

School Characteristics and the Implementation of Automatic Promotion: Implications for Literacy in English-speaking Primary Schools in Cameroon

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Abstract

There are concerns about the effects of automatic promotion on quality. However, this may differ according to school type or characteristics. The study was a survey that assessed the extent to which types of schools differ in practicing automatic promotion and the effects on literacy achievement of final year pupils from 18 schools in six randomly selected divisions of the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon. 18 teachers and 727 pupils participated and data were collected through an interview and an achievement test which was an extract of the English language paper of the 2013/2014 First School Leaving Certificate Examination. The validity and reliability of the test had already been established by the Ministry of Basic Education. Data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially. Findings revealed that the effects of automatic promotion on literacy is generally negative but differs by school type with the public schools having the lowest literacy achievement rates.

Keywords: Automatic promotion, collective promotion, literacy, school characteristics, school type, primary school, quality, Cameroon.

1. Introduction

A 2010 study conducted in Cameroon by the Ministry of Basic Education (MINEBUB) among primary schools reported that 49% of Cameroonian children in the third year of primary school struggled to read, while 27% could not read at all, demonstrating the urgent need for Cameroon to improve the quality of its education (World Bank, 2014). If Cameroon hopes to meet its objective of achieving emerging market status by 2035, it must invest in human capital, starting with improving the quality of its primary education by enhancing achievement in literacy. While access to basic education has improved considerably in Cameroon, with primary completion rates jumping from 53% in 2001 to 80% in 2011, academic performance in Cameroon has nonetheless declined. This may have accounted for the high repetition rates which triggered the initiation of the policy of automatic promotion also known as collective promotion by the government in order to minimize wastage (Fonkeng, 2006). If students' literacy level is low, in most cases it implies difficulties in the acquisition knowledge and skills in other subjects. Automatic promotion is a widespread but controversial educational practice both in developed and developing countries. It has sparked off debates on its effect on literacy and numeracy. Proponents of automatic promotion argue that it minimizes wastage (Ndaruhutse, 2008) but if not properly handled it may instead lead to wastage where pupils are not learning. Automatic promotion may have serious effects on achievement in literacy, which needs to be assessed. However, the implementation of automatic promotion and its effects on literacy may differ according to school characteristics. The study thus attempts at investigating the general level of literacy and the extent to which the implementation of automatic promotion and its effects on literacy differs by school type and location

2. Review of Literature

Some scholars have noted that the type and quality of educational experiences African American students are exposed to affects their reading achievement (Flowers, 2007; Lee, 1995). Similarly, research in Britain shows that schools have an independent effect on student attainment (Sparkes, 1999).

Marks et al., (2000) reports that students attending private non-Catholic schools were significantly more likely to stay on at school than those attending state schools while Buckingham, (2000a) also asserts that students from independent private schools are also more likely to achieve higher end of school scores. Most publicly owned schools are characterized by failing structures, physical dilapidated buildings, and teachers with outdated information, examination malpractice, and lack of planning and non-motivated teachers. This will have a negative effect on the students' academic performance as they may not be able to compete with their private counterparts. The physical, human and financial resources invested in schools influence not only the education provided to students but also aspects of teachers and their teaching. The OECD international survey in 2007 to 2008 focused on this factor and its effect on school learning. Program me for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that the more resource shortages are perceived to hinder instruction, the lower student performance (OECD 2007). Official statistics reveal that automatic promotion policy in public schools of the Punjab has severely affected the quality of primary education (Government of Pakistan, 2006). Through this policy pupils who have not acquired the desired learning standard for the next grade are also promoted without any remedial instruction along with the normal children (Cohan and Qadir, 2011). However, this assumption is non-conclusive on the performance of the public school students as some still shine against all odds against their private counterpart. Private schools which serve as a correction of the failed public schools tend to aid student learning and thus influence the academic performance for the student by making available a conducive learning environment for the students, thus having a positive impact on their academic performance (Oredein, 2016).

Also, students from non-metropolitan areas are more likely to have lower educational outcomes in terms of academic performance and retention rates than students from metropolitan areas (Cheers, 1990; HREOC, 2000). Despite an adequate number of educational facilities in rural and remote Australia, school children from these areas remain disadvantaged by other factors. Issues affecting access to education in regional areas include costs, the availability of transport and levels of family income support. Inequity exists with regard to the quality of the education that rural students receive, often as a result of restricted and limited subject choice. Furthermore, students may also have limited recreational and educational facilities within their school (HREOC, 2000). In addition, inequalities in student's educational performance often reflect disparities in their individual resources and socio-economic status and in the resources invested in schools (OECD, 2008). Research suggests that students in poverty are three times more likely to be retained than students from non-poverty areas (Bali, Anagnostopoulos and Roberts, 2005). Green and winters, (2009) report that Hispanic and African American students are more likely to be retained (Hispanics and African Americans are retained two times the rate of White students (Bali, Anagnostopoulos and Roberts, 2005; Braddock and McPartland, 1993).

Still in terms of rural urban discourse, a study by Chen et al (2010) on grade retention and school performance in poor areas in rural China showed that there is no positive effect of grade retention on school performance of the students that were retained in rural areas. Whether in the short term or longer term, they reject the hypothesis that grade retention improves the scores of the students that were retained. This result is true for students that were retained in grade 2, grade 3 and grade 4. In fact, in the analysis of some students that were retained, grade retention was shown to have a statistically significant and negative effect on school performance. Therefore, automatic promotion is recommended. Also, Ajayi (2006) asserts that school location can affect students' learning outcomes either positively or negatively. Urban environment can be conceptualized as that which has high population density, containing a high variety of beautiful common place views, whereas rural environment is characterized by low population density containing a low variety and isolated place views.

3. Statement of the Problem

The primary school system in Cameroon has three levels: Level 1 (classes 1 and 2); level 2 (classes 3 and 4); level 3 (classes 5 and 6). Automatic promotion is expected to take place within levels but not from one level to the other. However, experience has shown that due to over crowdedness of the final classes of each level, the promotion criteria are dropped and pupils are promoted to the next level. A significant percentage of children have left primary school in Cameroon without achieving basic levels in reading and writing. Even though there are many factors that may account for this trend, automatic promotion has been a topic of debate amongst parents and teachers recently as a major cause of the drop in the quality of primary education especially in literacy. In Cameroon the pilot project for automatic promotion yielded positive results and the strategy was adopted as a policy. However, there seems to be discrepancies between the conception of automatic promotion and its implementation.

Remedial teaching which a significant component of the automatic promotion package is not being practiced. Schools do not have additional human and material resources to enable them effectively implement the policy. Only class six pupils receive extra classes in preparation for the end-of –course examinations. There is scarcely any provision for pupils of classes 1-5 who are experiencing difficulties, yet they are promoted. Effected in the absence of remedial teaching automatic promotion may minimize repetition but leave a proportion of children functionally illiterate. However, these discrepancies in the implementation of automatic promotion and its effects on literacy may vary according to school characteristics. Therefore, while it is important to ascertain the general level of literacy achievement in primary schools after the implementation of automatic promotion, it is equally important to find out if its implementation and effects on literacy differ according to school characteristics. This data is important in order to establish the type of school that needs to be given the most support in the implementation of automatic promotion.

Research Question

Does the implementation of automatic promotion differ according to school characteristics?

Hypotheses

The general level of literacy is not significantly low in primary schools in English Speaking Cameroon

There is no significant influence of school type on the level of literacy in primary schools in English Speaking Cameroon.

There is no significant difference in the level of literacy in primary schools between the South West and the North West regions of Cameroon

4. Methodology

The study was a survey that involved a purposively selected sample of 727 primary six (final year) pupils, and their teachers (18 of them) from 18 schools (a public, private and confessional school each) in six randomly selected divisions of the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon. These divisions included Fako, Meme, Ndian, Mezam, Momo, Ngoketunja. These pupils started primary school when the automatic promotion strategy had been implemented and they have gone through the three cycles of primary school as conceived by the automatic promotion policy. An achievement test which is an excerpt of the English language paper of the 2013/2014 First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC) examination was used for data collection. The test was administered to class six pupils, one month prior to their graduation from primary school, to determine their attainment in literacy. The test consisted of items on reading comprehension which contained open-ended questions; grammar and vocabulary. The instrument had already been validated and tested for reliability by the Ministry of Basic Education. The teachers of each of the classes were interviewed to find out the extent to which weak students were given attention before promotion. The use of three types of schools in the study was meant to find out if the implementation and effect of automatic promotion on pupils' achievement differ according to school type and location. Permission was obtained from Head-teachers and they were assured of the anonymity of the results. Six teachers who did not take part in the study with at least five years of experience as examiners at the FSLC were selected to mark the test.

5. Findings

5.1. Findings from the Interview

Five main questions were posed to teachers of the class six pupils who were under study. These included the following:

Does your school practice automatic promotion?

Does the school have a schedule for classes 1-5 for remedial instruction out of the regular class time?

What is the pupil-teacher ratio per class?

Do you have alternative material to help very slow pupils?

Do you think the automatic promotion policy affects quality in the primary school?

18 (100%) of teachers agreed that their schools practice automatic promotion since it is a government policy. "We have no option but to implement it, some said. All of them were of this view."

However, only 3 out of 18 (16.6) (2 private school teachers and one confessional school teacher said they had a schedule to teach weak students either during break or for one additional hour at the end of regular classes. “Due to lack of time, I can work with weak students only during break” a teacher explained. 2 out of these 3(66.6) said remedial instruction was not done on a daily basis and not all classes are involved because the junior pupils are sometimes too young to stay back after school.” One cannot keep a six year old after school for more classes when he/she should go home and rest,” another explained. With regard to the pupil-teacher ratio, findings reveal variations. While it is large in some cases (above 60 pupils) in others it is average (50-60pupils). All teachers (100%) said schools did not have alternative material as such for remedial instruction. Remedial instruction had the advantage of additional time and other practice exercises and was individualized to a certain extent. However, only 4 (22.2) of teachers thought automatic promotion may not have a negative effect on quality. This was on condition that remedial instruction was effective. The other 14 teachers (78.8%) did not think automatic promotion helps quality and should be abolished. From the analysis above public schools do not seem to make any effort to carry out remedial instruction. Private and confessional schools make an effort to carry out remedial instruction, yet the effort is inadequate, inconsistent and plagued by a lack of alternative resources. Therefore, there are disparities in the implementation of automatic promotion with private and confessional schools having an advantage over public schools.

5.2. Findings from the Achievement Test

Hypothesis 1

The general level of literacy is not significantly low in primary schools in English Speaking Cameroon

The data collected for the level of literacy of primary school pupils in English Speaking Cameroon was extracted from an English language test that was administered to the pupils. The Population t-test analysis statistical analysis tool was used for analysis. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Population t-test analysis of the general level of literacy amongst pupils in primary schools in English Speaking Cameroon (N=727)

Test variables	Mean	SD	Reference Mean	t-value	p-value
Level of Literacy	9.14	4.69	10	-4.96	0.000

$p < 0.05$; $df = 726$; critical $t = 1.97$

The result of the analysis of the data collected from the test showed that the p-values for level of literacy ($p = 0.00$) is lower than the significance level of 0.05 with 726 degrees of freedom. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. This means that the general level of literacy is significantly low in primary schools in English Speaking Cameroon. The analysis reveals that the t-value ($t = -4.96$) is negative hence significantly low.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant influence of school type on the level of literacy in primary schools in English Speaking Cameroon.

The respondents in the sample were categorized into three groups based on the type of school they were attending. These groups were categorized as follows:

Group One:	Public Schools
Group Two	Confessional Schools
Group Three	Lay Private Schools

The statistical analysis technique used to test this hypothesis was One-Way Analysis of Variance (One Way - ANOVA). The results of the data analyses are presented in Tables 2.

Table 2: Group means and standard deviations for the three groups on test and the actual analysis of ANOVA and Multiple Comparison test

School Type	N	Mean	SD		
Public	290	8.55	4.12		
Lay Private	226	10.00	4.16		
Confessional	211	9.01	5.73		
Total	727	9.14	4.69		
Sources of Variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square value	F	p-value
Between Group	22.818	2	136.409	6.285*	0.002
Within Group	15714.701	724	21.705		
Total	15987.519	726			
LSD Multiple Comparisons	Mean Difference	p-value			
Public – Confessional	0.458	0.278			
Public - Lay Private	1.453*	0.00			
Lay Private – Confessional	0.995*	0.026			

The result of the analysis of the data collected from the test showed that the p-values for level of literacy ($p = 0.002$) is lower than the significance level of 0.05 with 2 and 724 degrees of freedom. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. This means that there is a significant influence of school type on the level of literacy in primary schools in English Speaking Cameroon.

Since school type significantly influences the level of literacy in primary schools in English Speaking Cameroon a further pattern of the influence was explored using the Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) multiple comparison analysis. The result of the analysis shows a significant difference in literacy between public and confessional schools ($p\text{-value} = 0.278$), a significant difference between public and Lay Private schools ($p\text{-value}=0.000$) and between Lay Private and confessional schools ($p\text{-value}=0.026$). Comparing their means reveals that the level of literacy for lay private schools (mean=10.00) is higher than the level of literacy for confessional schools (mean=9.01) and public schools (mean=8.55). This is in consonance with the interview results.

Hypothesis 3

There is no significant difference in the level of literacy in primary schools between the South West and the North West regions of Cameroon

The respondents in the sample were categorized into two groups based on the regions where they were attending school.

Group 1: South West region

Group 2: North West region

The statistical analysis technique used to test this hypothesis was the independent t-test. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Independent t-test analysis of influence of region on the level of literacy of primary school pupils in English Speaking Cameroon (N=727)

Region	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
South West	447	8.80	4.77	-2.44	0.015
North West	280	9.67	4.53		
Total	727	9.14	4.69		

* $p < 0.05$, $df=725$; critical $t = 1.97$

The result of the analysis of the data collected from the test showed that the p-values for level of literacy ($p = 0.015$) is lower than the significance level of 0.05 with 725 degrees of freedom. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. This means that there is a significant difference in the level of literacy in primary schools between the South West and the North West regions of Cameroon. Given these results the mean scores for literacy for the two regions were compared. The mean score for the South West (mean = 8.80) was found to be lower than the mean score for the North West (mean = 9.67). Therefore pupils in the North West region perform better than pupils in the South West Region in literacy

6. Discussion

The level of literacy in Cameroon English-speaking primary schools is low, there are disparities in the implementation of automatic promotion and there is a significant difference in the effects of automatic promotion on literacy achievement among school types. Automatic promotion is poorly implemented in all three types of schools and in both regions. There is no specific school policy for remedial instruction in public schools but pupils are being promoted automatically. In private and confessional schools, a few of them make an attempt but the mechanisms put in place are inadequate and inconsistent to make a significant impact. Cohan and Qadir, (2011) report that through this policy pupils who have not acquired the desired learning standard for the next grade are also promoted without any remedial instruction along with the normal children. Automatic promotion effected in the absence of remedial teaching may minimize repetition but leave a proportion of children functionally illiterate. The implications of such a situation are enormous. If student's reading literacy level is low, in most cases it automatically implies difficulties in the acquisition knowledge and skills in other subjects, and consequently obtaining education in general (Geske, and Ozola, 2008). Such a situation has long term consequences. Basic reading literacy is one of the essential underpinning skills that enable people to be productive in their work, to continue to learn, develop and to participate fully in society. Literacy strengthens the capabilities of individuals, families and communities to access health, educational, political, economic and cultural opportunities and services (EFA Monitoring Report, 2006) without which Cameroon cannot attain its vision of becoming a middle income nation by 2035 as a result of the poor quality of its human capital.

Even though Literacy is generally low, private and confessional schools seem to be doing better than public schools. Cynthia & Megan (2008) reported similar findings. They confirmed a strong and positive relationship between quality of school facilities and student achievement in English and Mathematics. In Nigeria, it is the general opinion of people that private schools are better in terms of the availability of human and physical facilities and consequently students' performance, than public schools (Sabitu, Babatunde and Oluwole, 2012). Similar findings were also reported by Ajayi (2006) and Philiat & Wanjobi (2011). This means in terms of achievement in literacy public school products that constitute the majority may not be able to significantly contribute to societal development. Also pupils in the North West region performed better in literacy than those in the South West region. From the review of various empirical studies on location, it is clear that findings on locational influence on academic achievement are not the same. Frederick (2011) views school location as one of the major factors that influence students' academic achievement in some subject areas and Onuoha (2010) noted that school location is one of the potent factors that influence the distribution of educational resources and academic achievement but argued that there is no significant difference between students' academic achievement in rural and urban areas. Ajayi (2006) asserts that school location can affect students' learning outcomes either positively or negatively.

With regard to the results, the North West Region is more populated and has more private and confessional schools than the South West Region. Results reveal that these school types make more efforts than public schools to help weak students and that may account for the better results. Implications include a probability of the North West region having a better quality of human capital than the South West region. Such low levels of literacy can be attributed to inadequate human and material resources. According to a World Bank report, Cameroon allocates substantially less of its resources to primary education than countries with a similar income level. Although public expenditure on education increased rapidly between 2001 and 2003, rising from 1.9% to 3.3% of GDP, it has since remained stagnant and is currently well below the regional average of 4.3%. The shortage of teachers (one teacher for every 53 students) and the lack of teaching materials in primary schools," (World Bank, 2014) have further compounded the problem of automatic promotion. Automatic promotion is poorly implemented in private, public and confessional schools largely due to inadequate resources. It entails a lot of input by way of human and material resources. In addition instruction must be supervised to ensure quality. Such a situation requires quality control mechanisms to ensure efficiency. Automatic promotion requires alternative human and material resources for remedial teaching, training of personnel and the acquisition of appropriate instructional materials especially in the context of developing countries with large class sizes. The absence of these only leads to poor quality.

7. Conclusion

Automatic promotion is aimed at minimizing wastage but if not properly handled, it can lead to further wastage resulting from poor quality of human capital. The level of literacy is low and with such a situation technological advancement in Cameroon may not be attained. Therefore, poverty may not be minimized and the capabilities of individuals, families and communities to access health, educational, political, economic and cultural opportunities and services are not enhanced. Governments should not be distressed only about the fact that children are repeating. They should ask why children are not learning. Children should not only access education but learn. The cost of educating children is far outweighed by the cost of not educating them. Adults who lack basic skills have greater difficulty finding well-paying jobs and escaping poverty. If automatic promotion must be implemented the school environment must receive input to enhance proper implementation. Schools together with teachers and parents should arrange alternative remedial programs for underachieving students. There is need for more resources to be allocated to basic education in order to give the future work force a proper foundation. Also, proper supervision and monitoring of the implementation of automatic promotion is essential and there is need for the development of curriculum and instructional practices for teaching reading and writing to struggling children and to address the underlying causes of their reading and writing difficulties. It is also necessary to evaluate curriculum materials e.g. textbooks, workbooks etc used for teaching reading and writing in schools. It is equally important to provide more teachers, up-to-date school libraries and instructional materials for the improvement of students' reading skills at primary levels of education (Edem, Mbaba, Udosen and Isioma, 2011).

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