat a grade or drop out. Teachers in Rwanda felt that these situations occurred across many of their primary schools and recommended the devolution of budgets to school level for schools to use to invest in adequate infrastructure (Ndaruhutse et al, 2006, pp. 20–1).

Furthermore, as has been commented on above, in rural areas where only a few grades of primary schooling are offered and there is no multigrade teaching children face a disincentive to stay in school. In Benin, where the primary school repetition rate was 25% in 1998/99, 24% of all children were being educated in a school which did not offer the possibility of completing a full cycle of primary education in the local area (World Bank, 2002, p. 2). Thus either constructing more classrooms or offering multigrade teaching are important options to consider in order to reduce the repetition rates.

Building schools in near reach of rural communities is also an important contributory factor to school attendance, particularly for those children involved in subsistence farming. Chimombo (2005, pp. 131–2) cites studies in Malawi and Zambia which found that work and household chores were keeping children away from school either temporarily or permanently. A study in Nigeria (Jakande, 1987, cited in Chimombo, 2005, pp. 141–2) found that the construction of neighbourhood schools in walking distance of communities enabled children to be available for work rapidly after school.

In addition, where female attendance rates are very low, there may be a need to create single-sex schools with appropriate facilities to encourage more girls to attend regularly and thus reduce the risk of them repeating.

2.3.4 Only Permitting Repetition Between Sub-Cycles of Primary Education

One of the approaches to repetition that has been adopted in some African countries is to divide the average six-year cycle of primary schooling into three two-year sub-cycles and not to permit repetition within the cycles. When practised alongside a system that identifies and supports weaker children, this approach has been found to increase quality (World Bank, 2006a, pp. viii–ix). Such initiatives have been adopted recently in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to try to reduce the average primary school repetition rate to below 10%. In Mali, the policy was not implemented and the repetition rate actually increased from 17.4% to 19.8%. In Burkina Faso, there was a reduction from 17.7% to 15.1% but not as far as the 10% target. But in Niger, the policy was quite successful with repetition dropping from 12.2% in 1998 to 7.3% in 2002 (UNESCO, 2005, p. 47). Niger was closer to the target in the first place so this may have been the reason for its success.

Guinea has seen an improvement in the internal efficiency of primary education since it followed the sub-cycle approach, but there are still more efficiency gains to be made and
it is yet to be decided whether this approach has guaranteed quality at the same time as improving efficiency (World Bank, 2005d, p. 111). The DRC is also following such an approach, though it is unclear how successful it has been in reducing repetition (World Bank, 2005a, p. 47).

Similar policies have been recommended by the World Bank (2005e, p. 32 and 2002, p. 55) in the Ivory Coast and Benin, and in the Central African Republic by Gounebana (2006, p. 274), though they argue that children at risk of repetition should be identified and given additional remedial support. Gounebana states that teachers should be informed about the negative impacts of repetition and in the Ivory Coast, the World Bank (2005e, p. 32) suggests that in the exceptional cases where children are required to repeat a year between cycles, the basis of this decision should be the result of a standardised test.

### 2.3.5 Creating School Networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CASE STUDY</th>
<th>Friendly Networks programme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target group:</strong></td>
<td>rural communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Approach:</strong></td>
<td>development of school networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country:</strong></td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ecuador is one of many countries which struggle with providing high levels of access to education, resulting in low schooling levels, high dropout and repetition rates and low coverage in rural areas. The ‘Friendly Networks’ programme gives rural schools more autonomy to manage their resources, and encourages higher parental and community participation in the school administration. It aims to improve teaching conditions in basic rural education (primary and junior high school). The programme comprises of 186 rural school networks, including approximately 2,225 schools which represent 20% of the total rural schools. The networks employ 6,032 teachers assisting 136,019 students and serve around 2,500 rural communities. Network participation in the programme is voluntary and includes a combination of Hispanic and bilingual schools.

In return for participation, the programme provides support to the autonomy process, teacher training, supply of materials and support to improve local infrastructure and facilities. Each network devises a strategic plan according to its needs and considering the amount of students involved. The programme has seen an increase in the student enrolment and improved student progression as well higher teacher attendance and greater levels of community involvement. An improvement has also been seen in maths and language attainment. Different teaching methodologies including more active student participation have also been noted within schools.

programmes which end up under-funded and sharing a small amount of food across a large group of children, thus not being as effective as at first desired. Other health interventions such as vaccination programmes and providing de-worming tablets are also low-cost solutions to basic health problems which either keep children out of school for long periods or reduce their learning ability due to sickness thus making them more prone to repetition and/or dropout.

2. Financial Interventions

Demand-side financing and financial incentives provided for at-risk children and households that lower the direct and indirect cost of schooling (for example, scholarships, vouchers, conditional transfers, school fees) can help to increase regular attendance and reduce the risk of children needing to repeat. One of the most well-known and successful examples is the Progresa programme in Mexico, which is outlined on page 50.
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

2.4.2 Supporting Specific Marginalised Groups

As outlined in section 1.9, there are various groups that are marginalised from education. This marginalisation may happen for a variety of reasons. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education calls for education to be inclusive so that all children are mainstreamed:

‘Inclusive education means that: “… schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups”’


UNESCO (2003, p. 7) takes this approach further stating that:

‘Inclusive education is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in formal and nonformal educational settings. Rather than being a marginal theme on how some learners can be integrated in the mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems in order to

CASE STUDY Progresa/Oportunidades

Target group: indigenous and rural populations
Approach: cash transfer schemes
Country: Mexico

Mexico has the largest indigenous population in the Americas, at over 12 million, approximately 13% of total population. Whilst access to formal education in Mexico has expanded in recent years and improvements have occurred in indigenous areas, educational levels remain lower in rural indigenous areas, with low enrolment, high dropout and high repetition. Indigenous children face a number of barriers to education, including language (where Spanish is not their mother tongue), lower parental attainment in education than in the non-indigenous population, lower household income and they are predominantly based in rural areas which contributes to higher levels of child labour than in non-indigenous areas. Language represents an important barrier for indigenous schoolchildren. In particular, it is shown that there is a large gap in the educational performance of monolingual indigenous children relative to bilingual indigenous children and that bilingual primary schools narrow this gap.

The Mexican government launched the PROGRESA programme (now called Oportunidades) in 1997. It is a large welfare programme targeted at improving education, health and nutrition in rural Mexico. The programme provides cash stipends to poor families in exchange for ensuring their children’s school attendance, obtaining preventative healthcare and attending education programmes on nutrition, healthcare and hygiene. Evidence suggests that it has led to significant improvements in educational indicators and outcomes; in particular it has lead to higher attendance rates and lower school dropout and repetition rates and better grade progression, particularly for monolingual indigenous children. There is also evidence of reduced child labour. PROGRESA students also have higher school re-entry rates among those who had dropped out, and the programme is especially effective in reducing dropout rates during the transition from primary to secondary school. The study also finds the programme to be effective in inducing children who dropped out prior to the initiation of the programme to re-enter school.

Source: Bando, Lopez-Calva and Patrinos (2005); IFPRI (2002).
respond to the diversity of learners. It aims to enable both teachers and learners to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment in the learning environment, rather than a problem.”

(UNESCO, 2003, p. 7)

This seems more appropriate particularly for the African context where certain groups will need flexible schools, modified curricula and an alternative LoI for the early years of schooling. For example, nomadic and pastoralist groups may need mobile schools with adapted curricula to fit around their lifestyle. While these may be very relevant for these groups, for more settled communities, this approach is unlikely to work, meaning that different schools and approaches will be needed for different groups, rather than all children being mainstreamed into a formal school setting with a rigid school calendar.

Several case studies are presented below which address the needs of certain marginalised groups. A common thread of the sustainable initiatives is that they have exit pathways onto other levels of education and permit children to move across to a formal school if their circumstances allow, as they are broadly following the national curriculum.

1. Out-of-school children

CASE STUDY

Second chance schools

Target group: rural children, girls, child labourers and street children
Approach: adapted curriculum, non-formal education
Country: Morocco

Morocco has established a non-formal education programme targeting the 2.2 million out-of-school children in the 8–16 age range to offer them a second chance for schooling or training for work. Over 75% of the targeted children live in rural areas and just under 50% are girls. Consequently, the programme has been tailored to particularly address the needs of rural children and girls, as well as those of child labourers and street children.

A key principle of the programme is the adoption of a flexible and adaptable approach to education. The weekly schedules are determined locally so that they are in accordance with the availability of the learners and in agreement with the parents. As such they vary from between 4 to 24 hours over 6 days and adopt a flexible approach to vacation periods. As well as the timetabling, the curriculum is also adapted to the learning needs of each group and the particularities of each region. Students are taught literacy and numeracy skills as well as given knowledge relating to health, the environment, civics, religion and leisure activities. Teacher are also recruited locally and given specialist training. There are no formal school buildings. Instead to ensure that the schools are accessible and so that costs remain low, classes take place in various facilities according to availability. For example, rooms offered by local associations, government offices, unoccupied school classrooms, even private homes.

The Ministry of Education supports the programme both financially and through a series of partnerships with various government departments, NGOs and local authorities and associations. These partnerships are underpinned by a convention outlining roles, responsibilities and a work plan. The NGOs employ young graduates as facilitators, enrol the pupils, and manage the programme at local level. The Ministry then trains the facilitators, provides funding for them, supplies educational materials and evaluates the overall programme.

In the four-year period up to 2000, over 87,000 children were actively involved in the programme including 57,000 girls. 48,000 children graduated with over 3,000 crossing into the formal schooling system and the remainder being prepared for employment. Of the latter category, nearly 7,000 had apprenticeships.

2. Children of nomadic groups and pastoralists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CASE STUDY</th>
<th>Mobile schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target group:</strong> nomadic communities</td>
<td><strong>Approach:</strong> mobile schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country:</strong> Kenya</td>
<td><strong>Country:</strong> Kenya</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1995 the Nomadic Primary Health Care Programme in the Wajir region of Kenya initiated a mobile school (Hanuniye) project which aimed to overcome the exclusion of pastoralists from education because of their mobility. The Hanuniye project has a mobile teacher living with the family, or herding group, of which they are a part. The attraction of this model is that it is consistent with daily mobility needs – with lessons designed to fit around household labour arrangements – as well as long distance mobility. Between 1995 and 1999 the project reportedly enrolled 3,148 boys and 2,830 girls as pupils, representing approximately 50% of the total district primary enrolment.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CASE STUDY</th>
<th>Shepherd Schools, Ghana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target group:</strong> nomadic communities</td>
<td><strong>Approach:</strong> mobile schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country:</strong> Kenya</td>
<td><strong>Country:</strong> Kenya</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Shepherd School Programme (SSP) was started by ActionAid in 1996 and provides non-formal education to seven pastoralist communities in northern Ghana with the aim of giving children basic literacy and numeracy skills and providing a way for them to be integrated into the formal school system. SSP follows the national curriculum and assessment but the schedule and timetable is flexible and the local language rather than English is used in the early years of schooling.

An evaluation of the programme undertaken through interviews of parents, children, teachers and local authorities found that these schools provide a second chance to children who are usually excluded from the formal system because of their nomadic lifestyle; children no longer have to walk long distances to school as the school takes place in their midst; children are sharing health and sanitation messages with their families with a greater uptake of immunisation; more women and children are involved in community decisions; and parents now value education as the only useful road to social and economic development whereas in the past they felt it threatened traditional values.

Source: www.id21.org/education/e2ommf1g1.html
3. Children with special needs and disabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CASE STUDY</th>
<th>Early detection of learning disabilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target group:</strong></td>
<td>children with learning difficulties or disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Approach:</strong></td>
<td>early diagnosis of needs and structured support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country:</strong></td>
<td>Jordan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) programme has been working since 1993 in Al-Mafraq in the north of Jordan through parents, teachers and community volunteers to sensitisie people about disability. The aims of the programme are to reduce the social stigma often associated with disability, to assist in the early detection of needs and to encourage parents to seek help for their children. Parents are educated through creating awareness of learning difficulties and disabilities. Teachers are given specific training and volunteers are recruited to work closely with young children with disabilities, whilst community members are responsible for the administration and running of the programme.

75% of Jordanian young children are cared for in the home so the CBR aims to support better parenting by increasing the knowledge and skills of parents and other caregivers in relation to child rights and needs. In the past, many children were wrongly diagnosed or hidden away if they had disabilities, whereas the CBR has changed this practice and has reduced the stigma of parents seeking help and information from communities. A survey conducted in 1997 revealed that 80% of the local community’s attitudes towards people with special needs had improved.


2.4.3 Providing Adult Literacy Programmes for Parents

In many developing countries, the educational level of parents is strongly positively correlated with the duration and achievement of their children’s studies. Thus, adult literacy programmes for illiterate and semi-literate families and especially for young women who have dropped out of school due to pregnancy or other factors, could be critical interventions to raise the likelihood of the next generation of children attending school and completing a full cycle of primary education (UNESCO, 1998a, p. 36).

Various studies and programme evaluations have established significant outcomes attributed to adult basic education (ABE) beyond the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. For example, a study by Tansel (1997, p. 126) on the Ivory Coast and Ghana found that parents’ education, especially the father’s education, has a significant influence on the educational achievement of children of both genders.

It is not surprising, for example, that literate mothers generally see to it that their sons and daughters become literate, too. There are definite correlations between parental education levels and children’s school enrolment, attendance and learning achievement. This suggests that any serious national effort to achieve UPE should include a strong ABE component. Together, UPE and ABE can reduce the incidence of illiteracy more quickly. The link between adult literacy and family planning practices is now well established, and ABE can also lead to improvements in family nutrition, health and childcare. A less visible but important outcome reported by many ABE participants is improved self-confidence, a basic ingredient of empowerment of rural people, especially of women. Literacy and numeracy are directly useful in the marketplace and in management tasks, so these skills, together with certain other ABE content, can lead to more productive livelihoods – an essential factor in alleviating poverty (Lakin and Gasperini, 2003, pp. 119–120).
2.5 How to Fund These Recommendations

2.5.1 Situational Analysis

Achieving UPE by 2015 will be costly on a worldwide scale, and specifically for Africa, the continent facing the biggest challenges. Various policymakers and researchers have tried to estimate the global resource gap for achieving UPE and the current estimates range from US$3 billion to $11 billion annually (Gurria and Gershberg, 2005, p. 2). This range is quite large due to different assumptions made in the estimates concerning learner–teacher ratios, the level of teachers’ salaries, projections of economic growth, the likely future impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and whether EFA costs should also include an element of secondary education. One commonality in all the estimates is that they use an average annual cost per child, whereas the marginal cost of reaching the last few per cent of out-of-school children and retaining children currently in the system though at high risk of repeating or dropping out, is likely to be much higher, with Foster and Keith (2003, p. 48) predicting total costs of $130 billion per year if these children are to be successfully targeted.

While African governments are financing a significant part of their own educational systems, most of them are supported by some external donor and NGO finances, and this will need to continue at the same time as the strengthening of domestic taxation systems. Levels of official development assistance (ODA) to the education sector have been increasing in recent years with a near doubling between 2001 and 2004 ($4.6 billion to $9.6 billion), most of this being from bilateral aid targeted towards low-income countries (LICs). This is an equivalent increase in the share of ODA committed to the education sector from 10.7% in 2001 to 13.5% in 2004, with the increase for LICs going from 10.2% to 17.1% over this same period. Six countries (Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Norway and the UK) were responsible for 63% of the increase in 2002/03 but only 23% of this went to Sub-Saharan Africa (FTI Secretariat, 2006a, pp. 2, 6–7).

Looking particularly at external funding to developing countries specifically allocated for basic education, this reached $3.4 billion in 2004, which is just above the minimum estimate of resources needed for developing countries to reach the UPE target. While this amount was committed, only $1.3 billion of it was actually disbursed during 2004 (FTI Secretariat, 2006b, p. 4). In addition, some technical assistance and budget support financing is spent on basic education, though this is categorised as general education spending and not included in the data on basic education. However, what is evident is that at least up until 2004, over 50% of official ODA for education was funding post-secondary education, though this may have changed over the last two years (FTI Secretariat, 2006b, pp. 12, 14).

2.5.2 Making Efficiency Savings

While it is clear that additional resources will be needed to help Africa reach the education...
MDGs, just as important as the total amount of resources is how resources are used and what they are used for.

‘The current conventional wisdom among practitioners is that additional spending will be necessary, but that it will only service to raise attainment and learning outcomes if: (a) it is devoted to categories of expenditure that are highly productive—including either better productive efficiency or better allocation across inputs, (b) if it is devoted to, or combined with, new techniques and pedagogical approaches (c) it is accompanied by systemic reform.’

(Pritchett, 2004, pp. 41–2)

As has been already mentioned in section 1.8, the practice of repetition is extremely inefficient from a financial perspective. 42.4 million children in the 6–14 age group still remain out of school, yet classes contain a significant proportion of children who are repeating and in many cases excluding space for those out-of-school children. Extra classrooms and teachers are needed to cater for the high number of repeaters than in a more efficient system; the public purse must pay for each additional year that a child repeats; and in addition to these ‘public costs’, repeaters are losing out in the market place in foregone earnings for each additional year they repeat, and if they go on to drop out, in the long run they are generally likely to earn lower wages.

1. Direct Efficiency Savings Due to Repetition

The most recent estimate of the direct cost of repetition in Sub-Saharan Africa that this research found was from 1995, and totalled US$ 570 million (UNESCO, 1998a, p. 25). A more recent study looking at the cost of achieving universal secondary education (including UPE) estimated that at current rates of repetition and cost efficiency, an additional $34 billion is needed annually for all developing countries over the next 15 years, but that this would drop by $2 billion to $32 billion if countries reduced repetition rates and overall costs to the best-practice EFA-FTI Indicative Framework levels (Glewwe, Zhao and Binder, 2006, pp. 35, 54). These are global figures rather than estimates specifically for Africa, but especially where repetition rates are high, the financial savings to be made through improved efficiency are significant.

Looking at education efficiency indices (see section 1.8 for more details), data from 1998 showed that the primary education efficiency index for Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa was 61% while in Anglophone Sub-Saharan Africa it was 75%. This meant that nearly 40% of total resources were being wasted due to high repetition and dropout rates in Francophone Africa, with around 25% of total resources being wasted due to repetition and dropout in Anglophone Africa (World Bank, 2002, p. 55), and correlates with the generally higher use of repetition in Francophone than in Anglophone education systems.

Given that this research has shown unequivocally that repetition has very few pedagogical benefits, it would seem that the money wasted on children repeating the same year could be better spent on promoting children and providing them with additional pedagogical support. If on average 40% of the primary education budget in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa is being wasted currently, then investing this money on some of the recommendations and alternative strategies outlined in sections 2.2 and 2.3 to support and train teachers, update the curriculum, provide additional teaching materials, develop bilingual education, assist weaker children, and complement education provision with additional non-educational nutritional or financial inputs, could dramatically improve efficiency with an additional injection of funds that would lead to cost savings in the medium to long term.

2. Efficiency Savings on Other Areas of Education Spending

In addition to efficiency savings made through directly reducing the repetition rate, there are other areas of education spending that may be inefficient. Examples are:

- high teachers’ salaries relative to the level of gross domestic product (teachers’ salaries often account for up to 90% of the education budget in some African countries (Michaelowa, 2003, p. 5);
- disproportionate spending on boarding schools when day schools could be cheaper and more effective in retaining learners;
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

• low child–teacher ratios in some low-density population rural areas which could be rationalised by introducing multigrade teaching;
• high levels of spending on central, local and school-level administration compared to pedagogical inputs.

Also, some African countries are spending far less than the recommended 50% of the national education budget on primary education, with secondary and higher education being relatively over-funded. Thus, if efficiency savings can be made by reallocating either within sub-sectors or between sub-sectors, even more resources could potentially be freed up to be used on improving the quality and relevance of primary school teaching, and providing additional support to weaker children at no extra cost to the taxpayer.

However, it is important that there is coordination and cohesion among initiatives in the sector. If a critical component in the EFA campaign in a given country is a school feeding initiative which provides families with an incentive to send their children to school, or the provision of a boarding school which provides security to girls and enables them to attend school, then attempting to increase efficiency by cutting these programmes is likely to be counter-productive. Similarly, if reducing teachers’ salaries results in a shortage of teachers or a poorer quality of teachers and lower teacher motivation, any efficiency gain will be merely superficial and short term. Proportionality and awareness of the wider, longer-term picture is key.

3. Efficiency Savings Due to Reallocation of Financial Resources

EFA-FTI best practice indicates that governments of developing countries should allocate around 20% of the national budget to the education sector. In practice, this figure varies significantly across Africa, with some countries giving far less and a few giving a little more. In those countries where education only receives 10–15% of national resources, the sector will remain under-funded and will continue to be sub-standard in terms of both increasing access to and improving the quality of primary education so that the UPE target can be met by 2015.

Looking holistically at a government’s national budget allocation to different sectors and to debt repayments could enable some dialogue among policymakers about the most optimal resource allocation. While each country needs to take into account specific factors related to its own economic, political and structural development, a broad framework is needed which ensures that education receives the right level of priority. This may need to involve looking at the diversification of funding for different sectors (including education), introducing community-financing initiatives and public-private partnerships.

Given that donors are contributing quite significantly to different sectors in many African countries, it will be important to have a coordinated donor investment strategy to ensure that donor resources are being used optimally and in a complementary way to national resources so that there is balanced funding across and between the different sectors of the economy. Ideally this should

CASE STUDY Linkage effects in Kenya

An experimental study in Kenya found that dropout rates decreased when more money was spent on textbooks and school uniforms in a given school compared to a control school (Kremer et al. 1997 cited in Betts 1999, p. 12). However, parents were attracted by the increased spending in the experimental school so enrolled their children there. The end-of-year test scores remained unchanged despite the increased resources and the increase in class size, so the authors concluded that from the resources economised through increasing class sizes, more textbooks could be bought without the need for additional resources, thus leading to improved efficiency through a lower dropout rate.
be government-driven and donors should be willing to invest in all areas, rather than being reluctant to fund some aspects such as educational materials supply or recurrent costs (Colclough and Lewin, 1993, p. 151).

2.5.3 Managing Resources at School Level

Where financial decision making all takes place at centralised level, there will be inefficiencies in the way some of the resources are used and allocated. While certain budgets need to be allocated and spent at central level such as policy development and curriculum revision, other budgets are better concentrated down to local community or school level so that those on the ground can decide, based on local knowledge, how best to spend these resources. This also develops a school’s management competency and increases community involvement in education decision making, creating greater ownership of children’s education among communities.

‘The fact that a greater proportion of developing-country studies than American studies find that school inputs significantly affect student outcomes implies that an increase in school spending is most helpful in relatively impoverished areas and schools.’

(Betts, 1999, p. 14)

However, providing the finances without at the same time training administrative staff and headteachers in the basic principles of financial planning and identifying cost-effective inputs, will not ensure that increased resources will lead to better learning outcomes. Thus, the effective use of finances to improve management and accountability and promote a better learning environment is critical (Fredrikson, 2005). In a UNESCO virtual forum in 2000 (UNESCO, 2000), 29 participants discussing issues around how to reduce repetition in Africa concluded that the three most appropriate strategies were:

- implicating parents in the management of schools;
- strengthening the local financial autonomy of schools;
- improving the training and supervision of teachers.

All of these are very much locally driven strategies requiring funding to be available at the school level. In addition, participants mentioned other strategies including greater collaboration with NGOs, developing multigrade classes, dividing the primary cycle into sub-cycles with automatic promotion from grades 1 to 4, improving school infrastructure, making the curriculum more focused on basic skills, developing more objective evaluation methodologies, and ensuring budgets for education are disbursed in full.

2.5.4 Hypothetical Cost-Saving Example

In section 1.8 above, we have already seen that in 1998, the primary education efficiency index for Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa stood at 61%, implying that nearly 40% of total resources were being wasted due to a combination of high repetition and dropout rates. In Anglophone Sub-Saharan Africa, the efficiency index was a higher 75%, meaning that only 25% of resources were wasted due to repetition and dropout (World Bank, 2002, p. 55).

As has been argued previously, while African countries do need significant and sustained additional resources to reach the MDG of UPE, there are substantial cost savings that can be made through reducing repetition rates that would free up resources to spend on pedagogical, management and specialist reforms leading to a higher quality, more efficient education system.

Given that the problem of repetition is so much greater in Francophone African than in Anglophone Africa, the following hypothetical cost-saving example is more applicable for Francophone countries. However, for those Anglophone countries with significant repetition rates, such as Malawi and Lesotho, the example is equally valid.

Step 1: Assume that 40% of primary resources are currently wasted due to repetition and dropout.

Step 2: Assume that 25% of primary resources are wasted due to repetition, with the other 15% being wasted due to dropout.
Step 3: Assume that the national annual primary education budget in our hypothetical country is 100 units, thus 25 units are currently being wasted due to repetition.

Step 4: Assume that the primary education budget is 50% of the total budget for education.

Step 5: Assume that this model is addressing the needs of children who are currently in school, rather than those that are out-of-school.

Step 6: An estimated additional 45 units of resources will be needed to raise quality, standards and relevance in our current education system, yet if this significantly reduces repetition rates to below the best practice target of 5% over the medium term, this should lead to at least 20 units of resources being economised, thus only an investment of 45−25 = 20 additional units will be needed annually in the longer run. This figure may indeed be lower if a knock-on effect of these new investments causes a decrease in the dropout rate too.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Budget</th>
<th>Crude Estimate of Additional Resources Needed</th>
<th>Total Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary education</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaries</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher training (Including CPD)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central management and policy development (including curriculum development)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textbooks and instructional materials</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual education development</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1−5% of national budget for education (i.e. 2−10 units)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health, nutritional and financial interventions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 3: Conclusion and Recommendations to Governments, Donors, Teachers and Schools

3.1 From Repetition to Promotion

Proponents of repetition policy argue that it helps to address quality, but this study has shown substantial evidence from many different sources to contradict this view and to show that repetition is not addressing the low quality of primary schooling in Sub-Saharan Africa and is hindering the achievement of the EFA agenda. Despite this evidence, there is a pervasive mindset among many in the education communities of Sub-Saharan Africa that prevents an evidence-based culture change.

This chapter aims to sum up the findings of the previous chapters and incorporate them into specific recommendations for different actors involved in policy reform and its implementation. Given the interlinked nature of the issues which affect repetition and the need for meaningful engagement among all stakeholders, the process of change will require the involvement of governments (especially ministries of education) policymakers, donors, district education officers (DEOs), school managers, teachers, teaching assistants, parents/carers, learners and civil society.

3.1.1 Francophone and Anglophone Repetition Policy

This research has shown that there is a clear, but not complete, difference in existing repetition policies between francophone/lusophone and Anglophone countries. In general, repetition is the preferred policy tool in the former and is less widely used in the latter. This has two main consequences for any reform in francophone countries: firstly, the practice of repetition is more deeply engrained culturally, and therefore likely resistance stronger, and secondly, the technical challenges in altering the system are larger and more complex.

3.1.2 From Repetition to Promotion

This report does not claim that repetition is ‘wrong’ and automatic promotion ‘right’ in all circumstances, but having examined the evidence in favour of repetition, the research suggests that there is little to recommend repetition as it currently stands, in either pedagogical or financial terms.

Thus, this report recommends a progressive reform which seeks to institutionalise the automatic promotion of children so that children are generally promoted, with the practice of repetition being eventually limited to a few special cases where there are demonstrable grounds supported by objective evidence for believing that a child’s educational well-being would be better served by repetition. Ministries of education would need to issue detailed criteria and guidance for schools and teachers to assess the grounds for these special cases of repetition. This process would require clear information and the justification for this policy change to be communicated between ministries, schools, teachers, children and the community in order to create the ownership required for the desired impact.

The reasons why a child might be considered to need to repeat can be broken down into two distinct categories.

1. The child has missed school for lengthy periods of time (irregular attendance).
2. The child has learning difficulties which make it hard for the child to learn at the same rate as his or her peers (low performance).

While the consequence of these may be the same – the child falls behind his or her peers in terms of notional academic achievement – the reasons are very different. It is thus important to recognise that the solutions required for each case will also be very different. Solutions may be preventative – those which address the root cause of lack of attendance or underperformance – or remedial – those which address the symptoms of the problem. The table on the following page outlines the principal preventative and remedial interventions. Implementation of the recommendations in the sections that follow would involve a strong synergy between
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Irregular Attendance</th>
<th>Preventative</th>
<th>Remedial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Economic Issues      | - The provision of educational vouchers, food or cash payments in exchange for attendance to compensate their families for the opportunity cost  
- The inclusion of income-generating projects in the curriculum, as in the case study of the agricultural-based learning programmes in Thailand and Madagascar  
- The provision of free school meals if malnutrition is a problem | - Placing the child on an accelerated learning programme (sometimes also called a ‘catch-up’ programme)  
- Providing individual or small-group tuition for the child  
- Providing girls-only classes  
- Providing self-supported learning packages to enable the child to catch-up in out-of-school time  
- In exceptional circumstances, allowing the child to repeat a year |
| Gender Issues        | - The provision of escorts on main routes into school if insecurity is a problem  
- Separate sanitary facilities close to the main school buildings  
- The provision of boarding facilities  
- Gender-awareness training for school management, teachers and students  
- Where appropriate, the recruitment of more female teachers | |
| Relevance and Flexibility of Teaching and Learning | - The inclusion of vocational and practical subjects such as agriculture in the curriculum and the promotion of community-centred adult learning including literacy initiatives  
- The provision of peripatetic teachers, mobile schools and an adapted curriculum and timetabling of schooling for pastoralist or nomadic groups | |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low Performance</th>
<th>Quality and Relevance of Teaching and Learning</th>
<th>Remedial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Quality and Relevance of Teaching and Learning | - Designing appropriate learning activities and resources for the child which promote independent learning and critical thinking  
- Moving towards more participatory teaching and learning styles  
- Introducing a performance record or individual action plan as a basis for negotiations between child, teacher and parent/carer for target setting  
- The use of alternative or modified curricula which stress alternative skills in which academically less able children may be able to achieve or excel  
- The use of developmental rather than summative assessment methods and the use of national standards of assessment  
- The provision of textbooks that contain content and activities suitable for a wide range of abilities and which accommodate a range of learning styles | - Providing in-class and mainstreamed support for the child through peer support, teaching assistant support, enrichment-pull-out, or a greater proportion of teacher time  
- Providing out-of-class and non-mainstreamed support though special needs provision, homework or study skills clubs, tuition (private or in groups), self-contained classes or peer support  
- Providing focused language classes in situations where the LoI is not native to the children  
- The formal identification of an individual’s special learning needs (“statementing” in the UK) and the allocation of resources for that individual’s needs from government in addition to the school’s normal funding  
- Providing teachers with a minimum of 10% planning, preparation and assessment non-contact time to prepare for delivering lessons in a differentiated teaching style |
| Language of Instruction | - The use of native Lols, or the provision of intensive teaching, where the LoI is non-native | |

7 The aim of this is to identify areas of concern and strategies to address them, and to provide an ongoing mechanism for teacher-assessment and self-assessment which monitors progress and gives an early indication of problems.
teachers, teacher training institutes, schools, the ministry and DEOs, and the community.

Clearly, in many resource-poor countries some of the proposed interventions will constitute something of a wish list for future programming rather than something which is attainable in the short or even medium term. However, providing the training necessary to implement such recommendations can begin at any stage, and is an important step in ensuring that the human capacity is ready for the reform when introduced. Also, surprisingly sophisticated and effective resources can be made from low-cost, locally-available materials, and young people and other members of the community can be used as minimal-cost resources when engaged as peer supporters, teaching assistants or administrative support, as shown by the case study of the Ecuador Friendly Networks programme. That said, it is necessary to prioritise the recommendations in a way that is realistic and achievable. It is also important to recognise that some interim measures, such as multigrade teaching, can be very long lasting, particularly for small schools in rural areas, as illustrated by the Cuba case study, and so appropriate training and support for these situations should not be overlooked. Logically, addressing the root causes of the problems is the first priority.

3.2 Recommendations

The sections below outline specific recommendations to stakeholders involved in education policy and practice.

3.2.1 Policymakers in African Governments

To minimise repetition, a range of policy responses will need to be carefully integrated into a coordinated framework of sector-wide and economy-wide initiatives that aim to address the issues of quality and relevance of teaching and learning, the LoI and issues affecting irregular attendance. Where repetition is retained, policymakers should ensure that: decisions about whether a child repeats are based on objective national criteria that are applied equitably across schools and regions. These criteria need to be based on solid pedagogical underpinnings; and should be accompanied by detailed advice for teachers and school managers, including supporting workshops, on how to implement them. A clear communication strategy needs to be developed so that all stakeholders are aware of the new policy, understand why promotion is replacing repetition as the first choice solution to children who are struggling, and are supported in the ‘how-to’ of implementing it at school and community level. Specific interventions drawn from the literature review and case studies are outlined below.

1. Ensuring the Quality and Relevance of Education and Teaching

If children and families perceive that education is not relevant and of low quality, there will be little incentive to attend school regularly. The Integrated Pest Management programmes in Thailand and Madagascar demonstrate how a diversified curriculum, innovative teaching and learning styles and an expanded concept of education can be successfully integrated with teacher education, school accountability and community participation to encourage greater participation in education. Flexibility was key to the success of the Moroccan second chance schools showing that relevant education is more easily provided for certain groups outside the formal school. If the goals of EFA are to be met, education must be inclusive which means that innovative approaches to targeting those children outside the formal education system will be required, as well as flexibility in the formal system. This underlines how it is at times necessary to challenge the very concept of a school, which tends to be seen as a physical building rather than a social site of learning. The mobile schools in Kenya demonstrate an innovative redefinition of the school concept, one which effectively meets the individual needs of pastoralist communities but which is a long way from the conventional mental image of ‘a school’. These examples show that there is a need for policymakers not to regard the non-formal sector as being beyond their remit. Instead, they should attempt to work with non-formal and alternative initiatives, understanding their successes and challenges, and offering appropriate support where necessary. While return to the formal sector may be an ultimate goal, it should not be expected that this is the only appropriate goal.
Similarly, the early identification of marginalised groups who are most at risk of repeating due to access issues and irregular attendance such as girls, minorities, those living in remote areas, the disabled, children with special educational needs, orphans, children affected by HIV/AIDS and children from socio-economically disadvantaged will ensure that specific interventions can be targeted towards them. The CBR project in Jordan demonstrates this approach.

Ensuring that the curriculum is relevant to the needs of learners and supported by appropriate teaching and learning materials as shown by the case studies from north-eastern Uganda and the Escuela Nueva programme in Colombia; preparing teachers in how to teach it (see section 3.2.3 below for more information); and using a variety of appropriate methods ranging from the formal school to ‘mobile schools’, catch-up centres and non-formal approaches, will contribute to children attending school on a regular basis and receiving quality and relevant education.

2. Promoting Indigenous Languages of Instruction

For those children whose mother tongue is not the LoI, providing MTE for the early part of their schooling with bilingual education later in the schooling cycle is very likely to help in integrating these children and enabling them to achieve better results without the need to repeat. A policy of automatic promotion combined with MTE was introduced in primary schools in Mali and led to improved performance on examinations (Kane, 2004, p.72). Several other examples in section 2.2.5 including the EBALAAN case study in Burkina Faso have shown similar improvement in results as a result of MTE. Making changes to the LoI will also require providing teaching and learning resources in the mother tongue. Additionally, the recruitment, training and allocation of bilingual teachers would need to be a priority for policymakers.

3. Addressing Reasons for Irregular Attendance

While the previous two sections address some reasons for irregular attendance, it is also important for ministries of education to work closely with other ministries to coordinate and target cross-cutting interventions effectively in such areas as health, child protection and food programmes. The case of Progresa in Mexico shows how integrating education with health and nutrition efforts can be mutually beneficial to all programmes. It shows that a tightly defined target group (indigenous rural communities) focuses the intervention, while the support they receive is coordinated at a macro level with the results being greater attendance in education and better health and nutrition outcomes for the population.

4. Prioritising Resources

Making the transition from repetition to automatic promotion require systemic changes to the ways teachers are trained and may well require substantial curriculum reform. This reform has financial implications in the medium term due to the costs of revising the curriculum, adapting teacher training, providing CPD to existing and new teachers as they adjust to teaching a potentially more mixed ability class, providing compensatory incentives for teachers who feel that more is being demanded from them, paying remote allowances for teachers posted to particularly challenging environments, and addressing the multi-faceted reasons for irregular attendance. While additional resources will be needed, repetition rates are likely to be dramatically reduced in one year due to the policy reform, thus freeing up financial resources as a result of increased efficiency. These resources can then be invested in the provision of a more relevant and supportive learning environment for children.

In the exceptional cases where repetition is necessary, sufficient resources will need to be allocated to supporting the repeating children to ensure that they benefit from the repeated year, and that the problems which caused the repetition in the first place are addressed. Repetition rates, the reasons for repetition, and the effects of repetition (in terms of future success and dropout) should be carefully monitored, with the information and statistics gathered being used to inform future decisions about repetition policy.
5. Adopting a ‘Once-only’ Repetition Policy for End-of-Cycle Children

With the growing number of children enrolling in primary schools in line with the MDG and EFA agendas, there is a greater demand for secondary schooling. Yet in many countries there is an insufficient number of schools, classrooms and teachers to meet this demand. This results in public secondary school places being rationed to the top performers giving children who pass the leaving certificate but with marks that are not high enough to access a scarce public secondary school place, the desire to repeat the final year or final few years over and over again until they score enough to obtain a place. While places remain rationed, for equity reasons, this research recommends that children who are completing a year which results in a statutory certificate should be offered the chance to repeat the final year only once should they fail in both the initial and re-sit examinations rather than being able to repeat several times. From the supply side, this research also recommends that policymakers consider a sector-wide approach to planning that does not look exclusively at the primary education sector but focuses on sustained system-wide expansion so that the MDGs can be met with the opportunity for as many children as possible to progress to secondary education where they have the ability.

3.2.2 Donors and NGOs Funding Projects and Programmes in Africa

1. Donors

Bernard et al (2005) pose the question as to whether it is possible to attain UPE and other EFA objectives without changing the culture of education, particularly in relation to the practice of repetition. The authors state that education systems in Africa must no longer require all children to reach the same standards, but instead they must permit each child to learn to the best of their ability (pp. 79–80).

However, this statement is at odds with much of the conceptual thrust of educational policy in a number of donor countries. In particular, the emphases on standard assessment tests; summative, examination-based assessment rather than developmental coursework; attainment targets; the focus of resources on core curricula (especially science, literacy and numeracy); concordance with the national curriculum; school inspections held against national standards and the setting of specific, measurable goals for achievement by the end of schooling (for example, the attainment of a minimum of five grade A–C GCSEs in the UK at age 16) all point to a renewed focus on academic standardisation rather than diversity of achievement in a number of developed countries which are also key donors. (This is arguably more true of Anglo-Saxon countries, such as the United States, the UK and Australia, and less so of others such as in Scandinavia and Canada.)

This focus is likely to inform the modalities of donor-funded education programmes in developing countries. Donors are naturally interested in advocating what they see as being the best practice that they themselves have adopted. The emphasis on numerically measurable goals and short-term outcomes in donor-funded projects, which enable donors to demonstrate impact within political cycles to their constituents, augments this. Along with the emphasis on quantity rather than quality mentioned in relation to the MDGs, this can create a policy environment in which quality takes second place.

As donors provide financial assistance to the education sector in different African countries, it will be important firstly that they engage in policy dialogue outlining the lack of evidence to support the positive pedagogical impact of repetition, and secondly that they provide finances to support interventions that are likely to reduce the reasons for irregular attendance leading to repetition as well as low performance. This will need to include a focus on assisting ministries of education through a sector-wide approach to reform to integrate the transition from retention to promotion with appropriate capacity building at all levels. A specific focus will need to be on programmes aimed at delivering improved educational quality through education and support for teachers, managerial capacity building, curriculum and assessment reform, textbook provision, and ensuring that wherever relevant, materials are available and teachers able to teach in local languages as well as the national LoI.
Where donors are able to fund cross-cutting programmes (directly or indirectly via civil society groups or NGOs) then interventions that have a positive effect on family’s nutritional, health and employment status are likely to feed through to increased educational participation and more regular attendance and thus should be prioritised. In addition, programmes that include an element of adult literacy can also have a strong positive effect on educational attendance and retention, as shown by the FABE case study in Uganda.

2. UN Agencies

In situations where the state is unable to provide educational services, United Nations (UN) agencies can operate as quasi de facto states, and in these circumstances the recommendations for government policy makers set out above would similarly apply to UN agencies.

In resource-poor environments cost issues are often the principal determinants of a child’s attendance and hence the likelihood of their repeating a grade. Thus where UN agencies are operating like other donors, they have an important role to play and have often been associated with initiatives such as school feeding programmes (usually implemented in conjunction with the WFP), voucher schemes and the provision of education in emergencies.

Where programmes are likely to see a rapid increase in enrolment, such as shown by the case study of the WFP take-home rations project in Pakistan, it is important for the UN agencies to work together with the government and other donors to ensure that a coordinated approach is taken which includes increased teacher recruitment, allocation and training; increased school infrastructure and staffing; and increased availability of teaching materials such as textbooks. If this is not done, education quality is likely to decrease significantly. This approach will need to be gender influenced: where the target audience is female, as in Niger and Pakistan, an effort should be made to recruit and train a higher proportion of female teachers in order to provide balance, a girl-friendly environment and positive role models.

3. NGOs

Given that irregular access is a serious problem in many parts of Africa, meeting the EFA goals will require a focus on marginalised children. Some of these children are being effectively targeted outside the formal education system. Thus, increasing the focus on the non-formal sector in a way that is in synchronism with the formal sector will simultaneously reduce the pressure on the formal system (including by reducing repetition) and capture children who would otherwise fall beneath the radar. The case study of the Moroccan second chance schools demonstrates the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships to success, where frameworks are agreed and where each agent knows its own responsibility.

NGOs often concentrate their efforts on a particular marginalised group as shown by two case studies in this research: Mali’s community schools run by Save the Children US and Ghana’s Shepherd Schools run by ActionAid. Sometimes a variety of NGOs are working on similar programmes. To ensure that NGOs maximise their potential, activities will need to be coordinated to ensure that overlaps and gaps do not occur, and that any synergistic potential is maximised. NGOs should work with partners in government and in communities to target marginalised groups, improve access for those excluded from education, and train local people in the skills necessary for projects to become self-sustaining and locally owned and run.

3.2.3 Teacher Trainers

TTCs, in-service teacher training programmes and distance learning teacher education institutes have two main roles to play in teacher education: one is to train teachers in the philosophy of education (teaching and learning), and the other is to help them gain sufficient subject knowledge coupled with practical skills to teach that subject in the classroom. These two roles are important in creating effective teachers.

1. Evidence-Based Philosophy of Education

Regarding the first role, teacher trainers can play an important role as a channel for evidence-based learning about repetition
and automatic promotion. This should focus explicitly on the reasons why promotion should be preferred to repetition, and should include practical ways to reduce teachers’ stress as a result of the change, for example, by including strategies to involve the community or to facilitate peer-to-peer support. This will provide the decision makers of tomorrow with the widest policy choice and the ability to make informed decisions.

2. Subject Knowledge and Practical Skills

Regarding the second role, an important aim of teacher trainers is to produce teachers who have sufficient subject knowledge and practical skills to create stimulating, critical thinking-oriented learning environments; environments which prioritise quality and access through individualised support, a diverse range of teaching and learning strategies, differentiated lessons and resources, systematic and progressive planning, and developmental assessment. A strong focus on supported and monitored teaching practice should be developed in TTCs to facilitate this. As found during the MUSTER study, in some countries this will require more of a focus on gaining sufficient subject knowledge, and in others a focus on practical skills, sharing good practice, preparation for classroom realities, and teaching trainees how to be flexible and adaptable in the way in which they teach the curriculum so that it meets the specific needs of a given group of children. TTCs are also obviously the primary site of learning for teachers about mixed-ability and multigrade teaching. In countries where these are particularly relevant approaches, training on these areas and self-supported learning methodologies in pre- and in-service teacher training should be prioritised. As already proposed in the MUSTER study recommendations, one approach would be for trainers to offer a core set of modules covering essential competencies including subject knowledge and basic teaching approaches, with additional optional modules covering practical skills of particular relevance to a specific teaching and learning environment (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, pp. xvi, 187).

If teacher trainers are able to help trainee teachers see their role as not being limited to the confines of the school, but also as resources available for the community, this would enhance the integration between the formal and non-formal learning environments and between the school and the community. This would also result in more accountable schools and improvement in the understanding of the community of the potential value of education, which in turn would contribute towards reduced irregular attendance of children.

3. CPD

While the issues above apply to trainee teachers as well as already employed teachers, ongoing support for existing teachers is often minimal in many countries. This will need to be prioritised and, in addition, existing teachers will need support in managing the transition from repetition to promotion. This support will involve training in and resources for differentiation for class teachers potentially including the creation of setted or streamed classes and working with children with special educational needs and disabilities. Further details are outlined in section 3.2.4 below.

3.2.4 Teachers, Schools and DEOs

1. Teachers

Although the advantages of moving towards automatic promotion seem clear from the research, automatic promotion can have potentially disruptive effects on classroom practice, implying as it does a wider variation of ability in a class and the expectation that the class teacher will need to use different pedagogical, assessment and classroom management techniques. As a result, it will be important to build the capacity of teachers and schools to offer children appropriate support in class. Much of this should take place through CPD as already outlined in section 3.2.3. It is important to note at this point that even in developed countries it is acknowledged that creating a fully differentiated lesson is much more time consuming than creating one which is not, and the debate about mixed-ability classes is not over yet. Setted or streamed classes may be among the answers, but very few schools in Africa would have the capacity to divide an age cohort into separate groups so it is important to recognise that improvements in classroom management and teaching methodology will not take place
overnight. However, reform may be aided by the recruitment of volunteers from the community who, with appropriate training, could act as teaching assistants. A programme in Togo called ‘Students’ Tutoring for Achievement and Retention’ has succeeded in reducing repetition rates (Kane, 2004, p. 72).

In recognition of the extra preparation time which is necessary for delivering lessons in a differentiated teaching style, teachers’ terms and conditions should be amended to include a minimum 10% of planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) non-contact time. Safeguards should be put in place to make sure that this time is actually used for PPA, and support structures (such as self-learning packs or advice sheets, mentoring by trained teachers or in-service visits by DEO teacher development staff) should be instituted to maximise the effective use of this time.

2. School Management

This report recommends that school management committees, together with community stakeholders, parents/carers, teachers and children, develop a repetition reform plan (RRP) which sets out how they will implement the process of reform from repetition to automatic promotion. This will require clear policy directives from government to provide the framework for the plan. The plan should include advocacy for the change, such that all stakeholders possess sufficient evidence-based knowledge to make informed choices about the process. The plan should also identify learning needs among the stakeholders (especially among the teaching staff) and identify how these learning needs might be met. In exceptional circumstances, such as where a child has missed the greater part of a year’s schooling, repetition may well be the preferred option and in the best interests of the child. The flexibility to keep repetition where appropriate should be retained, and should be seen as one way of keeping children in school (for example, after pregnancy) in order to meet the EFA targets.

Once the RRP has been developed, schools should ensure that, where repetition is allowed, all teachers are making decisions on repeating students informed by a reliable, objective and evidence-based assessment of a child’s learning (taking into account attendance) made in accordance with national standardised criteria. The decision about whether a child should repeat or not should be taken with the child and his or her parents/carers. An appeals process, to an independent mediator, should be available in case of disagreement. Repetition should be a last resort, and, where practised, should be supported by appropriate pastoral and/or academic interventions for the child which aim to address the reasons for the need to repeat.

To avoid repetition as a result of irregular attendance, schools will need to monitor attendance closely and keep written, accurate records for each child. Irregular attendance should be investigated at an early stage with schools having a coherent strategy for tackling irregular attendance based on a sympathetic and informed assessment of a child’s individual situation rather than an authoritarian response. This might include providing financial assistance, working with community members who can monitor the situation, and raising awareness about special needs and disability issues in order to reduce stigmatisation and allow early detection of problems. Schools should also be encouraged, through management decentralisation policies, to offer flexibility and adaptability to the needs of those excluded from the formal system, for example through flexible calendars, curricula and school hours.

3. DEOs

School inspection criteria should include identification of the rate of repetition, investigation into the factors influencing it, and an assessment of the work the school is doing to address them. DEOs should play an important role in assisting school to develop an RRP, monitoring how the school is implementing this plan, and working with community leaders to address issues of irregular attendance, feeding information into decentralised planning structures to enable appropriately targeted interventions where necessary.

3.2.5 Civil Society

Civil society has an important role to play in monitoring government policy and holding
government to account on ensuring policy becomes reality at grassroots level. Civil society groups should work with schools to find out what practical support they can offer which addresses the root causes of irregular attendance or which provides support for children who are struggling academically. This may involve providing demand-side initiatives to increase regular access and working with communities to advocate for the importance of educational participation.

3.3 Conclusion

This research has found little evidence to show that repetition is an option which works to the benefit of children, their families, their schools or the African continent as a whole. On the contrary, the empirical evidence suggests that the effects of repetition on children are deleterious and have a negative impact on the availability of limited government resources. This implies that, in those countries where a high percentage of children currently repeat, reform is necessary for both pedagogical and financial reasons. Such reform will need to focus firstly on addressing the multiple issues which lie behind irregular attendance causing the very real need for repetition due to the amount of schooling that has been missed. Secondly, the reform will need to focus on increasing the quality and relevance of teaching and learning and providing teachers with the necessary support to teach a mixed-ability group. Without such reform, particularly in francophone Africa, the continent is unlikely to meet either the MDGs or the more ambitious EFA agenda by 2015.
References


Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change


From the text:


Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change


Further reading


Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change

Further research publications

Through the Evidence for Education programme, CfBT Education Trust is proud to reinvest its surpluses in research and development both in the UK and overseas.

Our aim is to provide direct impact on beneficiaries, via educational practitioners and policy makers. We provide a range of publications from practice-based intervention studies to policy-forming perspective papers, literature reviews and guidance materials.

In addition to this publication the following research may also be of interest:

• Supporting National Educational Reform in Sub-Saharan Africa, Michael Latham, Susy Ndaruhamse, Dr Harvey Smith, CfBT Education Trust

• Private Schools for the Poor: A case study from India, James Tooley and Pauline Dixon

Forthcoming publications

Spring 2008

• Base-Line Primary Education Research in Angola, Professor Lynn Davies Education Action International

• New Directions in Schools Provision in Africa, Dr Cilla Ross, Co-operative College

• Advocacy-driven educational programming in emergencies and early reconstruction: A case study: making safe spaces work for children, Jonathan Penson and Kathryn Tomlinson

Summer 2008

• Alternative Education Programmes for Refugee, Internally Displaced and Returnee Children and Youth, Pamela Baxter and Lynne Bethke

• Protecting Positive Community Participation in Education During Emergencies and Reconstruction, Joan Sullivan-Owomoyela and Laura Brannelly

• Donor Engagement During Conflicts, Susy Ndaruhamse, Carole Rigaud and Laura Brannelly

For further information or for copies of the above research please visit our website at www.cfbt.com/evidenceforeducation or contact our Research and Development team at research@cfbt.com.
Grade repetition in primary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: an evidence base for change