

## **The effect of class repetition on the academic performance of pupils in lower primary schools in Homa-Bay**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Class repetition is used as a strategy of improving academic performance in schools in Kenya. The study objective was to examine the effect of class repetition on pupil's academic performance in public lower primary schools in Homa-Bay Sub-county. The study employed descriptive survey design and document analysis. The analysis of data was done using descriptive statistics as well inferential statistics using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The target population entailed all the class three repeaters in the 67 public primary schools in Homa-Bay Sub-County. Head teachers and class three teachers also took part in the study as informants. To obtain the desired number of schools out of the 67 public primary schools in Homa-Bay Sub-County from which the researcher obtained the respondents, the Krejcie and Morgan Sample Size Table (1970) was used. Simple random sampling was adopted in selecting 30 schools to include in the sample. In these 30 schools, there were a total of 42 class three repeaters all of them were involved in the study through the whole population purposive sampling. The study found that class repetition has a positive effect on the academic performance of lower primary pupils in that pupils perform better after repeating a class as indicated by a paired sample statistics which showed that on repeating a class, the pupils' academic performance ( $m=263.38$ ,  $sd=128.92$ ) was higher than their mean academic performance before repeating ( $=178.07$ ,  $sd=68.55$ ). This difference in the mean scores is statistically significant,  $t(41)=4.949$ ,  $t<0.001$ . It was further noted that more than half of the respondents (headteacher and class teachers) (80%) agreed that class repetition indeed has a positive effect on academic improvement, compared to only 20% of the respondents who stated that there is no effect on academic improvement after repetition. The researcher recommends that the Ministry of Education should review the policy that outlaws class repetition and allow teachers, parents and other educational stakeholders to consultatively make decisions on whether a pupil should repeat a class or not. The researcher suggests that a study should be carried out on the impact of 'no repetition' policy on children's behaviour and academic performance.

**Key Words;** - Advocates, dumb, dropout, class repetition, academic performance.

### **Introduction**

Class repetition, also known as "non promotion," "being retained," "flunking," "class retention," and "being held back," is the practice of keeping pupils at the same class for an additional year, usually because of poor academic performance or emotional immaturity. The commonly advanced rationale behind class repetition is that it gives low-achieving pupils an

extra year or so to catch up to the class-level standard. The assumption is that by catching up on prerequisite skills, pupils should be less at risk of performing poorly when they move on to the next grade (Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Critics of class repetition contend that it fails to benefit children in the long run, hurts children's self-esteem, leads to behavioral problems often associated with being over-age for class, has a correlative relationship with dropping out of school and incurs significant financial costs of having children repeat a class (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2005). The practice of class repetition is a phenomenon that in spite of many years of research has remained one of the most controversial and highly debated topics in the educational literature. Teachers, principals, parents, and other school stakeholders continue to have a wide-range of beliefs on the subject. For this reason therefore, the practice of class repetition varies from school to school, county to county, and state to state (Mwebi & Kamau, 2016). It is apparent that the analysis of class repetition is an issue that, for a long time has captured the interest of scholars particularly within the field of educational research. This strategy is implemented in the initial stages of the education system when learners exhibit a given degree of immaturity or social behavior problems that can interfere with their learning process (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). Other aspects that can also potentially lead to a pupil repeating a class include family problems or health issues that may lead to chronic school absenteeism.

The advocates of repetition argue that this intervention grants children more time in the same course to mature and acquire some basic skills to prevent failure and frustration in future grades where they will have to face more advanced learning tasks (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 2003; Hong & Yu, 2008). Moreover, they argue that this practice can result in more academically homogeneous classes, which facilitates teacher instruction (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). These arguments can explain why repetition has been a popular practice for decades. Furthermore, the interest of academic research about this practice is justified by the possibility to understand more factors associated with higher or lower levels of pupil achievement.

However, the great amount of research conducted on this issue has failed to categorically demonstrate that class repetition provides greater benefits to struggling pupils than promoting them to the next class (Jimerson, Gabrielle, & Angela, 2002). In fact, in many cases, the effects of this practice is just the opposite, since pupils who experience this situation are thought to be more prone to school failure, especially if that strategy is applied in primary education when individual differences in learning rates have long-term consequences (Rumberger, 1995; Ou & Reynolds, 2010). This is particularly worrying taking into account the fact that repetition rates usually depend significantly on socioeconomic factors thus it may potentially contribute to increased inequality within an educational system (Corman, 2003). In the face of this scenario of scholarly discordance, there is need to examine the effects of class repetition in the early stages of the education process.

The practice of repetition is usually adopted by school authorities following the recommendations made by teachers and, in some cases, considering parents' opinions. It is however worth noting that how the strategy of class repetition is implemented is dependent on the contexts and traditions of each nation. For this reason therefore, there are remarkable disparities in class repetition rates across different countries. This makes it possible for each country to find a suitable strategy to deal with the difficulties that children face in the early stages of learning as well as academic heterogeneity (Dupriez, 2008). These policy-based and

managerial choices have clear effects on the educational experience and performance of pupils as a whole.

In some countries such as Belgium, France, Netherlands or Spain, class repetition is a common practice for pupils who do not reach the minimum levels of attainment established, whereas in other countries this measure is either not allowed or not applied. In the latter countries, the use of differentiation and individual teaching is employed as is the case in Norway and Finland. Other countries separate children into distinctive ability groups at an early age which is the scenario in the United Kingdom. Eisenmon (1997) also reported that repetition rates in developing countries are often high, especially in rural areas.

In the United States of America, repetition rates have gone up in the past 25 years. The US National Center for Education Statistics reports that, in 2007, 5.7% or 1.3 million of all elementary school pupils were repeating their class (Planty et al., 2009). In the past, repetition has been greatest in kindergarten and first grade, decreasing throughout elementary school. Current testing policies are increasing the number of pupils repeating third grade. Those retained tend to be males, minorities, low in socio-economic status, and have low parental involvement in their education and lives (Frey, 2005).

A common assumption is that pupils who are made to repeat a class just need more time to develop and learn. According to Range, Pijanowski, Holt and Young (2012), headteachers and teachers believe that pupils should be made to repeat class when they fail to achieve the preset pass mark. They further opined that teachers believe that class repetition helps prevent future failure and maintain standards, helps teachers provide math support, and motivates pupils to attend school. Additionally, teachers and headteachers perceived a benefit to self-concept when pupils repeat classes especially in primary grades or kindergarten. This argument unfortunately ignores the many other factors that impede productive learning at school. It further results to scenarios where pupils are merely subjected to the same learning experiences from the previous year and are not exposed to other supportive interventions (Peterson & Hughes, 2011; Picklo & Christenson, 2005). In addition to individual developmental and motivational considerations, a variety of family conditions are reported as factors contributing to class repetition. These factors include problems stemming from inadequate financial resources, language other than English spoken at home, parents lacking basic literacy skills, abusive caretaking, and much more. Besides these factors, schooling deficits also play a role in predisposing pupils to class repetition (Dombek & Connor, 2012).

Research examining pupil academic outcomes after class repetition reveals that it does not result in long-term improvements for students. However, grade retention continues to be used as an intervention (Schnurr B. L., Kundert D. K & Nickerson A. B., 2009). Class repetition can adversely affect the well-being of the pupils both socially and mentally. It may also subject pupils to serious trauma and feelings of isolation when they are held back. When asked about their feelings, class repeaters reported that they felt sad, bad, punished and upset about it (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1985). An adult who had been retained in elementary school typically reacted that the experience caused her to lose friends, made her feel dumb and was of no help to her at all.

Elementary school pupils ranked academic repetition as one of the top five most stressful things that could happen to them, just under losing a parent, parental fighting, getting lost, and being caught stealing (Anderson, Jimerson & Whipple, 2005). Children who have repeated a year or so feel ashamed or embarrassed in front of other kids because they're

bigger and older than their classmates. They also get teased by classmates for being "dumb" and feel that their parents forced or misled them into staying back a year. Furthermore, they are more likely than children who did not repeat to drop out of school and often say that being held back was the worst thing that ever happened to them. These studies however do not address the effect of class repetition on children's academic performance but rather focuses on the effect of the phenomenon on children's psychological well-being.

In South Africa, studies indicate that repetition is a strong predictor of dropout and that there is a strong correlation between repetition and dropout. In 2009, on average, 9% of learners enrolled in schools were repeating the class they were in the previous year. South Africa's level of repetition is high. International Comparative Information for Primary Schools for 2007 (UNESCO, 2010), shows that South Africa's average level of repetition in primary schools which stood at 7%, was higher than the average level for developing countries which was 5% and for developed countries which was less than 1%. Another study in the same country yielded a similar result showing that in 2007, a third of all children at school in South Africa had repeated a class. This applied to 21% of learners in the Foundation Phase thus, Grades 1 to 3 while 52% had repeated by the time they were in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase, Grades 10 to 12 (Social Surveys Africa and Centre for Applied Legal Studies, 2009).

Basic education in Kenya, has been primarily characterized by high rates of class repetition as well as numerous incidences of school dropout before completion of standard eight which is the final class of the primary education course. According to Abagi and Odipo (1997), for those pupils who enrolled in class one in 1988, only 42.6% which is 42.1% of girls and 43.0% of boys completed class eight. They further stated that although overall school enrolment increased over the years with the introduction and implementation of Free Primary Education(FPE), in 2003 and later Free Day Secondary Education(FDSE) in 2008, school completion rates were still worryingly low. In 2007 the school completion rate was 81.0%, whereas in 2008 the rate declined to 79.5%(MOE 2009). The completion rate further dropped to 75.8% in 2010. This trend of low completion rate could be attributed to class repetition and dropout. Abagi and Odipo note that poor performance, class repetition and loss of interest in school are factors that are to blame for low completion rates at class eight level. The foregoing literature demonstrates that the phenomenon of class repetition remains a controversial educational practice which is yet to receive a universal research concordance.

It is rather apparent that the available empirical literature assessing the consequences of class repetition provides inconclusive and incomplete evidence of the socio-emotional and academic effects of repetition on pupils. As a matter of fact, the available empirical literature is divided into two camps (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). The first camp supports the position that class repetition is profitable for the pupil while the other camp holds that it is detrimental to pupil's learning and overall development. These divergent findings make the assessment and analysis of this educational intervention and its utilization by educational policymakers controversial (West, 2012). Despite attempts to explain the differences in findings as the result of the disparity of the contexts analyzed in terms of pupils' characteristics, educational system features, country differences, and children's home environment, a great amount of confusion about class repetition policies still remains. Homa-Bay County in general and Homa-Bay Sub- County in particular reports significant levels of class repetition. The continued perpetuation of this practice by curriculum implementers against the existing policy guidelines called for further interrogation thereof so as to help

disentangle its positive and negative effects. This was therefore expected to provide a sturdy ground on which the practice could either be promoted or dismissed accordingly.

A survey of literature indicates that although a substantial amount of research has been conducted in the area of the effect of class repetition on pupils' academic performance the world over, there has never been any scholarly unanimity or concurrence of the findings. It is clear from the available literature that there are two distinct conflicting schools of thought among scholars on this matter. Moreover, there is scanty evidence of such studies having been conducted in Kenya focusing particularly on lower primary pupils. The findings of this study were therefore expected to highlight the effect of this controversial practice of class repetition on the academic performance of lower primary pupils particularly in Homa-Bay County. It is hoped that the findings of this study will help stakeholders such as parents, teachers and government policy makers to formulate policies that will cushion pupils from any adverse effects that may accrue from this practice or lack of it. It was further hoped that the findings would offer relief to pupils who could have been forced to repeat a class or move on automatically to the next class against their wish or ability.

## **Literature Review**

### **Negative Effects of Class Repetition**

A growing number of American states and school districts require pupils to meet basic performance standards in core academic subjects at key transition points in order to be promoted to the next class. A study by Schwerdt and West (2012) on causal effect of class repetition on pupil outcomes over time in Florida, America, indicated large short-term gains in achievement among retained students and a sharp reduction in the probability of retention in subsequent years. The achievement gains from repetition fade out gradually over time, however, and are statistically insignificant after six years. Despite this fade out, the results of the study suggested that previous evidence that early repetition leads to adverse academic outcomes was found to be misleading due to unobserved differences between retained and promoted pupils. This study reveals a lack of final unanimity on whether class repetition has a positive or negative effect on pupils' academic performance. While this review was a longitudinal study on third graders in America, the researcher's current study focuses on the immediate effect of class repetition on academic performance.

Hwang and Cappella (2018) recently carried out a study in the United States examining early elementary class repetition focusing generally on short-term effects and academic outcomes. The researchers employed propensity score methods and a national data set to estimate the effect of first- or second-grade retention on academic achievement and psychosocial outcomes. By comparing pupils who were retained to those who were similar on observed characteristics but otherwise promoted, causal estimates were generated that showed a statistically significant negative effect of retention on reading achievement. This study was conducted in America on a wider scope involving general effects and academic outcomes of repetition. However the current study was basically concerned with the effects of repetition on academic performance.

Similarly, Andrew (2014) examined the implications of class repetition and social promotion for pupils academic and non-academic outcomes. Using data from 3261 pupils, structural equation modeling demonstrated that, after controlling for interactions with other factors, demographic covariates and ability, there were significant main effects of grade retention. The study found that in terms of academic factors, grade retention was a significant negative predictor of academic self-concept and homework completion. It was also found to be a

positive predictor of maladaptive motivation and absenteeism. In terms of non-academic factors, class repetition was a significant negative predictor of self-esteem but was not significantly associated with relationship with peers. In their follow-up analysis using a sub-sample of retained pupils matched by ability, age and gender, findings were confirmed and with stronger effects on some factors. The study investigated academic and non-academic outcomes using a larger sample while the current study focused on academic outcomes using a smaller but more concentrated sample.

Reis, Nunes and Seabra (2018) also conducted a study in Portugal to find out whether grade retention is beneficial to low-achieving pupils or not. In the study, the researchers measured the impact of pupils' retention on their subsequent academic performance. Using a propensity score matching approach, retained and promoted 4<sup>th</sup> grade pupils were matched according to their socioeconomic characteristics and the scores obtained in national exams. The results suggested that in some situations retention may have on average a positive impact on future achievement. However, in the cases where statistically significant impacts are found, the estimated magnitudes are relatively small. This study was done on fourth graders which is an upper primary class while the current study targeted lower primary pupils.

Tingle, Schoeneberger and Algozzine (2012) carried out a study on the impact of grade retention on the academic achievement of learners. In the study, they considered the characteristics and consequences of pupils' retention in elementary grades and middle school. Based on the findings of the study, they concluded that although class repetition is a popular method of academic intervention, it does not guarantee positive results. They opined that there is need to identify and use research-based education interventions to provide remedial instruction for struggling learners. This study combined both elementary and upper primary pupils while the current study focused specifically on lower primary pupils.

Stearns, Moller, Blau and Potochnick(2007), conducted a research on the relationship between class repetition and school dropout. In the study , they found out that students who repeated a class had a higher risk of dropping out of school especially when they reach higher classes than those who are continuously promoted. They stated that although the presence of variables, including academic achievement and disciplinary problems, reduces the higher probability of repeating students dropping out, existing models of dropping out do not adequately explain the markedly higher probability of dropping out for repeating students. They therefore concluded that class repetition could be responsible for the trend. This literature focused on the relationship between class repetition and school dropout while the current study focused on the relationship between class repetition and academic performance.

In a 4-year longitudinal study of class repetition, Wu, West and Hughes (2010) studied the effects of repetition in first grade on children's externalizing and internalizing behaviours, social acceptance, and behavioral, cognitive and effective engagement. They matched repeating children with promoted children on the basis of propensity scores. Based on the findings, they concluded that repeating children had a short-term increase in mean peer-rated liking and school belongingness relative to promoted children, but this advantage showed a substantial decrease in the longer term. This study was a longitudinal one while the current one was a survey.

As can be observed in the foregoing studies, although proponents of class repetition advocate for this practice as a strategy to improve performance and promote academic, emotional, and social development, a number of studies have continued to prove otherwise and this has been so for quite a considerable period of time. Earlier in a study by Flynn(1989),a similar result

was realized. He had compared a group of 74 repeating-in-grade students with 74 matched, promoted students in the middle school grades. Comparisons of repeating and promoted students a year later indicated that the promoted students significantly out performed repeating students on measures of academic achievement, social behavior and school attendance. This again discredited the practice of class repetition as an ineffective academic intervention strategy.

This view is further supported by a study conducted by Peixoto, Monteiro, Mata, Sanches, Pipa and Almeida (2016). In their study, they analyzed the differences in students achievement, motivation, and self-related variables according to their class repetition status. After considering all the categories of the repeating learners, the study revealed that the experience of and effects of repetition, whether in the past or recently, leaves a huge psychological scar on those learners, thus undermining their achievements and socio-emotional wellbeing. Despite these abundantly clear negative findings about class repetition, the practice continues to be a popular response to academic underperformance in many countries.

Murray , Woodruff and Vaughn (2010) also carried out a study on pupils who were made to repeat class at the end of first grade each year for three consecutive years. From the study they discovered that repeating pupils consistently demonstrated not only less academic competence, but also fewer social skills coupled with greater behavioral problems. They therefore concluded that class repetition will do very little if any to improve the academic performance of pupils. A study by Andrews (2014) further supports the foregoing position. She conducted a quantitatively rigorous study to find out the harmful effects of class repetition for younger children. She looked at more than 37,000 children across the United States from two older multi-year surveys (National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979) and National Longitudinal Study (1988) and found that about 10 percent had been held back at school, most of them during the 1980s (Andrew, 2014).

Andrew's surveys included details of the family characteristics of the children. This allowed her to create 6,500 matched pairs of pupils, where the repeating and non-repeating pupils had similar backgrounds. Their mothers had attained the same level of education and their families had the same household income. The pupils had scored the same on a pre-school cognitive test. The matched pupils also had similar behavioral problems, as reported on the surveys. Home environment, gender and race were factored in, too. In other words, Andrew matched the held-back students with students who were equally "at risk" of being held back, but weren't. Then Andrew looked at whether these matched students eventually graduated from high school. She discovered that the retained learners were 60% more likely to have graduated from high school than their matched counterparts who moved on to the next grade. Andrew recognizes that retaining a child in a grade usually result in a short-term improvement in their academic scores. However she believes this improvement fades away shortly later. She hypothesizes that being made to repeat a grade/class is so psychologically tormenting that many pupils fail to gain back their confidence and self-esteem in the long-term. Andrews therefore postulates that making a child repeat a grade is one of the most serious negative occurrences in a child's life. In most studies , pupils rank being made to repeat a class second only to the death of a parent. This study was a longitudinal one conducted with a very large sample over a longer period of time while the current study is a survey conducted over a relatively smaller smaller.

This view supported a study by Byrnes and Yamamoto (2001) who had opined that class repetition seems to be of dubious effectiveness as an answer to low pupil achievement and

motivation and is often internalized by the children as a negative and confusing experience. Several research studies demonstrate that in the long-term, making children repeat a class results in very insignificant academic improvement if any, for pupils (Jimerson, 1999, Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007).

The foregoing assertion bears some significant concurrence to a longitudinal study by Moser, West and Hughes (2012) who used a propensity score matching to equate the repeating and promoted pupils based on a large and comprehensive set of potential confounders measured prior to any pupil being made to repeat a class. He found that in the repetition year, the repeating pupils performed better academically on normed reading and math achievement measures, compared to their younger, equally at-risk but promoted grade-mate pupils. However, by grade five, the propensity scores matched with retained and promoted pupils did not differ in reading and math achievement, although the retained pupils reached grade five one year later than the promoted students. Similar results were found in a study of Flemish pupils retained in grade one (Goos et al., 2013) that also employed propensity score matching. Furthermore, similar results have been obtained in other studies carried out in the United States (Dong, 2010) and in France (Alet, 2010) that used instrumental variable analysis to control for selection factors at the child and school levels. These studies further reveal a Pandora of scholarly mix up and incongruity on the matter of class repetition and its attendant effects. This scenario inevitably calls for further research on this phenomenon in order to try to find out what really is the actual effect of class repetition on children's academic performance.

Pagani, Tremblay, Vitano and McDuff (2001) had also earlier advanced a similar argument. In their study, they asserted that class repetition portends both a short- and long-term negative influence on academic performance for boys and girls although boys were more vulnerable to the negative influence of class repetition on academic performance and classroom disruptiveness. Another study in Uruguay by Manacorda (2012) almost perfectly concurred with Pagan et al's view. Scholarly concurrence on the demerits of class repetition abound, with a study by Griffith, Lloyd, Lane, and Tankersley, (2010) further revealing that there was a slightly but statistically significantly poorer eighth grade reading growth for pupils made to repeat at some point in lower primary classes compared to those who were never-retained. This was irrespective of any demographic factors that may have led to the decision to promote.

A study by Chen, Liu, Zhang, Shi, and Rozelle (2010) on grade retention and school performance in poor areas in rural China showed that there is no positive effect of class repetition on school performance of the pupils that were retained in rural areas. Whether in the short term or longer term, they reject the hypothesis that class repetition improves the scores of the pupils that were made to repeat. This result is true for pupils that were retained in third grade and fourth grade. In fact, in the analysis of some pupils that were made to repeat, class repetition was shown to have a statistically significant negative effect on their school performance.

Terry (2011) while examining the beliefs of kindergarten through fourth grade teachers regarding effects of class repetition on academic, emotional, and social areas, as well as alternative interventions to repetition in a rural school in Ohio - USA, found that teachers felt that class repetition is an appropriate intervention for pupils. She also found that repetition has very negative effects on a pupil's future socially or academically. This is despite the strong empirical evidence against class repetition and calls for automatic promotion.

According to Ou and Reynolds (2010), the effects of class repetition are not uniform across all classes. They postulate that repetition in lower class in primary school is not as harmful academically as repeating upper primary classes. Hong and Yu (2007) in concurrence found that first grade repeaters continued to widen their academic achievement gap relative to comparable promoted pupils, and this negative effect lasted throughout the elementary years, suggesting that being even one year older may be enough to solidify repetition's disadvantages.

Although several research findings argue in favour of class repetition as bearing some merits especially when it is as a result of a universal school policy, a study by Hong and Raudenbush (2006), undermined the argument, because it found negative effects of repetition in both low and high repetition schools. Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) in their assessment of the effects of early grade repetition through the high school years, found that promoted pupils consistently demonstrated higher achievement than retained pupils. Pupils who had repeated class in lower primary classes were also found to be five to nine times more likely to drop out of school, and to display aggression in late adolescence.

The foregoing finding is in tandem with a study conducted by Sabates, Akyeampong, Westbrook, and Hunt (2010) that focused on the relationship between class repetition and school dropout among primary school pupils in nine countries, namely; South Africa, Namibia, Armenia, Philippines, Botswana, Uganda, Rwanda, Cameroon and Kenya. The study indicated that forcing children to repeat classes even as early as class one is a major cause of school dropout. In a related study, Goos, Van Damme, Onghena, and Petry (2010) compared repeating pupils to their younger grade-mates as well as to same-age promoted peers. They found that although repeating pupils started their repeat first grade year with an advantage in math and reading relative to their class-mates, this advantage was lost by the end of elementary school. Same-age comparisons found that promoted pupils consistently outperformed repeating pupils. Teacher-rated math and language skills were also higher for promoted than repeating pupils.

McGrath (2006) in his summary of the negative effects of class repetition opined that class repetition contributes to poor mental health outcomes, leads to poor long-term social outcomes, contributes to a negative attitude to school and results in pupils dropping out of school. Additionally, he postulated that class repetition decreases the likelihood that pupils will proceed to post-primary levels of schooling, leads to higher rates of behavioural problems and comes with huge financial costs associated with funding a pupil's for two or more years in the same class. Finally he concluded that there is no advantage to pupils in delaying school entry for a year in order to increase school readiness

### **2.1.2 Positive Effects of Class Repetition**

In spite of the foregoing negative research findings on class repetition, repetition still remains an educational policy through which school systems try to meet pupils' educational needs. By repeating a class, slower pupils are given a second chance to master their coursework. Class repetition also serves a motivational purpose because it is sometimes also used as a way to penalize pupils who do not perform well or do not put forth the necessary effort in school academic activities. With the prospect of repeating a class and thus not moving forward with their peers, pupils at risk may decide to put more effort into their studies to avoid class repetition.

Pupils repeating a class demonstrate sizable proficiency gains in their repeated year, although in some instances, their proficiency rates lag far behind those of pupils who never repeated. A study carried out much earlier in a single location by Somerset (1974), indicated that those pupils who repeated class performed far much better in class tests than those doing the tests for the first time in that particular class. In another study ten years later by Gottfredson, Fink and Graham (1994), that compared class repeaters and promoted pupils that existed prior to repetition with comparable academic achievement in math and reading sections, through standardized tests found that class repetition has positive effects on the pupil's attitudes and attachments. Another study by Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber (1994) that examined the effects of class repetition in a sample in Baltimore City schools concluded that repetition was beneficial for pupils.

Studies of class repetition that compare teachers' beliefs about the benefits of class repetition demonstrate that teachers believe repetition to be an effective remedial strategy (Doyle, 1989, Overman, 1986). Some studies by Gomes-Neto and Hanushek (1994) confirm that positive results can be obtained from pupil's class repetition. Conventional wisdom holds that pupils retained at a younger age tend to benefit from an additional year in the same grade (Hong and Yu, 2008; Jimerson, et al., 1997; Mantzicopoulos, Delmont & Morrison, 1992; Pianta, Tietbohl, & Bennett, 1997; Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Proponents of class repetition argue that children walk, toilet train, and learn to talk at different ages; therefore, they should not be expected to learn at the same age and pace. They have argued that low-performing pupils benefit from an additional year of instruction and from being with peers of matched ability (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Schwerdt & West, 2012; West, 2012). These researchers also maintained that promoting pupils to the next grade level before they were academically ready sets them up for failure in subsequent grades (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011). Hong and Raudenbush (as cited in Goos et al., 2013) stated that holding back the weakest pupils may create more academically homogeneous classes. This results in an increased potential for effectiveness of teacher instruction, the ability to cover more advanced content, and more opportunities for the teacher to meet pupils' individual needs (Goos, et al., 2013).

When pupils are able to comprehend the material and achieve higher grades, their confidence and self-esteem improves, increasing the likelihood that they will remain in school. If pupils are consistently underperforming because they are promoted without having the foundation necessary for academic success, their self-esteem and sense of belonging decreases, and the idea of dropping out of school becomes more prominent (Goos et al., 2013). Fiester (2013) in his argument in favour of class repetition asserts that promoting pupils who are yet to master certain skills causes pupils to fall further behind their classmates and causes them to repeat in later classes, drop out of school, or attain insignificant grades. Viadero (2000) illustrated this concept by tracking nearly 800 class one pupils for up to eight years. A surprise in this study was that, repeating pupils continued to show improvements in their academic achievements, levels of self-regard and their attitudes toward school.

In addition, the American Federation of Teachers (as cited in Babcock & Bedard, 2011) stated that proponents of repetition claim that social promotion communicates the message to pupils and teachers that effort and achievement are unimportant. It also compels teachers to deal with a much wider range of pupil preparedness and unpreparedness which consequentially denies pupils a second chance to learn what they missed.

Several studies have shown positive results following repetition. Winters and Greene (2006), for example, compared gains in developmental-scale scores of two 19 cohorts of grade three pupils. In their study, one group consisted of grade three pupils who scored level one on the state-mandated achievement test in 2001 and were promoted before the repetition policy was introduced. The second group in the study by Winters and Greene consisted of grade three pupils who scored a level one in 2002 and thus were made to repeat.

The only difference between the two groups of pupils was the year in which they were born (Winters & Greene, 2006). Had the first group been born a year later, they would have been subjected to the repetition policy brought forth by NCLB. Winters and Greene additionally found that the pupils who were made to repeat made larger relative gains than those who were not subjected to the repetition policy.

In a study involving the Los Angeles Unified School District, pupils who were retained in grades one or two made significant improvements in their repeated year (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011). In another study, McCombs, Kirby, and Mariano (2009) examined reform efforts in the New York City public schools and found small, positive effects on seventh-grade assessments of pupils who received early interventions in the fifth grade or who attended summer school; however, moderate positive effects occurred when similar pupils were given an additional year of instruction due to repetition.

In their study, Mariano and Martorell (2013) established that the effects of retention in the fifth grade are substantial and positive through seventh grade on both math and Early Literacy Assessment (ELA) outcomes, suggesting that the additional year of instruction in fifth grade leads to improvements in subsequent grade achievements. Hughes et al. (2010) found that repeating first-grade pupils were more likely to pass state-wide, criterion-referenced tests in the third grade than if they were automatically promoted to the second grade. Hughes et al. further noted that repetition in the early grades may increase a pupil's chance of successfully meeting the academic challenges of subsequent classes.

In a study involving 363 pupils who were at equal risk of repetition in the first grade, Moser et al. (2012) claimed that the most striking finding was that being made to repeat a class protected pupils from being made to repeat in later classes. This finding was supported by the results obtained under the Florida's test-based promotion policy involving pupils who achieved at higher levels than their promoted peers in both reading and mathematics for several years after repeating the third grade and who were also less likely to be retained in subsequent years (West, 2012).

Researchers in Texas tracked successive groups of 35,000 third-grade pupils who failed the state assessment and found that those who were socially promoted continued failing the state assessments until they were required to repeat later grades (Viadero, 2000). Once again, allowing underperforming pupils to have the time they need to acquire the foundational skills needed to be successful in future classes is imperative. Promoting pupils who are not academically ready for the tasks of the next level causes them to become progressively further behind academically.

Additionally, Hong and Yu's study as cited in Child Trends, (2012) suggested that social promotion can cause a decreased interest in school due to pupils falling behind the class norms and may increase the likelihood of the pupils' decision to drop out. Furthermore, social promotion can create additional problems for pupils, teachers, and parents. Not only do parents receive a false sense of their children's progress, but social promotion also gives

pupils the false sense that they are prepared to succeed in a class for which they are ill-prepared. This can create greater frustration for unprepared pupils.

Aldridge and Goldman (2014) further asserted that social promotion sends a message to the socially promoted pupils that they are able to move on without investing the requisite effort, while other pupils may receive the message that their effort and achievement do not really count. In addition, having socially promoted pupils in the classroom is challenging because teachers must plan for and teach a group of children with widely ranging abilities (Aldridge & Goldman, 2014). Other pupils notice the difference in material taught or the expectations and may treat the underperforming pupils differently, further lowering the pupil's self-esteem and self-perception.

The available literature reveals a sorry state of scholarly variance on the effects of class repetition on pupils' academic achievement. Every school of thought puts forth a robust line of argument to support their views. Most of the studies on this area are large scale and longitudinal in nature while this particular research focuses on a smaller region and involves lower primary pupils only. There is also no evidence that such a study has been carried out in Homa-Bay Sub-County.

None of the studies done on this phenomenon has categorically resulted in a universally accepted finding among educational scholars, researchers or stakeholders. The implication therefore is that this is a matter that still calls for a more comprehensive and in-depth investigation until a middle ground is achieved. It is against this background that the researcher set out to interrogate the effects of class repetition on the academic performance of lower primary pupils in Homa-Bay Sub-County.

### **Research Methodology**

In this study, the researcher adopted descriptive survey design in trying to establish the effect of class repetition on the academic performance of pupils in lower primary schools in Homa-Bay Sub-County. This is because descriptive survey design is most appropriate when the purpose of the study is to create a detailed description of an issue (Mugenda and Mugenda, 1999). The design allows the use of both descriptive and inferential statistics. Furthermore it permits the researcher to consider many different aspects of a problem and hence is paramount in helping a researcher to gain new insights and ideas about a problem (Kothari,2003). It also allows a researcher to capture all characteristics of a population and tests relevant hypotheses where applicable. Moreover, this design cushions the study from undue manipulation or bias by the researcher. The researcher therefore only reports what exactly transpires during the study. Surveys provide a prompt and precise means of assessing information if properly conducted (Zikmund 2003). The design was therefore found to be very appropriate for the study. The researcher used questionnaires and document analysis to collect data on class repeaters. The analysis of data was done quantitatively in which case the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 21) program was employed.

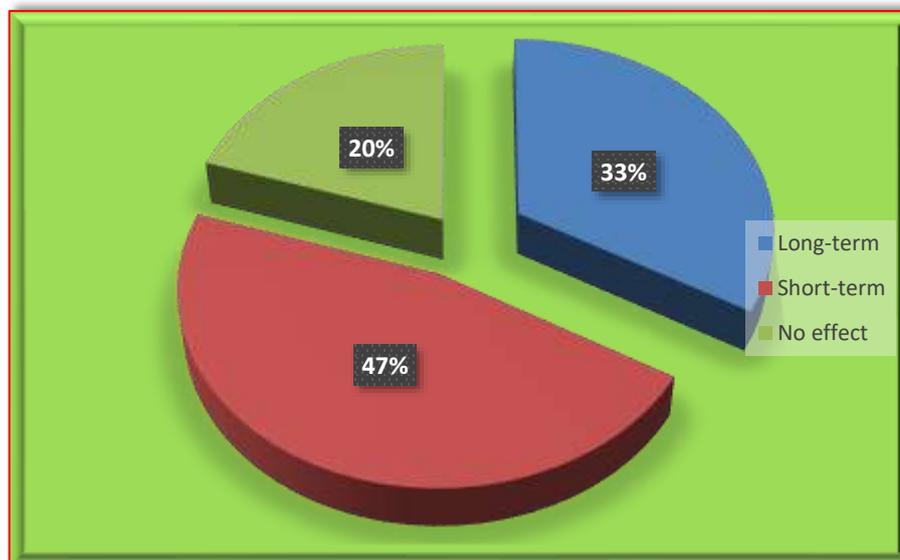
## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Effect of Class Repetition**

The first objective of this study was to investigate the effect of class repetition on the academic performance of pupils in lower primary schools in Homa-Bay Sub-County. To achieve this objective, a research question was posed: Is there a difference in academic performance of pupils in lower primary schools in Homa-Bay Sub-County before and after class repetition? To answer this question, academic performance records of 42 pupils were

obtained with the help of head teachers. Performance records of pupils before and after repeating a class were obtained. That is, mean scores were obtained before and after repeating a class based on end year examination results. To find out whether or not there was a significant difference between the mean scores obtained before and after repeating a class, a paired t-test was performed on SPSS using the same observations on mean scores. Results showed that on repeating the class, the pupils' academic performance ( $m=263.38$ ,  $sd=128.92$ ) was higher than their mean academic performance before repeating ( $=178.07$ ,  $sd=68.55$ ). This difference in the mean scores was found to be statistically significant,  $t(41)=4.949$ ,  $t<0.001$ .

To further assess whether class repetition has an effect on academic performance, headteachers and class teachers were asked about whether or not class repetition improves academic performance. The researcher inquired whether class repetition results to long-term or short-term academic improvement or whether there is no effect on academic improvement at all in items. A summary of responses for this inquiry was presented in the pie-chart shown



in Fig.4.5

**Fig. 4.5: Effect of Class Repetition on Academic Improvement**

From Figure 4.5, the researcher observes that when he cumulatively considered the effect of class repetition, it was noted that more than half of the respondents (80%) agreed that class repetition indeed has a positive effect on academic improvement, compared to only 20% of the respondents who stated that there is no effect on academic improvement.

A number of studies postulate that class repetition has no positive effect on the academic performance of class repeaters. For example a study conducted by Byrnes, Deborah, Yamamoto and Kaoru, (2001) opined that class repetition seems to be of dubious effectiveness as an answer to low pupil achievement and motivation and is often internalized by the children as a negative and confusing experience. This was supported by a study by Chen, Liu, Zhang, Shi, and Rozelle, (2010) on grade retention and school performance in poor areas in rural China which showed that there is no positive effect of grade repetition on school performance of the pupils that were retained in rural areas. However the findings of this particular study is also supported by some previous research findings. For example, a study conducted by Ou, and Reynolds, (2010) found that class repetition especially in lower classes has a long-term positive effect on pupils' academic performance. It is also similar to a study conducted by Alexander, Entwisle and Dauber (2003) as well as Hong and Yu, (2007)

who argue that this intervention grants children more time in the same course to mature and acquire some basic skills to prevent failure and frustration in future grades where they will have to face more advanced learning tasks. A study by Hong and Raudenbush, (2005) further claims that this practice can result in more academically homogeneous classes, which facilitates teacher instruction with the subsequent result of improved academic performance.

### Conclusion

The study concludes that class repetition has a positive effect on the academic performance of lower primary pupils and therefore the practice is beneficial to low academic achievers.

### Recommendation

The study recommends that the Ministry of Education should review the “no repetition” policy that outlaws class repetition and allow teachers, parents and other educational stakeholders to consultatively make decisions on whether a pupil should repeat a class or not. It further recommends that parental involvement in school activities should be streamlined in such a way that every parent is required to periodically and systematically consult their children’s teachers for purposes of educational decision-making.

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