The Views of Teachers and Parents on the Practices of Automatic Grade Promotion Policy in Ethiopian Primary Schools

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Theoretical and Empirical Bases of the Study

- Two common types of promotion practices/policies in schools
- Grade retention/Grade repetition and automatic/social promotion

- Grade retention: Repeating a year or more in the same grade level when academic standards are not met.

- Automatic promotion: Promotion to the next grade regardless of the educational attainment of the pupils.

Underlying Assumptions

- Grade retention:
  - The prospect of retention will motivate students to achieve, and if students do not reach a certain achievement level, they should repeat the material.
  - Repetition of learning material is an effective means of increasing their achievement.
- Automatic promotion
  - Avoids negative attitude towards schooling
  - Schooling in lower grades is for socialization purposes
  - Keeps children with their peers and promotes same age learning

Critics

- Automatic promotion
  - Lowers academic standards and expectations
  - Compromises educational quality
  - Develops inflated sense of capability among students
  - Creates an additional problem to teachers in handling students who do not have the requisite knowledge and skills

- Repetition
  - Poorer self-concept and negative attitude toward school
  - Poorer social and personal adjustment for students
  - Increase in dropout (maximizes educational wastage)
  - Repetition of material is not an appropriate way of supporting low-achieving students
  - Fear of failure is a negative way of motivating students
  - Results in having many overage students

Empirical evidence: What does it say?

- The effect of retention is estimated by comparing the achievement test scores of retained students to a matched group of promoted youths.
- Longitudinal studies that follow up retained students for 5-10 years
- Meta-analysis of previously conducted studies

Cont'd

- Findings:
  - Retention has short-terms benefits, but in the long term retained students do not perform better than automaticlly promoted students
  - Retention is a strong predictor of dropout in schools
  - No significant differences in learning in later years
  - Both automatically and retained students demonstrated social and academic adjustment problems
  - Teachers' classroom management demands become difficult in automatically promoted students
  - Effectiveness of the two depends on instructional support and intervention rather than policy decisions
  - Automatic promotion seems to lower parents' and students' expectations in schools

Lessons

- No further research regarding the relative efficacy of grade retention and social promotion- ‘to retain or not to retain?’
- Neither automatic promotion nor grade repetition addresses satisfactorily the problems of low achievers Both result in educational wastage if not accompanied by proper instructional support
- So, what matters is which one works better in a certain local context?

World Experience

- Diverse experiences
- Some set percentage on the number of students that need to be retained (China, recent move towards retention and school-mandated decisions, Chen et al, 2010).
- Some have both automatic promotion and retention depending on states (USA, former president Clinton proposed to repudiate social promotion in 1999, calling for higher academic standards, Carifo and Carey, 2010).

Cont'd

- Europe has both experiences, Scandinavian countries (Iceland, Norway) and Bulgaria have automatic promotion policy (EURYDICE, 2010).
- In many European countries, grade retention is permitted by academic legislation but usually with various restrictions such as automatic progression during the first year of primary education and schools are mandated and held accountable.
- In UK, no policies on retention and students progress normally with their peers.
- Countries in Africa have both practices.

Cont'd

- Developing countries: have high repetition rates even in the presence of automatic promotion.
- Developed countries: low repetition rate.
- Repetition can be voluntary in some cases and at other times can be enforced for failing academic standards.

Problem of the Study and Study Context

- High inefficiency in primary education, high dropout and repetition rate.
- The legalization of automatic promotion in primary grades of 1 to 3 in 2002.
- Mainly intended to minimize dropout and repetition in early grades

Cont'd

- The Education and Training Policy and Its Implementation states that "... students from Grades 1 to 3 are continuously evaluated.... At this level, almost all students, with the exception of those with extreme learning handicaps (or challenger), pass from grade to grade without having to repeat class."

Cont'd

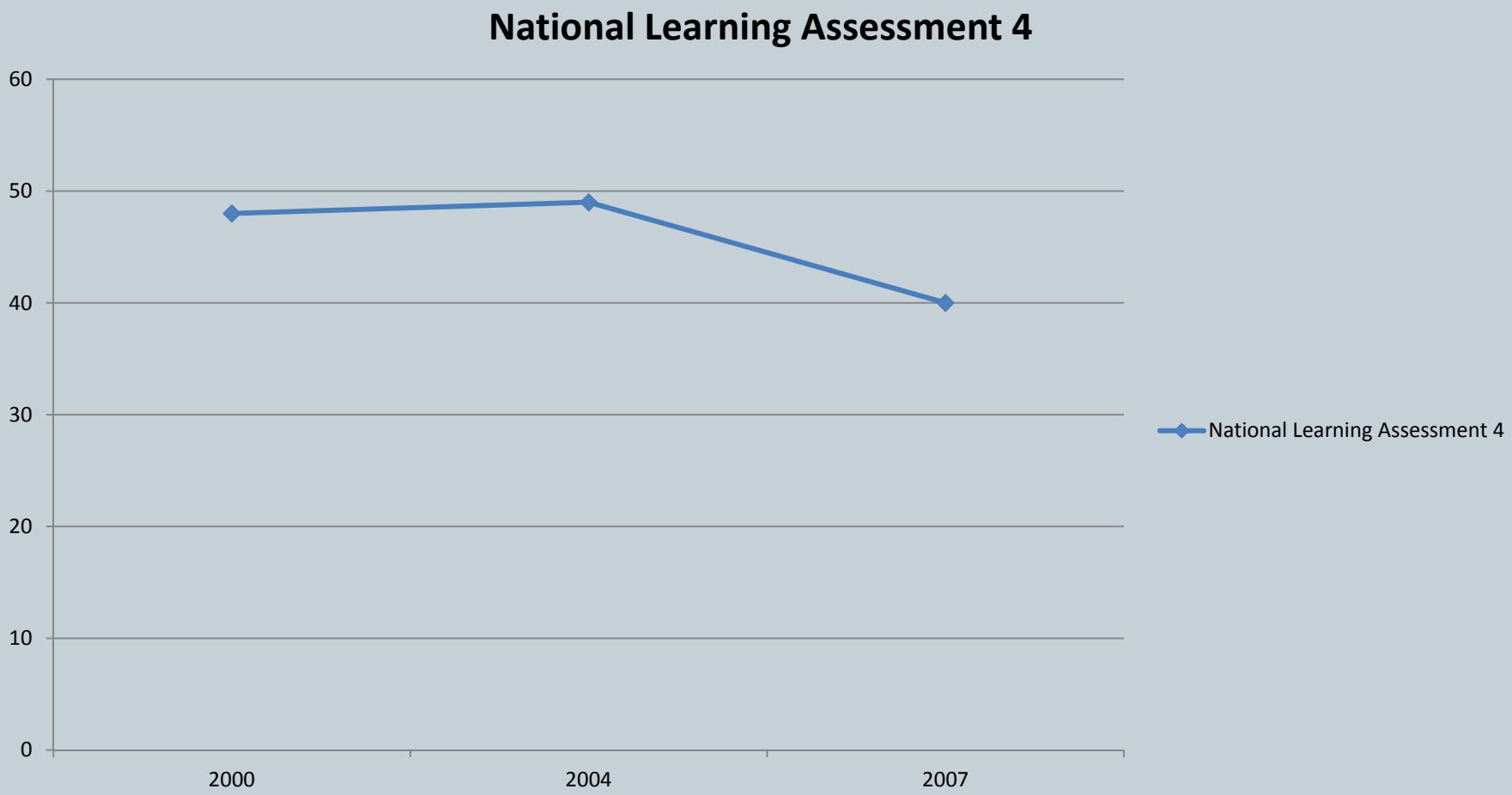
- Repetition, expectedly, in schools has decreased.
  - 16.7 % in 1997 to 6.2 % in 2008 in grade 1
  - 11.9 % in 1997 to 6.7 % in 2008 in grades 1-8
- Steady increment in higher levels of primary schools in recent years, however.
- The highest repetition rates in 2008 were in grade 8 (10.4 %), grade 7 (9 %) and grade 5 (7.1 %).
- Dropout has remained high even after the introduction of the promotion policy (2002)
  - About 20 % percent in grade 1 since 2002
  - Grades 1-8, 12-15 %

Cont'd

- Some students continue to repeat in the same class albeit the automatic promotion policy- high rate of absenteeism (Dereje, 2005).

- NLA in 2000, 2004, 2007-below 50 percent in both grades 4 and 8.

NLA Grade 4


National Learning Assessment 4
60
50
40
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2000
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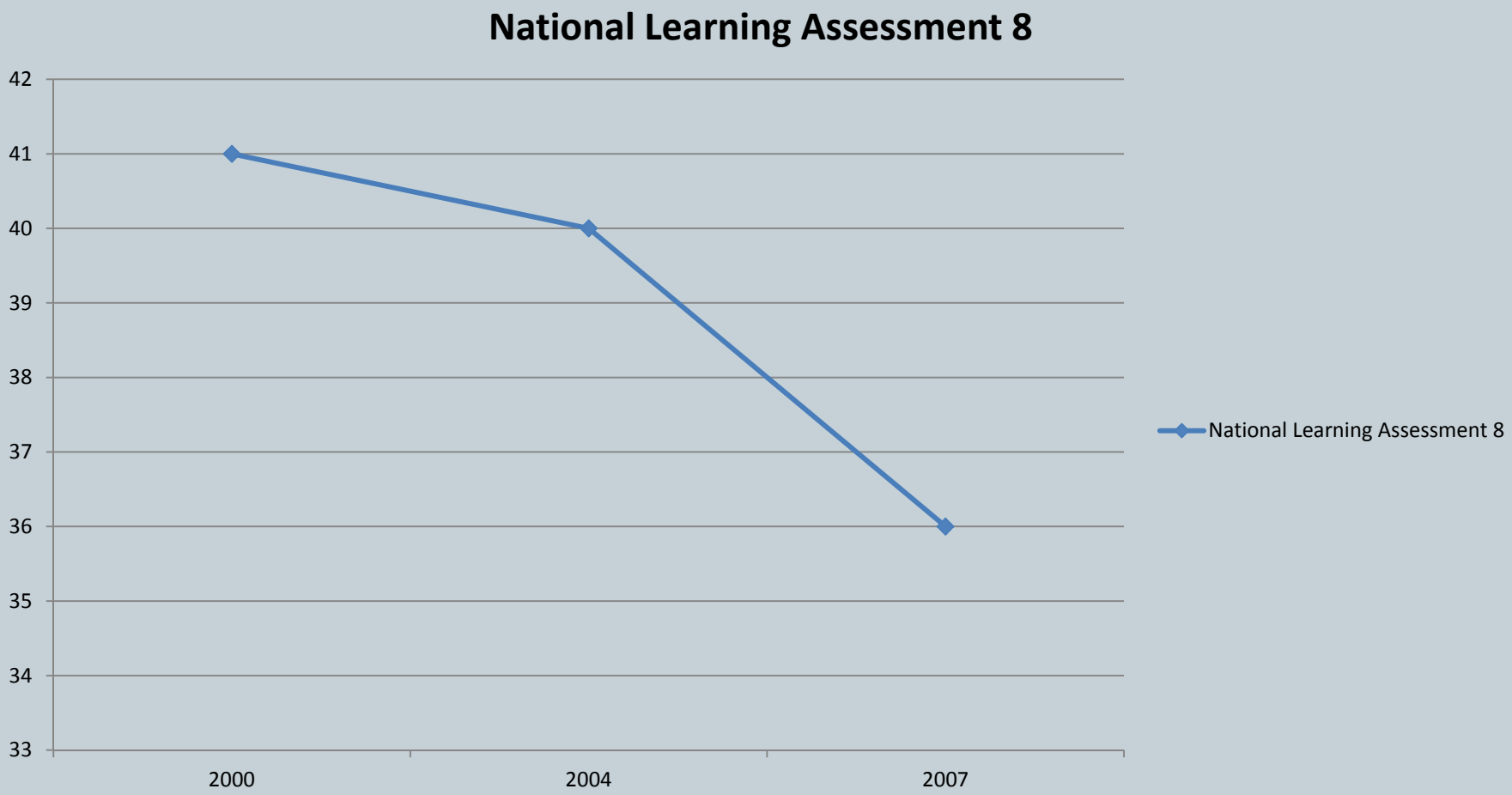
2007
National Learning Assessment 4

NLA Grade 8


National Learning Assessment 8
42
41
40
39
38
37
36
35
34
33
2000
2004
2007
National Learning Assessment 8

Purpose of the study

- Examine the views of parents and teachers on the practice of the automatic promotion policy
- Investigate how teachers actually assess the students and decide students' promotion
- Assess effects of the promotion policy as reported by teachers and parents

Methodology

- Two primary schools in Bahir Dar city sub-urban district
- Reported repetition rate of 6.8 % and dropout rate of 9.6% in grades 1-4 in 2009.
- 21 teachers from the primary schools, 2 principals and 12 parents were included in the study.
- Teachers were selected by considering their experience in schools (those who have been teaching since the formulation of the policy) and parents who have close interaction with the schools and who know about the promotion policy were selected.
- Questionnaire and interview were used to gather data.

Results

- Decision of promotion and assessment practices
  - Continuous testing, consideration of students' social interaction and decision by curriculum committee of the school on who should be promoted
- A teacher reported:
  - Students are promoted from one grade to the next [grade 1 to 3] based on the results found through continuous assessment which account 60% and final examination accounts 40%. The continuous assessment is summed up after a number of small tests have been administered... Students will be asked to read, write, and name plants and animals. Teachers also evaluate the overall social interaction of students, how they play with other students, discipline, etc. The teacher collects and summed up the achievement marks in each assessment. In this way, continuous assessment of students is done.

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- A teacher responded:
  - Students result will be evaluated by the school's curriculum committee. Students could be promoted to the next grade level even if they scored below 50%. It is not fair to raise the expectations and retain them. Retention would make them develop hatred towards schools. That is the justification given.
- A principal was asked why there are repeaters when there is automatic promotion policy:
  - Students who could not sit for assessment on regular basis and those who missed many classes would be retained by the decision of the curriculum committee.

Support for low-performing students

Table 1: The frequency of provision of support to low-performing students by teachers (1 teacher's response missing)

Items	Not at all		Sometimes (1 in two weeks)		Always (Once in a week)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Provide tutorial classes outside of the regular school hours for students who want it	-	-	3	14.2	17	80.95
Prepare instructional strategies and activities based on student's experiences and readiness	-	-	4	19.04	16	76.19
Communicate assessment results to students and parents	-	-	3	14.2	17	80.95
Advise parents to support students	-	-	2	9.5	18	85.71

Ways of and challenges in supporting students

- A teacher reported:
  - ...it is tiresome, teachers cover up to 30 periods per week, complete continuous assessment result of 60-70 or even more number of students, coordinate different co-curricular committees. The students need different types of help and I cannot do that to all these students. I tried to repeat difficult contents. But I cannot ensure they reach the required level because of their number.
- Another teacher also reported that:
  - The school expects me to develop the basic competence of low-achieving students to the required level. However, these students have different ability levels. Which one of them shall I teach in class? Many of these students have irregular class attendance. They come to sit for the exams and when the semester is approaching to end. I give them higher marks to make them reach expected standards and enhance their moral.
- Another teacher reported:
  - Tutorials are organized on weekend days. I teach the contents to the students. But, some do not come and others do not get the right support for we teach only 1 to 2 hours in a week or two weeks. Covering the content of the books is also difficult in this manner.

Views of parents and teachers on automatic promotion

Considering the experiences since 2002, how would you rate the following statements?	Teachers				Parents			
	Disagree		Agree		Disagree		Agree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Automatic promoted students improve their achievements in the next grade level	20	95.2	1	4.7	10	83.3	2	16.6
Automatic promotion has an adverse effect on student's psychosocial development	6	28.5	14	66.6	7	58.3	5	41.6
Automatic promotion increases students learning interests	20	95.2	1	4.7	7	58.3	5	41.6
Automatic promotion enables students to catch up their peers in the next grade level	20	95.2	1	4.7	9	75	3	25
Automatic promotion does not provide enough time for students to recapture what they have missed	1	4.7	20	95.2	6	50	6	50

Cont'd

- A teacher reported:
  - ...the number of students in a typical classroom is up to 60 and 70 even more. This creates series problem for a teacher to identify the learning needs of students. Some of the students may not fulfil the competency levels of a particular grade level. In this case, a teacher has to make them fulfil the competency level in every possible means. If not, these students are promoted to the next grade level because retaining a student is not allowed and considered as a wastage, a teacher may be blamed for not making these students meet the requirements of the grade level. But these students usually have problem in the next grade level. Teachers cannot always help them in large classes. Some of these students leave schools when they feel they do not match their peers.

Cont'd

- A parent stated:
  - *...unless the teacher facilitates the students learning by supporting them in the direction of the expectations set in the curriculum, simple promotion is disastrous. Parents become dissatisfied by the students' reading and writing ability.*
- Another parent stated:
  - We promote some children in the hope that they will improve next year. But, because they do not improve as expected, parents complain...

Effects of promotion policy-views of teachers and parents

- Retention of disadvantaged students in schools
  - ....Parents may not fulfil learning materials like pen, pencil, and exercise book for the child. Therefore, the child lacks interest towards learning, even coming to school. We discuss with parents on how these problems can be solved and make the child finish the school year. The child will be promoted even when he does not meet the requirement.

  A parents who is a member of school board stated:

  - The policy allows that [automatic promotion]. But parents use the policy to mean that students can be promoted after many days of absenteeism. To keep students in schools, we promote them. We believe that they will not come next year if they are retained.

Cont'd

- **Unwanted impact on students' interest toward learning**
  - ....students will also face difficult to deal with the subjects. They have less classroom participation, less confident when responding to a question, and shy. Sometimes, when they forward incorrect answer, they become less motivated to try again....
  - ... Students experience such problems as less classroom participation and low interest to the learning process to the extent of being absent from school. Students will not be competitive, unless the policy allows retaining these students. It makes them to be stressed as they are required to fulfil competencies beyond their capabilities.

Cont'd

- **Discontent among teachers and high repetition in higher primary grades**
  - Well, the problem is finally felt at grade 4 when students are required to sit for a comprehensive exam prepared at a district level [recently introduced]. Many could not proceed to grade 5. At this level, students will be filtered and those who fail in the comprehensive exam will be retained and remain at grade 4. There is a serious disagreement among teachers regarding retained students following the comprehensive exam.
  - ..if you retain a student, you will be questioned why do you fail to make this child able? Sometimes parents also complained about the failure of their children, they want their children to be promoted. Some parents even say to their children, "If you are not promoted, go to the head ..." Teachers are told every time to work for the realization of universal education, they are also made responsible for the low state of quality of education schools are facing...But the resources are not available, the classes are not comfortable for teaching-learning, classrooms are crowded with large number of children...

Conclusion

- What is the lesson that we could draw from this?
  - Reversal effect of automatic promotion in Ethiopian context- promoted students low interest in classes and in learning
  - Teachers unable to manage the expectations of social promotion policy, hence inflating students' score not to disappoint parents and educational officers
  - Attendance of classes has become a main criterion in promoting students
  - Disadvantaged students are kept in schools for a longer period of time.
  - Teachers and parents believe that automatically promoted students do not catch their peers nor do they stay longer in schools for they cannot handle contents of the next grade level
  - Support provision appears to be mere repetition of contents attributed to heavy workload and large class size

Discussion and way forward

- What would you suggest for developing countries with high repetition rate but declining academic standards in the effort to universalize primary education? Retention or promotion???
- Is automatic promotion better off retention in developing countries when there is shortage of resources? How about the failing students in later grades? How about class size to support these students?
- Limit automatic promotion only to disadvantaged students identified by teachers at the beginning of the academic calendar. Maintain academic standards for other students.

ARIGATO GOZAIMASU

The Views of Teachers and Parents on the Practices of Automatic Grade Promotion Policy in Ethiopian Primary Schools

Dawit Mekonnen Mihiretie*

Abstract

The Ethiopian Ministry of Education launched automatic promotion policy for the first cycle of primary education (Grades 1-4) in 2002. The general rational for the introduction of the promotion policy was to minimize repetition and enhance the efficiency of the educational system. While proponents of retention and automatic promotion school policies propose conceptual merits to each of them, met-analysis studies indicate that the empirical evidence attests conclusively to neither of the two. Hence, scholars suggest that policy debate on which one to employ in schools should be substituted to searching effective mechanisms to support low achieving students in schools. This study, using interview and questionnaire, investigated primary school teachers' and parents' views on the practices of the promotion policy. The majority of the teachers (95.2%) and parents (75%) included in the study reported that it is hardly possible for socially promoted students to catch up their peers in the next grade level. Hence, although the literature indicates that promoting low achieving students helps to develop self-esteem of the students, teachers' responses on interviews show that promoted students have adjustment problems in classes when they realize that they are not in the same level as their peers. Parents, on the other hand, indicated the promotion policy has helped their children to be retained in schools although they are concerned by the quality of learning demonstrated by their children and its impact on later grades.

Key words: Automatic promotion policy, quality education, primary education, Ethiopia

1. Conceptual and empirical basis of the study

Automatic promotion is the practice of allowing students who have failed to meet performance standards and academic standards to pass on to the next grade with their peers instead of completing or satisfying the requirements. Grade retention, on the other hand, requires a student who failed to meet academic standards in a given grade level to remain at that level for a subsequent school year (Jackson, 1975 in Jimerson, 2001, Brophy, 2006). Automatic promotion is considered as an alternative to grade retention to help low achieving students as it is less costly in terms of educational and socio-emotional outcomes (Picklo and Christenson, 2005). Policy makers, researchers as well as practitioners have long debated on the relative benefits of social promotion versus grade retention (King, Orazem, and Paterno, 1999) as there are mixed results regarding the efficacy of the two policies though support for social promotion has been developing until recently (Carifio and Carey, 2010).

Proponents of automatic promotion contend that children in lower grades are not matured enough to realize why they are retained. Automatic promotion has also gained support for it has been believed that the major role of primary education is socialization rather than gains in academic knowledge. Retention hurts students' self-esteem when lagging behind their peers, increases dropout and wastage and does not improve students' learning (Jimerson, 2006). . In this regard, three extensive meta-analyses studies (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001) that systematically pool the results of various studies conducted in diverse school contexts fail to support retained students in terms of academic gains as compared to low-achieving but promoted groups of students. Yet, Retention also consumes budget and schooling places that could have been used by other students ((Carifio and Carey, 2010). On the other hand, proponents of retention indicate academic gains for retained students, maintaining academic standards, and developing high expectation for learning and success as its major benefits (Frey, 2005).

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2. Study Context

Primary education in Ethiopia lasts for eight years, divided in to two cycles. The first cycle is from grade 1-4 and the second cycle lasts from grade 5-8. The education policy states that the purpose of primary education is to offer basic and general primary education to prepare students for further general education and training (Ministry of Education, 1994). Ethiopia had very low enrollment rate (22 %) before two decades. Education sector plans after the formulation of the policy has reported efforts to universalize primary education by 2015. Enrollment has shown very high increment (83 % in 2008) and disparity between boys and girls in school enrollment has been narrowing down (Ministry of Education, 2010a). Children in rural areas and disadvantaged groups have also got access to basic education. However, the education system has still high dropout rates and survival rates in grades 5 and 8 are very low (Ministry of Education, 2010b).

Diverse actions have been put in place to address these challenges. One of these actions is the enactment of automatic promotion in primary grades of 1 to 3. Although the education and training policy (Ministry of Education, 1994: 18) states that 'In order to- get promoted from one level to the next, students will be required to have a minimum of fifty percent achievement', the Education and Training Policy and Its Implementation (Ministry of Education, 2002: 42) states that "… students from Grade 1 to 3 are continuously evaluated…. At this level, almost all students, with the exception of those with extreme learning handicaps (or challenger), pass from grade to grade without having to repeat class."

Dropout rate has remained steadily high in primary education even after the introduction of this policy. Dropout rate in grade 1 between the years of 2002 and 2008 has been between 27.9 % and 22.7 % (Ministry of Education, 2010b). Dropout in primary education has been between 12 % and 14.6 % in the years of 2004-2008. Notwithstanding the introduction of automatic promotion, repetition rate in the general primary level has been growing recently. Repetition rate in primary level increased from 3.8 % in 2004 to 6.7 % in 2008 (Ministry of Education, 2010b). The highest repetition rates in 2008 were in grade 8 (10.4 %), grade 7 (9 %) and grade 5 (7.1 %). However, when repetition rates before and after the introduction of the automatic promotion are compared, there are significant changes. For example, repetition in grade 1 decreased from 16.7 % in 1997 to 6.2 % in 2008. Repetition in primary education (grades 1-8) decreased from 11.9 % in 1997 to 6.7 % in 2008 (Ministry of Education, 2010b; Ministry of Education, 2005). This indicates although there are automatic promotion policies in schools, some students continue to repeat in the same class because of high rate of absenteeism (Dereje, 2005). Parallel to the high increment in enrollment and high dropout rate, concerns on the quality of primary education have been raised (Durbessa, 2006, Yalew, Dawit, and Alemayehu, 2010). Results in national assessment at grades 4 and 8 showed that students result has remained to be below 50 % in all three assessments and there is a significant decline in 2007 from 2000 (Ministry of Education, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2010a).

Some teachers and educators raise their concern on low students' achievement and quality of education in general. There are many factors behind that. However, some point their fingers to the automatic promotion policy. This paper intends to examine the views of parents and teachers on the practice of the promotion policy as both are major stakeholders in the implementation of the promotion policy. The paper also examined how teachers actually assess the students as assessment of students is an ingredient part of automatic promotion.

3. Methodology

Twenty one teachers from two public primary schools and 12 parents were included in the study. While teachers were selected by considering their experience in schools (those who have been teaching since the formulation of the policy) and parents who have close interaction with the schools and who know about the promotion policy were selected. The selection of parents also considered those who work as members of school board and those whose children were promoted through automatic promotion. The principals of the two schools were also included in the study. Questionnaire and interview were used to gather data. The questionnaire assessed the views of teachers and parents on the practice of automatic promotion and teachers' reported practices in supporting those low-achieving students. Interview was also conducted with four teachers, two principals and three parents.

4. Findings

4.1 Assessment practices in grades 1-3

One of the underlying bases of automatic promotion is continuous assessment of students. Teachers were asked to describe how they assess students. A teacher reported one of the general guidelines given to the primary schools of Ethiopia. That assessment has to be conducted at different times. The assessment results are then to be used as a basis for supporting the students. The teacher stated:

Students are promoted from one grade to the next [grade 1 to 3] based on the results found through continuous assessment which account 60% and final examination accounts 40%. The continuous assessment is summed up after a number of small tests have been administered… Take for example students may be learning about plants and animals. A teacher after describing the nature and characteristics of plants, animals, he may ask his students about the types of plants and animals they know around them. Students will read, write, and name plants and animals. Teachers also evaluate the overall social interaction of students, how they play with other students, discipline, etc. The teacher collects and summed up the achievement marks in each assessment. In this way, continuous assessment of students is done.

Another teacher also reported that:

Students result will be evaluated by the school's curriculum committee. Considering the overall result of all students in to consideration, promotion will be decided even though 50% is the minimum requirement stated in the policy. Students could be promoted to the next grade level even if they scored below 50%. This is because such issues like students may not cover all the contents allocated for that grade level due to lack of teachers, curricular materials, classrooms, etc. Under these situations, students are forced to cover the contents very fast, and they may not do well on exams and assessments. It is not fair to raise the expectations and retain them that would make them develop hatred towards schools. That is the justification given.

4.2 Efforts in supporting low-performing students

Table 1 revealed that all teachers (100%) provide extra support for students who scored below average in the form of tutorial classes and always an attempt is made (by 76.19% of the teachers) to present the instructional strategies and activities by taking into account students' experiences. Many teachers (80.95%) also reported that they communicate assessment results to students and their parents. Moreover, most of the teachers (85.71%) also reported that they always advise parents about the students' progress and consult on the provision of extra help for the students at home.

Table 1: The frequency of provision of support to low-performing students by teachers (1 teacher's response missing)

Items	Not at all		Sometimes (1 in two weeks)		Always (Once in a week)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Provide tutorial classes outside of the regular school hours for students who need or want it	-	-	3	14.2	17	80.95
Prepare instructional strategies and activities based on student's experiences and readiness	-	-	4	19.04	16	76.19
Communicate assessment results to students and parents	-	-	3	14.2	17	80.95
Advise parents to support students	-	-	2	9.5	18	85.71

Despite these efforts, interview responses indicate the challenge posed in the provision of additional support. These include the organizing activities to the needs of diverse students, time shortage to deal with curriculum contents, identification of the needs of students, and high teaching load. A teacher reported:

…it is tiresome, teachers cover up to 30 periods per week, complete continuous assessment result of 60-70 or even more number of students, coordinate different co-curricular committees. The students need different types of help and I cannot do that to all these students.

Another teacher also reported that:

The school expects me to develop the basic competence of low-achieving students to the required level. However, these students have different ability levels. Which one of them shall I teach in class? Many of these students have irregular class attendance. They come to sit for the exams and when the semester is approaching to end.

Another teacher reported:

Tutorials are organized on weekend days. I teach the contents to the students. But, some do not come and others do not get the right support for we teach only 1 to 2 hours in a week or two weeks. Covering the content of the books is also difficult in this manner.

Teachers also indicated that they have to identify students by administering some tests. A teacher stated:

First of all, the teacher has to identify those students who are at risk of failure by identifying them as slow learners, medium learners, and fast learners using his/her own special way/or strategy, for example, by giving exams/or tests. Then, we give these students extra assistance in the form of tutorial classes in the week end to improve their academic achievement.

4.3 Views of parents and teachers on automatic promotion

The majority of the teachers (95.2%) and parents (75%) included in the study believed that it is hardly possible for students who are socially promoted to catch up their peers in the next grade level which in turn has an adverse effect on their interest for learning. Therefore, it is less likely for automatic promotion to be implemented in its true sense with the existing situation as there are several factors which bar its effectiveness. And also 95.2% of teachers and 83.3% of parents believed that the promotion policy does not enable students to improve their achievement in the next grade level as it does not give enough time for them to recapture what they have missed. Yet, majority of parents (58. 3%) do not think the policy has adverse effect on students psychosocial development.

Table 2: Teachers' and parents' views towards automatic promotion policy

	Teachers				Parents			
	Disagree		Agree		Disagree		Agree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Automatic promoted students improve their achievements in the next grade level	20	95.2	1	4.7	10	83.3	2	16.6
Automatic promotion has an adverse effect on student's psychosocial development	6	28.5	14	66.6	7	58.3	5	41.6
Automatic promotion increases students learning interests	20	95.2	1	4.7	7	58.3	5	41.6
Automatic promotion enables students to catch up their peers in the next grade level	20	95.2	1	4.7	9	75	3	25
Automatic promotion does not provide enough time for students to recapture what they have missed	1	4.7	20	95.2	6	50	6	50

Teachers mentioned the reasons why they think students could not catch their peers in next grade levels. A teacher reported:

…the number of students in a typical classroom is up to 60 and 70 even more. This creates series problem for a teacher to identify the learning needs of students. Some of the students may not fulfil the competency levels of a particular grade level. In this case, a teacher has to make them fulfil the competency level in every possible means. If not, these students are promoted to the next grade level because retaining a student is not allowed and considered as a wastage, a teacher may be blamed for not making these students meet the requirements of the grade level. But these students usually have problem in the next grade level. Teachers cannot always help them in large classes. Some of these students leave schools when they feel they do not match their peers.

Another teacher reported:

…it is difficult to implement social promotion and has become counterproductive in deteriorating student's classroom participation, interest to learning, even interest to come to school. Some teachers may have unfavourable attitude towards low achieving students because of the pressure they face from educational officers because they are demanded to reduce wastage by promoting students to the next grade level. ....students will also face difficult to deal with the subjects. They have less classroom participation, less confident when responding to a question, and they are shy.

A parent and a principal of one school indicated retaining is helpful to the parents and students. The school principal stated that teachers' commitment is that matters and automatic promotion is necessary to maximize efficiency in schools. A parent stated that automatic promotion helps to keep students in schools and develop their interest but stated that it has affected students' attendance, learning and commitment as they know they will be promoted. A parent stated:
…unless the teacher facilitates the students learning by supporting them in the direction of the expectations set in the curriculum, simple promotion is disastrous.

4.4 Teachers' and principals' assessment of the effects of automatic promotion policy in schools

Promotion of students even without having basic competency levels

Well, because some students are promoted to the next grade level while they are not well prepared in terms of fulfilling the competencies…

Another teacher stated:

...it is difficult for students to accomplish tasks like reading, writing, etc. as they were promoted while they did not fulfil the minimum requirement. They became shy to demonstrate their accomplishments while their classmates are doing better.

Retention of students in schools for longer period of time

A teacher states:

….Parents may not fulfil learning materials like pen, pencil, and exercise book for the child. Therefore, the child lacks interest towards learning even coming to school. We discuss with parents on how these problems can be solved and make the child finish the school year. The child will be promoted even when he does not meet the requirement. Another type of support is providing tutorial classes. Teachers can arrange after school classes and weekend classes for those students who are achieving lower.

Unwanted impact on students' attitude toward learning

....students will also face difficult to deal with the subjects. They have less classroom participation, less confident when responding to a question, and shy. Sometimes, when they forwarded incorrect answer, they become less motivated to try again and find the correct answer.

… Students experience such problems as less classroom participation and low interest to the learning process to the extent of being absent from school. Students will not be competitive, unless the policy allows retaining these students. It makes them to be stressed as they are required to fulfil competencies beyond their capabilities.

Teachers' reluctance to support low-achieving students

A teacher reported that:

Some teachers may have unfavourable attitude towards low achieving students because of the pressure they face from educational officers because they are demanded to reduce wastage by promoting students to the next grade level.

Another teacher reported teachers' disagreement in dealing with students who are detained at grade four for they could not be promoted to grade 5 following the administration of a local exam.

Well, the problem finally felt at grade 4 when students are required to sit for a comprehensive exam prepared at a district level [recently introduced]. At this level, students will be filtered and those who fail in the comprehensive exam will be retained and remain at grade 4. There is a serious disagreement among teachers regarding retained students following the comprehensive exam. After taking students up to grade 4, a self-contained teacher returned to grade 1 for another group of students leaving repeating students for another teacher who has been with grade 3 students. The second teacher has a responsibility of making these students meet the requirements of the level together with his students who are not repeating. For this reason, the second teacher usually complains to deal with students whom he/she does not know before. This makes teachers stressful. The second teacher also leaves his/her group of repeaters for the forthcoming teacher.

Teachers also reported that there is pressure from parents and education officers to promote students. A teacher stated:

..if you retain a student, you will be questioned why do you fail to make this child able? Sometimes parents also complained about the failure of their children, they want their children to be promoted. Some parents even say to their children, "If you are not promoted, go to the head ..." Teachers are told every time to work for the realization of universal education, they are also made responsible for the low state of quality of education currently schools are facing...But the resources are not available, the classes are not comfortable for teaching-learning, classrooms are crowded with large number of children...

5. Conclusion

School policies cannot be judged in isolation from actual school contexts. Despite the widely-recognized merits of automatic promotion, it appears to have unintended impact not only in stressing low-achieving students in classes but also affecting students' attitude towards learning in general. The policy may have contributed in lowering repetition rate. Yet, although proponents argue that it positively influences the self-esteem of students, students promoted to the next grade were reported to be shy to stay in class and reluctant to be involved in discussions. Attendance to school and attitude towards learning seems to have been also negatively affected. Large class size has also been mentioned as a challenge by teachers. The implication is that educational practices like social promotion cannot be enacted effectively in contexts where major assumptions behind them are not satisfied for different reasons. Socio-cultural reasons need to be considered as well.

The challenge is while the policy would have merited those students who could not reach the required level due to poor attendance for staying at home to assist the parents and other acceptable reasons, its undesired effect has spread to those who could have attended classes regularly and demonstrated better learning outcomes.

With universal educational access approaching to be met, it is time that automatic promotion is reconsidered and alternative measures in Ethiopian primary schools are introduced. We suggest that automatic promotion shall be kept only to those students with justifiable reasons who shall be identified from the beginning. The average Ethiopian primary school students shall be required to meet the minimum requirement of 50 %. Holding teachers accountable for students' failure to meet the required competence when students are failing to come to schools and students' interest of learning is low for different reasons would have a detrimental effect on teachers' motivation and commitment for work.

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