Psychosocial Effect of Grade Retention of Learners in The Foundation Phase: A South African Case Study

Roy Venketsamy⊠
University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Durban, South Africa

Abstract

Purpose – This study to explore teachers' perceptions on the impact of grade retention on the psychosocial wellbeing of Grade 1 learners in South Africa.

Design/methods/approach – This study adopted a qualitative case study design within an interpretivist paradigm. It was grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model as a theoretical framework. Data was collected through unobtrusive observation of four learners and a focus group interviews with the two teacher participants. An observation schedule was used by each teacher to record her observation and the semi-structured interview schedule was used during the focus group interview. The data was analysed using Creswell's 6 steps of data analysis using thematic approach. Through inductive process theme were identified and reported against. Ethical principles were adhered to as guided by the University of Pretoria's ethical guidelines for research. Approval for this study was obtained from the university.

Findings – The findings revealed that grade retention affected young learners behaviours, emotions, social relationships and academic performance. Furthermore, retained learners exhibited signs of academic frustration, poor self-esteem, emotional outbursts and social challenges. Participants (teachers) shared ambivalent views regarding the department's retention policy. Teachers expressed mixed feelings about policy retention while other critiqued its emotional and social toll on learners.

Research implications/limitations – The sample size was small with only two teachers and four learners, thus limiting the generalisability and transferability of the findings. A larger sample size with different grades may yield different result. Furthermore, geographically, the study was limited to only one province namely KwaZulu-Natal. Additionally, the study relied on teacher perspectives which may not fully represent the learner experiences or parental views.

Practical implications – Some of the practical implications are policy revision — it is recommended that South African policymakers reconsider the retention policy by integrating psychosocial well-being criteria. Additionally, professional development is recommended so that teachers are equipped to recognize and manage the emotional impact of retention. An alternative intervention is to introduce support mechanisms such as remedial programs or peer support systems, rather than relying on retention. Finally, there should be a shift from an academic performance-centred curriculum to one that includes life skills and emotional intelligence development.

Originality/value – This study offers a fresh perspective by highlighting the often-overlooked emotional consequences of grade retention. It adds value to the discourse by advocating for a more holistic approach to education that prioritizes psychosocial support alongside academic achievement. The study also contributes by proposing practical, systemic changes that can inform both policy and classroom practice in the South African context.

Keywords Educational policy, Grade 1 learners, Grade retention policy, Psychosocial wellbeing

Paper type Research paper

Roy Venketsamy
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.14421/al-athfal.2025.111-05

1. Introduction

Globally, education systems are increasingly being challenged to provide equitable and supportive learning environments, particularly in the foundational years of schooling. Among the debated interventions is grade retention, a practice whereby learners are made to repeat a grade if they fail to meet academic or developmental benchmarks (Gonzalez-Betancor & Lopez-Puig, 2016). While this strategy is often implemented with the intention of offering learners another opportunity to succeed, it remains contentious due to its far-reaching psychosocial implications (Hadebe & Moosa, 2022; Merga, 2019; Pipa et al., 2024). In the South African context, the Foundation Phase (Grades R–3) is pivotal for learners' social, emotional, and cognitive development, making grade retention in these years especially consequential (Louw & Louw, 2023). Concerns surrounding the long-term effects of retention—such as diminished self-esteem, social stigma, and elevated dropout rates—highlight the need to reassess this practice, especially for younger learners (Horwitz, 2019; Xia & Glennie, 2005).

Extensive literature reveals that retained learners often suffer emotionally and socially, with studies indicating an increase in anxiety, depression, and withdrawal from peers (Schaack et al., 2022; Van Canegem, 2022; W. Wu et al., 2010). Research consistently reports that grade retention in the early years disrupts peer relationships, fosters a sense of failure, and creates a psychological burden that learners carry into later schooling years (Hill, 2023; Merga, 2019; Pipa et al., 2024). These psychosocial effects are compounded by learners' perceptions of being different or "less capable" than their peers, leading to low self-concept and school disengagement (Goos et al., 2021; Hadebe & Moosa, 2022). Furthermore, evidence indicates that the transition into new peer groups after retention may exacerbate social isolation and identity confusion (Muchemwa, 2017; Pipa et al., 2024; Schaack et al., 2022). Despite these findings, grade retention continues to be used as a remediation strategy in numerous countries, including South Africa, often without adequate consideration of these psychosocial risks (Horwitz, 2019; Xia & Glennie, 2005).

Studies also show divergent global perspectives on grade retention, reflecting national education policies and cultural values. In Nordic countries such as Norway and Iceland, grade retention is virtually banned, based on the belief that children should progress with their age cohort (Education, 2011; Goos et al., 2013; Muchemwa, 2017). Conversely, in countries like South Africa, retention is implemented under specific promotion criteria and developmental benchmarks, particularly in the Foundation Phase (Hadebe & Moosa, 2022). In Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, retention practices differ significantly, reflecting variations in national education agendas and socioeconomic contexts (Education, 2011; Eyasu, 2017; Muchemwa, 2017). These global inconsistencies underscore the importance of localised research, particularly in underrepresented contexts like South Africa, to assess the impact of retention on learner wellbeing and educational outcomes.

In addition to cultural and policy differences, previous research has illuminated the complex psychosocial challenges learners face post-retention. Teachers often observe emotional distress, diminished classroom engagement, and behavioural issues among retained learners (Hung & Lin, 2025; López-Montón et al., 2025; Merga, 2019; Pipa et al., 2024; T.-J. Wu et al., 2025; W. Wu et al., 2010). These behavioural patterns include aggression, social withdrawal, and non-participation, frequently misinterpreted as disinterest rather than signs of underlying emotional trauma (Hadebe & Moosa, 2022; Maloney et al., 2024; Rosa et al., 2025; Sharafi et al., 2025; Stein et al., 2025; Van Canegem, 2022; Van Loon-Dikkers et al., 2025). Furthermore, retention disrupts the continuity of peer relationships, which are crucial during early childhood for building confidence, communication skills, and social identity (Hill, 2023; Louw & Louw, 2023; Schaack et al., 2022). Studies also indicate that such early negative experiences can create a cyclical pattern of disengagement, lowered expectations, and eventual school dropout (Giano et al., 2022; Horwitz, 2019; Jimerson, 2001; Martins et al., 2024).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory offers a useful framework for analysing how retention affects young learners, positioning them within interconnected systems that shape their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989; Louw & Louw, 2023). At the microsystem level,

classroom dynamics, peer interactions, and teacher support critically influence the learner's daily psychosocial experience (Merga, 2019; Pipa et al., 2024; Venketsamy et al., 2021). The mesosystem involves teacher-parent relationships and the home environment, which may either mitigate or exacerbate the learner's psychological response to retention (Giano et al., 2022; Ouidani et al., 2022; Xia & Glennie, 2005). Institutional policies within the exosystem—such as retention guidelines and assessment practices—also indirectly shape learners' psychosocial wellbeing (Education, 2011; Gonzalez-Betancor & Lopez-Puig, 2016). Finally, the macrosystem and chronosystem frame how societal values and long-term exposure to educational practices affect developmental trajectories over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Hadebe & Moosa, 2022; Xia & Glennie, 2005).

Despite the breadth of literature on grade retention, there remains a paucity of research focusing specifically on the psychosocial dimensions of retention in early grades within the South African context. Prior studies have largely concentrated on academic outcomes, often neglecting nuanced teacher observations on learners' emotional wellbeing, self-esteem, and peer relationships (Hadebe & Moosa, 2022; Pipa et al., 2024; Xia & Glennie, 2005). Furthermore, existing research is limited in its exploration of how retention impacts learners' day-to-day classroom experiences and long-term identity formation (Hill, 2023; Van Canegem, 2022; W. Wu et al., 2010). The lack of qualitative insights from teachers—who observe these dynamics firsthand—presents a significant gap in the discourse, particularly regarding emotional development in the Foundation Phase (Merga, 2019; Schaack et al., 2022; Venketsamy et al., 2021). This omission undermines a holistic understanding of retention effects and weakens policy relevance in local contexts like South Africa.

This study seeks to explore Grade 1 teachers' perceptions of the psychosocial effects of grade retention on learners in South African classrooms. Focusing on emotional wellbeing, self-esteem, and peer relationships, the study draws from classroom-based observations and teacher focus group interviews to provide rich qualitative insights. By integrating Bronfenbrenner's ecological lens, the research highlights how multiple systemic factors converge to shape learners' psychosocial development post-retention. The findings aim to contribute to policy and pedagogical discourse by offering context-sensitive recommendations that prioritise holistic child development over narrow academic remediation. In doing so, this study addresses a critical knowledge gap and advocates for more empathetic, developmentally appropriate interventions in early grade education.

2. Methods

Given the multimethod nature of qualitative research and its interpretative, naturalistic orientation (Nieuwenhuis, 2016), this study adopted a qualitative design within an interpretivist paradigm to examine teachers' perspectives on grade retention in Grade 1. The aim was to interpret the meanings teachers assign to the emotional and academic experiences of retained learners (Maree, 2020; Nieuwenhuis, 2016). A humanistic lens was employed to capture the lived experiences of learners as observed by teachers. Data collection relied on unobtrusive classroom observation and focus group interviews, offering insights grounded in authentic contexts (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Koszalka & Whorway, 2024). Teachers observed four retained learners across two Grade 1 classes from February to April 2018 through anecdotal reports documenting emotional, social, behavioral, and academic aspects.

Observations were conducted in natural settings to preserve authenticity, leveraging teachers' familiarity with the learners and curriculum for contextual interpretation. This longitudinal observation enabled pattern recognition in behavior and performance over time. To enhance trustworthiness, a focus group interview was held in May with the two participating teachers, guided by open-ended questions probing behavioral, emotional, social, and academic changes, peer relationships, parental involvement, and reactions to retention. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent to ensure accuracy and transparency (Cohen et al., 2018).

Participants included two Grade 1 teachers and four retained learners—two per class—selected through purposive and convenience sampling. Only teachers with retained learners and learners who had remained in Grade 1 were eligible, with parental consent obtained. Learners were unaware of being observed to mitigate the Hawthorne Effect (Podschuweit, 2021). Data collection tools included reflective journals and a semi-structured interview schedule reviewed for clarity by faculty experts (Cohen et al., 2018). Data were analyzed thematically using Creswell's six-step model (Creswell & Poth, 2018), involving data immersion, coding, theme identification, and refinement. Verbatim excerpts were presented to illustrate findings, and data triangulation with audio recordings was employed to ensure credibility (Cohen et al., 2018). This approach enabled the transformation of raw narratives into meaningful insights (Okeke & van Wyk, 2015).

Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Pretoria (EC 17/11/01). The study adhered to principles of informed consent, confidentiality, honesty, and voluntary participation (Cohen et al., 2018; Maree, 2020). Teachers were identified using codes (T1–T2), and learners were assigned pseudonyms (Hopewell, Siyabonga, Tsoane, and Nelliswa) to protect identities. Ethical integrity was maintained throughout, including respect for participants' right to withhold responses to sensitive questions. A more detailed view can be seen in table 1.

Table 1. Profile of participants

Participant code	Grade Teaching	Pseudonyms for learners	Gender
T1	1A	Hopewell	Male, 8 years old, 2 older siblings. Reason for retention: emotional instability, bullying, poor academic achievement
		Siyabonga	Male 8 years old, 1 older and 1 younger sibling. Poor academic achievement, high rate of absenteeism
T2	1B	Tsoane	Female 8 years old, 3 older siblings at the same school
		Nelliswa	Female 7-year-old, only child

3. Result

The findings presented in this section are based on three months of classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with two Foundation Phase teachers (T1 and T2), focusing on four Grade 1 learners who were retained for failing to meet the minimum academic requirements. These learners—two boys (Hopewell and Siyabonga) and two girls (Tsoane and Nelliswa), three of whom were aged 8 and one aged 7—were retained due to underperformance in key subjects: Home Language, First Additional Language, Mathematics, and Life Skills. Their academic scores fell below the benchmark of 50%, with mathematics and life skills as low as 20%, in accordance with the thresholds outlined in the National Policy on the Programme and Promotion Requirements (NPPPPR). The data reveal a complex interplay between academic retention and developmental readiness, as echoed by prior research (Gonzalez-Betancor & Lopez-Puig, 2016). The following findings are organised into five key thematic domains: behavioural patterns, emotional impact, social adjustment, academic performance, and parental involvement. A more detailed view can be seen in table 2.

3.1. Behavioural Responses to Grade Retention

The behavioural responses of the retained learners varied significantly across individuals, as observed by both participating teachers. One of the most striking patterns was seen in Hopewell, who consistently exhibited dominant and controlling behaviour in the classroom. T1 described him as "a confident learner who wants to lead the class. He often raises his hand to assist the teaching in passing out the books and wants to be in control." Hopewell often positioned himself as superior to his younger classmates and reportedly told them that he was "bigger than them and the leader in his class." His efforts to establish dominance appeared to stem from a desire to manage the social imbalance caused by his retention.

Hopewell's behaviour escalated over time and included bullying tendencies, especially towards younger learners. T1 observed that "he sometimes likes to bully the younger learners in the class," an issue that became more evident when the learners reminded him that he had failed

the previous grade. His frustration was frequently expressed through disruptive actions and verbal outbursts, creating a difficult classroom dynamic. This was further compounded by peer rejection, as T1 noted, "The learners in my class don't want to sit and work with Hopewell. They also don't want to make him a part of the group because he is rough with them."

In contrast to Hopewell, Siyabonga demonstrated a distinctly passive and withdrawn behavioural profile. T1 explained that "Siyabonga is a very timid learner who was retained due to his frequent absenteeism in his previous grade. He is quiet and often has his 'head in his books.' I noticed that he is much quieter and does not speak or volunteer in the class." His withdrawal from social and academic engagement was consistent and extended to break times, where he preferred to eat alone and avoid interaction with peers. The teacher interpreted this avoidance as a behavioural manifestation of depression and emotional instability stemming from the experience of grade retention.

The two female learners, Tsoane and Nelliswa, also exhibited initial behavioural withdrawal, though their patterns were more adaptive over time. According to T2, "I noticed that Tsoane is more active and has befriended the new learners in her class than Nelliswa. Both these girls show collaborative behaviour patterns in their classes. They get along with the other learners but remain quiet and always sit with each other." Unlike Siyabonga, they were not completely isolated but rather developed a shared comfort zone, mostly interacting with one another. This suggests a milder form of behavioural withdrawal marked by mutual support and gradual re-engagement with the broader class context.

Both teachers agreed that most retained learners were initially shy and hesitant to participate in class activities, except for Hopewell who displayed the opposite behavioural spectrum. Tsoane and Nelliswa, while reserved, demonstrated signs of behavioural adjustment and improved interaction with their peers as the school term progressed. This range of behaviours—from Hopewell's dominance to Siyabonga's withdrawal, and the girls' quiet adaptation—highlights the multifaceted nature of learners' behavioural responses to grade retention.

Table 2. Summary of Main Findings on the Impact of Grade Retention

Thematic Domain	Key Findings
Behavioural Responses to Grade Retention	Retained learners exhibited distinct behavioural patterns. Hopewell displayed dominance and aggressive tendencies, while Siyabonga showed signs of emotional withdrawal, depression, and social isolation. Initially, all retained learners were shy and reserved; however, the two girls (Tsoane and Nelliswa) gradually demonstrated adaptation and increased social interaction.
Emotional Impact of Retention	Learners experienced a spectrum of negative emotional responses, including sadness, shame, frustration, anxiety, and withdrawal. These emotions were closely linked to feelings of academic failure, embarrassment, and diminished self-image. Several learners expressed missing former peers and feeling ashamed when grouped with younger classmates.
Social Adjustment and Peer Interactions	Most learners—especially Siyabonga, Tsoane, and Nelliswa—demonstrated low self-esteem and reluctance to engage in peer relationships or classroom group activities, often preferring solitude due to embarrassment. In contrast, Hopewell's social behaviour was marked by increased aggression, leading to further peer rejection and exclusion.
Academic Engagement and Performance Barriers	All four learners faced academic challenges, particularly in English-medium instruction. Learners whose home language was isiZulu struggled with reading and writing, resulting in minimal academic improvement. Nevertheless, Tsoane and Nelliswa showed stronger performance in mathematics, benefiting from its symbolic and universal structure.
Parental Involvement and Home Support	Teachers observed a clear disparity in parental involvement. While the parents of Tsoane and Nelliswa were engaged and supportive, those of Hopewell and Siyabonga were largely absent from school activities and offered limited academic support at home, contributing to the learners' emotional and academic struggles.

3.2. Emotional Impact of Retention

Retention was found to have a profound emotional impact on all four learners, manifesting in varied yet consistently negative affective states. Both teachers observed early signs of sadness, fear, and withdrawal among Siyabonga, Tsoane, and Nelliswa. T1 and T2 reported that "Siyabonga, Tsoane and Nelliswa initially looked sad, withdrawn and scared in class." These learners often cried and expressed feelings of loss, indicating that they "missed their friends," an emotional response likely tied to being separated from their original peer group and placed among younger learners.

The emotional burden of retention extended beyond mere sadness and into feelings of shame and anxiety. According to T2, Tsoane herself articulated a sense of humiliation when she stated that she feels "ashamed to be with the Grade R learners (she does not refer to the learners in her class as Grade 1s)." This comment highlights a disrupted sense of identity and belonging, which can adversely affect motivation and participation in the classroom. T1 and T2 both observed signs of anxiety and emotional withdrawal in Nelliswa and Siyabonga, noting that "they refused to talk to other learners and always kept to themselves." Such behavioural cues reinforce the presence of internalised emotional distress.

Hopewell, though outwardly more expressive and dominant, also exhibited emotional struggles related to his retention. T1 recounted that he would "burst out slander against his classmates," an expression of frustration likely rooted in social rejection and perceived failure. His emotional responses were often triggered by peer teasing, especially when other learners reminded him that he had "failed" Grade 1 the previous year. Although his behaviour contrasted with the withdrawn tendencies of the other learners, it similarly pointed to an internal conflict and a damaged self-concept.

The emotional impact of retention culminated in a shared experience of diminished self-worth among all four learners. Both teachers concurred that retention had negatively affected their self-image and confidence, stating that "although they are only in Grade 1, they feel ashamed." This generalised sense of shame, coupled with ongoing anxiety and emotional withdrawal, suggests that the psychological toll of grade retention may have lasting consequences on the learners' emotional development. All four learners, despite their differences in behaviour, "exhibited some form of shame, low self-esteem, anxiety and withdrawal," demonstrating that the emotional implications of retention were both pervasive and individualized.

3.3. Social Adjustment and Peer Interactions

The social integration of the retained learners was uneven, marked by initial isolation and peer rejection. Both teachers, T1 and T2, observed that all four learners "experienced decreased self-esteem and were initially afraid to form peer relationships." While this reluctance to engage was a shared experience, its manifestation varied across individuals. Learners often avoided participating in group activities and preferred to remain alone, especially during unstructured times like breaks.

Among the four, Siyabonga exhibited the most pronounced social withdrawal. T1 noted that he "felt isolated, showed little interest in his schoolwork, and refused to work with his peers." His social disengagement extended beyond the classroom, as he consistently sat alone during break times and avoided eye contact or interaction with classmates. This pattern suggests a sustained disconnection from the peer group, possibly influenced by his internalised feelings of inadequacy and the stigma of retention.

In contrast, Tsoane and Nelliswa displayed signs of quiet companionship, although still marked by avoidance of broader peer engagement. T2 explained that the girls "were embarrassed to join or interact with their new peers," indicating a hesitation rooted in social discomfort rather than overt rejection. Instead of integrating into the full class group, they chose to sit together, forming a small social enclave that provided emotional safety but limited broader social development. Despite their mutual support, this type of pair-bonding may hinder wider peer adjustment over time.

Hopewell's social trajectory contrasted starkly with the others. While he actively sought to assert leadership, his rough interpersonal style resulted in peer rejection. According to T1, "the

learners in my class don't want to sit and work with Hopewell," and he was effectively excluded from group activities. His aggressive behaviour—previously discussed in behavioural terms— also carried social consequences, as it alienated him from classmates who perceived him as domineering and unkind. This dynamic suggests that while retention can foster passivity and withdrawal in some learners, it can also prompt socially maladaptive attempts to reassert control and status in others.

Together, these observations reveal a spectrum of social adjustment difficulties faced by retained learners. Whether through withdrawal, passive avoidance, or aggressive dominance, each learner struggled to find a place within their new peer context. These maladaptive social responses were exacerbated by feelings of embarrassment and diminished self-esteem, ultimately impeding their ability to rebuild peer relationships after retention.

3.4. Academic Engagement and Performance Barriers

Despite being retained to allow for developmental catch-up, the four learners continued to face substantial academic challenges. Both teachers, T1 and T2, consistently observed that the learners demonstrated "minimal progress" across key subjects. One of the primary barriers identified was linguistic: many of the learners came from isiZulu-speaking homes but were placed in English-medium classrooms. T1 explained, "My learner's barrier was the language of teaching and learning. These learners experienced a barrier to teaching and learning since their home language (HL) is isiZulu, and they are in an English medium school."

This language mismatch hindered the learners' ability to engage with core academic content, particularly in literacy-based subjects. Teachers noted that reading and writing tasks were especially difficult, and learners often struggled to meet grade-level expectations. These difficulties were not only technical but also emotional in nature; the learners exhibited visible discomfort during literacy activities. T1 and T2 indicated that during 'reading aloud' sessions, "all retained learners showed signs of fear, low self-esteem and sometimes frustration when they could not read a word aloud." Such emotional reactions suggest that academic underperformance was compounded by anxiety and a fear of failure, creating a feedback loop that further inhibited learning.

While the learners uniformly struggled with language-based subjects, some demonstrated relative strength in mathematics. T2 noted, "Tsoane and Nelliswa performed much better in mathematics than HL," suggesting that their engagement with a more symbolic and visual subject area offered them a reprieve from the language barrier. However, even in mathematics, their performance did not fully compensate for the broader learning gaps observed across the curriculum. The success in numeracy, though encouraging, remained isolated and insufficient to offset the overall pattern of low academic achievement.

Despite these challenges, both teachers acknowledged the learners' willingness to try and engage. T1 and T2 remarked that "these learners were trying to engage with the learning material and were willing to give them extra attention." This suggests that retention did not entirely erode the learners' motivation, but that systemic barriers—particularly linguistic and emotional— limited their capacity to succeed. Their effort, while commendable, was not matched by the level of academic progress expected after a full year of grade repetition.

4. Discussion

Grade retention, particularly in the Foundation Phase, remains a contentious educational strategy in South Africa, with debates centering on its psychosocial implications for young learners. This study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of the impact of grade retention on the psychosocial wellbeing of Grade 1 learners, addressing a notable gap in the literature that often prioritizes academic outcomes over emotional and social dimensions. Previous research indicates that retention can adversely affect learners' self-esteem, peer relationships, and overall emotional health (Hadebe & Moosa, 2022; Merga, 2019; Pipa et al., 2024). Moreover, the Department of Basic Education acknowledges the necessity of meeting specific academic criteria for progression, yet the broader psychosocial consequences of retention are less frequently examined. Understanding

these effects is crucial, as early educational experiences significantly influence children's long-term development and academic trajectories (Louw & Louw, 2023; Van der Berg et al., 2013).

The findings revealed that retained learners exhibited diverse behavioral responses, ranging from aggression to withdrawal. Hopewell displayed dominant and controlling behavior, often asserting superiority over younger classmates, which aligns with observations that retained learners may seek control to compensate for feelings of inadequacy (Hadebe & Moosa, 2022; W. Wu et al., 2010). Conversely, Siyabonga exhibited signs of emotional withdrawal and depression, preferring isolation over peer interaction, reflecting the internalized distress associated with retention (Giano et al., 2022; Horwitz, 2019). Interestingly, the two female learners, Tsoane and Nelliswa, initially showed shyness but gradually adapted, forming supportive peer relationships, suggesting that gender may influence coping mechanisms post-retention (Pipa et al., 2024; Schaack et al., 2022). These varied responses underscore the complex interplay between individual characteristics and the psychosocial impact of grade retention.

The emotional impact observed among the retained learners corroborates existing literature highlighting the negative affective consequences of grade retention. Feelings of sadness, shame, and anxiety were prevalent, with learners expressing embarrassment over being placed with younger peers, consistent with findings that retention can diminish self-image and increase emotional distress (Hadebe & Moosa, 2022; Merga, 2019). Hopewell's aggressive outbursts and peer rejection further illustrate how retention can lead to behavioral issues and social exclusion, as documented in studies linking retention to increased bullying and isolation (Goos et al., 2021; W. Wu et al., 2010). These emotional and behavioral manifestations highlight the profound psychosocial challenges faced by retained learners, emphasizing the need for supportive interventions.

The academic challenges faced by the retained learners, particularly in language-based subjects, align with research indicating that retention does not necessarily lead to improved academic performance. The learners' struggles with English-medium instruction, despite their isiZulu-speaking backgrounds, reflect the barriers posed by language mismatches in educational settings (Van Canegem, 2022; Venketsamy et al., 2021). While some improvement was noted in mathematics for Tsoane and Nelliswa, this did not compensate for the overall academic difficulties, echoing findings that retention's benefits are often limited and short-term (Jimerson, 2001; Xia & Glennie, 2005). These results suggest that retention alone is insufficient to address underlying academic challenges, particularly when compounded by language barriers and lack of support.

The observed psychosocial difficulties among retained learners can be understood through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes the influence of multiple environmental systems on a child's development. The lack of parental involvement for Hopewell and Siyabonga, as noted by their teachers, likely exacerbated their emotional and academic struggles, highlighting the critical role of the microsystem in providing support (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Dini, 2021). Furthermore, the school environment's response to retention, including peer interactions and teacher support, significantly impacts learners' adjustment, underscoring the mesosystem's importance. These findings underscore the necessity of a holistic approach to retention, considering the interconnected systems influencing a child's wellbeing.

The differential responses among the retained learners suggest that individual factors, such as personality traits and gender, may mediate the psychosocial impact of retention. The gradual adaptation observed in Tsoane and Nelliswa may be attributed to their supportive relationship and possibly greater resilience, indicating that peer support can buffer against negative outcomes (Hadebe & Moosa, 2022; Pipa et al., 2024). In contrast, Hopewell's aggression and Siyabonga's withdrawal highlight how retention can exacerbate existing behavioral tendencies, leading to further social and emotional difficulties. These variations emphasize the need for individualized support strategies that address the specific needs and coping mechanisms of retained learners.

The findings of this study have significant implications for educational policy and practice. They suggest that grade retention, as currently implemented, may not effectively address the academic and developmental needs of learners, and may instead contribute to adverse psychosocial outcomes. Educational stakeholders should consider alternative interventions, such

as targeted support programs, language assistance, and increased parental engagement, to support learners at risk of retention. Furthermore, policies should be informed by a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted impacts of retention, ensuring that decisions prioritize the holistic development of learners. Future research should explore long-term outcomes of retained learners and evaluate the effectiveness of supportive interventions in mitigating negative consequences.

4.1. Research Contribution

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing in-depth, context-rich insights into the emotional, behavioural, academic, and social experiences of Grade 1 learners following grade retention. By adopting a qualitative lens grounded in teacher observation and reflection, it highlights the nuanced and individualized responses of young children to retention−a perspective often overlooked in large-scale quantitative studies. The study emphasizes the multifaceted consequences of retention, including emotional distress, social withdrawal, and persistent academic underperformance, despite the intended remedial purpose. Importantly, it underscores the role of contextual factors such as language barriers and parental involvement in shaping learners' post-retention trajectories. These findings have practical value for educators, policymakers, and school psychologists working to design more responsive and child-centred intervention strategies.

4.2. Limitations

While the study offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small and context-specific, involving only two teachers and four retained learners from one school. This limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations or educational settings. Second, the data relied heavily on teacher-reported observations and interviews, which, while rich in depth, may introduce subjective bias. Third, the study focused on a short observational period (three months), which may not fully capture the long-term impact of grade retention. Additionally, the voices of the learners themselves were not directly captured, which could have added another important layer of perspective, particularly regarding their emotional and social experiences.

4.3. Suggestions

Future research should consider adopting a longitudinal design to examine the long-term developmental, academic, and emotional outcomes of retained learners. Including a larger and more diverse sample across multiple schools and language backgrounds would enhance the generalizability of findings. Moreover, incorporating learner perspectives through child-friendly interviews or narrative methods would provide a more holistic understanding of how retention is internalized by children themselves. Finally, comparative studies evaluating the efficacy of alternative interventions—such as remedial instruction, language support programs, or socio-emotional learning curricula—could offer evidence-based pathways to reduce reliance on retention as a primary academic intervention strategy.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant psychosocial impact of grade retention on young learners, including reduced self-esteem, frustration, social isolation, bullying, attention-seeking behaviours, and withdrawal. Despite intentions to improve academic performance, retention often contributes to increased dropout rates and long-term negative consequences for learners. The findings emphasize the need for policy revision that prioritizes learner wellbeing and supports age-appropriate progression, rather than relying solely on academic outcomes. Although the study was limited to one school and a small sample, it offers valuable insights from teachers' observations that can inform broader educational policies. It is recommended that policymakers adopt more flexible and inclusive strategies, integrate emotional intelligence and life skills into

the curriculum, and provide targeted support interventions to ensure learners thrive both academically and psychosocially.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Roy Venketsamy conceived the idea and conducted data collection, developed the theory and performed the analysis. His engaged in discussions regarding the findings and made contributions to the final manuscript.

Funding statement

This research did not receive funding or grants from any public, commercial, or nonprofit funding agencies.

Data availability statement

The dataset generated and analyzed during the research is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of interests statement

All authors declare that they have no financial or personal interests that could influence the work presented in this manuscript.

Additional information

Correspondence and material requests should be addressed to Venketsamyt@ukzn.ac.za.

ORCID

Roy Venketsamy ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3594-527X

References

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989). Ecological Systems Theory. In R. Vasta (Ed.), *Annals of Child Development* (Vol. 6, pp. 187–249). JAI Press.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research Methods in Education* (8th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.

Dini, J. P. A. U. (2021). The Role of Student's Parent in Shaping Home Learning Environment (HLE) for Early Childhood. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, *5*(2), 1512–1535.

Education, A. and C. E. A. (2011). *Grade Retention During Compulsory Education in Europe: Regulations and Statistics*. Author. https://doi.org/10.2797/50570

Eyasu, N. (2017). Causes of Grade Nine Students' Grade Retention in General Secondary Schools of Dabat Woreda in North Gondar, Ethiopia. *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies*, *5*(2), 84–100. https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.5n.2p.84

Giano, Z., Williams, A. L., & Becnel, J. N. (2022). Grade Retention and School Dropout: Comparing Specific Grade Levels Across Childhood and Early Adolescence. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *42*(1), 33–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/02724316211010332

Gonzalez-Betancor, S. M., & Lopez-Puig, A. J. (2016). Grade Retention in Primary Education is Associated with a Quarter of Birth and Socioeconomic Status. *PLoS ONE*, *11*(11), e0166431. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0166431

Goos, M., Pipa, J., & Peixoto, F. (2021). Effectiveness of Grade Retention: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Educational Research Review*, *34*, 100401. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2021.100401

Goos, M., Van Damme, J., Onghena, P., Petry, K., & De Bilde, J. (2013). First-Grade Retention in the Flemish Educational Context: Effects on Children's Academic Growth, Psychosocial Growth, and School Career Throughout Primary Education. *Journal of School Psychology*, *51*(3), 323–347. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2013.03.002

Hadebe, M., & Moosa, M. (2022). "I thought I was going to pass": Learners' experience of grade retention. *South African Journal of Education*, *42*(3). https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v42n3a2054

Hill, S. (2023). *Student Anxiety: How Does School Affect Mental Health?* Helium. https://tryhealium.com/blog/why-is-school-so-stressful

Horwitz, D. (2019, August 30). The true cost of our failing education system. *The Star*. https://dgmt.co.za/the-true-cost-of-our-failing-education-system

Hung, T.-C., & Lin, L.-Y. (2025). Predictors and clinical implications of emotional distress on the day of discharge in hospitalized patients. *Applied Nursing Research*, *84*, 151978. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnr.2025.151978

Jimerson, S. R. (2001). Meta-analysis of Grade Retention Research: Implications for Practice in the 21st Century. *School Psychology Review*, *30*(3), 420–438.

Koszalka, T. A., & Whorway, D. G. (2024). Development and Validation of a Learner Interactions Behavioral Observation Checklist (BOC). *American Journal of Distance Education*, *39*(1), 76–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2024.2303334

López-Montón, M., Aonso-Diego, G., & Estévez, A. (2025). Body dissatisfaction in older adults: The role of social media, emotion regulation, social support, emotional distress, and coping strategies. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *245*, 113282. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2025.113282

Louw, D., & Louw, A. (2023). *Child and Adolescent Development*. Psychology Publications.

Maloney, J. E., Whitehead, J., Long, D., Kaufmann, J., Oberle, E., Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Cianfrone, M., Gist, A., & Samji, H. (2024). Supporting adolescent well-being at school: Integrating transformative social and emotional learning and trauma-informed education. *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy*, *4*, 100044. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sel.2024.100044

Maree, K. (2020). *First Steps in Research*. Van Schaik.

Martins, J., Rosário, P., Cunha, J., Carlos Núñez, J., Vallejo, G., & Moreira, T. (2024). How to help students in their transition to middle school? Effectiveness of a school-based group mentoring program promoting students' engagement, self-regulation, and goal setting. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *76*, 102230. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2023.102230

Merga, M. K. (2019). "Fallen through the cracks": Teachers' perceptions of barriers faced by struggling literacy learners in secondary school. *English in Education*, *54*(4), 371–395. https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2019.1672502

Muchemwa, S. (2017). Grade Retention at Primary School: What the Teachers in Zimbabwe Say. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*, *3*(3), 82–93. https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v3i3p82

Nieuwenhuis, J. (2016). Introducing qualitative research. In K. Maree & 2nd (Eds.), *First Steps in Research*. Van Schaik.

Okeke, C. I. O., & van Wyk, M. M. (2015). *Educational Research: An African approach*. Oxford University Press.

Ouidani, Y. E., Youssef, S., & Baghdadi, E. L. (2022). Exploring problem behavior in the Moroccan EFL high school classroom: Types, causes, and coping strategies. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, *7*(8), 1069–1084.

Pipa, J., Daniel, J. R., & Peixoto, F. (2024). Effects of grade retention in lower secondary education on students' self-concept, self-esteem, goal orientation and school career. *Psychology in the Schools*, *61*(5), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.23145

Podschuweit, N. (2021). How ethical challenges of covert observations can be met in practice. *Research Ethics*, *17*(3), 309–327. https://doi.org/10.1177/17470161211008218

Rosa, I., Conti, C., Lanzara, R., Ceccato, I., Gallelli, C., La Malva, P., Domenico, A. D., & Porcelli, P. (2025). The echoes of childhood: How parental bonding and emotional trauma shape loneliness in young adults. *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports*, *21*, 100938. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadr.2025.100938

Schaack, D. D., Donovan, C. V., Adejumo, T., & Ortega, M. (2022). To Stay or to Leave: Factors Shaping Early Childhood Teachers' Turnover and Retention Decisions. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *36*(2), 327–345. https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2021.1951930

Sharafi, A., Hasani, J., Shahabi, M., & Abdolloahi, M. H. (2025). The relationship between childhood trauma and obsession is mediated by emotional schema and reappraisal. *Acta Psychologica*, *254*, 104860. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.104860

Stein, S. F., Nuttall, A. K., Gearhardt, A. N., Riley, H. O., Kaciroti, N., Rosenblum, K. L., Lumeng, J. C., & Miller, A. L. (2025). Trajectories and predictors of maternal eating behaviors across the first year postpartum: The role of women's childhood trauma in emotional, external and restraint eating. *Eating Behaviors*, *56*, 101946. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2025.101946

Van Canegem, T. (2022). *Grade Retention: Helpful or Harmful? A Contextual Study Towards the Non-Cognitive Outcomes of Grade Retention from a Cross-National Perspective* [Ghent University]. https://biblio.ugent.be/publication/8756872

Van der Berg, S., Girdwood, E., Shepherd, D., Van Wyk, C., Kruger, J., Viljoen, J., & Ntaka, P. (2013). *The Impact of the Introduction of Grade R on Learning Outcomes*. University of Stellenbosch. https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Grade-R-Evaluation-1-3-25-Final-Unpublished-Report-13-06-17.pdf

Van Loon-Dikkers, A. L. C., Tierolf, B., Schuengel, C., & Steketee, M. J. (2025). Linking family violence and children's trauma symptoms through attachment and emotional insecurity. *Acta Psychologica*, *256*, 104967. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.104967

Venketsamy, R., Hu, Z., & Beyers, M. (2021). *Teacher Experiences of Learner Retention in the Foundation Phase and Its Effect on Learners' Academic and Social Development* (M. Chitiyo, B.-I. Seo, & U. Ugorji, Eds.; pp. 1–12). African Academic Research Forum.

Wu, T.-J., Sheih, C. S., Jou, S.-T., Lee, C.-Y., Yu, T.-Y., Liu, C.-Y., & Chen, C.-W. (2025). Effects of bibliotherapy on emotional distress, coping strategies, and resilience in adolescents with

cancer: A pilot randomized controlled trial. *European Journal of Oncology Nursing*, *76*, 102900. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejon.2025.102900

Wu, W., West, S. G., & Hughes, J. N. (2010). Effect of Grade Retention in First Grade on Psychosocial Outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *102*(1), 135–152. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016664

Xia, N., & Glennie, E. (2005). *Grade Retention: The Gap Between Research and Practice*. Center for Child and Family Policy, Duke University. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED492017.pdf