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*SACMEQ Policy Issues Series*

## What are the levels and trends in grade repetition?

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Research has associated grade repetition (grade retention) with undesirable outcomes at the individual, school, and national levels. At the individual level, grade repetition is reported to negatively affect pupil self-esteem, academic motivation, and peer-relationships – which could lead to long-term problems such as poor academic achievement, behavioural problems and school dropout. At the school level, grade repetition is said to negatively affect school operations because high levels of grade repetition can lead to increased class sizes and classroom management problems (due to large age differences among pupils in the same classroom). At the national level, grade repetition is blamed for increasing the overall cost of schooling because if many pupils repeat each year, school systems need to employ more teachers and build more classrooms (Brophy, 2006).

Results from the SACMEQ III Project, summarized in the Table below, show that most SACMEQ school systems have grade repetition problems. Overall, more than one-third of the Grade 6 pupils in the SACMEQ III Project indicated that they had repeated a grade at least once. About 12 percent of the pupils reported that they were repeating Grade 6 in the year that the SACMEQ III data were collected (2007).

There were large differences in grade repetition rates across SACMEQ countries - however in many countries the repetition rates were very high. For example, over one-half of the Grade 6 pupils in SACMEQ III Project in Malawi (60.3%), Mozambique

(59.6%), Swaziland (56.4%), Uganda (52.7%), and Lesotho (51.7%) reported that they had repeated a grade at least once since they started school. In addition, there were considerable percentages of pupils who were repeating Grade 6 in 2007 – particularly in Uganda (27.7%), Mauritius (21.7%), and Swaziland (21.2%).

Encouragingly, the levels of grade repetition observed during 2007 in the SACMEQ III Project were generally lower than the levels that were recorded during 2000 in the SACMEQ II Project. For example, the overall percentage of Grade 6 pupils repeating a grade at least once went down between 2000 and 2007 by 8.7 percent. While this trend towards reduced grade repetition was welcome, grade repetition rates are still far too high in most SACMEQ countries, and this situation demands some policy interventions.

It should be noted that decisions about grade repetition for individual pupils can often be faulty because they tend to be based on school-level perceptions rather than justifiable national criteria. For example research evidence has shown that, when decisions on pupil performance are made by individual teachers, pupils are often judged relative to their classmates, rather than in comparison with acceptable performance levels for the school system as a whole (Ikeda, 2005). As a result some pupils (especially in high-achieving schools) are made to repeat grades when they would be promoted if they attended low-achieving schools.

In developing countries, grade repetition is often considered to be a remedy for low achieving pupils based on the assumption that automatic promotion would disadvantage them. However, educational research has shown that (a) “neither automatic promotion nor grade repetition addresses the problems of low achievers satisfactorily”, and (b) “potential solutions lie in providing these pupils with more and better learning opportunities” (Brophy, 2006). These solutions include early intervention for at-risk pupils through the provision of supplementary instruction, and closer collaboration with parents to ensure that the

pupils are supported and encouraged in the home.

### References

- Brophy, J. (2006). *Grade repetition*. Education Policy Series 6. Paris: International Academy of Education & International Institute for Educational Planning.
- Ikeda, M. (2005). *Grade repetition and its effect on performance in SACMEQ countries*. Paper presented at 2005 SACMEQ Research Conference, Paris, France.

## Percentages of Grade 6 pupils repeating grades in SACMEQ school systems in 2000 and 2007

	Repeated at least once			Repeating Grade 6 this year		
	2000	2007		2000	2007	
Botswana	31.4	31.3	►	5.5	5.2	►
Kenya	64.1	48.2	▼	17.7	13.8	▼
Lesotho	60.8	51.7	▼	14.6	15.1	►
Malawi	66.1	60.3	▼	12.5	15.6	▲
Mauritius	18.7	22.3	▲	18.2	21.7	▲
Mozambique	78.2	59.6	▼	26.5	5.5	▼
Namibia	54.1	43.2	▼	15.9	17.2	►
Seychelles	10.3	2.2	▼	2.6	0.3	▼
South Africa	42.3	28.5	▼	12.8	9.5	▼
Swaziland	59.3	56.4	►	20.6	21.2	►
Tanzania	23.3	20.4	►	6.6	1.5	▼
Uganda	52.9	52.7	►	22.7	27.7	▲
Zambia	51.5	33.6	▼	23.5	7.8	▼
Zanzibar	27.6	15.3	▼	4.7	3.1	▼
Zimbabwe <sup>1</sup>	39.9	31.4	▼	××	8.5	××
<b>SACMEQ</b>	<b>45.8</b>	<b>37.1</b>	<b>▼</b>	<b>14.6</b>	<b>11.6</b>	<b>▼</b>

#### NOTES:

▼ Significant decrease (desirable change)      ► No significant change      ▲ Significant increase

<sup>1</sup>Zimbabwe did not participate in the SACMEQ II Project (2000) and the value given in grey is from the SACMEQ I Project (1995).

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