

Academic Performance of the Repeaters: A Mixed Method Approach to Primary Education

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This mixed method study examines the impact of grade retention on the academic performance of the repeaters during the repeated year. For the quantitative part, 4th grade students (N=346) in public schools (N=42) were taken as the study sample. Initially, this sample was divided into two main groups, i.e. Identified Poor Performers and the Normal Group of students. After annual examinations, the former group was further divided in two subgroups on the basis of results, i.e. Repeaters Sample and Identified Poor but Promoted Sample. A multiphase panel study was designed to collect quantitative data. The data related to academic performance was collected by locally developed tests of five subjects taught in public schools at grade four. A series of analysis were performed with quantitative data to analyze the variations in academic performance of all the three groups. For qualitative part of the study, a group of experienced school teachers (N=12) teaching at primary level in public schools were selected as the key informants. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with the participant teachers. The two sets of data were collected concurrently, whereas the triangulation of both types was carried out after completion of the analysis stage. The findings of the study suggested that there was significant positive impact of grade retention on the academic performance of the Repeaters. However, the academic performance of the Repeaters was not found significantly better than those of the Identified Poor but Promoted Sample and the Normal Group of the students of public schools.

Keywords: Grade Retention, Public Schools, Repeaters, Universal Primary Education.

Grade retention is a widespread and controversial educational practice, both in developed and developing countries. "The practice of retaining the lowest achieving students in the same grade for an extra school year" (Goos, Schreier, Knipprath, De Fraine, Damme, & Trautwein, 2013, p.54) "has been implemented for decades as an intervention to improve academic proficiency, although its effectiveness on either academic or social-behavioral difficulties has not been reported consistently" (Ousuh-Ruu_ & Arthur, 2010, p. 118). The pedagogical significance of grade retention is still debated among educationists. Proponents of grade retention usually argue that it is helpful in improving inadequate academic progress and in the development of emotionally immature students. They believe that, though this policy increases "heterogeneity of age within classrooms but it may also reduce heterogeneity of academic achievement within those classrooms, which may arguably make instruction more efficient" (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005, p.205).

In majority of the educational systems, grade retention is still taken as a best possible solution for student's poor academic performance. The main purpose of grade retention is considered to help the low-achieving students by giving them extra time so that they can improve their academic ability. School administration takes retention decision in the benefit of the child, while still holding him/herself responsible for the failure. Educators defend implementation of grade retention policy in early grades on the basis that continually passing low-achieving students only increases the academic problem for them. When these students arrive at high school, they are totally unprepared to fulfill the needs of higher classes. These beliefs continue to be generally accepted, despite the research evidence indicating the harmful effects of grade

retention on the academic performance of the students (Pomplun, 1988; Westbury, 1994; Trethewey, 1999; Anderson, 2000; Stearns, Moller, Blau, & Potochnick, 2007; Hong, & Yu, (2007)).

Opponents of grade retention proposed various arguments for defending their position. They were of the view that grade retention is not an effective school practice and the students do not show better results after repeating (Westbury, 1994). Research evidence has revealed that “students were most often exposed to the same material used in the previous year” (Stone & Engel, 2007, p.605). Substantial special help is rarely provided to repeating pupils; instead, they are recycled through a program that was inappropriate for them the first time and that may be equally inappropriate and less interested for the second time also. On the other hand, it is also not clearly known that a student having serious difficulties in one grade can be expected to perform better in the next grade, if merely promoted to the next grade.

Grade Retention Policy in the context of Pakistan

The achievement of Universal Primary Education (UPE) has been a priority of all education policies since the country was founded in 1947. On the basis of the review of education policies in Pakistan, it can be inferred that, almost all policies, except the report of the commission, 1959, ignored intentionally or unintentionally, the consequences of the grade retention on the academic performance of children and especially on the dropout rate at primary stage. In line with the international commitment of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Pakistan has to achieve the target of UPE by 2015. For achieving the target, Ministry of Education, Islamabad in collaboration with provincial departments has taken a number of initiatives both on macro and micro level. In accordance with these initiatives, the students of first three or four grades (depending on internal policies of provinces) at the primary level in all public schools are promoted without examinations to next grade at the end of academic session. Although, there are some special cases where retention is considered very necessary and allowed such as serious illness or immaturity etc. but no child repeats the early three grades due to slow learning. As a result of this policy, the pupils who have not acquired the desired learning standard for the next grade are also promoted along with better performers. It is worth mentioning that there is no arrangement of extra coaching or any remedial instruction for poor performers in this regard. When these poor performers reach grade four, most of them are retained in the same grade, because at the end of primary level, all students of grade five have to appear in final departmental examination for promotion to grade six. This examination increases the pressure especially on low-achieving schools to retain the low-scoring children at grade four. If weak students are also promoted to grade five, then there is a greater probability of their failure in the final departmental examination and in turn negatively affect the school result at departmental level. But, nobody is concerned about these repeaters as to what happens to them in the classrooms throughout the “repeated year” as a consequence of poor implementation strategies of educational policies. Most of these repeaters drop out from school as a result of continuous insulting behavior and unfair treatment by the teachers and their class fellows.

The national statistics of Primary Education in Pakistan presented by the Ministry of Education, Islamabad, also reveal that grade retention is one of the possible causes of dropouts and other problems related to quality of education at primary level.

Table 1
Dropout Rates by Grade and Gender at Elementary Level for Public Sector Institutions (2005)

<u>Grades</u>	<u>Dropout Rates</u>		
	Total	Male	Female
Between Grade I and II	14.1%	16.1%	11.2%
Between Grade II and III	3.7%	8.6%	-
Between Grade III and IV	5.0%	7.4%	1.5%
Between Grade IV and V	8.5%	9.9%	6.5%

Source: National Education Census, 2005, Government of Pakistan, 2006, p.32

As depicted by the Table 1, the report of National Education Census, 2005 (most recent) showed that the dropout rate between grade four to five is 8.5 % that is much higher than grade two to four, i.e.3.7 % and 5.0 %. This fact is also described by a high number of repeaters at primary level by the data taken from two latest consecutive reports of Pakistan Education Statistics as revealed in Table 2.

Table 2
Enrolment Statistics at elementary level in public schools of Pakistan

Grade	% of Repeaters compared to Total Enrolment	
	2006-2007	2007-2008
1	4.5%	3.5%
2	3.9%	2.8%
3	3.9%	2.6%
4	7.0%	4.5%
5	1.3%	0.6%

Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2006-07, 2007-08, (Government of Pakistan, 2008, Government of Pakistan, 2009)

Table 2 presented the statistics (2006-07, 2007-08) of repeaters at different grades and the total enrolment at primary level of the public schools of Pakistan. It is well demonstrated that highest percentage of repeaters was present in grade four.

Keeping in view all the official statistics regarding total enrolment, repetition and dropout rate of the public schools, it can be inferred that the existing governmental policy and attitude of the schools' administration towards slow learners badly affect the academic performance of 4th grade students.

On the basis of the above discussion, it is concluded that grade retention is needed to be further discussed and studied especially in the context of Pakistan Educational System. Therefore, the present study is designed to conduct a thorough investigation of the possible negative or positive effects of grade retention in terms of academic performance of the students of grade four in public schools of Pakistan. It is anticipated that this study would be helpful to pinpoint issues related to grade retention and to develop interventions to handle the problem effectively in the primary education system of a developing country like Pakistan where the problem of dropout is still a big hurdle in the way of achieving the goal of universal primary education.

Method

This study has focused on mixed method approach of research. Qualitative approach was employed alongwith the quantitative, to unravel the multifarious issues related to the academic performance of the repeaters during the repeated year. The two sets of data were collected concurrently, whereas the triangulation of both types occurred at analysis stage. In this way, separate quantitative and qualitative methods were used "as a means to offset the weaknesses inherent within one method with the strengths of the other method" (Creswell, 2003, p.217).

The policy of automatic promotion is homogenously implemented (with little variations across regions) at primary level in the public schools of Pakistan, therefore, 4th grade students (N =346) of the public schools (N=42) were selected as the study sample. A two-phased panel study was designed for the collection of data related to quantitative part. The researcher considered two categories of subjects for the purpose of data collection namely, the Identified Poor Performers of grade four, and the Normal Group of students of the same grade from the same selected sample schools. The Identified Poor Performers consisted of those 4th graders, who had continuously shown poor performance in the internal assessment system of the school and had the probability of failure in annual examination. This sample size comprised of 238 students of 4th grade students of public elementary and primary schools¹. Of the 238 Identified Poor Performers, 152 students failed and repeated the same grade and 86 passed and were promoted to the next grade. It was

¹ The primary and elementary schools in the education system of Pakistan are differed in a way that the elementary school comprised of eight classes whereas in a primary school, five classes are taught.

found that 29 students who were declared failed, left (dropout) the school just after announcement of result and did not carry on with their studies in the repeated year. Whereas, during the next academic session 6 more students from the repeater sample also left school due to unknown reasons². As a result, the data for these students was not usable and these cases (n=35) were eliminated from the sample and the original number of students (n = 238) was reduced to 203 in the second phase.

The Normal Group (n=108) comprised of those students of grade four who had shown better performance as compared to Identified Poor Performers in the internal assessment system in same schools and had the probability to succeed in final examinations. The sample of Normal Group was selected for the purpose of comparing the poor and better performers of the same grade. Moreover it also verified the validity and reliability of the tests during the two phases of the study. The Normal Group later passed and was promoted to the next grade. During first and second phase, 5 students shifted to some other schools due to some domestic reasons³ and the total number of Normal Group was left 103. The left cases were eliminated from the sample and, the total number of subjects of the study remained 305, with 102 Normal Group and 203 being Identified Poor Performers and consequently the analysis and findings of the study were based on this remaining sample.

Table 3

Detailed Account of the Original Sample of the Study (N=346)

Groups	Original sample	Promoted	Repeaters sample	Left	Remaining
Identified Poor Performers	238	86	152	35	203
Normal Group	108	108	-	06	102

After announcement of annual school result, the sample was further divided into three sub categories. The sample of Identified Poor Performers was further divided into two sub categories i.e. Repeaters and Identified Poor but Promoted sample on the basis of school result. In this way, For the purpose of analysis, the whole study sample was categorized as follows:

- Repeater group (RG)
- Identified Poor but Promoted group, (IPPG) and
- Normal group (NG)

Five locally developed tests (MCQs=20) comprising the syllabus taught at grade four in public schools containing the subjects of English, Urdu, Mathematics, Social Studies and General Science (duly verified reliability and validity through pilot testing) were used for data collection.

Table 4

Categorical Description (Pass/Fail) of the Study Sample on the basis of School Result (N=305)

Category	Frequency	Pass	Fail
IPPG	203 (66.6 %)	86 (42.3 %)	117(57.6 %)
NG	102 (33.4 %)	102 (100%)	-

Table 4 describes the two major categories of the study sample. The total number of 302 students included in the study sample was further categorized as 203 (66.6%) Identified Poor Performers and 102 (33.4%) students as Normal Group. Among Identified Poor Performers, 86 (42.3%) students succeeded in examination while 117 (57.6%) failed. All 102 (100%) students belonged to Normal Group who succeeded in the annual examination.

The process of quantitative data collection of the study was completed in two major phases.

² All these left cases did not apply for school leaving certificates (SLC), so they were also included in dropouts.

³ As described in applications for. SLC

Phase 1

Identified Poor Performers and the Normal Group of grade four in the public elementary and primary schools had delivered locally developed tests of the syllabus of grade four containing the subjects of English, Urdu, Mathematics, Social Studies and General Science during the last term of their academic session.

Phase 2

In the next academic session, after ten months of the phase 1, whole sample was reassessed by the same instrument at the end of second term. In this way, the researcher compared the Repeaters of grade four with the Promoted but Identified as Poor students of the same sample, at the same time this whole sample was also compared with the sample of Normal Group of students.

Results

For analysis purpose, the null hypotheses' being formulated at the start of the research as follows:

There is no impact of grade retention on the academic performance of the repeaters of grade four

In order to test the hypothesis, Paired *t*-test and Independent *t*-test were applied to all three categories of the sample selected.

The analysis related to the hypothesis is presented in Table 5, 6 and 7.

Table 5

Comparison of Academic Performance (Phase 1/Phase 2) of RG (n=117), IPPG (n=86), and NG(n=102)

	RG		IPPG		NG	
	mean	<i>t</i> -value	mean	<i>t</i> -value	mean	<i>t</i> -value
AP-2	32.60		48.87		58.38	
vs		5.45***		13.56***		14.24***
AP-1	30.54		44.26		54.09	

*** Significant at .000

Table 5 describes the cumulative academic performance of the Repeaters, Identified Poor but Promoted students and Normal Group in Phase 1 and Phase 2. The mean score of the cumulative academic performance of the Repeaters in Phase 2 was 32.60, and 30.54 in the Phase 1. The mean difference ($t = 5.45$) of the academic score of the Repeaters in two phases was found significant at .000 alpha. The positive sign of the *t*-value indicated that the academic performance of the Repeaters increased significantly in Phase 2 as compared to Phase 1.

Similarly, a significant increase was seen in the mean scores of the cumulative academic performance of Identified Poor but Promoted group of students. The mean score of the academic performance of this group was increased to 48.87 in Phase 2, from 44.26 in Phase 1. The mean difference ($t = 13.56$) of the academic score of the Identified Poor but Promoted students in two phases was found significant at .000 alpha. The positive sign of the *t*-value indicated that the academic performance of the Identified Poor but Promoted group of students increased significantly between the two phases.

In the same way, the mean score of the cumulative academic performance of Normal Group in Phase 2 was 58.38, whereas 54.09 was in Phase 1. The mean difference ($t = 14.24$) of the academic score of the Normal Group in two phases was found significant at .000. The positive sign of the *t*-value indicated that the academic performance of the Normal Group was increased significantly in the Phase 2 as compared to Phase 1.

A significant increase was seen in the mean scores of the academic performance of all the three groups. Although the *t*-values reveal minimum increase in the mean of the Repeaters' academic performance, whereas, the Identified Poor but Promoted sample had shown significant increase. Same is the case with Normal

Group. The Normal Group has depicted highly significant increase in their academic performance throughout the period.

Table 6

Comparison of Identified Poor but Promoted sample (n=86) and Repeaters (n=117) regarding Academic Performance (Phase 1/Phase 2)

Groups	AP-1		AP-2	
	Mean	t-value	Mean	t-value
IPPG	44.26		48.87	
vs		10.86***		12.86***
RG	30.54		32.60	

*** Significant at .000

Table 6 demonstrates the comparison of Identified Poor but Promoted students and Repeaters regarding the academic performance in both phases. The mean score of the cumulative academic performance of the Identified Poor but Promoted and the Repeaters in Phase 1 was 44.26, and 30.54 respectively. The significant mean difference was found between the two groups in Phase 1 ($t = 10.86$, $p < .001$). Similarly, the mean score of cumulative academic performance of the respective groups in Phase 2 was 48.87 and 32.60 respectively. A highly significant t -value ($t = 12.86$, $p < .001$) was found in the two groups in the Phase 2. The increase in the t -values of both groups between the two phases revealed that the academic performance of both groups was increased in the phase 2 with respect to Phase 1.

As the academic performance was measured on five subjects separately in the two phases, therefore in order to find out the impact of grade retention on each subject respectively, a paired t -test was conducted between the two sets of scores of Repeaters and Identified Poor but Promoted sample.

Table 7

Subject-wise paired comparison of Academic Performance (Phase 1/ Phase 2) of Repeaters (n=117), and Poor but Promoted students (n=86)

	RG		IPPG	
	Mean	t-value	Mean	t-value
Eng-2	7.28		12.22	
vs		5.57***		8.23***
Eng-1	6.29		11.07	
Urdu-2	10.62		13.85	
vs		2.84**		2.97**
Urdu-1	10.14		13.26	
Math-2	6.73		10.12	
vs		1.92 ^{ns}		11.23***
Math-1	6.41		8.53	
S.St-2	6.82		10.76	
vs		2.43 ^{ns}		5.79***
S.St-1	6.44		9.78	
G.Sc-2	6.85		9.65	
vs		3.13**		9.13***
G.Sc-1	6.33		8.10	

*** Significant at .000, ** significant at .00, ns=not significant

Subject-wise comparison of Repeaters and Identified Poor but Promoted students in both test scores is displaced in Table 7. The mean of English score of Repeaters in Phase 2 was 7.28 and 6.29 in Phase 1. The t -value for English score of Repeaters in both sets of score was found highly significant ($t= 5.57$, $p< .001$). The mean of Urdu score of this group in Phase 2 was 10.62 and 10.14 in Phase 1. The findings of t -test for Urdu score in both phases also revealed significant results ($t= 2.84$, $p<.01$). The mean of Mathematics score of Repeaters in Phase 2 was 6.73 and 6.43 in Phase 1. The t -value for Mathematics score was found not significant ($t= 1.92$). Similarly, the mean of Social Studies score of this group in Phase 2 was 6.82 and 6.44 in Phase 1. The findings of t -test of Social Studies scores of Repeaters ($t= 2.43$) indicated no significant results. The mean of General Science score in Phase 2 was 6.85 and 6.33 in Phase 1. The t -value of General Science score revealed significant results ($t= 3.13$, $p< .01$).

The positive t - value of all the variables indicate that Repeaters perform better in Phase 2 as compared to Phase 1, though the findings of the paired comparison revealed that the rate of progress varies from subject to subject.

Table 7 also presents subject wise comparison of Identified Poor but Promoted sample in both test scores. The mean of English score of this group in Phase 2 was 12.22 and 11.07 in Phase 1. The t -value for English score in both sets of score was highly significant ($t= 8.23$, $p< .001$). The mean of Urdu score of this group in Phase 2 was 13.85 and 13.26 in Phase 1. The findings of t -test for Urdu score ($t= 2.97$) in both phases also revealed significant results at .00 alpha. The mean of Mathematics score of Repeaters in Phase 2 was 10.12 and 8.53 in Phase 1. The most significant results were found in mean differences of Mathematics scores of the two sets of scores ($t = 11.23$, $p<.001$). The mean of Social Studies score of Identified Poor but Promoted sample in Phase 2 was 10.76 and 9.78 in Phase 1. The mean difference of Social Studies ($t = 5.79$) revealed significant results between the two sets of scores at .000 alpha. The findings of t -test of Social Studies scores ($t= 5.79$) of this group indicated highly significant results at .000 alpha. In the same way, the mean of General Science score in Phase 2 was 9.65 and 8.10 in Phase 1. The findings of the t -value ($t = 9.13$) for General Science score revealed highly significant results at .000 alpha.

The t - values of all the variables indicate that Identified Poor but Promoted sample performed much better in Phase 2 as compared to Phase 1, and yielded highly significant results in all the subjects.

The analyses presented in Table 5, 6 and 7 revealed a positive and significant impact of grade retention on the academic performance of the repeaters. So the null hypothesis that there is no impact of grade retention on the academic performance of the repeaters is rejected. Moreover, the paired comparison of different sets of scores depicted that the mean differences of academic performance of Identified poor but promoted students were higher than the mean differences of Repeaters.

In the present study, the quantitative and qualitative methods were combined while maintaining the distinction that quantitative method would be given priority and considered as a primary method, whereas the qualitative method would be considered as secondary.

The impact of grade retention on the academic performance of the repeaters was further explored with the perceptions of the primary grade teachers through their in-depth interviews. With the help of open-ended interviews of the participants, questions were asked related to attitudes of repeaters toward academics. The qualitative data was collected through interview focused on the expected changes in the attitude of students towards their studies after failure at primary level in public schools. This part of the interviews was proposed to triangulate with the quantitative section of the study. The part of the quantitative data to be triangulated comprised of the quantitative findings related to the impact of grade retention policy on the academic performance of the repeaters in the repeated year.

Teachers were taken as key informants as they are the persons who work most closely with these children, yet the teachers in Pakistani educational system have no special training to understand the special problems created by grade retention. Without such understanding, teachers cannot be involved to improve

the situation as effectively as possible. Experience gives them many strategies to cope with such situations. While keeping in view, all these conditions, it was decided to consult the class teachers of fourth grade students, as they have better understanding of the repeaters' academic performance during the repeated year after failure. All participant teachers were asked about the changes in the attitude of repeaters with respect to their studies.

A variety of responses was encountered, when the participants were asked about the changes in the attitude of repeaters after failure, which they had observed from time to time during their teaching experience. Four teachers reported that the students feel very disturbed and sad at the start of the repeated year. The teacher Ms K.B explained

They in fact feel worried about this loss. It seems that they need some support to come out of this tense situation. If the teacher pays special attention to them and shares their problems, then they feel a bit satisfied, start paying attention to studies, thus enhance their self esteem and get adjusted very soon

Consistent with the teacher's point of view, the research evidence has also explored the association between the coping strategies while encountered unfair treatment by the teacher and fellow students and academic performance. Powell and Arriola, (2003) investigated the relationship between psychosocial factors and academic achievement among African American Students. Findings of the study indicated that "there was a strong negative association between the way the student copes with unfair treatment and GPA" (p.175). The findings further suggested that "students who talk to others about being treated unfairly instead of keeping it to themselves are more likely to have higher GPAs" (p.175).

Similarly, the conclusion of a research study by Ross and Broh (2000) explored that "better academic performance improves self-esteem and a sense of personal control" as proved by another study that "the self-esteem of students is affected by their perceived ability, especially as formalized from test results or other assessments" (Chetcuti & Griffiths, 2002, p.544). This rapid rehabilitation is perhaps due to the optimistic sentiments of the children of this age group as research evidence has also revealed that "optimism is overwhelmingly more characteristic than pessimism in both boys and girls in the age range 9-13 in grades four through six" (Fischer & Leitenberg, 1986, p.246).

In the present study, five participants reported diverse reaction among repeaters. They stated that some feel embarrassed and work harder but some do not. This difference is perhaps due to individual differences among children. The teacher Ms I.K reported that the repeaters show improvement in studies. Consistent with her view, Jacob and Lefgren (2004) found that "retention has no negative consequences on the academic achievement of students retained in the third grade, and it increases performance in the short run" (p.227). The participants mentioned that the repeaters can be well adjusted through extra love and care. The role of teacher is very significant in this regard. He/ she can handle the situation effectively or worsen it significantly.

The teacher Ms I.A stated that no improvement is seen in the attitude of repeater, rather they show more belligerent behavior. Similarly teacher Ms T.M added that some students try to improve at the start of the repeated year, but fail to show any improvement. She explained that they lose their interest in studies and are left behind from their class fellows and in extreme cases even dropout from school. A study conducted by Westbury (1994) also suggested that "grade repetition does not correct the original learning problem" (p.249). He further concluded that "retention is ineffective for improving achievement and ability" (p.241).

Only Ms S.K gave a contradictory response. She said that the attitude of repeaters towards studies does not change after failure. Others had reported significant changes in the attitude of repeaters after failure. Consistent with this view, Gomes-Neto and Hanushek (1994) concluded in their study that "students learn when repeating" (p.129). They further added that "on average, while students who repeat are below

average in performance before repetition, they move to above average after repetition” (p.130). But this study also admitted that “after repetition, the students are still somewhat behind the promoted students” (p.130).

Triangulation

The teachers’ perceptions regarding the attitude of repeaters towards studies were triangulated with the findings of the hypothesis that was related to their academic performance in the two phases of the study.

The quantitative data described overall significant positive impact of grade retention on the academic performance of the repeaters, whereas the subject wise comparison depicts significant and positive impact on English, Urdu and General Science scores, while the impact of grade retention on the Mathematics and Social Studies score was found positive but not significant. On the other hand, the other group of identified poor performers, (who had passed the annual examination and promoted to next class) showed highly significant and improved performance as compared to the repeaters’ group (see also Table 5 and 6). In this way, the statistical analysis of the scores of both groups (repeaters and promoted) of the identified poor performers revealed that the promoted group showed better performance in the next grade as compared to repeaters in the same grade.

Whereas, the qualitative findings support the quantitative results to some extent, at the same time, some discrepancies have also been emerged due to individual differences. Only two teachers expressed satisfactory remarks in response to the queries related to the attitude of repeaters towards studies. They explained that improvement is often seen in the academic performance of the repeaters. Both teachers were of the view that students seem to be concerned about this loss; they try to pay more attention towards studies, work hard in the repeated year to show better results.

The qualitative findings explored contradictory responses also. Some teachers (n=6) believed that repeaters become more serious in repeated year and seem more attentive towards studies, whereas, the rest of others reported negative attitude towards studies. The teachers’ perceptions were based on individual differences. The teachers believed that there are some repeaters who feel sorrow at their failure and thus decide to be more attentive towards studies, and some do not show any regret and carry on with their previous routine, whereas, some extreme cases take their failure as insulting experience and become rebellious. In this way, it cannot be said that the qualitative findings completely support the quantitative results, but they provide evidence that improvement is seen in many cases. The qualitative findings present clearer picture with respect to individual differences among the repeaters.

Literature has presented both supportive and contradictory findings in this regard. Alexander et al., (1988); Westbury (1994) column Hong and Raudenbush (2005) found in their respective studies that the academic performance of the repeaters did not improve during the repeated year. However, the findings of the research studies by Pomplun, (1988); Gomes-Neto and Hanushek (1994) Jacob and Lefgren (2004), Silbergliitt, Appleton, Burns, & Jimerson, (2006). and Jimerson, & Ferguson, (2007) reveal improvement in the academic performance of the students in the repeated year.

Findings

On the whole, the triangulation of both types of data depicted a weak but positive impact of grade retention on the academic performance of the repeaters of grade four. Moreover, the findings revealed that students work hard in the repeated year and show better results, it was also revealed by these analyses that the poor performers did show much better results if they were promoted despite the weaknesses in studies, and they could perform much better in the next grade as compared to repeaters’ performance in the same grade. There were similarities as well as discrepancies found while triangulating both types of data related to the academic performance of the repeaters.

Discussion

The focus of present study is the phenomenon of grade retention which directly affects the primary education in Pakistan. Primary education is considered as the foundation of entire educational pyramid. It is also “the gateway to all higher levels of education that train the societies, teachers, doctors, and other highly skilled professionals that every country, no matter how small or poor, requires” (World Bank, 2003, p.27). Pakistan has national and international commitments to achieve Universal Primary Education and is a signatory to Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). MDG-2 aims to achieve universal primary education by 2015. Unfortunately, the efforts to achieve “Education for All” in Pakistan have focused mainly on improving the participation rates, rather than on improving either completion rates or students’ academic performance.

The findings of the present study suggested that the current practice of automatic promotion policy in the first three grades and grade retention in the last two grades of primary level needs revision after careful analysis of grass root problems. These policies can be workable if they are accompanied by other reform measures. The literature has offered a number of alternatives to grade retention. Stone and Engel (2007) proposed that

--- as an alternative to (or, at least, in parallel to) “doing retention differently,” investment in other efforts at the levels of both scholarship and practice may yield more promising outcomes, systematic efforts to develop individualized, classroom, and school strategies to address differing learning needs within students, as well as differing densities of these students across classrooms and school (p.630).

Similarly, Stearns et al., (2007) had suggested the alternatives to grade retention, including “summer schools and academies that keep children with their same-age peers while ensuring that they gain mastery of the academic content and skills that had previously caused them difficulty, can be attractive” (p.231). In the same way, Meisels and Liaw (1993) proposed in the concluding remarks of their study of examining the phenomenon of retention in kindergarten through eighth grade that “retention should be used only in rare exceptions, and new approaches to curriculum development, school restructuring, and individualized student instruction should become the focus of efforts to improve academic outcomes” (p.76).

During the interview sessions for this study, the participant teachers also offered various alternatives of grade retention, such as summer classes and extra coaching of poor performers etc.

It is therefore strongly recommended that the policy of automatic promotion at the first three grades of primary level should be modified after careful survey of ground realities and implemented with other reform measures as discussed above. Moreover, the high ratio of grade retention at grade four should also be noticed and take effective steps to minimize the negative consequences of this phenomenon.

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