

**Teacher experiences of learner retention in the
foundation phase**

by

MARELIE BEYERS

Research supervisor:
Dr. R Venketsamy

University of Pretoria

2018

**Teacher experiences of learner retention in the foundation
phase**

by

Marelle Beyers

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree

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Department of Early Childhood Education
Faculty of Education
University of Pretoria

Supervisor:

Dr. R Venketsamy

Co-Supervisors:

Dr. L Bosman

Mrs. M Bruwer

APRIL 2018

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UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

Full names of student: MARELIE BEYERS

Student number: 11010372

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INVESTIGATOR

Ms Marelle Beyers

DEPARTMENT

Early Childhood Education

APPROVAL TO COMMENCE STUDY

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DATE OF CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

15 March 2018

CHAIRPERSON OF ETHICS COMMITTEE: Prof Liesel Ebersöhn

CC

Ms Bronwynne Swarts
Dr Roy Venketsamy
Ms Marietjie Buwer
Ms Linda Bosman

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to my father, Dawie Beyers. Thank you for your never-ending love and for being an exemplary role model in life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the following people who have supported me throughout my research endeavour.

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ABSTRACT

Teachers offer a unique insight into the practice of learner retention and the possible effects of retention on the academic progress and social development of retained learners. Learner retention is a custom that requires learners to repeat a school grade-level if they did not master the basic requirements stipulated by curriculum policy for a grade-level. Although the customary practice of learner retention is present in numerous school systems, internationally and within the borders of South Africa, a gap in the literature exists regarding the benefits thereof on learners' academic progress and social development. Research studies conducted in Europe and America report the possible and observed negative effects of retention on learners' development, with limited reported benefits. Still, it is evident in the literature that many teachers are of the belief that retention can be beneficial to struggling learners.

The aim of this qualitative study was to determine possible effects of learner retention on the social development and academic progress of learners, as experienced by teachers. To this end, the study's primary research question is: *What are the perceptions of teachers regarding learner retention and its effect on the social development of learners in the foundation phase?* In pursuit of an answer, semi-structured focus group interviews, which yielded meaningful findings, were held with foundation phase teachers.

The study found that teachers strongly advocate for the implementation of learner retention in cases where learners do not meet the minimum curriculum requirements for a specific grade-level. Teachers report that learners perform better academically during their repeated year when compared to their initial year in that grade-level. Furthermore, teachers are more likely to implement retention if they have experienced positive results with previous learners. However, the teachers who participated in this study were aware that retention often leads to teasing amongst peers and can have negative effects on the social development of retainees. Owing to the findings of this research study, teachers, principals, parents, and policy makers are more knowledgeable of how teachers experience, justify, and implement learner retention in South African classrooms, and what the observed academic and social development effects of learner retention are within a South African context. Further research should be conducted regarding why teachers advocate for the practice of learner retention amidst a literary domain that is against the practice. Also, the possibility that previous research studies overlooked possible benefits of retention on learner development or academic progress of retainees should be explored.

LANGUAGE EDITOR'S LETTER



8 April 2018

To whom it may concern

This is to testify that the Master's dissertation titled:

“Teacher experiences of learner retention in the foundation phase”

by

Marelie Beyers

has been language edited to the best of the language practitioner's knowledge and ability.

The language practitioner in question is registered at the South African Translators' Institute (SATI) with membership number 1003382, and thereby fully qualified and authorised to provide said services.

Should there be any queries, please feel free to contact the language practitioner at the number provided below.

Kind regards

Elcke du Plessis

0845480579

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAPS:	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
DBE:	Department of Basic Education
DoE:	Department of Education
GDE:	Gauteng Department of Education
NPA:	National Protocol for Assessment
NPPPPR:	National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement
NRP:	Not ready to progress
P:	Participant
Q:	Quote
RP:	Ready to progress
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

KEYWORDS

Learner retention, social development, social-emotional development, retainees, development, foundation phase, teachers, experiences, grade, grade-level, effects, bio-ecological systems' theory.

DESCRIPTION OF KEY TERMS

Bio-ecological systems' theory: a theory on human development created by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Development: progress and growth.

Effects: consequences, results of.

Experiences: past encounters.

Foundation phase: Grade R to 3.

Grade 1: the second grade in the foundation phase, but the lowest grade included in this study.

Grade R: the first grade in the foundation phase, excluded from this study for not being a compulsory grade-level.

Grade/Grade-level: an academic level, a school year level.

Learner retention: the repetition of an academic grade-level/school year by a learner; spending two academic years in the same grade-level.

Retainee: a learner who has been retained; a learner who is repeating a grade-level or has repeated a grade-level at some point in their academic school journey.

Social development: progress and growth with regard to social skills, social competence, social confidence, friendships, and a sense of belonging.

Social-emotional development: progress and growth with regard to social skills and emotional skills and/or wellbeing.

Teachers: educators and facilitators of learner retention.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY	1
1.1	INTRODUCTION	1
1.2	RATIONALE	2
1.3	PROBLEM STATEMENT	4
1.3.1	Primary research question	4
1.3.2	Secondary research questions.....	4
1.4	PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	5
1.4.1	Research aim.....	5
1.4.2	Research objectives.....	5
1.5	RESEARCHER'S ASSUMPTIONS	5
1.6	LITERATURE OVERVIEW	6
1.7	THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	7
1.8	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	9
1.8.1	Research design.....	9
1.8.2	Research methods.....	11
1.8.3	Trustworthiness	12
1.9	ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	13
1.10	SUMMARY	13

2	CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK....	14
2.1	INTRODUCTION	14
2.2	LITERATURE REVIEW.....	14
2.2.1	A global perspective on retention	15
2.2.2	Learner retention in South African schools.....	16
2.2.3	Retention interventions and initiatives	18
2.2.4	The social development of retainees.....	19
2.2.5	Factors pertaining to learner retention in education.....	22
2.2.6	Understanding learner retention.....	23
2.2.7	Possible benefits of retention	24
2.2.8	Predicting retention	25
2.2.9	A justification of retention as an accepted educational practice.....	26
2.2.10	A brief look at the advocates of and opponents to retention	27
2.2.11	The perceptions of teachers on learner retention	28
2.3	RETENTION THROUGH THE LENS OF THE BIO-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY.....	30
2.4	SUMMARY	34

3	CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES FOLLOWED.....	35
3.1	INTRODUCTION	35
3.2	METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN	35
3.2.1	Research paradigm.....	36
3.2.2	Approach	37
3.2.3	Type of research.....	38
3.3	RESEARCH METHODS	39
3.3.1	The role of the researcher.....	39
3.3.2	Participants and research site.....	39
3.3.3	Data collection	41
3.3.4	Data analysis	42
3.3.5	Documents reviewed for analysis.....	44
3.4	TRUSTWORTHINESS.....	44
3.5	ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	47
3.5.1	Informed consent and voluntary participation	47
3.5.2	Protection from harm	48
3.5.3	Privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity.....	49
3.6	SUMMARY	50

4	CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS	51
4.1	INTRODUCTION	51
4.2	DESCRIPTION OF FOCUS GROUPS	51
4.2.1	Group A	51
4.2.2	Group B	52
4.3	DATA ANALYSIS AND EMERGING THEMES	52
4.4	RESEARCH FINDINGS	54
4.4.1	Teacher perceptions of retention.....	54
4.4.2	Retention and social development	56
4.4.3	Possible advantages of retention	59
4.4.4	Possible disadvantages of retention.....	60
4.4.5	Parents' involvement and interventions.....	62
4.4.6	Retention policies	64
4.4.7	Retention policy analysis.....	66
4.4.8	Participant experiences.....	67
4.4.9	Discussion of participant experiences	70
4.5	SUMMARY	77

5	CHAPTER 5: INTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	78
5.1	INTRODUCTION	78
5.1.1	Primary research questions	78
5.1.2	Secondary research questions.....	78
5.2	EMERGING THEMES AND THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	79
5.2.1	Placement of themes within the theoretical framework.....	80
5.3	INTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS	82
5.3.1	Teacher perceptions of retention.....	82
5.3.2	Retention and social development	84
5.3.3	Possible academic advantages and disadvantages of retention.....	89
5.3.4	Parents' responses and interventions	91
5.3.5	Retention policies	92
5.4	AN INTERPRETATION OF PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES	95
5.5	THE RESEARCHER'S ENDEAVOUR	102
5.5.1	What are the perceptions of teachers regarding learner retention and its effect on the social development of learners in the foundation phase?	102
5.6	A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH AND RESEARCH FINDINGS	103
5.7	THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK'S RAPPORT TO THE RESEARCH FINDINGS	103
5.8	RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	104
5.8.1	Limitations of the study	104
5.8.2	Recommendations.....	104
5.9	CONCLUDING REMARKS	106
5.10	SUMMARY	106
6	REFERENCES	107
7	LIST OF APPENDICES	117

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory	8
Figure 2: School-based social development.....	20
Figure 3: Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological system's theory.....	32, 80
Figure 4: Social development factors according to teachers.....	86
Figure 5: The researcher's interpretation of the NPPPPR and NPA	95

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Four aspects of trustworthiness (Guba, 1981) and its relevance to the study	12
Table 2: Percentage of repeaters at schools by grade and gender (DBE, 2011)	17
Table 3: Initiatives to improve education access and reduce retention (DBE, 2011).....	18
Table 4: Factors associated with learner retention (DoE, 2008)	26
Table 5: Teachers' beliefs relating to learner retention (Tomchin & Impara, 1992)	27
Table 6: Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems (Liddel & Rae, 2001)	31
Table 7: Characteristics of possible retainees (DoE, 2008)	33
Table 8: A qualitative research process.....	37
Table 9: Enhancing a study's trustworthiness.....	45
Table 10: Emerging themes	53
Table 11: Participant coding method	54
Table 12: Participant experiences in relation to Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory.....	70
Table 13: Emerging themes (regrouped).....	79
Table 14: Integration of themes within this study's theoretical framework.....	80
Table 15: Codes and descriptions for recording and reporting in Grades R–3.....	93
Table 16: Interpretation of participant experiences	96

1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Learner retention is an educational intervention that originated in the twentieth century (Reynolds, 1992) and has received increasing attention in educational research (Peixoto, Monteiro, Mata, Sanches, Pipa & Almeida, 2016). Learner retention can be defined as the act of requiring a learner to repeat his or her current grade the following year despite having spent a full school year in that given grade (Silberglitt, Appleton, Burns, & Jimerson, 2006), and is implemented as a means of dealing with poor academic attainment (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). Research studies on retention increased in the 1990s and continues to be conducted in the present. According to Demanet and Van Houtte (2016), learner retention is prevalent in many countries including Switzerland (Bonvin et al., 2008); the United States (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012); Canada (Pagani, Tremblay, Vitaro, Boulerice & McDuff, 2001); and Belgium (Goos, Van Damme, Onghena & Petry, 2011).

However, the majority of research studies to date have criticised grade retention as an ineffective practice to improve learning (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2016, Peixoto et al., 2016). Through conducting this study, the researcher intended to investigate the views and perceptions of foundation phase teachers on learner retention and its effect on the social development of young learners. Learner retention has been shown to have socio-emotional implications for retainees, e.g., lower self-confidence, higher levels of hyper-distractible behaviour, a higher risk of developing depressive symptoms, and lower levels of well-being at school (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2016).

Policies, practices, and results of research vary (Silberglitt et al., 2006; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011), leading to a prevalent and controversial practice in education (Reynolds, 1992). Studies on learner retention conducted in the 1990s (Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Reynolds, 1992; Westbury, 1994) report similar findings to recent studies on retention (Silberglitt et al., 2006; Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008; Wilson & Hughes, 2009; Goos et al., 2011; Range, Pijanowski, Holt, & Young, 2012; Ritzema & Shaw, 2012), indicating that little change has occurred in terms of the practice of learner retention. For this reason, this research study references studies on learner retention ranging from the late twentieth century to studies conducted as recently as 2017. The practice of learner retention has been a focus point in data and research for over 85 years, which is an indication of the struggle to determine the effects associated with the habitude of learner retention (Silberglitt et al., 2006).

Still, educational literature lacks an indisputable justification for retention, bringing about the call for researchers to investigate this controversial phenomenon, as intended in this study.

1.2 RATIONALE

Education research and literature provides several opinions and research findings on learner retention and its effect on learner development; however, there is a lack of concrete evidence in support for retention. Furthermore, a gap exists in the literature regarding the social development of South African learners after retention. An inquest into literature reveals that mixed feelings exist amongst stakeholders regarding learner retention (Pagani et al., 2001). Although the repetition of a grade provides the learner with the opportunity to personally mature and revise work that was not mastered during the previous academic year, learner retention has psychological consequences (Pagani et al., 2001). Teachers in primary schools consider learner retention as an acceptable corrective intervention preventing learners from further failure, and there have been several studies reporting academic-related benefits of learner retention (Pagani et al., 2001). However, limited evidence of the positive effects of learner retention was found, and those positive effects found have a tendency to reduce with time (Pagani et al., 2001; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Ikeda & Garcia, 2013).

The existence of educated opinions and credible theories might enable stakeholders in education to form a deeper understanding of what learner retention means with regard to a learner's social development. Therefore, the researcher intended to obtain the perceptions and experiences of teachers on learner retention as they are the primary administrators. Teachers are also witnesses of the potential effects of retention on learners. As a beginning teacher, the researcher was confronted with retention amongst learners in her classroom. During her first year as a foundation phase teacher, she encountered several learners who were retained, with their teachers advocating their decision for retention. In some cases, the researcher, too, advocated the teachers' decision in retaining a learner, witnessing immense progress on the retained learner's part when compared to the learner's previous academic results in the same grade.

Despite the negative depiction of retention in the literature, there are teachers advocating and administering the practice in South African schools when learners do not meet the promotion requirements of their grade-level, as stipulated by the Department of Basic Education (DBE; 2013). The researcher intended to provide reasons for the gap between teachers' perceptions (i.e., practice) and the existing body of knowledge on retention-related research (i.e., theory).

According to Haidary (2013), teachers rely on their own understanding and experience of retention, rather than on what research studies claim. Bearing this statement in mind, the researcher understood that teachers apply the practice of retention based on their own assumptions, which are, in turn, based on their own experience in their classrooms. For some retained learners in her classroom, the researcher struggled to identify any advantages of their retention and witnessed an ongoing academic barrier to learning. For some, having repeated a year held almost no advantage regarding their academic success, and despite being retained, their academic results did not improve. The cases of these learners made the researcher question the policies pertaining to retention, the benefits and disadvantages that retention potentially holds, and the different perspectives of teachers on this controversial phenomenon. Furthermore, the effects associated with retention on the social development of retainees were brought to light by her own encounters with the social challenges that retainees experienced.

The aim of this study was ultimately to provide all stakeholders in education with new and current information on learner retention in the foundation phase and the effects thereof on learners' social development as viewed by the teachers who implement the retention policies within a South African context. Learner retention is occasionally justified as a necessary practice with the intention of maintaining grade level standards (Reynolds, 1992). According to Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) retention is a stern step but has the potential to benefit struggling learners. However, McCoy and Reynolds (1999) claim that it is clear that learner retention as typically practised in schools cannot be viewed as an effective educational strategy, and it does not seem to benefit the learners involved.

The authors further state that there has been an increase in longitudinal research studies on learner retention with the intention of estimating the effect thereof on learners' educational success. In a study conducted by Peterson et al. (as cited in McCoy & Reynolds, 1999), evidence was presented that indicated modest positive effects of retention that went undocumented in previous studies. One such study, as mentioned by McCoy and Reynolds (1999), reported that learners who were retained "*demonstrated a greater attachment to school, greater overall ratings of school adjustment, and less rebellious behaviour*" (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). Haidary (2013) refers to teachers as the "key influencer" and deems that "*their views regarding grade repetition seem crucial in terms of their beliefs and practices*", thereby illustrating the significance of this study. The exploration of teachers' perspectives on learner retention in the foundation phase will lead to a better understanding of the reasoning behind a teacher's decision for retaining a learner.

Additionally, possible advantages and disadvantages of learner retention were explored, and an awareness of how retention affects the social development of learners, as perceived by foundation phase teachers, was formulated.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The implementation of the National Curriculum Statement: Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (NCS: CAPS) has created much anxiety amongst teachers (Maharajh, Nkosi, & Mkhize, 2016; Moodley, 2013). The Annual Teaching Plan in the CAPS (DBE, 2011) is very prescriptive of what needs to be done during a particular term, leaving teachers with little time for remediation and consolidation. This has resulted in many learners not achieving the required outcome (DBE, 2014; Maharajh, Nkosi, & Mkhize, 2016; Moodley, 2013). As a result, many South African learners are retained at some point during their school career. According to research conducted by the DBE (2011), a third of all learners at school in the year 2007 had already repeated a grade-level. According to the DBE's report on drop-out and learner retention strategy, 21 % of foundation phase learners (Grades 1 to 3) had been retained, whilst 52 % of learners had been retained by the time they reached Grades 10 to 12.

There is concern amongst teachers regarding the retention policy of the DBE (2014). There are teachers who believe that some learners should be retained in the early grades whilst others feel that learners should progress on to the next grade. There are also mixed feelings and concerns of teachers on the effects of grade retention on the learner's social development (Demagnet & Van Houtte, 2016). A gap in the literature regarding the perceptions of foundation phase teachers on learner retention in South Africa exists, with specific regard to their understanding of the matter and the effects associated with retention on the social development of retained learners. This researcher has identified this problem and intended to address it by answering the research questions stated below.

1.3.1 Primary research question

What are the perceptions of teachers regarding learner retention and its effect on the social development of learners in the foundation phase?

1.3.2 Secondary research questions

- How do teachers experience learner retention in the foundation phase?

- Which South African policies exist regarding learner retention?
- According to teachers, how does the implementation (and non-implementation) of retention affect learners' social development?

1.4 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers on learner retention in the foundation phase and the effects thereof on the social development of learners. Through conducting this study, the researcher envisaged to provide context-specific information on retention in South Africa.

1.4.1 Research aim

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of teachers on learner retention in the foundation phase and its effect on the social development of learners.

1.4.2 Research objectives

The research objectives are: 1) to provide information regarding learner retention in the foundation phase, and 2) to describe the effects of retention on the social development of learners within the South African context. The significance of this research lies in providing information that is relevant to the controversial factor of retention, adding knowledge to the educational and social development research spectrum, creating a platform through which teachers can voice their understanding of retention, and allowing a context-specific comprehension of retention in the foundation phase.

1.5 RESEARCHER'S ASSUMPTIONS

The following are general assumptions that the researcher holds about this study:

- South African teachers are experiencing uncertainty when faced with retention in their classrooms – some advocate retention, whilst some oppose the practice.
- Teachers base their understanding of retention on personal experience and specific cases of learners in their classrooms, not on previous studies and research findings.
- Learner retention has the potential to affect the social development of learners.

1.6 LITERATURE OVERVIEW

The issue of learner retention is a serious factor within the school community, pertaining to administrators, learners, parents, and teachers (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Learners are ostensibly retained in early grades in order to prevent future failure (Silberglitt et al., 2006). Even though a small percentage of learners are retained in a given school year grade-level, larger percentages of learners will experience retention at some point in their early grades (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011). Research studies dating from the 1990s to the present report the numerous negative effects associated with retention (Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Reynolds, 1992; Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Bonvin et al., 2008; Wu, Hughes, & West, 2010; Goos et al., 2011; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Ikeda & Garcia, 2013).

The majority of studies scarcely report any possible advantages of retention and, although some advantages might exist for some learners, the majority of retainees strongly exhibit negative effects of having been retained (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). The need to repeat a certain school year is advocated and debated by teachers, with insufficient evidence in the literature to support the benefits thereof. The practicality and effectiveness of learner retention is a question broadly raised in educational literature, with little explanation as to why the practices are still in place. Haidary (2013) mentions that the controversy of learner retention sprouts from numerous research findings reporting only the negative effects of learner retention; yet, it is still a common educational practice. When considering the prevalence of grade retention, it might be presumed that the practice thereof holds strong empirical support (Wu, Hughes, & West, 2010). However, the observed evidence of the effects of learner retention on social-emotional adjustment is inconsistent. Wu, Hughes, & West (2010, p. 136), therefore, argue that:

“Identifying the effects of early retention on students’ psychosocial functioning and social relationships at school during the elementary grades is a necessary step in building more comprehensive developmental models that test theoretically and empirically informed hypotheses regarding the processes responsible for retention’s effects on both psychosocial and academic outcomes in later grades.”

Consequently, it is necessary to explore retention and consider the possible effects that retention might have on the social development of learners. As learner retention is generally practiced in the primary grades, the importance of understanding teacher beliefs about retention as a justifiable option for low-performing learners is emphasised by Range et al. (2012). Although a considerable amount of research on the effects of retention on learners exists, a gap in the literature is present regarding why teachers recommend retention (Range

et al., 2012; Bonvin et al., 2008). Research reports on retention generally provide two main reasons for learner retention (Haidary, 2013; Pagani et al., 2001; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999), namely: 1) not meeting the academic promotion requirements set for a specific grade, and/or 2) emotional, physical, or mental immaturity. Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) define the primary goal of retention as providing learners with an extra year of instruction to be better prepared for the upcoming grade-level. Ultimately, literature and research reports on retention depict a very negative, yet controversial picture of learner retention. Researchers, policy writers, parents, principals, teachers, and learners consequently call into question this high-occurring, international phenomenon. Why is retention considered an educational intervention? Does retention improve learning? How do teachers perceive retention? Does retention have any effect on the social development of retainees and, if so, what are these effects, according to teachers? These questions all have educational significance and must not be overlooked.

1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Retention occurs in several developing countries, with learners' surroundings and environment playing an important role (Liddel & Rae, 2001). The bio-ecological systems theory was developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) in relation to human development (Kamenopoulou, 2016), as he argued that people are embedded in multiple nested systems, with development being a result of complex interactions between an individual and the factors within their various systems influencing each other (Kamenopoulou, 2016). Briefly, the bio-ecological systems theory can be described as interrelated systems of influences and factors of an individual (Kamenopoulou, 2016; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Liddel & Rae, 2001). According to Houston (2017), Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of child development provides an insight into how children and young individuals mature and progress in their developmental years.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory has made an influential contribution to how we understand human development (Houston, 2017). Kamenopoulou (2016) refers to 'development' as the person's evolving conception of the ecological environment and his relation to it. Expectedly, Bronfenbrenner's model has been "*influential on research concerned with child development*" (Kamenopoulou, 2016, p. 516). Furthermore, Kamenopoulou leans on Bronfenbrenner's conceptualisation and states that human development depends on complex interactive processes between systems or contextual factors. Implementing Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory makes it possible to view a learner's development through

schematic lenses and to understand the relationship between the biological, psychological, and social areas of influence (Houston, 2017).

The following illustration, Figure 1, represents a visual interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory (Psychology Notes HQ, 2013):

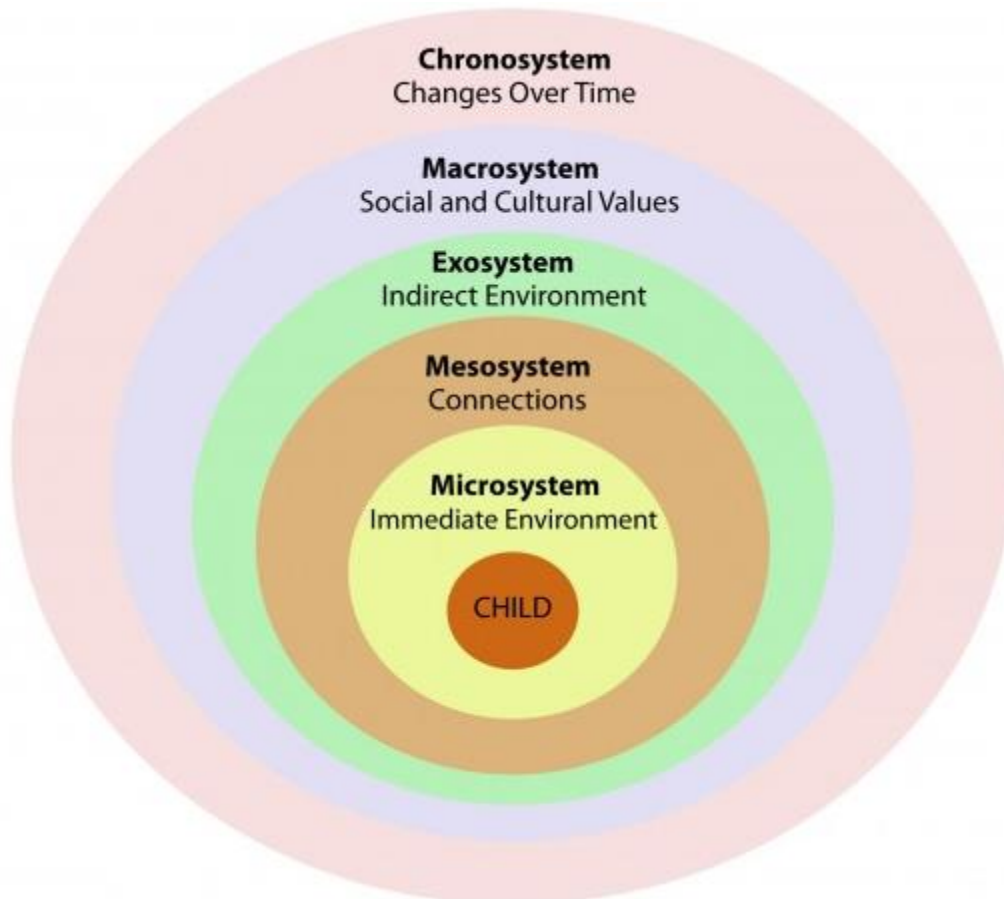


Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory

“Real children, with real families in real schools do not exist in compartmentalised worlds for ease of study, and this is clearly recognised by a bio-ecological approach.” (O’Toole, 2016, p. 19)

According to O’Toole (2016), the bio-ecological systems theory’s emphasis on the individual within a society enables researchers to analyse development in conjunction with various factors, proving particularly useful for educational research. One cannot attempt to understand a child’s development without considering their social context (O’Toole, 2016), as no child exists in an isolated vacuum (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Krishnan (2010) states that children

develop gradually and that their development involves a give-and-take or shared relationship between themselves as individuals and their environment. Research conducted by Dauber, Alexander, and Entwisle (1993) and McCoy and Reynolds (1999) report that developed countries' learners' earliest experiences in the classroom (microsystem) are considered strong predictors of retention.

Conversely, retention of learners in developing countries (such as South Africa) are more often credited to home-environment factors within the microsystem, such as poverty and low degrees of parental literacy (Liddel & Rae, 2001). Moreover, poor interaction between the home-environment and the school-environment increases learners' risks of being retained (Liddel & Rae, 2001). It is essential for the mesosystem to operate effectively, which is achieved when all the microsystem-environments interact and support one another in order to prevent possible retention. Studying a learner's immediate environment might indicate why the learner is experiencing difficulty in learning, and why the learner was/is being retained. Factors in retainees' ecological systems might enable researchers and teachers to identify other predictors of retention, as well as indicate the effects of retention on learners' development. Davoudzadeh, McTernan, and Grimm (2015) suggest the following:

“Given the negative outcomes associated with grade retention at the student level, as well as at the larger level of society and the economy, examining early predictors of grade retention in order to minimise the need for grade retention or to develop interventions is important.”

As the present study focussed on educational research, with learner retention and social development as key factors, the bio-ecological systems theory lends a solid foundation upon which to construct a relatable theoretical framework.

1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The term methodology refers to the strategy underlying the choice and use of research methods in conducting a research study (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2009; Maree, 2014; Maree, 2015). A summary of key points in the study's research methodology follows.

1.8.1 Research design

This study followed a qualitative research design including two focus group interviews with participants, thereby forming a case study of the participating school.

1.8.1.1 Research paradigm

The interpretive paradigm provides an adequate lens through which the research could be viewed, interpreted, and explained, when bearing in mind the personal and social nature of the research to be conducted as part of this study. Interpretivism asserts that social reality is seen and interpreted by numerous people, in a different manner, creating multiple perspectives of reality (Mack, 2010). The study required the interpretation of the views of a number of teachers on retention and its effects on the social development of learners. Connections and uniform causal links made within the field of science, according to Mack, cannot be made within the field of education where teachers and learners construct meaning.

It is important to understand and be able to assign meaning to the perceptions of foundation phase teachers' perceptions of learner retention, as the researcher intended to do by conducting this research. The following statement links the importance of qualitative research and interpretivism: *"personal as well as cultural identities are formed and understood through interactions between and among multiple individuals situated in the same, or metaphorically or vicariously similar, surround"* (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 49). Hence, a researcher with an interpretivist paradigm must understand and explain social reality as experienced by the different participants (Mack, 2010). By interacting with the participants (teachers), the researcher was able to comprehend their understanding of the matter and interpret the meanings behind their perspectives.

1.8.1.2 Research approach

A qualitative approach was followed to gain a clear understanding of learner retention as an accepted educational practice. Maree (2014) reflects that a case study is a systematic enquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest (Bromley, 1990). Maree further asserts that case study research can be selective, placing focus on the important issues in understanding the system being researched. Smit (2003) explains that a qualitative approach to educational research offers substance and deeper understanding of the complexities at the levels of policy implementation. Furthermore, Smit (2003: 2) argues that "better informed choices regarding policy implementation could be made if evidence of qualitative findings were to be seriously considered in the development and formulation of policy". Providing qualitative data might enable teachers and policy writers to better comprehend retention in South African schools and shed light on how teachers understand and apply retention policies.

1.8.1.3 Type of research

The study envisaged to explore a phenomenon within its context by making use of a case study research design. This design allowed the researcher to observe the social practice of learner retention through the eyes of the teachers who implement it within the South African school system. By forming a case study on the participating school, an in-depth understanding of learner retention and its effect on the social development of learners was established. Case study research allows the researcher to observe, document, analyse, and report on a phenomenon within a specific context, presenting in-depth, rich, and descriptive data. The present study addressed the controversial phenomenon of learner retention by voicing the perspectives of teachers, leading to context-specific, in-depth data. These teacher perspectives were voiced during two focus group interviews between the participants (teachers) and the researcher (moderator), thereby forming a single case study of the participating school.

The participating school was selected according to the following criteria (in protecting the participants' identity, limited information on the school is provided):

- Government school within the Gauteng Province
- Representing a large number of South African learners (categorised as a large school based on number of learners)

1.8.2 Research methods

1.8.2.1 Participants

The study comprised of 5 foundation phase teachers occupying a teaching position at the participating school, teaching Grade 1, Grade 2, or Grade 3.

1.8.2.2 Data collection

The data collection methods mainly consisted of two focus group interviews between the researcher and teachers participating in the study and (with the principal's permission) took place at the participating school and were conducted via the internet application, Skype. The reasoning behind the data collection method lay in practicality; the participants did not have to travel to any additional location, and participation was not a financial expense to participants.

1.8.2.3 Data analysis

The aspect of teachers' views on learner retention in the foundation phase and the effects thereof on learners' social development were analysed from the case study narrative and relevant data gathered during the focus group interviews with participants. The data were transcribed and coded according to emerging themes. Teacher experiences of foundation phase learner retention and how retention affects the social development of learners formed the ultimate and fundamental data that were analysed. Furthermore, two policies pertaining to learner retention were analysed and interpreted.

1.8.3 Trustworthiness

The term trustworthiness refers to the validity and reliability associated with qualitative research (Guba, 1981). The following table explains the four aspects of trustworthiness, as described by Guba (1981), and outlines how the researcher of this study will ensure trustworthiness:

Table 1: Four aspects of trustworthiness (Guba, 1981) and its relevance to the study

Aspect of trustworthiness	Description	<i>How was it achieved in this study?</i>
<i>Credibility</i>	Refers to the richness and quality of the data and research.	<i>The researcher provided rich and descriptive data and used member-checking in order to assure the accuracy of the findings.</i>
<i>Transferability</i>	Refers to the degree in which the research can be transferred to other contexts.	<i>The researcher provided readers and external researchers with highly detailed methodology, data collection, and analysis strategies. The background and circumstances of the study are clearly explained.</i>
<i>Dependability</i>	Refers to the assurance that research findings are consistent and can be repeated.	<i>The researcher conducted, analysed, and presented the study whilst taking the dependability of results into account. The researcher reported the processes undertaken in the study to enable external researchers to repeat the study.</i>
<i>Confirmability</i>	Refers to how the research findings are supported by the collected data; it is a process by which to eliminate researcher-bias.	<i>In order to enhance the study's confirmability, the researcher demonstrated how the collected data correlated with the research findings by drawing comparisons between participant responses and by interpreting data fairly and without bias.</i>

1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present study included teachers as participants. Two focus group interviews were conducted with the participants; therefore, a number of ethical considerations were considered before, during, and after the conducting of the research. Participants were assured that their participation in the study is voluntary. Furthermore, the researcher communicated and clarified the participants' option to discontinue and withdraw from the study at any time, should they have wished to do so. The personal information and identity of the participants and case study subjects are kept anonymous and protected; this is achieved by the dedication of the researcher to uphold the mutual understanding of confidentiality between the researcher and participants. In reporting the research findings, the researcher referred to the participants as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), etc.

Moreover, the GDE and the ethics committee at the University of Pretoria clearly stipulated all the ethical and legal considerations to uphold during the undertaking of the present study, as the study took place within one school in the Gauteng Province and include the anonymous discussion of learners. The protection of all participants from personal, psychological, and physical harm as well as the confidentiality of the identities of teachers are assured by the researcher at all times throughout the study.

1.10 SUMMARY

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the research rationale, problem statement, and research questions. Furthermore, a literature overview was provided, along with a summary of the research methodology and theoretical framework. Lastly, key points of the study's ethical considerations were described.

2 CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth discussion of learner retention alongside literature and explores current debates, research findings and policies on learner retention in schools. The literature review reference studies dating back to the 1990's up to 2017, showcasing the magnitude of studies conducted on this educational practice and the long presence of the controversy surrounding retention as an effective educational intervention. Furthermore, the study's theoretical framework, namely Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological system's theory is studied.

2.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the practice of learner retention has been present since the early twentieth century (Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Reynolds, 1992), the effectiveness thereof as an educational intervention has globally been debated by educational societies (Tomchin & Impara, 1992; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Pagani et al., 2001; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Literature on previous research findings has indicated a number of negative effects that retention might have on learners (Tomchin & Impara, 1992; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Pagani et al., 2001; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Jacob, 2016). However, personal benefits to retainees, albeit very few, have also been reported. In a research study by Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) research findings indicate an improvement in the grade-level skills of grade 1 and grade 2 learners during the repeated year, as well as progress in learners' reading skills in grade 1. According to Wu, Hughes and West (2010), retention has the potential to grant short term social advantages to retainees, yet, in the long run, pose harmful effects on social acceptance due to retainees' age difference. Wu, Hughes and West (2010) report on longitudinal studies testing the effects of learner retention on long-term academic and social adaptation, emphasising the necessity to realise the benefits and avoid the costs of retention as an educational intervention. Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) state that policy makers have an interest in the spectrum of early educational interventions as these practices are costly to school districts and states. Various research studies (Jimerson, 2001; Goos et al., 2011; Warren & Saliba, 2012; Turney & Haskins, 2014) strongly claim that grade retention holds significant harmful effects on long-term outcomes as well as learner performance and continue to argue that empirical evidence is unsuccessful in revealing any advantages of grade retention.

According to Knoff (2016) retention cannot be considered as an intervention, but rather as an opportunity to present effective instruction and intervention approaches in order for the learner to succeed. It is, therefore, necessary to further investigate the application of retention in schools and explore the perceptions of teachers on foundation phase learner retention. Furthermore, a number of research studies have indicated that retention causes negative socio-emotional development in retained learners (Bonvin et al., 2008; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2016). According to Elizabeth and Selman (2012), 'school-based social development' can be described as the characteristics promoting positive, healthy relationships between the individuals and their environment, such as the actions, decisions, words, and ideas present in the classroom and school. This study further explored the social-developmental effects associated with retained learners, according to the teachers' observations and experiences.

2.2.1 A global perspective on retention

Learner retention is an educational practice that requires or advises learners to repeat their current grade-level in the upcoming academic year, due to possible factors, such as: not mastering the curriculum or needed skills; personal, cognitive, or emotional immaturity; not being emotionally or personally 'ready' for the next grade-level (insufficient 'school readiness'); and teachers' perceptions about learners' academic/cognitive and/or social well-being (Pagani et al., 2001; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). According to Haidary (2013), learners may repeat a grade due to the following two reasons: firstly, they did not meet the academic requirements for that specific grade, and/or secondly, they are deemed too immature for the next grade-level. According to Warren and Saliba (2012), retention is a widely used educational practice to indicate the progress of learners in an education system. Haidary also mentions that age has a particular effect on retention. As much controversy surrounds retention as an educational practice, stakeholders in education cannot help but question the practice itself, and global research is being conducted to find mutual ground upon which to form a comprehensive understanding of why retention is still an active educational initiative. With the literature pointing mostly to the negative effects of learner retention, the benefits thereof are at times overlooked and difficult to come across, although not completely non-existent. The added academic year intends to allow retainees to reach curricular goals by providing learners with more time to learn (Bonvin et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, learner retention frequently turns into a repetition of the same grade with no adjustment to either the learning objectives or instruction methods to accommodate learner needs (Bonvin et al., 2008). According to Tomchin and Impara (1992), teachers of all grades

accept retention as a school practice, and a significant number of teachers are of the opinion that retention might even motivate learners to work harder. International policies on learner retention vary among even the biggest contributors to educational reform, with a difference in opinion and practice between, for example, the Scandinavian countries and countries such as the United States, France, and Belgium (Goos et al., 2011); the former of which are advocating promotion and 'on-time' progression, whereas the latter practice early-grade repetition. It is imperative to examine whether the practice of retention produces the desired educational excellence (Dauber et al., 1993). The elementary phase of schooling in the South African context, referred to as the foundation phase, is noted for its considerable variation in learners' cognitive and psychosocial skills (Goos et al., 2011). The question as to what to do with learners not successfully passing through these early years of education thus arises amongst teachers, parents, and policy writers (Goos et al., 2011). Retention of learners annually forms part of teachers' profession and entails controversial factors affecting all stakeholders, namely the learners, parents, teachers, schools, and the South African education system.

2.2.2 Learner retention in South African schools

According to the Department of Basic Education (DBE; 2011), an average of 9 % of learners enrolled in South African schools were retained and thus repeated their grade, with a retention average in primary schools of 7 %. South Africa has a notably high level of primary school retention when compared to other developing countries that have a retention average of 5 % and developed countries with a retention average of less than 1 % (DBE, 2011). The South African education system allows for learner retention and repetition with strict adherence to policy (DBE, 2015). According to the National Policy pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R–12 (DBE, 2015, 2017), a learner qualifies to be promoted to the next foundation phase grade-level if the learner attained an adequate achievement, meaning a score of at least 50 % in their official Home Language. Writer (2018) provides a clear explanation of the current minimum requirements to be met by learners in South African public schools in order to pass their grade-level. According to Writer (2018) the DBE is proposing a change in South African public schools' pass marks and have requested public comments on the matter. The current minimum achievements to pass a grade-level is (Writer, 2018):

- 50% or higher for a Home Language (first compulsory language)
- 40% or higher in a First Additional Language (second compulsory language)
- 40% or higher in Mathematics and in 3 other subjects

The proposal brought forward by the DBE suggest the following changes:

- 40% in four subjects, one being a Home Language
- Any three subjects at 30%
- A condonation of 2% in one subject if it would mean that a learner would pass rather than fail.

Currently, a mark of below 30% constitutes a fail for that subject, “*making the “barrier between success and failure one of the lowest in the world.”* (Writer, 2018: p.1), when compared to countries like Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, China and the Netherlands, to name a few. These countries’ pass marks range from 40% to 60%, correlating with the pass marks of local and international tertiary institutions (Writer, 2018). However, a learner who does not meet the requirements for promotion can be progressed to the next grade in order to prevent the learner being retained in the foundation phase for longer than four years, apart from Grade R (DBE, 2015). The South African Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools of 1998 limits learner retention to a maximum of one year per school phase, meaning a possible four years of retention throughout the twelve years of schooling (DoE, 2008). Moreover, the policy pertaining to repetition, non-promotion, and retention acknowledges that the practice of retention rarely results in better learning achievement (DoE, 2008). In relation to the DBE’s (2011) report on drop-out rates and retention, it is stated that retention occurs more frequently in higher grades than in lower grades, due to higher grade teachers dealing with “*learners who have failed to master basic skills in primary school, but who have nonetheless progressed from grade to grade*” (DBE, 2011, p. 4). Furthermore, a third of all children in South African schools had repeated a grade, according to research conducted in 2007 and reported by the DBE (2011), pertaining to 21 % of foundation phase learners.

Table 2: Percentage of repeaters at schools by grade and gender (DBE, 2011)

Current grade	% of male repeaters	% of female repeaters	Total % of repeaters
Grade 1	8.2	6.1	7.2
Grade 2	8.3	6.5	7.4
Grade 3	10.4	4.3	7.4
Total	8.9	5.6	7.3

(Adapted from DBE, 2011, p. 5)

2.2.3 Retention interventions and initiatives

“Retention as a remedy for poor academic performance has been hotly debated and extensively studied for decades. In an era emphasising educational accountability, policies of determining grade retention based on students’ scores on standardised tests have been adopted by many states and school districts in an effort to end social promotion.” (Xia & Kirby, 2009, p. 1)

Jimerson and Renshaw (2012) are of the belief that no single intervention will be able to successfully tackle the learners’ diverse needs, and further advises schools to rather implement a comprehensive approach encompassing multiple interventions when addressing retention as an educational practice. Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) suggest that schools need to implement effective early interventions to improve grade-level skills in order to avoid at-risk learners being retained. Neither learner retention nor social promotion can be considered a successful solution in addressing learners’ needs (specifically, learners with academic, behavioural, and/or social-emotional strains; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Prevention of retention and early intervention to address learners’ learning needs are the first lines of defence in eradicating the habitude of retention (Silberglitt et al., 2006). The DBE (2011) announced several initiatives and incentives to improve school attendance and reduce retention, as explained in the following table:

Table 3: Initiatives to improve education access and reduce retention (DBE, 2011)

a) The National School Nutrition Programme	Aimed at improving access to quality education, this programme has provided meals to more than 7 million learners in over 20 000 schools.
b) No-fee schools	The no-fee school policy is an initiative aimed at improving education access for poor learners. It stipulates that schools that have a no-fee status may not charge fees to parents. In 2010, over 8 million learners benefitted from the no-fee policy.
c) The Workbook Project	This project entails the providing of millions of workbooks to public schools and has been operating since January 2011. The workbooks are available in 11 languages and are intended for Grade 1 to 6 learners.
d) Expansion of Grade R	Studies indicate that a learner who attends pre-primary programmes is likely to remain longer in the education

	system. Therefore, the DBE is expanding the provision of Grade R in schools.
e) Reduction of teacher administrative workload	The Minister of Basic Education undertook several initiatives in 2010 to reduce the administrative workload of teachers. These include the discontinuance of learner portfolios and the number of projects that learners are expected to undertake. These initiatives intend to facilitate more teaching time and greater attention to learners, thereby increasing opportunities to learn. Studies have indicated that improved opportunities to learn will reduce retention, which, in turn, is likely to reduce dropout.
f) Textbooks	The Department has encouraged provincial education departments to provide learners with a textbook for each subject, reducing the schooling cost for parents.
g) Education for All Campaign	This campaign highlights the importance of education for children, encouraging parents to enrol their children in schools and other education programmes.
h) Ministerial Project: Crime and Violence	This intervention seeks to reduce crime and violence in more than 500 identified schools.
i) Full service schools	Aimed at providing learners with disabilities with access to education.

(Adapted from DBE, 2011, p. 7-8)

2.2.4 The social development of retainees

“Conventional wisdom predicts that retention will have negative effects on students’ emotional health and social adjustment by lowering their self-esteem, causing emotional distress, and decreasing their peer acceptance. Yet, empirical findings on socio-emotional effects of retention are mixed and inconclusive.” (Xia & Kirby, 2009, p. 21)

Retention is associated with causing harmful effects on learners' academic achievement and social-emotional adjustment, with retained learners exhibiting a negative attitude towards school and a higher absenteeism rate than non-retained learners, additionally leading to emotional distress, low self-esteem, drug abuse, suicidal inclinations, and violent behaviours during adolescent years (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). According to conventional wisdom, Xia and Kirby (2009) claim that retention will have negative effects on the emotional health and social adjustment of retainees. The decision to implement learner retention is often made mutually between teachers and parents (Warren & Saliba, 2012). Retention is reported for triggering emotional distress and decreasing peer acceptance; still, empirical findings on the social-emotional effects of retention are inconclusive (Xia & Kirby, 2009). This study examined teacher experiences of the effects of retention on the social development of learners.

Before one can explore possible effects of retention on the social development of learners, it is crucial to comprehend what the term 'social development' represents within a school context. Tkach (2013) is of the opinion that the development of positive socio-emotional skills within a school setting is vital for early school-aged learners, while Hoffman (2009) asserts that an individual's social setting is a crucial aspect in understanding their social-emotional development. Hoffman further states that certain skills are of importance in becoming an active member of one's social setting, with these skills mentioned as social-awareness, emotional intelligence and literacy, self-awareness, and self-regulation. Elizabeth and Selman (2012) refer to the term 'school-based social development' and divide it into two general, flexible categories, namely: prosocial behaviour and social understanding. Figure 2, interpreted from Elizabeth and Selman's work (2012) and designed by the researcher, provides a brief description of these two categories:

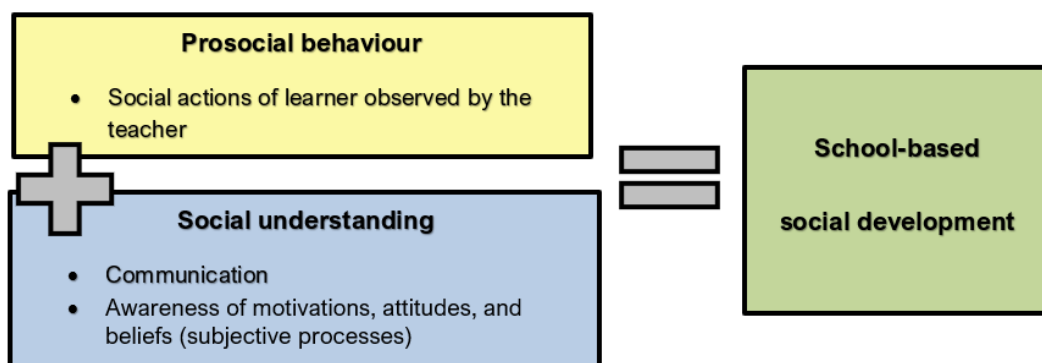


Figure 2: School-based social development

The way in which learners' social-emotional skills develop has the potential to influence their holistic development (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011), therefore, it is of importance to investigate the implications of retention on learners' social development. According to numerous studies conducted since the 1990s, retention causes negative social-emotional development and leads to lower self-esteem, higher dropout rates, and an adverse attitude towards school (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Westbury, 1994; Pagani et al., 2001; Silberglitt et al., 2006; Xia & Kirby, 2009; Wu, Hughes, & West, 2010; Goos et al., 2011; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2016). Nonetheless, according to Tkach (2013), teachers have the ability to inhibit these detrimental effects by acknowledging social development theories and methods for fostering social-emotional skills in their classroom learners. Tkach recommends the implementation of the following social-emotional skills in the school and classroom: learners' self-reflection, active listening, forward thinking and communication skills, so as to co-operate effectively in the classroom- and school setting. Furthermore, Dotterer and Lowe (2011) suggest that teachers and schools who support positive social-emotional skills enable learners to improve their academic performance and possess a positive outlook on their academic work.

Jimerson et al. (1997) assert that teachers report retainees to be more unpopular and less socially competent than their promoted or non-retained peers. As conveyed by Jimerson et al. (1997), retainees rank lowest on an emotional health and peer acceptance scale and display significant behavioural problems. The reasoning behind retention is that the repetition of a year's academic work provides learners who experience barriers in learning with the opportunity to adequately master skills and content not mastered previously and enables them to acquire an equal level of understanding to that of their peers (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). However, it seems as if the negative impact of learner retention on the social-emotional development of retainees could counteract the possible academic benefits.

It is, therefore, evident from literature and research reports that retention might not be the best solution to support underachieving learners. Nonetheless, the presence of learner retention strengthens the belief that, despite its flaws, retaining learners is a necessary practice in education. The Centre for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA suggests that schools and communities weave together resources to develop a unified and comprehensive system of learning support (Krier, 2012), rather than relying merely on retention and remediation after academic failure.

2.2.5 Factors pertaining to learner retention in education

“If a variable predicts grade retention but does not predict a more positive result from being retained, the wisdom of considering that variable in decisions to retain a child is called into question.” (Wilson & Hughes, 2009: p. 2)

Teachers', parents', and principals' decisions for or against the promotion and/or progression of learners play a crucial role in the retention practice, which implies that learners are promoted or retained based partly on the subjective opinions of their teachers (Jimerson et al., 1997; Peixoto et al., 2016). The debate on whether behaviour affects retention decisions can be closely related to whether behaviour influences teachers' evaluation of performance (Jimerson et al., 1997). Furthermore, it needs to be considered whether gender plays a role in learner retention. Differences in gender have been examined, with results indicating that males are more likely to be retained than females (Jimerson et al., 1997; DBE, 2011; Peixoto et al., 2016). Due to the higher repeater rate of male learners, they have a tendency to transfer to the next grade at a slower pace than female learners, causing more male learners to be left behind at primary school (DBE, 2011).

The scarcity of studies with longitudinal information, sufficient control groups, and concurrent investigators of holistic learner outcomes restricts the ability to draw conclusions about factors affecting learner retention (Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; Jacob, 2016). The term 'holistic' refers to the academic, social, emotional, and cognitive development of learners, i.e., the complete development of a learner. A multitude of retention policies are deemed flexible, with decisions being made on an individual basis, leading to the investigation of variables other than child characteristics in order to explain why some learners are retained and others promoted (Jimerson et al., 1997). The question arises whether a child's demographic variables such as their sex, race, socio-economic status (Peixoto et al., 2016), and related family characteristics play a role in the retention decision-making process (Jimerson et al., 1997). The socio-economic conditions of learners emerge as a critical issue creating barriers to learners' school attendance (DoE, 2008), resulting in content not being covered and causing lower achievement scores and ultimately learner retention. Parental traits such as involvement and the role of the parent with regard to their child's academic progress have also been found to impact retention (Jimerson et al., 1997).

Learners are being retained based on the assumption that the placement of learners with younger learners and lower expectations may benefit the social and personal adjustment of these learners (Jimerson et al., 1997). However, according to Jimerson et al. (1997), findings on these assumptions have been inconclusive. Conclusions of previous studies vary from

reporting harmful and negative effects to benign effects, with none reporting any evidence of beneficial effects (Jimerson et al., 1997; Jacob, 2016). According to a study conducted by Peixoto et al. (2016), learner retention leaves a significant mark on retainees which they carry with them even after having recovered academically - though retention might have happened in their distant past, the mark remains.

There have been studies researching the adjustment of repeaters and potential repeaters in lower grades, reporting no difference amongst these learners (Jimerson et al., 1997). Research focusing on older learners, however, found significantly poorer adjustment rates for retained learners (Jimerson et al., 1997, Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Jacob, 2016). Therefore, the social and personal adjustment effects are moderated, with early retention less likely to be associated with negative effects when compared to later retention (Jimerson et al., 1997). Consequently, since evidence in support of retention has been scarce, the issue regarding the benefits thereof has not been fully resolved (Jimerson et al., 1997; Jacob, 2016, Wofford, 2016). Positive effects of learner retention have yet to be confirmed, issuing the need for further research on this matter.

2.2.6 Understanding learner retention

Grade repetition in some school systems is viewed as an effective remedial action to be taken in cases of academic failure (Haidary, 2013). Turney and Haskins (2014) report that learners are retained if they perform below a specified grade-level threshold. Retained learners are observed as learners who need supplementary support in their learning or behaviour in order to progress to the following grade-level (Turney & Haskins, 2014). However, some school systems do not permit the practice of grade repetition, but rather practice a policy of social promotion whereby learners “*pass automatically to the next grade with their peers and, if required, receive remedial academic assistance*” (Haidary, 2013, p. 2). Haidary (2013) states that studies conducted by UNESCO (2012) show that repetition adds extra costs to the parties involved, and causes long-term negative consequences, both academically and socially. Even though retainees may improve their academic achievement throughout the first year after retention, their achievement gains generally decline throughout the following years (Silberglitt et al., 2006; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Retained learners do not improve in the long term or automatically catch up to non-promoted learners without intervention – they do, however, perform poorer than non-retained low-achieving learners (Silberglitt et al., 2006).

“Grade repetition is generally ineffective as an intervention to address early learning problems, regardless of when the repetition occurs.” (DoE, 2008, p. xix)

A committee was appointed by the South African Minister of Education at the time to direct an investigation on the extent of retention in the schooling system. According to the DoE (2008), grade repetition occurs most frequently in Grade 1, which is attributable to inadequate school readiness programmes, barriers to learning, and learning disabilities experienced by learners (DoE, 2008).

The term 'school readiness' refers to the extent to which learners are able to start their schooling and the degree to which they have mastered the necessary learning skills (Mohamed, 2013). According to a progress report by Pandor, the high rate of Grade 1 retentions could be attributed to "inadequate school readiness programmes" (DoE, 2008). This occurrence results in a number of learners being enrolled in Grade 1, despite not being ready or able to meet the academic demands set by Grade 1. Consequently, these learners are either progressed to Grade 2 despite the lack of needed skills, or they are retained in Grade 1, causing controversy among the previously mentioned stakeholders. Learner retention on its own cannot be expected to remediate academic learning difficulties; however, when coupled with intervention strategies, may result in learners successfully overcoming barriers to learning (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). McCoy and Reynolds (1999) hereby raise the question whether retention together with intervention is more effective than promotion together with intervention; an issue also queried by Pagani et al. (2001).

To successfully address the needs of underperforming learners, comprehensive, innovative, and intensive interventions should be implemented prior to academic failure (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). McCoy and Reynolds (1999) advocate the need for policies and practices other than learner retention to effectively promote learning and development, since learner retention fails to support or benefit the learners it is designed to help. Learners repeating a grade should be part of special programmes, not merely repeating material and content not mastered during the initial year in the grade, with intensive staff development initiatives to enable teachers to better identify and support learners with barriers to learning (DoE, 2008). Learner retention or non-promotion should not be viewed as a means to overcome learning barriers, but rather as a means to deeply clarify and experience content, knowledge, and skills not initially mastered by learners.

2.2.7 Possible benefits of retention

"With the best of intentions, retention has far reaching impacts on students and their families." (Porter, 2016: 83).

According to Westbury (1994), a mere 14 % of learner retention studies reflect positive gains for retained learners. In a study by Westbury herself, it is noted that retained learners exhibit neither positive academic gains nor negative academic losses when compared to the non-retained learners.

An extensive body of research indicates that the benefits of grade repetition can be considered short-lived, with long-term effects proving harmful to academic and other outcomes (DoE, 2008). Bearing this statement in mind, the question of why retention is still present in schools forms a significant issue worthy of extensive research. Retained learners exhibit poorer academic results and inferior personal adjustment when compared to non-retained learners (Westbury, 1994). Although the majority of studies on retention uphold the negative effects thereof on retainees, the assumption that no learners benefit from it is incorrect (Westbury, 1994; Marsh, 2016; Porter, 2016; Marsh, Pekrun, Parker, Marayama, Guo, Dicke & Lichtenfeld, 2017). Marsh et al. (2017) are of the opinion that an extra year in a specific grade-level allows learners an opportunity to learn the material that led to their retention more effectively and gives learners a reinforced foundation on which to build the learning of new material in higher grade-levels. Furthermore, research findings indicate that retention resulted in more positive self-beliefs (Marsh, 2016; Marsh et al., 2017).

In a research study controlled by Westbury (1994), a small minority of repeaters displayed a significant improvement on achievement scores post-retention. The problem is that no full-proof strategy exists in predicting which learners are likely to benefit from learner retention, therefore, practices that benefit the majority need to be established (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Marsh, 2016; Marsh et al., 2017). Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) find that learners can benefit from retention, be it only in the short term. Additionally, the research findings of Marsh et al. (2017) undoubtedly contest the simplistic conclusions of retention being purely negative, issuing the importance of further studies to be done on possible benefits of learner retention.

2.2.8 Predicting retention

Predicting potential retention is possible with the examination of factors known to accompany retention (Dauber et al., 1993; Liddel & Rae, 2001). Retained learners, or possible retainees, fit into an 'at-risk' profile based on their demographic characteristics. Generally, retainees exhibit characteristics such as poverty, lower parental educational involvement, and lower levels of intelligence (Ikeda & Garcia, 2013). Possible retainees and repeaters are likely to come from a low socio-economic background, displaying serious academic and learning barriers prior to retention (Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992).

The following table provides factors associated with learner retention, as observed by the DoE (2008):

Table 4: Factors associated with learner retention (DoE, 2008)

ASPECT	CHARACTER
Home and family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low socio-economic status • Unstable family structure • Lack of parental involvement in child's schooling activities
Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of support systems for at-risk learners • Lack of support systems for teachers • Absence of school policy on teaching of reading
Learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor infrastructure • Large teacher-learner ratios (creating a climate not conducive to positive interaction between teacher and learner and between learner and learner)
Curriculum delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor curriculum delivery • Insufficient attention given to teaching of reading • Inappropriate instructional practices (which are not developmentally appropriate)
Teacher quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unprepared to deal with transition, slow learners, learner diversity • Inconsistencies in standards and services offered to pre-primary aged learners • Finds difficulty in diagnosing learners with learning difficulties and unable to design appropriate remedial programmes for ensuring learner success • Low teacher expectations • No opportunities for upgrading skills and competencies • Limited learner-teacher interaction
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdated equipment • Lack of necessary support services e.g., guidance counsellors and facilitators to cater for individual needs of learners at risk
Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Malnutrition and insufficient mental stimulation in early years • Social, emotional, and health problems, learner absenteeism • Individual needs not met

2.2.9 A justification of retention as an accepted educational practice

"Of 20 studies on the effects of retention, 16 reached negative conclusions, showing poor outcomes on academic and behavioural indicators. Other studies have shown that retention has long term negative effects..." (Peterson & Hughes, 2011, p. 2)

With the negative, contradictory information regarding grade repetition and non-promotion found in previous studies and reports, the question remains: why is the practice of retention still actively part of education policies? Knoff (2016, p. 1) report the following observation:

“...grade retention was one of the available interventions that the teachers and support staff routinely considered.”

The perspectives, beliefs, and reasoning of teachers regarding grade repetition form a critical basis from which to better understand the justification of retaining learners. According to a study undertaken by Tomchin and Impara (1992), teachers of all grade-levels consider retention to be an acceptable school practice preventing learners from facing daily failure and motivating them to work harder. Teachers also expressed the opinion that retention is not harmful up to Grade 3 (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Retention is considered an intervention that is avoided by teachers and parents, however, some stakeholders in education feel that retention is sometimes a necessity and a more desirable option to social promotion and future failure (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011).

Exploring the literature on education and retention clearly underlines the role and perspectives of teachers. It might be possible that the true justification for retention as an acceptable school practice lies within the opinions and perspectives of the teachers enforcing it. What, then, do teachers believe regarding learner retention? The investigation of this question might reveal significant reasoning behind retention. A study undertaken by Tomchin and Impara (1992) presents the following beliefs of teachers relating to learner retention:

Table 5: Teachers' beliefs relating to learner retention (Tomchin & Impara, 1992)

a) Retention is necessary for future success in school: Teachers are of the opinion that the impact of being successful at academic tasks after having been retained can help learners to develop a positive self-concept.
b) The curriculum mandates retention.
c) Retention reflects teachers' adherence to standards. Despite the popularity of early-learner retention, the practice thereof remains a controversial subject with diverse own theory-based arguments (Goos et al., 2011).

Haidary (2013) asserts that teachers rely more on practical knowledge when making repetition decisions than on formal (theoretical) knowledge, meaning that teachers are more likely to act on their own personal experience than change their beliefs based on research.

2.2.10 A brief look at the advocates of and opponents to retention

The advocates of early-learner retention hypothesise that retention:

- 1) allows learners more time to acquire prerequisite knowledge and skills;

- 2) provides underachieving learners with the opportunity to refresh, relearn, and experience new successes during the retention year, leading to a greater motivation and a feeling of competence; and
- 3) stimulates the self-concept and self-confidence of retainees due to their enjoying a small advantage in knowledge and skills over their younger classmates (Goos et al., 2011).

According to Jimerson et al. (1997), retained learners displayed a significant growth in math achievement, despite the fact that there was no evidence of improvement in reading and spelling achievement. Goos et al. (2011) further describe the hypothesis of opponents to retention:

- 1) Retention deprives retainees from accessing meaningful intellectual challenges on a continual basis;
- 2) Retention fails in solving learners' learning problems and addressing individual needs;
- 3) Retention results in learners experiencing failure, humiliation and shame in comparison to their promoted peers, negatively affecting their self-concept and sense of confidence;
- 4) Retention increases the risk of retainees being treated differently by their teachers due to teachers' negative perceptions and low expectations of retained learners.

It is not the lack of ability, but rather the lack of learning opportunities that causes learners to experience difficulty in schools; learners are at risk of being retained, with no efficacious method of addressing their needs (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Retention cannot be considered as an effective method for meeting the needs of learners at risk of failing their grade-level, nor can social promotion, also known as progression (Krier, 2012; Knoff, 2016; Jacob, 2016).

“Decisions about grade retention and social promotion raise serious dilemmas for all concerned. Policy has spiralled back and forth, with the current emphasis on retention. Researchers tend to conclude that both practices are unsatisfactory.”
(Krier, 2012, p. 1)

Instead, Jimerson and Renshaw (2012) and Peixoto et al. (2016) call for a system which identifies possible retainees and provides for the development of effective interventions.

2.2.11 The perceptions of teachers on learner retention

“Because the teacher is the person who initiates the retention process, it is necessary for the beliefs of the teacher to be examined. The perspectives of

teachers may influence their judgment about students and implementation of certain school policies.” (Wynn, 2010, p. 7)

According to Bonvin et al. (2008), the strongest predictor of retention is a learner’s mark in reading as assessed by the teacher at the start of the year, with this mark being taken into account regarding retention at the end of the school year. The importance of teacher judgments in the decision to retain a learner is therefore emphasised (Bonvin et al., 2008). Although public opinion, teacher perspectives, and policy creators all support learner retention, there is a lack of justifiable reasoning for learner retention (Ritzema & Shaw, 2012). The importance of repeating a grade when prerequisite knowledge and skills have not been mastered needs to be investigated.

During a study by Okpala (2007) wherein the perceptions of kindergarten teachers on kindergarten retention were explored, the author emphasised the importance of understanding teachers’ perceptions on the matter, as they are those who implement the practice. Okpala (2007) hereby states that teacher beliefs and perceptions are school-based factors pertaining to retention and need to be addressed, especially when considering the extensive body of literature on the effect of retention on learner achievement and the correlation between retention and learner drop-out rates. Teacher perceptions of learner retention in the foundation phase are central to the present study, hereby maintaining the contention made by Okpala (2007), stressing the important role that teachers play in practicing retention as an educational intervention. According to Okpala (2007), teachers perceive kindergarten retention as an essential intervention strategy concerning learner accountability and educational reform. The following are statements made by kindergarten teachers participating in Okpala’s study (2007):

- *“Kindergarten retention, to me, is an equalizer of educational opportunities for some student.”*
- *“Students enter kindergarten classroom at different developmental levels, and retention is a useful strategy for the immature students.”*
- *“Kindergarten curriculum is as rigorous as 1st grade and some students might need the extra year to catch up.” (Okpala, 2007, p. 403)*

The findings of the study conducted by Okpala (2007) showed that kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of retention somewhat depended on their individual teaching experience: teachers with less than five years’ teaching experience regard the benefits of retention to be greater than teachers with more than five years of teaching experience. Okpala (2007) further notes that teachers who are not certified place a higher value on the benefits of retention than do certified teachers. Even though experienced teachers were not as supportive of retention, they still considered their education district’s policy on retention to be sound.

With literature and past research studies painting a very negative image of learner retention, it is paramount to investigate the use of retention in South African schools by listening to the voices of the individuals who implement the practice, namely teachers. The present study provided a platform on which these perspectives could be explored.

2.3 RETENTION THROUGH THE LENS OF THE BIO-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Schools experience extreme pressure due to not progressing or promoting learners to the following grade-level until they have attained the specified or required skills and knowledge (Ritzema & Shaw, 2012). The practice of retaining learners in the same grade for a supplementary year is evident in various developing nations, be it due to learners performing below the established examination criteria (Liddel & Rae, 2001) or due to immaturity on various possible levels (Pagani et al., 2001). In order to better understand the practice of and reasoning behind retention, gaining insight into the retained learners' characteristics, environments, and backgrounds appears to be essential.

With the aim of establishing a framework of individual characteristics, environments, and backgrounds, the ecological systems theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), seems to be a well-established theoretical framework whereupon the present study could be constructed. Bronfenbrenner is admired as a prominent leading authority in the domain of developmental psychology and is famously known for his ecological systems theory, presently referred to as the bio-ecological systems theory (Harkönen, 2007).

The bio-ecological systems theory identifies and defines five environments describing the quality and context of a learner's surroundings, taking into account the various factors affecting the child both directly and indirectly (Harkönen, 2007). Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes these environments as concentric systems that interact with each other (Harkönen, 2007), and labels them in the following order: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. According to Liddell and Rae (2001, p. 414-415), the bio-ecological systems theory "defines layers of influence, nested in one another". The identified layers or systems move outward, with the most direct and internal influences in the centre and the least influential in the outmost layer (Liddel & Rae, 2001). Bronfenbrenner's model theorises that the systems can "exert important effects on children's developmental trajectories over time" (Liddel & Rae, 2001, p. 415). Bronfenbrenner's theory of bio-ecological systems focuses on human

development and monitors one's progression into a proficient member of society (Liddel & Rae, 2001; Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron, 2017).

The following table provides a brief definition of each bio-ecological system, as developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), as well as an explanation as to how each system was pertinent to the current study:

Table 6: Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems (Liddel & Rae, 2001)

BRONFENBRENNER'S BIO-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM	PERTINENCE TO THE CURRENT STUDY
<p><i>Microsystem:</i> Individual and personal characteristics, home-, school- and peer-environment. This system forms the innermost layer within the ecological systems theory.</p>	<p>Background of learner as provided by the teachers: the exploration of individual traits and needs, familial circumstances, and peer relationship of learners.</p>
<p><i>Mesosystem:</i> Refers to the interaction and relationship between the different microsystems.</p>	<p>The investigation of the interaction between:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teachers/school and parents • teachers/school and peers • parents and peers.
<p><i>Exosystem:</i> Local education policies, parental employment, and societal institutions and interventions.</p>	<p>Exploration of school curricula; retention as a local education policy; parental employment; and possible societal institutions and interventions pertaining to retention.</p>
<p><i>Macrosystem:</i> Local beliefs, traditions, ideologies, and social values of learner's environment.</p>	<p>Possible beliefs regarding retention; ideological and social values within the society and schools.</p>
<p><i>Chronosystem:</i> The outermost layer of the ecological systems, referring to the time period or era in which the learner exists.</p>	<p>The grade-level of the retainee succeeding the grade-level where retention took place.</p>

The bio-ecological systems theory is visually represented Figure 3, (as interpreted and designed by the researcher):

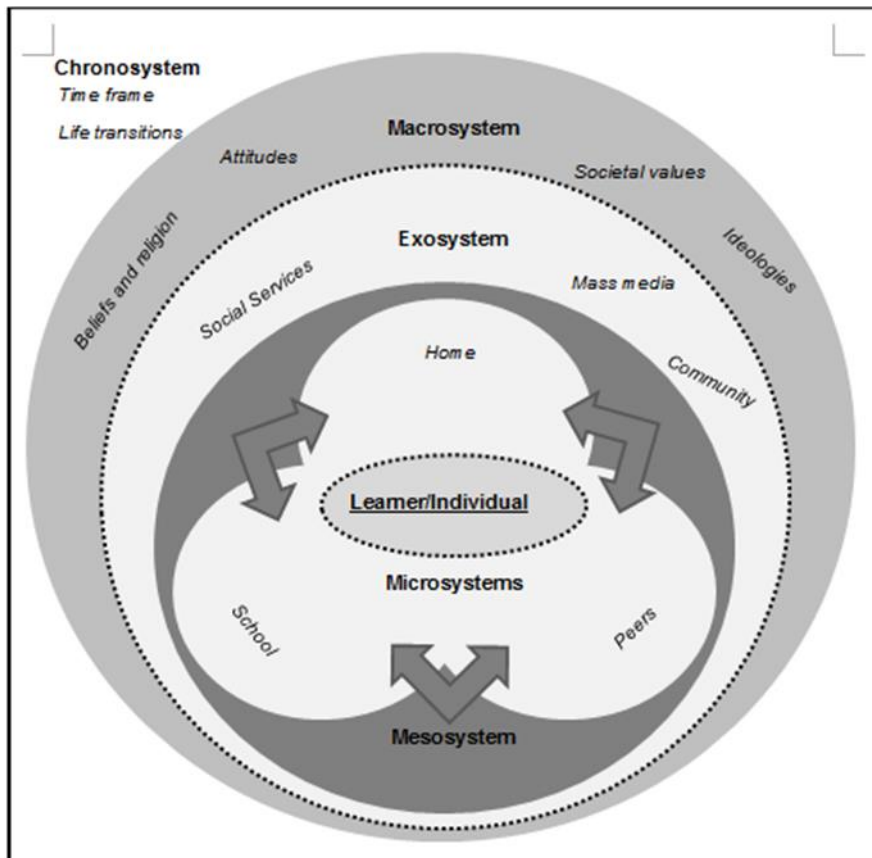


Figure 3: Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory

According to Liddel and Rae (2001), considerable evidence indicates that children's earliest experiences within the microsystems of the classroom act as powerful predictors of possible future retention. Liddell and Rae are of the opinion, however, that retention and low achievement amongst children can be attributed to other factors within the microsystems, particularly the home environment factors such as poverty and low levels of parental literacy. Furthermore, children of uninvolved and unsupportive parents experience a weak interaction between home and school environments within the mesosystem, adding to these learners' risk for retention (Liddel & Rae, 2001). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory enables the researcher to study learners' worlds and create case studies encompassing factors directly and indirectly influencing the learners' social development.

Bearing in mind previous research findings, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory adequately provides a conceptual framework whereupon to build the present study on the effect of learner retention on learners' social development. Learners' backgrounds and

characteristics might further shed light on the academic development, successes, and barriers to learning experienced by the learners. Learners who have been retained often come from disadvantaged backgrounds, i.e., low socio-economic status, a life of poverty, lesser levels of intelligence, and having parents of lower educational accomplishments (Ikeda & Garcia, 2013). The exploration of societal, familial, and personal traits, strengths, and limitations of learners as experienced by teachers could possibly provide information pertinent to why the learner is subjected to retention and showcase the effects of retention on social development.

The following table indicates possible causes of retention, as well as the researcher's interpretation thereof with reference to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory.

Table 7: Characteristics of possible retainees (DoE, 2008)

HIGH RATES OF REPETITION/RETENTION	LOW RATES OF REPETITION/RETENTION	RELATED BIO-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS
Developing nations	Developed nations	<i>MACROSYSTEM EXOSYSTEM</i>
Rural areas	Urban areas	<i>MACROSYSTEM EXOSYSTEM</i>
Learners studying in a language other than their mother tongue	Learners whose mother tongue is the same as the national language of instruction	<i>MICROSYSTEM</i>
Learners from low socio-economic background	Learners from high socio-economic background	<i>MICROSYSTEM EXOSYSTEM</i>
Learners whose parents have low levels of literacy, especially mothers	Learners whose parents have high levels of literacy, especially mothers	<i>MICROSYSTEM, EXOSYSTEM AND MESOSYSTEM</i>
High absenteeism	Low absenteeism	<i>MICROSYSTEM</i>
Teachers with low expectations of learners	Teachers with high expectations of learners	<i>MICROSYSTEM</i>
Schools with limited contact hours	Schools with longer contact hours	<i>MICROSYSTEM</i>
Poor school infrastructure	Good school infrastructure	<i>MICROSYSTEM</i>
High teacher-learner ratio	Low teacher-learner ratio	<i>MICROSYSTEM</i>

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory is relevant to the current study due to the social and interactive nature of the research methodology and epistemology.

"This theory is able to account for multiple influences found across various ecological levels that can impinge upon child development. Bio-ecological systems theory can acknowledge potential risk variables for behaviour difficulties both within the individual (including biological predispositions that may remain static) as well as influences occurring in the wider social, cultural and historical contexts." (Oldfield, Humphrey, & Hebron, 2017, p. 150).

The practice of learner retention expands into each bio-ecological system by affecting learner circumstances, thereby affecting the systems. With consideration to the findings of Jimerson et al. (1997) and Jimerson and Renshaw (2012) concerning the emotional effects of learner retention, retainees exhibit feelings of personal failure, a lower level of self-concept, negative perceptions regarding their self-esteem, and a tendency to be criticised by peers; pertaining to the learners' microsystems. Moreover, an extra year of schooling demands additional schooling costs for the retainees' parents as well as the school system, affecting the exosystem and macrosystem of learners.

The application of the bio-ecological systems theory as a theoretical framework holds an advantage due to its focus on the interaction amongst internal and external factors pertaining to the individual, as Kamenopoulou (2016) mentions. Furthermore, by focusing on individual as well as contextual factors and how they influence each other, studies constructed upon the bio-ecological systems theory might help researchers investigate methods to support the inclusion of children whose complex individual characteristics cause them to be disadvantaged in schools and societies (Kamenopoulou, 2016). Therefore, the bio-ecological systems theory is a practical and holistic approach to understanding the factors influencing the lives of retained learners.

2.4 SUMMARY

In Chapter 2, literature and research studies regarding learner retention were extensively examined and explained, allowing for a broader understanding of the topic. The literature review considered various aspects of learner retention, ranging from local to international. The literature review provided detail on policies and interventions pertaining to retention, described teachers' perspectives of retention, and studied social development of retainees briefly, as found in previous studies. Finally, the theoretical framework on which this study was constructed was explained and linked to the objectives of the research study.

3 CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES FOLLOWED

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Three, the researcher discusses the research methods, approach, and procedures which were followed in conducting this study. The research methods are explained, along with the sampling, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Further, an explanation of how the data were collected and analysed within the interpretive paradigm is provided. Lastly, the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the research study are discussed.

3.2 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The term 'methodology' refers to the strategy underlying the choice and use of research methods (Crotty, 1998). Research is constructed with underlying philosophical assumptions about validity and knowledge development, as well as assumptions regarding the importance of choosing appropriate research methods in a particular study (Thomas, 2010). The most universal classification of research methods is the qualitative research approach and the quantitative research approach (Thomas, 2010; Creswell, 2009). In order to derive valid generalisations and representations from data collected in a study, the aptness of a specific methodology needs to be determined with regard to the context, purpose, and nature of the research (Thomas, 2010). One of the uses of a quantitative research approach is to study phenomena within the natural sciences, while a qualitative research approach would typically be used to study social and cultural phenomena within the social sciences (Thomas, 2010). Combining the two approaches is referred to as a mixed methods approach to research (Thomas, 2010; Creswell, 2009).

Brundrett and Rhodes (2013) stipulate the importance of understanding the difference between the terms 'methodology' and 'methods', as they cannot be used interchangeably. 'Methodology' refers to the "*broad system or body of practices and procedures that will be employed to investigate a set of phenomena*" whereas 'methods' can be described as the "*actual analytical approaches that will be employed in the research process*" (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2013, p.13). Qualitative research, according to Thomas (2010), is considered naturalistic and exceptionally suitable for studying educational settings and processes. Brundrett and Rhodes emphasise the significance of school-based research by arguing that practitioners be regarded as equal partners with academic researchers so as to generate evidence in the raising of standards. In this study, the researcher followed a qualitative

research design, comprising two focus group interviews with participants (teachers) to form a case study of the participating school. Herewith follows a complete clarification of the study's research methodology.

3.2.1 Research paradigm

Research generates knowledge, giving rise to the inquiry of the nature and limitation of knowledge. "*What knowledge counts and by what evidence?*" (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2013, p. 14). By employing a research paradigm, one can base research and its knowledge on an accepted platform, to be interpreted within that paradigm. The interpretive paradigm is often associated with social research and considered to be a 'people-orientated' approach acknowledging the researcher's interaction with the research setting (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2013). Interpretive researchers "*will immerse themselves in the research environment*", aspiring to understand the participants' perspectives on the phenomena being studied (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2013, p. 14).

Interpretivism asserts that social reality is seen and interpreted by numerous people, in a different manner, creating multiple perspectives of reality (Mack, 2010). By using the case study method in this research, the researcher was able to get different views of the participants regarding retention and its effect on the social development of learners. The interpretive paradigm provides an adequate lens through which the research could be viewed, interpreted, and explained, when bearing in mind the personal and social nature of the research conducted as part of this study. Creswell (2009) explains that this lens sheds light on the types of questions to ask and the way in which the data will be collected and analysed. According to Creswell, qualitative research of the 1980s started including theoretical lenses to expand the range of inquiry, hereby guiding researchers to address important issues and examine the necessary people.

Connections and uniform causal links made within the field of science, according to Mack (2010), cannot be made within the field of education where teachers and learners construct meaning. Hence, a researcher with an interpretivist paradigm should understand and explain social reality as experienced by the different participants (Mack, 2010). Data collected within the interpretive paradigm tend to be qualitative in nature, providing rich and descriptive data on the research environment, within a unique context (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2013).

3.2.2 Approach

This study followed a qualitative research approach involving the case study method within an interpretive paradigm to explore teachers' perceptions of learner retention as an accepted educational practice. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research can be used to explore and understand the meaning given to a social or human problem by studying those individuals who assign these meanings. Smit (2003) explains that a qualitative approach to educational research offers substance and deeper understanding of the complexities at the levels of policy implementation.

The following table explains Creswell's (2009) process of research, correlated with its orientation to this study:

Table 8: A qualitative research process

Creswell's research process	Orientation to the study
Emerging questions.	Primary and secondary research questions (see Chapter 1).
Data collected in participants' setting.	Data collected at the participating teachers' settings.
Data analysis: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inductive • Building from particulars to general themes. 	Data analysis: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compiling a summary of the raw data • Establish links between the data and the research objectives • Investigating emerging themes.
Inductive process: Generating meaning from field-collected data.	The researcher generated meaning from the data collected during the focus groups with participants.

Qualitative research lends itself to the comprehending of a social phenomenon, also regarding individual meanings and perspective and thereby generating rich and descriptive data (Maree, 2014; Creswell, 2009). A qualitative approach is essential in understanding the perceptions that teachers assign to the practice of learner retention, and their beliefs on the effects of retention on learners' social development.

3.2.3 Type of research

“Research findings on retention in kindergarten are inconsistent with regards to reasons for and benefits of retaining students. Examining the issue using a case study can provide valuable insight into how retention decisions are made and what the perceived benefits are.” (Wofford, 2016, p. 56)

The case study research method was used to collect and analyse the data of the participating teachers' perceptions of foundation phase learner retention and its effect on retainees' social development. Case study research is a method of in-depth inquiry allowing the researcher to explore an event, process, phenomenon, and/or individuals (Creswell, 2009).

Maree (2014) reflects that a case study is a systematic enquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest (Bromley, 1990, as cited in Maree, 2014). Maree further asserts that case study research can be selective, placing focus on the important issues in understanding the system being researched. Case study research provides a study with specific context and time boundaries (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). This design allowed the researcher to observe the social practice of learner retention through the eyes of four teachers who enforce it within their foundation phase classrooms. This single case study explored 'real life' experiences of teachers in a school within the Gauteng Province in South Africa and can therefore be interpreted only within this context, limiting the generalisability of the study. However, according to Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1989), the case study method provides 'ecological validity' to a study through the 'real life' perspectives of the participants.

The two primary objectives of case study research are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others (Stake, 1995). Yin (2013) advises that a single-case study can be used in pursuing an explanatory purpose, while Stake (1995) explains that qualitative case studies expects to hear the unique experiences and special stories of participants. A single-case study can therefore be applied to gather and interpret the unique experiences of teachers regarding learner retention. Yin (2013) demonstrate the generalisability of qualitative case studies by stating that case studies are generalisable to theoretical propositions, not populations. A single-case study is a common approach and is justifiable in research purposing to provide new and revelatory or information (Yin, 2013). Stake (1995) advises that a qualitative researcher should inhibit the possibility of “Yes” or “No” questions by leading the interview with issue-oriented questions prompting description, linkage or explanations from participants in their responses. Stake (1995) further asserts that an interview can be seen as the main road in discovering multiple realities.

3.3 RESEARCH METHODS

3.3.1 The role of the researcher

The researcher engaged in a “collaborative partnership” alongside the participants in pursuance of collecting and analysing data, with the intent of “creating understanding” (Maree, 2014, p. 41). During the study, the researcher aspired to:

- Remain unbiased and objective
- Adhere to the ethical stipulations set by the involved institutions and committees
- Tend to the administrative and practical factors of the data collection:
 - a) Compile the focus group research schedule
 - b) Conduct and record the two focus group interviews
 - c) Transcribe the recorded data
 - d) Ensure the participants’ informed consent, anonymity and safety
- Analyse the collected data by employing triangulation and member-checking (Maree, 2014)
- See to the responsible storage of collected data by the researcher and research supervisor
- Report the findings fairly, comprehensively, and in an unbiased fashion
- Report on the limitations of the study and its findings
- Make the findings and results known to the participating school

The moderator (researcher/interviewer) should, according to Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick (2008), facilitate a focussed group discussion without leading it.

Furthermore, the moderator’s role entails the following: preventing that the discussion be dominated by an individual, ensuring that all participants have sufficient opportunities to contribute towards the discussion, allowing fair discussion of differing opinions and, lastly, encouraging reserved participants (Gill et al., 2008).

3.3.2 Participants and research site

Harrel and Bradley (2009) mention the importance of referring to a study’s research questions in determining the study’s participants. Researchers need to consider the following two questions when deciding on a sample (Harrel & Bradley, 2009): who can address the research questions best, and does it make sense to conduct focus group interviews according to the research topic and individual participants?

In a study conducted by Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen and Kyngäs (2014), the value of the correct sampling procedures is emphasised. Elo et al. (2014) advise that the sample should comprise of appropriate participants who best represent or have knowledge of the research topic. The study employed purposive sampling in selecting participants. Purposive sampling occurs when participants are selected according to pre-determined criteria (Maree, 2014) that are also relevant to the research question (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Purposive sampling is an appropriate qualitative research method in studies where the researcher requires participants to have the best knowledge regarding the research topic (Elo et al., 2014), thereby leading to rich, descriptive data on the research topic (Creswell, 2009). Elo et al. (2014) deem purposive sampling as the most commonly used method in content analysis studies.

Bearing in mind the current study's primary and secondary research questions centring on the perspectives of teachers, it is evident that teachers are the main focal point and, therefore, able to answer these questions best. Teachers also have the best knowledge of the research topic and can be considered appropriate participants (Elo et al., 2014). Therefore, the study comprised of five Grade 1 to Grade 3 teachers, currently employed by the participating school. The participants were included based on the following criteria:

- They are qualified teachers, holding a Bachelor of Education degree or the equivalent thereof.
- They are registered with the South African Council of Educators (SACE).
- They are currently occupying a teaching position at the participating school.
- They are teaching Grade 1, Grade 2, or Grade 3.

The abovementioned criteria have been selected by the researcher according to the following researcher assumptions:

- It is necessary to include qualified, registered South African teachers in this study to ensure that the data collected within the study is context specific.
- The study focuses on foundation phase teachers, therefore should include teachers ranging from Grade 1 to Grade 3.
- Grade R is generally considered as part of the foundation phase, as stated in the CAPS document (DBE, 2011). However, it is not yet a compulsory grade-level and will, therefore, not be included in this study.

Gill et al. (2008) state that interaction is the key to a successful focus group, and that the group size impacts interaction. Harrel and Bradley (2009) warn that too few participants would not

produce dynamic conversation and too many participants may hinder the engagement of all participants, thus suggesting between six and eleven focus group members. However, Gill et al. report that focus groups have been successful with as few as three participants and as many as fourteen. Even though focus group data have the potential to be extremely rich, the dynamic aspects of discussion limit researchers in knowing the extent to which participants influence each other's answers (Harrel & Bradley, 2009). In ensuring the best quality discussion, great care in the selection of participants and composition of the focus group should be taken (Gill et al., 2008).

The focus group interviews were conducted over an interactive video application, namely Skype, to reduce the cost of data collection commonly associated with qualitative research (Maree, 2014). The focus group interviews took place at the participating school (with permission from the school principal) in order to accommodate the participating teachers. By communicating with the principal's assistant and a teacher, the researcher ensured that the school was equipped with the necessary technology to host the focus group interviews over Skype by providing a laptop and an internet connection device. The researcher undertook the following steps in establishing the school as a research site:

1. Received permission from the University of Pretoria's ethics committee to conduct the research at a school within the Gauteng Province.
2. Received permission from the Gauteng Department of Basic Education (DBE) to conduct the research at a school within the Gauteng Province.
3. Addressed the selected school by sending a letter to the principal, explaining the research project and objectives, asking permission to conduct research at the school.
4. Provided the school with the necessary technology to conduct the focus group interviews over the internet. (The necessary technological items to conduct the research at the school were: a laptop with a web-cam/camera and internet access.)

3.3.3 Data collection

3.3.3.1 Semi-structured focus group interviews

Gill et al. (2008, p. 295) considers interviews and focus groups to be "*the most common methods of data collection in qualitative research*". Focus groups generate data on group perspectives and the reasoning or meaning behind those perspectives, leading to a deep comprehension of participants' experiences and beliefs (Gill et al. 2008). Harrel and Bradley

(2009) share the following analogy regarding focus groups: a focus group has similar characteristics to those found in a game of soccer. A soccer game includes several factors such as a coach, players, and a soccer ball. The players move the ball around on the field, interacting with each other, while the coach encourages the action from the side line. The coach calls different players into the game, pulls players out, directs them, but does not personally play along with them on the field. The coach is moderating the game while the players dynamically interact. In focus groups, the coach is the moderator, the players are the participants, and the ball is the research topic and questions (Harrel & Bradley, 2009). During a focus group, the moderator directs the conversation according to the interview schedule, encourages participation, and ensures data collection on the research topic (Harrel & Bradley, 2009).

The data collection methods mainly consisted of two semi-structured focus group interviews with the researcher and teachers participating in the study, conducted over the internet by employing the interactive video application known as Skype. The focus groups did not include the same participants twice, but conveniently provided them with two different opportunities to attend an interview. To further the convenience of the participants and ensure ease of access, the focus group interviews were held at the participating school by following the above-mentioned research site establishment steps.

During the focus group interviews, participants were asked a set of pre-determined questions as laid out in the Focus Group Interview Schedule. The interviews were set to last no longer than 45 minutes. The participants were encouraged to answer the questions as thoroughly as possible, with one participant speaking at a time. It was not required that every participant answers every question, but that the question allow for discussion amongst teachers. The researcher (moderator) made a voice recording of both interviews. The participants were allowed to discuss the topic and questions openly. The raw, collected data were transcribed from the voice recordings, and the interviewer made field-notes as the focus groups took place. The data gathered during the two focus group interviews provided the information needed to create a case study of the participating school.

3.3.4 Data analysis

According to Richardson (2010), teachers play an important role as classroom decision-makers and, therefore, play a significant role in learner retention. The focus group interviews were semi-structured and allowed for in-depth discussion of open-ended questions, as well as the answering of a few closed-ended questions. The interview questions centred on teachers'

perspectives and experiences of learner retention and the effects of retention on the social development of learners.

- 1) Both focus group interviews were voice-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using the following strategies:
- 2) The voice-recordings were once again carefully listened to, while the researcher made draft notes of recurring themes and topics.
- 3) The interviews were then transcribed in Afrikaans, as both interviews were conducted in Afrikaans.
- 4) The transcribed data were thoroughly translated from Afrikaans to English by the researcher using the faithful translation method (Newmark, 1988).
- 5) The translated English text was then compared to the original Afrikaans transcription by the researcher and a professional language editor to eliminate ambiguity and ensure a true representation of the original data.
- 6) The English transcribed interviews were studied to form a holistic understanding of the data.
- 7) Theme-clusters were formed by coding text segments with words or phrases.
- 8) Notes were made on recurring themes and topics and compared to earlier draft notes.
- 9) The coded clusters were then organised into emerging themes, forming the essential data to be thoroughly studied and discussed alongside the relevant literature.

The data collected within the current study were qualitative; hence, the information was potentially personal, subjective, and descriptive (Maree, 2014). Maree (2014, p. 37) acknowledges that “*researchers in the interpretive paradigm mostly prefer inductive data analysis*”, which enables them to identify the potential multiple realities present in the data. The data were gathered in the narrative form, as opposed to numerical and statistical quantitative data (Creswell, 2009). However, the data analysis of focus group research can be a difficult task, as stressed by Gill et al. (2008, p. 294):

“...it is important to note that the analysis of focus group data is different from other qualitative data because of their interactive nature, and this needs to be taken into consideration during analysis.”

Gill et al. (2008) recognise the context of participants as essential in comprehending individual contributions. Hence, to ultimately analyse the data effectively, it is important to: take group dynamics into account, ensure that all participants match the set criteria (refer to section 3.3.2), and are contributing towards the research study from within the same context. Therefore, the aspect of teachers’ views on learner retention in the foundation phase and the

effects of retention on learners' social development were analysed from the case study narrative and relevant data collected, recorded, and transcribed at the focus group interviews with participants. Moreover, the collected data were coded according to emerging themes (Elo et al., 2014; Maree, 2014; Creswell, 2009). Comparisons were made between the participant responses. The researcher made use of triangulation and member-checking in assuring the trustworthiness of the findings (Guba, 1981; Maree, 2014; Creswell, 2009). Teachers' perspectives of learner retention and their understanding of learners' social development after retention formed the ultimate and fundamental data that were analysed.

3.3.5 Documents reviewed for analysis

To strengthen my research and to ensure that a high degree of reliability in the research findings are imminent, I found it necessary to look at the education policies pertaining to progression and retention of learners in the South African public school. The two documents published by the Department of Basic Education are the:

- National policy pertaining to the programme and promotion requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12 (NPPPPR); and
- National Protocol for Assessment Grades R-12 (NPA).

Analysing public documents is an approach which assisted me to gain a greater understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Both the NPPPPR and NPA documents were collected, read and reread in order to gain an understanding of what these documents covered concerning learner retention in the early grades. According to the NPPPPR (DBE, 2011) promotion in the foundation phase from grade to grade within the appropriate age cohort should be the accepted norm, unless the learner displays a lack of competence to cope with the following grade's work. A learner, who is not ready to perform at the next level, should be assessed to determine the level of support required. The policy further states that if learner who does not meet the requirements for promotion can be progressed to the next grade in order to prevent the learner being retained in the Foundation Phase for longer than four years, excluding Grade R.

3.4 TRUSTWORTHINESS

The term 'trustworthiness' refers to the validity and reliability associated with qualitative research (Guba, 1981). Maree (2014, p. 113) declares trustworthiness to be of the "*utmost*

importance in qualitative research". Maree (2014) suggests the inclusion of the following procedures (among others) to enhance a study's trustworthiness:

Table 9: Enhancing a study's trustworthiness

Procedure (Maree, 2014)	How was this achieved in this study?
Verifying the raw data (by allowing participants to review field notes and transcripts.)	Participants received and completed a post-interview confidentiality form (Appendix D).
Controlling for bias	The researcher avoided becoming too involved with participants (refer to the role of the researcher). The researcher was careful not to include personal views and experiences in the focus group discussions, but mainly provide a platform on which the participants may share theirs.
Avoiding generalisation	The researcher provided data and insight on the participants' perceptions and experiences, taking care not to generalise the findings across a wider population. She discussed context-specific data in strict relation to this single-case study only.
Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity	The researcher has the responsibility to protect the identity of participants at all times, including after the completion of the study, and should therefore take great care when referring to the participants and discussing the data. No names or identifiable characteristics of the school or participants were included in this study.

The researcher abided by the procedures and methods mentioned above in ensuring the study's trustworthiness. The researcher ensured that participants could withdraw at any time (as done by Participant 5) and change statements should they wish to do so via the post-interview confidentiality form. The researcher controlled for personal bias by strictly adhering

to the interview schedule and not participating in teacher discussions. The researcher did not share her personal views and experiences of learner retention with participants but listened to and gathered their experiences as guided by the interview schedule. The researcher was aware of the limitation concerning qualitative research generalisation and undertook not to generalise the findings of this study to a broader context than the one investigated. The researcher maintained the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants throughout the focus group interviews and discussion of the findings by not mentioning names or personal identification markers of both the participating school and teachers. In order to adhere to Guba's four aspects of trustworthiness (1981) within this study, the following methods were utilised:

Credibility was achieved by providing rich and descriptive data, direct quotes from participants and honouring the voice of the participating teachers. Additionally, member-checking was used to assure the accuracy of the research findings (the participants received the data and completed a post-interview confidentiality form). Transferability of the study is limited due to the study being a single-case study, however, the researcher provided an extensive and in-depth discussion of the research methodology, data collection and analysis strategies. Therefore, the study's unique circumstances, objectives, background and context are explained. Additionally, the detailed methodology, data collection and analysis strategies provide future researchers with adequate information to repeat the study as part of new research endeavours, enhancing the study's dependability. Lastly, confirmability was achieved by the correlation between the collected data and the research findings (see Chapter 5). The researcher drew comparisons between participant responses and interpreted the collected data fairly and truly, eliminating researcher bias.

The researcher strived to enhance the present study's trustworthiness by adhering to the abovementioned procedures, also taking into consideration the four aspects of trustworthiness as described in Table 1 (Four aspects of trustworthiness and its relevance to the study; Guba, 1981). Elo et al. (2014) discuss the trustworthiness of qualitative data by stating that content analysis is dependent on the obtainability of rich, appropriate, and well-saturated data. Data collection, data analysis, and the discussion of results cannot be separated from one another (Elo et al., 2014). According to Elo et al. (2014), in order to ensure the trustworthiness of data collection and analysis, researchers must verify their methodology by providing precise details of the processes and procedures followed throughout the study (See 3.3.4).

3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research ethics addresses the question of the relevant influences that the researchers' interventions might have on the people on whom the research is based (Schnell & Heinritz, 2006). Additionally, ethics are "*concerned with the procedures that should be applied for protecting those who participate in the research, if this seems necessary*" (Schnell & Heinritz, 2006, p.17). According to Creswell (2009), ethical problems might occur when reciprocity (mutual benefit) is absent between the participants and the researcher, stating that both the researcher and the participants should benefit from the research. Reciprocity may be achieved when participants are collaboratively involved in the research (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research is known for being social and involving human participation (Creswell, 2009).

Considering that participants were encouraged to share personal experiences and perceptions and that human interaction is necessary to conduct qualitative research, it is required to mention that numerous ethical considerations were considered before the commencement of the research. In ensuring ethical conduct during the research, the researcher applied for ethical clearance and approval prior to data collection. The following ethical considerations have been accounted for during the study.

3.5.1 Informed consent and voluntary participation

Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) stress that participants must be informed about the research objectives, data analysis strategies, and to whom the results would be made known. By ensuring that participants understood the study comprehensively, the participants were able to determine their willingness to take part in the research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The researcher addressed the participants after receiving ethical approval and permission to conduct the research from The University of Pretoria, the Gauteng Department of Basic Education (DBE), and the participating school's principal. The participants received a detailed letter describing the research objectives, asking them to voluntarily participate in the study. After expressing initial interest, potential participants were provided with a consent form whereby the researcher obtained written informed consent from the participants prior to the commencement of data collection. According to Flick (2014), participants' rights and dignity can be associated with them giving their consent. The participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide reasons (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The participants had a clear understanding of what the research project consists of, what was expected from them as

participants, what benefits and challenges the research potentially held, as well as how the data was collected, analysed, and stored (Creswell, 2009; Maree, 2014).

3.5.2 Protection from harm

The protection of the identities and personal information of participants is central to the conducting of research in an ethical manner (Kaiser, 2009; Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2009) advises researchers to anticipate the possibility of unintentionally disclosing harmful and intimate information while collecting research data. Researchers abide to an ethical code to protect participants and all individuals involved in a study (Creswell, 2009). The researcher of this study maintains the responsibility to assure all participants of their safety and protection from harm. The study does not hold the potential to cause participants harm of any kind. The researcher abided to the ethical code by protecting all the participants from any physical, mental, and emotional harm. The participants were encouraged to only share information they were comfortable sharing. The conducting of the study did not pose risks to the participants, and they held the right to withdraw from the project at any time, should they have wished to do so. The sampling procedure, data collection method, and data analysis strategies did not include any risk-related activities. Creswell provides the following safety measures in protecting the participants' rights, with the researcher stating how these safety measures were met in this study:

- 1) The research objectives should be communicated both verbally and in writing to ensure that the participants understand the research project fully, also mentioning to what purposes the data will be used.
 - The participants received a detailed letter prior to their commitment to the study, outlining the exact objectives of the study, method of data collection, and how the data were to be used. At the start of the focus group interviews, the participants were thanked for their willingness to partake and the objectives of the study were again communicated to participating teachers.
- 2) Written permission to proceed with the research should be obtained from all participants.
 - The participants completed a consent form, thereby providing their consent to participate in the study.
- 3) The necessary forms and documentation should be filed to the respective research and ethics boards/institutions/stakeholders.

- The signed documents are held and protected by the researcher, the researcher's supervisor, and the research institution in strict confidentiality.
- 4) Participants should be informed of all the data collection methods and activities.
- The data collection methods and activities were communicated to the participants in writing prior to the commencement of research and verbally during the conducting of the research.
- 5) Verbatim transcripts and field notes/written interpretations should be made available to the participants for their viewing.
- The transcripts were made available to participants for viewing and the opportunity to change statements were provided to participants in the form of a post-interview confidentiality form.
 - Upon this viewing, participants 1 to 4 did not wish to make any changes to their statements or responses. Prior to this, participant 5 made it known to the researcher that she preferred to be excluded from the entire study.
- 6) The rights, interests and wishes of the participants must be taken into account first when making choices on reporting the data.
- As per the request of P5, her responses were entirely withheld from the study.
 - No other participant wished to be excluded or make any changes to their statements.
- 7) The final decision on the participants' anonymity will rest with the participants.
- As previously stated, all names of participants were kept anonymous during the study.

By following the above-mentioned safety measures, the researcher was able to protect participants' anonymity and safeguard the participants from any form of harm that might have arisen from their participation in the study.

3.5.3 Privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity

Qualitative research is commonly associated with rich descriptions of participants and has the potential to allow confidentiality breaches by means of deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009). Deductive disclosure occurs when participants are identifiable in research studies due to the mentioning of personal traits and unique characteristics (Sieber, 1992). Therefore, qualitative researchers are confronted with the difficult task of providing detailed, accurate reports while

protecting participants' identities (Kaiser, 2009). Flick (2014) describes the necessity of researchers guaranteeing participants' complete confidentiality. Participants must be assured that the information they provide will not enable other people to identify them or enable an institution to use the information against the interest of the participant (Flick, 2014).

The researcher assured all participants of their ultimate anonymity by not including any personal names or private information. The data collected, field notes taken, informed consent letters, and any other related documents that arose from the conducting of the research were treated with the utmost confidentiality by both the researcher and the researcher's supervisor. The participants were given the opportunity to review their contributions and to change any information they feel might compromise their anonymity by completing the post-interview confidentiality form (Kaiser, 2009). The researcher abided to the safety measures as mentioned above in section 3.4.2 by ensuring the safe, private, anonymous, and confidential participation of all participants.

3.6 SUMMARY

Qualitative research methods enable researchers to view the lives and experiences of participants in great detail (Kaiser, 2009), leading to rich data and ambiguous ethical challenges in the dissemination of information. In this chapter, the research methodology was described in relation to the selected research approach, sampling procedure, data collection and analysis strategies, as well as the study's ethical considerations. The research methodology was justified in line with the research objectives and questions. The following chapter will report on the findings of the study.

4 CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

As Chapter 3 deliberates, a qualitative research approach was utilised in conducting the present case study. By manner of purposive sampling, a well-established, public primary school was selected and a case study regarding this school was formed. The school provided the research setting and the participants. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with foundation phase teachers, with the objective of collecting rich, descriptive data based on the teachers' personal experience and perspectives.

Chapter 4 presents the research findings, commencing with a description of the participants in each focus group. Moreover, the data collected during the focus group interviews were transcribed and categorised according to analogous topics. Emerging themes and categories were analysed, grouped together, and supported by participants' quotes from the transcribed focus group interviews.

4.2 DESCRIPTION OF FOCUS GROUPS

In ensuring participants' anonymity and personal information safety, the participating school's name and the participating teachers' names will not be used. The first focus group interview is referred to as 'Group A', consisting of participant numbers 1 to 3. The second focus group interview is referred to as 'Group B', consisting of participant numbers 4 to 5.

4.2.1 Group A

Group A included three teachers, each occupying a foundation phase teaching position at the participating school. Participant 1 is a Grade 1 teacher with more than ten years' teaching experience. She has also been appointed as the administrator of all foundation phase retention cases at the school and handles the policy documents pertaining to learner retention between the school and the Gauteng Department of Education (DoE). Participant 1 advises the teachers of the school on the correct procedures and methods they should employ when addressing possible retention of learners. Furthermore, she assists when parents and teachers have meetings regarding the possible retainees' progress and/or retention.

Participant 2 is a Grade 2 teacher with five years' teaching experience. She has completed her Honours' degree in learning support and provides learners with remedial support sessions

after school to address various learning barriers. She has encountered several retained learners in her own class during her 5 years of teaching, and she has worked with retained learners during the remedial support sessions at the participating school.

Participant 3 is a Grade 3 teacher with two years' teaching experience and has witnessed learner retention in her classroom.

4.2.2 Group B

Group B includes two teachers, each occupying a foundation phase teaching position at the participating school. Participant 4 is a Grade 2 teacher with ten years' teaching experience, and six years' remedial education experience. She has provided intensive academic and perceptual therapy sessions to learners who have experienced extreme barriers to learning. She has a strong passion for helping challenged learners and showing parents strategies in supporting their child's learning journey.

Participant 5 is a Grade 1 teacher with eight years' teaching experience. She is a creative person who enjoys creating a beautiful environment where her learners can feel free to express themselves and share a sense of belonging with their peers. She is not a remedial education teacher and has not been trained to manage retention in her classroom. She was keen to participate in this study to broaden her own understanding of retention in South Africa and to share her perceptions as formed by her experience of retained learners. However, after the focus group interview was conducted, Participant 5 informed the researcher that she no longer wishes to partake in the study and requested her responses to be removed from the interview transcription. Therefore, Participant 5 will be excluded in the analysis of the data and discussion of the research findings.

4.3 DATA ANALYSIS AND EMERGING THEMES

The data analysis procedure (see 3.3.4, Chapter 3) led to emerging of recurring themes and topics of discussion in the participant responses. The researcher studied the transcription of both focus group interviews and identified the following emerging themes, with subthemes, that have significant prevalence in the data. The emerging themes are presented in the following table:

Table 10: Emerging themes

EMERGING THEMES AND SUBTHEMES
<p>a) TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RETENTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. An understanding of the term 'retention' II. A justification for retention
<p>b) RETENTION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Possible effects of retention on retainees' social development II. Factors pertaining to social development
<p>c) POSSIBLE ADVANTAGES OF RETENTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Academical II. Positive social-emotional development
<p>d) POSSIBLE DISADVANTAGES OF RETENTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Academical II. Negative social-emotional development
<p>e) PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT AND INTERVENTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Parental involvement in homework and reading II. The home environment III. Parent education
<p>f) RETENTION POLICIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Teacher training in policies II. National policies on retention
<p>g) PERSONAL EXPERIENCE</p>

The following codes will be used for referencing in the presentation of the research findings:

Table 11: Participant coding method

Focus group interviews	Teachers	Coding used in Transcribed notes	Coding used in discussion of themes
Group A	Participant 1	1.	P1
	Participant 2	2.	P2
	Participant 3	3.	P3
Group B	Participant 4	4.	P4
	Participant 5	Excluded	

Additionally, certain phrases, quotes, and participant responses will be coded as 'Quote 1' (or 'Q1'), 'Quote 2' (or 'Q2') and so forth, permitting uncomplicated access to the raw data.

4.4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.4.1 Teacher perceptions of retention

Richardson (2010) states that the personal beliefs and perceptions of teachers as well as their knowledge of retention are to be considered vital variables in the process that is learner retention. The aim of the present study was to gather, examine, and present teachers' perspectives and understanding of learner retention within a South African context.

The participants of the study shared their perceptions of the matter at hand generously, with the following matters prevalent in participants' responses:

4.4.1.1 An understanding of the term 'retention'

According to Participant 1 (henceforth referred to as P1), a child is:

"held back, because they do not have all the basic building blocks for the subject"
(Q1),

and must therefore repeat the grade-level in order to gain the knowledge and skills not mastered during the initial year, an argument prevalent in research literature (Jimerson et al., 1997; Xia & Kirby, 2009; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012;). Participant 2 (P2) and Participant 3 (P3) indicated that they agreed with the definition of retention given by P1 (Q1), with P2 stating that she feels it is:

“good to retain a learner, because at the end, they benefit from it.” (Q2)

According to Richardson (2010), teachers are reported to base their perception of retention on personal experience, not research.

Participant 4 shares her understanding of the term ‘retention’ as such:

“Learner retention is the procedure that takes place when a learner did not achieve the necessarily outcomes, requirements and goals for a specific grade.” (Q3)

Furthermore, she advises that younger learners can be retained if they are not

“...emotionally or socially ready to go to the next class” (Q4),

for instance, if a Grade R learner is not considered ‘school ready’ and thus has to repeat the year. Teachers define school readiness as the self-regulatory and social domains of a learner, while parents view school readiness as basic academic skills (Rimm-Kauffman & Sandilos, 2017). According to Rimm-Kauffman and Sandilos (2017), an important factor in predicting future academic success of learners is their school readiness.

4.4.1.2 A justification for retention

According to Richardson (2010), teachers are of the belief that retention prevents future academic failure and that it benefits learners. As reported by Richardson (2010), teachers provide various reasons for their decision to retain a learner, ranging from lack of readiness or maturity to academic failure. Teacher perspectives and policy creators all support learner retention, yet, a lack of justifiable reasoning for learner retention exists (Ritzema & Shaw, 2012).

According to P2:

“...a child is not only retained due to academic skills, but also emotional and social skills...” (Q5),

with P1 stating:

“...it is better for them to lay a proper foundation before progressing on” (Q6),

(with the word ‘them’ referring to learners who do not have all the basic building blocks of a subject and are therefore held back). Moreover, P2 explains that, because teachers experience retention first hand, they are able to witness the benefits thereof, justifying their belief in the practice of learner retention.

According to P4, retention should be practised as it is sometimes:

“...an absolute necessity to promote [the] holistic development of a child.” (Q7)

Furthermore, based on her experience, P4 states that learners who progress to the next grade before they are ‘ready’ tend to develop behaviour problems, leading to an even worse self-image. According to P4, a teacher failed if he or she allowed a learner to progress to the next grade before the learner is ‘ready’.

Additionally, P4 adds that teachers cannot build learning on an unstable foundation, because

“...then we are not teaching life-long learners. A happy child is a happy adult.” (Q8)

According to a study conducted by Quinn and Duckworth (2007), happiness and academic achievement are communally reinforcing. When learners are happy, they perform well in their academic work, and learners who are performing well in their academic work are happy children (Quinn & Duckworth, 2007).

4.4.2 Retention and social development

The present study further aimed to shed light on possible effects that learner retention might impose on the social development of retainees, as experienced by foundation phase teachers.

4.4.2.1 Possible effects of retention on retainees’ social development

According to P4, retention does:

“...impact the learners’ social development – especially if they remain in the same school. Children can be very mean.” (Q9)

However, P2 reports of a

“...learner who was kept behind and is now in my class...” who is emotionally and socially

“...much stronger than he was last year...” (Q10).

Quotes 9 and 10 mentioned above suggests that learners deal with retention depending on personal circumstances and personalities, and one can infer that retention would not affect all learners’ social development in the same way.

P3 maintains the following:

“Initially it is a shock to them that they will be held back...children are so good at adapting, the year that they stay behind – they make new friends on their own social- and thinking level, so they adapt quicker than what we think” (Q11), which correlates with the following contribution made by P1.

According to P1, a retaineer who spent his second year in her classroom

“...got along much better with peers.” (Q12)

She also clarifies that his first year was difficult and his peers teased him; however, during his second year he experienced an increase in his social capability:

“He made friends more quickly...and he adapted well with the new Grade 1 learners.” (Q13)

Unfortunately, outside of his classroom, his same-age peer group still teased him about repeating Grade 1, as they were his previous classmates and witnessed him not being promoted to the next grade-level with the rest of them. Furthermore, regarding the learner mentioned in Q12 and Q13, P1 reports:

“He struggled a lot [emotionally]...He was a child who was generally bullied by other children, whether he was going to be retained or not” and he “was a child that other children did not like very much.” (Q14)

Thus, she stated that retention benefited him socially more so than it benefited him emotionally, since he made friends during the repeated year (social development) but was still teased by his previous classmates (emotional harm). Considering this study’s theoretical framework, namely Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) bio-ecological systems theory, an improvement was visible within the learner’s microsystem (immediate peer-environment), but within his exosystem (previous classmates and broader social-influences) he experienced regression.

Consequently, P1 states that retention has both positive and negative effects on learners’ emotional and social development, and that it:

“depends on learner to learner...” (Q15),

while P4 mentions the following:

"Most of the learners' self-confidence grows, because they appreciate the fact that they are more able to complete tasks without the struggling of the previous year."
(Q16)

4.4.2.2 Factors pertaining to social development

Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that human development takes place in conjunction with factors within an individual's environment and the interrelationships between these factors. According to P2, two factors that play a role in the social development of retainees are their personality and their grade-level. P2 mentions that the effects of retention on learners' social development differ from

"...personality to personality", and that "...it also varies from grade to grade."
(Q17)

She explains the latter by stating that in Grade 1, learners don't know each other yet and don't ask about who has been retained. Only the previous year's Grade 1 learners can see who has been held back since they did not progress with the classmates to Grade 2 (same-age peer group). This response from P2 relates to the responses of P1, previously mentioned in quotes 12 to 14. However, in Grade 2 and Grade 3, the learners are aware of retention and will ask each other whether they have been in Grade 2 or 3 before (especially if they don't recognise the learner from the previous grade/year), meaning that Grade 2 or 3 retainees will be bullied more than Grade 1 retainees. Another factor that affects the social development of retained learners, as stated by P3, is the physical size and learner count of the school.

She reports the following regarding her previous experience. One school

"...had such a small playground that [foundation phase learners] were able to interact with most of the learners [on a daily basis]...So the bullying was much worse than what it would have been at a larger school, on a larger playground, because then not all learners will see each other." (Q18)

With regard to the school as a factor in the social development of retainees, P4 reports that she has

"...noticed that many learners handle it better when they re-do the grade in another school." (Q19)

A new school allows a retainee to start over with new peers, teachers, and classmates.

4.4.3 Possible advantages of retention

Knoff (2016) state that retention should not be required when an additional year in the same grade-level will not benefit a learner. A debate prevalent in literature pertaining to learner retention centres on the belief or disbelief of possible positive effects and advantages of retaining learners. The participants of the present study were eager to share their experiences of possible advantages of retention with regard to the following two aspects: academic progress and positive social-emotional development.

4.4.3.1 Academic progress

According to P2, retainees do better academically, because the knowledge

"...is already there, it has been triggered, it must just be reinforced." (Q20)

P1 reports:

"...certain children will definitely benefit from it" (Q21), clarifying that it will benefit learners who

"still need emotional development and [are] small and young." (Q22)

Additionally, P1 asserts that:

"It does not help to retain everyone." (Q23)

P1 continues to explain that learners are all developing at their own pace and, although they might be behind their peers at some point, they might still improve with time; therefore, retention won't benefit every learner equally or in the same manner. P4 expresses that the

"...academic effect is mostly very successful, because learners rebuild the learning that was unstable." (Q24)

According to P3, learners who are retained

"....once again get to learn it from the beginning" (Q25)

with *"it"* referring to the curriculum content of the specific grade-level. The subsequent response of P4 indicates a perceived link between academic progress and the social-emotional development of retainees:

“When learners feel better about learning, they feel better about themselves and this motivates them to do and be more than the previous year.” (Q26)

This statement (Q26) allows for better understanding of why teachers believe retention holds significant benefits to the academic progress of retainees, as teachers are amongst the limited reported individuals who advocate for the practice of learner retention. Retention is justified by teachers, because they strongly believe that retainees will experience academic progress which, in turn, would cause the retainees to feel better about themselves and their learning. Teachers are also aware that retention does not always benefit all learners who experience academic failure.

4.4.3.2 Positive social-emotional development

The participants shared a limited amount of experienced positive effects of learner retention on retainees’ social-emotional development. A previously mentioned response from P4 (*“Most of the learners’ self-confidence grows, because they appreciate the fact that they are more able to complete tasks without the struggling of the previous year”* Q16), correlates with a response from P3 regarding the possibility that they

“...might fare better in the classroom...” (Q27)

Even though teachers advocate the practice of learner retention, they do not report many benefits thereof on retainees’ social-emotional development. However, Marsh et al. (2017) made the following statement regarding reported benefits of retention on learner development:

The participating teachers in this study report certain experienced positive effects on the social development of retained learners, i.e., better peer-relationships in the classroom, stronger self-confidence and stronger emotional well-being.

4.4.4 Possible disadvantages of retention

The possible disadvantages of retention are what drives the opponents to retention in the literary debate and research studies on the matter. With an abundance of research showcasing negative long-term and short-term effects portrayed by retained learners (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Wilson & Hughes, 2009; Jimerson et al., 1997), the opponents to retention policies have a strong argument, making one question why the practice is advocated for by teachers.

4.4.4.1 Academic disadvantages

P1 explains that not all learners will benefit from retention as an academic intervention:

“It does not help to retain everyone” (Q23), because “...learners keep developing. They still develop perceptually...” (Q28)

P1 further clarifies that learners might experience certain academic shortcomings when graded according to their curriculum grade-level criteria, but they

“...might still improve, so it might not benefit that learner.” (Q29)

The other participants' responses did not include any information on possible academic disadvantages of learner retention. Even though some learners might benefit from retention, one cannot successfully predict who will, and who will not (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). However, Haidary (2013) mentions that a study conducted by UNESCO in 2012 reported long-term negative consequences of retention, academically and socially. According to a report by the Department of Education (DoE; 2008), an extensive body of research indicated that retention has short-lived benefits, with long-term effects proving harmful to the academic outcome of learners. Retention has been present in education research studies since the twentieth century, showing how long the dispute of retention has been present and questioned.

One such a study conducted by Tomchin and Impara (1992) mentions that teachers consider retention not harmful, up to Grade 3. However, Goos et al. (2011) state that retention fails to address individual learner needs and does not solve learners' learning problems.

4.4.4.2 Negative social-emotional development

According to P4, the emotional and social effects of retention

“...depends on the child's emotional and social development” (Q30),

thus, the effects thereof will differ from learner to learner. Still, P4 states that retention

“...can have a negative effect on a child's emotional and social development” (Q31) when one takes bullying into account.

P3 mentions that learners are negatively impacted by retention on the school grounds:

“During break...they can still experience being teased and that breaks them down emotionally.” (Q32)

According to Niehaus and Adelson (2014), learners' social-emotional skills impact their academic development, emphasising the importance of researching the effects of retention on social development. Previous research studies indicate that retention has the potential to grant short-term social advantages to retainees, yet, in the long run, cause harmful effects on their social development (Goos et al., 2011; Ritzema & Shaw, 2012) and on their social acceptance due to retainees' age difference (Wu, Hughes, & West, 2010). Though few, the participants of this study report experienced negative effects of retention on the social development of learners.

4.4.5 Parents' involvement and interventions

The important role of parents in their children's school life cannot be disregarded simply because parents are not present in the classroom, as asserted by the participants of the present study. According to all the participants in the present study, parents' participation in their child's academic progress is a key factor in the child's academic success, with the following topics prevalent in participants' responses.

4.4.5.1 Parental involvement in homework and reading

P1 explains that the grade she teaches (Grade 1) does not give learners homework in the traditional sense, but rather instructs them to

"...do a lot of reading, that is the children's homework." (Q33)

Regarding parents' duty in their child's learning, she states the following:

"So, I feel, if they want their children to at least pass Grade 1, they will have to read stories with their children in the evenings, and the children have to read to them." (Q34)

"If the child cannot read, then the child will eventually not pass at Grade 4 or 5. So that [reading] is according to me [the parents'] duty." (Q35)

According to P4:

"Parents are [also] liable for their child's development." (Q36)

"Parents must take the time to look at their child's work on a regular basis. Communicate with the teacher and school." (Q37)

P1 raises the following question regarding learners in higher grades:

"If they [the children] don't attend aftercare, who will do the homework with the children?" (Q38)

Correspondingly, P3 claims that parents do not provide learners with the necessary support at home and therefore the schoolwork

"...is not practiced at home, and nothing gets reinforced." (Q39)

The present study's findings mirror, to some extent, the following statement:

"Most of the teachers interviewed felt parental support was very important. Several teachers responded that they were less apt to retain if parents were willing to get involved and support academics at home or get tutoring." (Renaud, 2013, p. 9)

4.4.5.2 The home environment

P2 and P4 mention the importance of a child's home environment in their development. P2 claims that parents need to motivate their children and

"...create a positive environment at home" (Q40),

so as to ensure that the child is happy. The previous statement evokes quote 8:

"A happy child is a happy adult." (Q8, by P4)

Furthermore, P2 says that if a child

"...is not happy at home, or does not have a positive environment, he will not have the willpower to want to adapt at school." (Q41)

P4 states that parents must

"Make time for [their] child" (Q42), and that

"They need to make sure they get all the help needed for their children. Some people don't have the money for a therapist and psychologist, but there are a lot of resources on the internet." (Q43)

All participants were of the understanding that parents are essential in preventing learner retention, a belief that has been reported in previous literature (Richardson, 2010; Wofford, 2016; Renaud, 2013).

4.4.5.3 Parent education

P3 brought to light the factor of parents' education. According to P3, it is

"...parents' duty to teach themselves so that they are able to help their children" (Q44),

which she qualified with the following:

"I have a girl in my class. Her first language is Afrikaans, her second language is Zulu, and her third language is English. She struggles with English...Neither of her parents can speak English and she does not attend aftercare. There is no reinforcement, no English at home, therefore, what she gets [exposed to] at school is all that she gets." (Q45)

P3 explains that when a learner is struggling with a school subject, parents should be able to assist them in overcoming their struggle. If parents are unable to do so, then the learner might not pass that subject/grade-level and, as a result, be at risk of being retained.

This correlates with the following statement:

"...the greatest intervention for at-risk students was parents' willingness and ability to teach their children at home." (Wofford, 2016, p. 66)

4.4.6 Retention policies

The practice of retention in the participating school is imposed by their following of policy as stipulated by the Department of Education, and the participating teachers refer to the following two topics during the focus group interviews: teacher training and national policies on retention.

4.4.6.1 Teacher training

According to P1, teachers

"...receive quite a lot of training in policies and things we need to follow." (Q46)

This statement indicates that the policy writers and education system communicate policies to the school, and the school, in turn, communicates these policies to the teachers. Retention is not a blithe decision taken by teachers and imposed without reason, but rather the following of procedure as stipulated by educational policy. Okpala (2007) reports that uncertified teachers place a higher value on the benefits of retention than certified teachers, indicating the important role of teacher training and education in the practice of retention.

Range et al. (2012) suggest that student teachers need better instruction from universities regarding the negative effects of learner retention and possible research-based interventions they can employ in supporting struggling learners. There is also a need to offer training to parents and teachers, as early, intensive, and targeted intervention is the most effective alternative to retention (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

4.4.6.2 National policies on retention

According to P4,

“...retention is made almost impossible” (Q47) due to

“...so much paperwork and admin that needs to be done” (Q48)

“...by the teachers, school and education system.” (Q49)

The DBE (2015, 2017) formulated a policy document explaining the basis on which a learner should be progressed, promoted, or retained, namely the National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement: Grades R-12, or the NPPPPR. Teachers refer to this document when dealing with retention as this document stipulates the process and procedure to be followed regarding learner progression, promotion, and retention. A second document to consider when studying South African learners is the National Protocol for Assessment: Grades R-12 (2017), or the NPA. The NPPPPR (2017) and NPA (2017) will be analysed at a later stage in this chapter and referred to as part of the interpretation of findings in Chapter 5.

P1 explains that retention policies were recently changed:

“...mathematics is not a subject on which a learner may be retained.” (Q50)

P1 explains the changes to policy entails that only if a learner fails his or her home language may they be retained in that grade-level. Failing mathematics no longer constitutes failing that specific grade-level year. With changes to the South African education system's policy on retention, one can deduce that retention is not a forgotten topic or practice that continues for the sake of tradition or lack of departmental involvement, but rather a topic currently under discussion by departmental policy writers and stakeholders in the South African education system.

Okpala (2007) further mentions that although experienced teachers were not as supportive of retention, they still considered their education district's policy on retention to be sound.

4.4.7 Retention policy analysis

With the aim of understanding retention policy in South African schools, the analysis of two policies regarding learner retention hereafter follows. The two policies provide information on assessment in schools (school-based assessment) and retention/promotion requirements from Grades R to 12. However, the following analysis will provide information only pertinent to the foundation phase.

The DBE (2017) define the term ‘assessment’ as follows:

“Assessment is a process of collecting, analysing and interpreting information to assist teachers, parents and other stakeholders in making decisions about the progress of learners” (DBE, 2017, p. 3),

and stipulate assessment to be

“...a compulsory component for progression and promotion in all the different school phases.” (DBE, 2017, p. 6)

According to the DBE (2017), assessment in schools should be recorded, reported, and be a true indication of learner achievement and progress. Teachers are responsible for collecting evidence of achievement by employing several forms of assessment and ensuring learners are informed on the assessment criteria (DBE, 2017). Foundation phase learners’ recorded assessment tasks should be included in the final school-based assessment mark for progression and *“used to decide whether a learner should progress or be promoted to the next grade”* (DBE, 2017, p. 4).

The NPPPPR (DBE, 2015, p. 8) stipulates that progression from grade-level to grade-level with learners’ same-age peer group should be the accepted custom in the foundation phase, except if a *“...learner displays a lack of competence to cope with the following grade’s work”*. The NPA (DBE, 2017) specifies that learner promotion is based on the combined marks obtained by a learner throughout all four terms of the academic school year.

Furthermore, the NPPPPR (DBE, 2015, 2017) suggests that learners who are deemed by teachers as ‘not ready’ to perform in the following grade-level should be assessed in order to determine their needed support. If a learner has already been retained and still displays a level of unreadiness to perform at the expected grade-level, support must be provided in order for

them to be progressed to the next grade-level (DBE, 2015, 2017), meaning that retention should not occur a second time in the same school phase.

A learner is allowed by policy to be retained for one grade-level within each school phase, signifying that a learner may only be retained once in the foundation phase. For this reason, teachers advocate for retention to occur in the earlier foundation phase grade-levels where basic skills and content are reinforced, rather than retaining learners in higher-grades, where they will struggle to master higher-level content without reinforced basis skills. This reasoning is supported by Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) stating that earlier retention is preferred to later.

The NPA (BDE, 2017, p. 6) specifies that school-based assessment and assessment tasks are designed with the intention to address *“content competencies, skills, values and attitudes of a subject”* and provide *“learners, parents and teachers with results that are meaningful indications of what learners know, understand and can do at the time of assessment”*. Therefore, when teachers decide to implement retention, they do so based on the learners’ competencies and skills portrayed by their assessment task marks. Learners may not be retained if they display high academic assessment task marks. Even though the participating teachers report retaining a learner based on his/her emotional readiness, retention will only take place if teachers’ observations can be substantiated by proof of low academic achievement. The DBE’s policies on retention does not provide information on the effects of retention on the social development of retained learners, indicating the importance of further study on this matter.

4.4.8 Participant experiences

At the end of the focus group interviews, the researcher asked the participants whether they would like to tell the group about a specific learner who was retained or should have been retained according to them. According to Friberg and Öhlén (2010), studying the experience of participants is a social, participatory, practical, and collaborative method to explore a phenomenon. By studying participant experiences, the *“focus is on the researcher’s participation in a specific setting and on the significance of grasping what is going on by means of being with the other person in the field and listening to what that person narrates, both verbally and nonverbally, about the phenomenon in question”* (Friberg and Öhlén, 2010, p. 276). In both focus groups, the participants were able to recount cases of learners who were retained or progressed and shared their experiences with the group. For the safety and anonymity of all learners, the participants did not include any names or identifiable characteristics, and referred to the learner as ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘the learner’, ‘they’, etc. The

participants of the present study shared the following recounts of their personal experiences with learner retention, retained learners and learners who were advised to be retained but were still progressed to the next grade.

4.4.8.1 Experience of P1

Last year and the year before, I had a boy in my class that was retained. I took over another teacher's class in the third term and I saw that he was not up to standard. I met with the parents and explained to them that he will have to be retained. I have to say that this boy came from terrible circumstance at home. There were reports of abuse, low financial income, his mother was bipolar, and his dad worked long hours. His dad also left their family for another woman in the middle of his first Grade 1 year.

I also witnessed perceptual problems (he shook/shivered when he was trying to write). During his almost two years in my class, he was never able to understand and recognise the sounds we learnt, so he could never really read properly or build words. He was referred to a neurologist (by me), but they [the parents] could not afford to take him.

4.4.8.2 Experience of P2

I want to tell you about a learner who is going to be retained this year, he has not been retained yet, but I know he will be this year. He has a twin sister. The circumstances at home are not good. The parents are divorced. His older brother is 19 years old, and his oldest brother is 28 years old. And then the twins are 7. Because the parents are separated, they decided to separate the twins as well. The sister stays with the mother and the brother stays with the father. On top of that, their home language is English. (Not Afrikaans, the school's language of instruction).

The boy has trouble adapting and has separation anxiety, he has had a few incidents at school where he threw tantrums in the corridors and shouted. And now, based on his marks, he has failed his year, but the sister just passed. The mother requested that both be retained, I think because of their emotional and social circumstances. So, both will be staying behind. Now and then they both stay at their mother's house.

So yes, they have bad circumstances, but I believe at the end they will benefit from being retained.

4.4.8.3 Experience of P3

Last year I had a boy that should have been retained that year according to me, but he wasn't, and he moved on to Grade 3. This was in Grade 2. He also had terrible circumstances. They are very poor, and they struggle to take care of him and he sometimes fails to attend school because they don't have money for petrol and can't bring him.

So, already this problem caused him to fall behind...he can't really read, he can't do English, he struggles a lot. With support he can understand, if you read it to him he can understand and answer you, but he can't read or write it himself. So even though his Afrikaans and English marks were very poor, his other marks were higher and then he was put through to the next grade. And now, his new teacher struggles a lot with him, he is definitely going to be retained this year.

I also think that he would have benefitted more if he repeated Grade 2, rather than Grade 3. Another thing is, his parents aren't able to help him. His mother is unemployed every second week, his father is much older, and is also not his biological father.

They also don't have money to have him tested or put on medication to improve his concentration. He is very hyper-active and can't sit still either, so that doesn't help.

4.4.8.4 Experience of P4

a) I once had a child in Grade 2 with me. When we did the base line assessment in the beginning of the year, this child did not achieve the necessary requirements. I spoke to the head of the foundation phase and said that this child needs to go back to Grade 1. It was not taken seriously.

That child is in his 3rd school already.

b) Another child was in Grade 1 and during the year he did show progress, but his mom and I felt that it was not enough for him to progress to Grade 2. We began the process of retention and gathered all the administration and information. The mom then decided to move the learner to a smaller school.

The learner is currently receiving 7's for all his subjects. He just needed a little push. He is very happy and has a much better self-image.

4.4.9 Discussion of participant experiences

The participant experiences of retention discussed in section 4.4.14 to 4.4.18 allows education researchers, policy writers, and other stakeholders in the field of education to consider retention in South African schools from teachers' standpoints. Experiences 1 to 4 emphasise the importance of retention according to teachers in the academic progress of learners who do not meet the curriculum-set criteria. Experiences 1 to 3 place focus on the importance of parental involvement, parent education, and parents' responsibilities in their child's learning and mention the crucial role a happy (or unhappy) home plays in the development of children. Experience 5 highlights the possibility that learner retention does not and will not benefit all learners, a statement that is supported by the responses of both P1 and P4 (see section 4.4.4 to 4.4.7). Experiences 1 to 3 refer to learners who are presently in the participating school, ranging from Grade 1 to Grade 3.

Experiences 4 and 5 refer to learners who were in the participating teacher's classroom at the participating school but have also attended other schools (that were not mentioned by the participant and are unknown to the researcher). The participant experiences will be thoroughly discussed in the following section of this chapter. Throughout the recounted experiences, the participating teachers once again refer to the themes that emerged from the transcribed focus group interviews, with elements in the learner cases reinforcing these themes and topics.

The following table outlines how the participant experiences correspond to the study's emerging themes, supported by the researcher's interpretation of the cases as they relate to the study's theoretical framework (see Chapter 1).

Table 12: Participant experiences in relation to Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory

Experience of Participant 1	
Quotes and phrases	Relation to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory
<p><i>"...this boy came from terrible circumstance at home."</i></p> <p><i>"There were reports of abuse..."</i></p>	<p>MICROSYSTEMS</p> <p>Home environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"terrible"</i> • Possible abuse at home • Father's sudden absence • Mother's psychological condition

<p><i>“His dad also left their family for another woman in the middle of his first Grade 1 year.”</i></p> <p><i>“...his mother was bipolar...”</i></p> <p><i>“I also witnessed perceptual problems...”</i></p> <p><i>“During his almost two years in my class, he was never able to understand and recognise the sounds we learnt, so he could never really read properly or build words. “</i></p>	<p>Individual factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reports of abuse • perceptual barriers witnessed by teacher
<p><i>“I met with the parents and explained to them that he will have to be retained.”</i></p>	<p>MESOSYSTEMS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher communicated her concerns with parents regarding their child’s retention
<p><i>“...low financial income...”</i></p> <p><i>“...his dad worked long hours.”</i></p> <p><i>“He was referred to a neurologist (by me), but they could not afford to take him.”</i></p>	<p>EXOSYSTEM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low financial income • Father’s employment duties • Cannot afford to have their child examined
<p>THEMES PRESENT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ PARENTS’ RESPONSES AND INTERVENTION <p>The home environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ RETENTION POLICIES 	
<p><u>OUTCOME:</u></p> <p>Retained.</p> <p>Did not show academic progress.</p> <p>Effects on his social development – unreported.</p>	

Experience of Participant 2	
Quotes and phrases	Relation to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory
<p><i>"The circumstances at home are not good."</i></p> <p><i>"The parents are divorced. His youngest brother is 19 years old, and his oldest brother is 28 years old."; "He has a twin sister."; "...the twins are 7."</i></p> <p><i>"Because the parents are separated, they decided to separate the twins as well. The sister stays with the mother and the brother stays with the father."</i></p> <p><i>"The boy has trouble adapting and has separation anxiety, he has had a few incidents at school where he through tantrums in the corridors and shouted."</i></p> <p><i>"And now, based on his marks, he has failed his year..."</i></p>	<p>MICROSYSTEMS</p> <p>Home environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Not good" ▪ Two much older brothers ▪ One twin sister ▪ Parents are separated ▪ Lives with his father while his sister lives with their mother <p>Individual:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exhibits behavioural problems caused by separation <p>School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Did not master the required curriculum content
<p><i>"...their home language is English. (Not Afrikaans, the school's language of instruction)."; "... the sister just passed. The mother requested that both of them be retained...because of their emotional and social circumstances."</i></p>	<p>MESOSYSTEMS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home and school: home language and language of instruction differs
<p><i>"...Both of them will be staying behind."</i></p>	<p>EXOSYSTEM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible retention as stipulated by the school system's retention policy
<p><i>"...yes, they have bad circumstances, but I believe at the end they will benefit from being retained. "</i></p>	<p>CHRONOSYSTEM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teacher believes that they will benefit from their retention in their future

THEMES PRESENT:

- ✓ **TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RETENTION**
- ✓ **RETENTION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**
- ✓ **POSSIBLE ADVANTAGES OF RETENTION**

Academic

- ✓ **PARENTS' RESPONSES AND INTERVENTION**

The home environment

- ✓ **RETENTION POLICIES**

OUTCOME:**Will be retained.****Academic progress will be observed the following year.****Already displaying negative social-emotional behaviour.****Experience of Participant 3**

Quotes and phrases	Relation to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory
<p><i>"He also had terrible circumstances."</i></p> <p><i>"They are very poor, and they struggle to take care of him..."</i></p> <p><i>"...his parents aren't able to help him."</i></p> <p><i>"...his father is much older and is also not his biological father. "</i></p> <p><i>"They also don't have money to have him tested or put on medication to improve his concentration."</i></p> <p><i>"He is very hyper-active and can't sit still either, so that doesn't help."</i></p> <p><i>"...he can't really read, he can't do English, he struggles a lot"</i></p>	<p>MICROSYSTEMS</p> <p>Home environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"terrible circumstances"</i> • Very poor • Parents struggle to provide him with the needed care, learning support, and medication • Biological father not present <p>Individual:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hyperactive, can't sit still <p>School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggles to read and write • Has difficulty with English as a school subject

<p><i>"With support he can understand, if you read it to him he can understand and answer you, but he can't read or write it himself."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher provides extra support
<p><i>"... he sometimes fails to attend school because they don't have money for petrol and can't bring him. So, already this problem caused him to fall behind."</i></p>	<p>MESOSYSTEMS</p> <p>Home and school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circumstances at home leads to him being absent from school and missing school work
<p><i>"His mother is unemployed every second week."</i></p>	<p>EXOSYSTEM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instability of mother's employment has the potential to cause stress and contribute to low financial income
<p><i>"...even though his Afrikaans and English marks were very poor, his other marks were higher... he was put through to the next grade."; "... his new teacher struggles a lot with him, he is definitely going to be retained this year."</i></p> <p><i>"I also think that he would have benefitted more if he repeated Grade 2, rather than Grade 3."</i></p>	<p>CHRONOSYSTEM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He progressed to the next grade, despite his teacher's opinion. • He is at risk of failing his current grade
<p>THEMES PRESENT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RETENTION <p>An understanding of the term 'retention'</p> <p>A justification for retention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ POSSIBLE ADVANTAGES OF RETENTION <p>Academic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ PARENTS' RESPONSES AND INTERVENTION <p>Parent education</p> <p>The home environment</p>	

✓ RETENTION POLICIES	
<p><u>OUTCOME:</u> Was not retained in Grade 2 but will be retained in Grade 3. Academic progress did not improve after progressing to next grade. Effects on his social development – unreported.</p>	
Experience of Participant 4 (a)	
Quotes and phrases	Relation to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) bio-ecological systems theory
<p><i>“When we did the base line assessment in the beginning of the year, this child did not achieve the necessary requirements.”</i></p>	<p>MICROSYSTEMS School environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The necessary requirements assessed during the first few weeks of Grade 2 were not met.
<p><i>“I spoke to the head of the foundation phase and said that this child needs to go back to Grade 1. It was not taken seriously.”</i></p>	<p>EXOSYSTEM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school system and school policy might have prevented the teacher’s intervention
<p><i>“That child is in his 3^d school already.”</i></p>	<p>CHRONOSYSTEM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has attended several schools
<p>THEMES PRESENT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RETENTION ✓ RETENTION POLICIES 	
<p><u>OUTCOME:</u> Was not retained. Transferred to two different schools. Academic progress did not improve. Effects on his social development – unreported.</p>	

Experience of Participant 4 (b)	
Quotes and phrases	Relation to Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological systems theory (1979)
<p><i>"Another child was in Grade 1 and during the year he did show progress, but his mom and I felt that it was not enough for him to progress to Grade 2."</i></p> <p><i>"We began the process of retention and gathered all the administration and information. The mom then decided to move the learner to a smaller school."</i></p>	<p>MESOSYSTEMS</p> <p>Home and school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The learner's teacher and mother discussed his progress and possible intervention
<p><i>"The learner is currently receiving 7's for all his subjects. He just needed a little push. He is very happy and has a much better self-image."</i></p>	<p>CHRONO-SYSTEM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transferring to a smaller school enabled the learner to overcome his initial barriers to learning, and also improved his self-image
<p>THEMES PRESENT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ RETENTION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT <p>Factors pertaining to social development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ POSSIBLE ADVANTAGES OF RETENTION <p>Academic</p> <p>Social-emotional development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ RETENTION POLICIES 	
<p><u>OUTCOME:</u></p> <p>Was not retained.</p> <p>Transferred to a different school.</p> <p>Academic progress improved significantly.</p> <p>Effects on his social development – positive.</p>	

4.5 SUMMARY

In Chapter 4, the researcher presented the research findings as per the themes that emerged from analysing the data across all data sets. The researcher considers the research to be trustworthy and feels confident that it will enable her to answer the research questions mentioned in Chapter 1. The researcher has presented her research findings thoroughly and unambiguously, abiding by the strategies she had set for systematic data analysis (4.3). The researcher presented the research findings in the narrative form, supported by quotes from the data as well as quotes from other researchers and research studies correlating with participants' responses. Furthermore, the researcher discussed the relation between participants' experiences and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory, referring between the participant quotes and bio-ecological systems.

5 CHAPTER 5: INTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 depicted the data analysis strategies, themes that emerged from the data through data analysis, and, ultimately, the study's research findings. Participant quotes and responses were presented and discussed with reference to previous research studies. Furthermore, specific learner cases as recounted by participants were presented and analysed. Lastly, the research findings were summarised.

Chapter 5 presents an interpretation of the research findings in connection with relevant and imperative literature on learner retention. The study's theoretical framework, namely Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory, will provide an identifiable background against which the findings can be interpreted and explained. Furthermore, Chapter 5 will give reference to and endeavour in answering the study's research questions (Chapter 1).

5.1.1 Primary research questions

What are the perceptions of teachers regarding learner retention and its effect on the social development of learners in the foundation phase?

5.1.2 Secondary research questions

- How do teachers experience learner retention in the foundation phase?
- Which South African policies exist regarding learner retention?
- According to teachers, how does the implementation (and non-implementation) of retention affect learners' social development?

To establish a comprehensive understanding of the research findings and provide a sensible interpretation of results, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory will be utilised in conjunction with the themes that emerged from the data (Chapter 4). Lastly, Chapter 5 will provide a comprehensive summary, final conclusions, and the researcher's recommendations of the research study. The literature review that the researcher conducted between 2016 and 2017 (see Chapter 2) shed light on the global perceptions of learner retention, the South African policy on retention in South African schools, and teachers' perceptions of the implementation of learner retention.

By referring to the literature review and the present study's research findings, it is prevalent that retention is a much-debated topic in the field of education, both internationally and within the borders of South Africa. Teachers seem to be the key factor in the process of retention, with the best interest of the learner at the heart of all stakeholders, making it such a controversial educational matter.

5.2 EMERGING THEMES AND THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the process of interpreting the research findings, it is pertinent to, once again, refer to the themes that emerged from the data during the data analysis. In order to present a clear interpretation of the research findings, certain themes were grouped and will be discussed accordingly. The following table presents the regrouped emerging themes.

Table 13: Emerging themes (regrouped)

REGROUPED EMERGING THEMES
<p>a) TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RETENTION</p> <p>III. An understanding of the term 'retention'</p> <p>IV. A justification for retention</p>
<p>b) RETENTION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT</p> <p>III. Possible effects of retention on retainees' social development</p> <p>IV. Factors pertaining to social development</p> <p>V. Possible advantages of retention on learners' social development</p> <p>VI. Possible disadvantages of retention on learners' social development</p>
<p>c) POSSIBLE ACADEMIC ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF RETENTION</p>
<p>d) PARENTS' RESPONSES AND INTERVENTION</p> <p>I. Parental involvement in homework and reading</p> <p>II. The home environment</p> <p>III. Parent education</p>
<p>e) RETENTION POLICIES</p> <p>III. Teacher training in policies</p> <p>IV. National policies on retention</p> <p>V. An interpretation of reviewed policies</p>
<p>f) PERSONAL EXPERIENCES</p> <p>I. Five retention-related cases recounted by the participants</p>

5.2.1 Placement of themes within the theoretical framework

Figure 3 (as initially presented in Chapter 2) represents the researcher's own interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory.

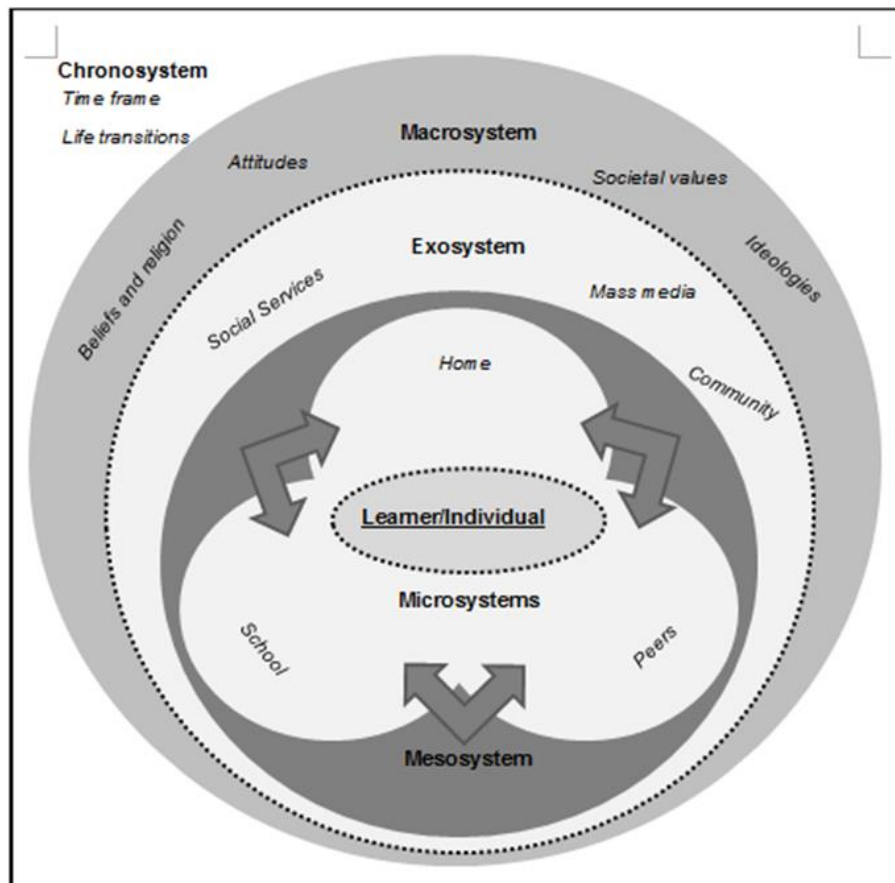


Figure 3: Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory

The themes present in this study relates to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory based on how they directly and indirectly influence a learner. In order to interpret the research findings effectively, the researcher utilised integration between the study's themes and theoretical framework. The following table presents how the themes that emerged from the data are integrated within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory, briefly indicating which theme can be explained within each ecological system or environment:

Table 14: Integration of themes within this study's theoretical framework

Integration of themes within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory	
Themes	¹Bio-ecological systems
<p>TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RETENTION</p> <p>I. An understanding of the term 'retention'</p> <p>II. A justification for retention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Microsystem: school environment ➤ Exosystem: education policy ➤ Macrosystem: societal perspectives
<p>RETENTION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT</p> <p>I. Possible effects of retention on retainees' social development</p> <p>II. Factors pertaining to social development</p> <p>III. Possible advantages of retention on learners' social development</p> <p>IV. Possible disadvantages of retention on learners' social development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Microsystem: peer environment school environment
<p>POSSIBLE ACADEMIC ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF RETENTION</p>	
<p>PARENTS' RESPONSES AND INTERVENTION</p> <p>I. Parental involvement in homework and reading</p> <p>II. Home environment</p> <p>III. Parent education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Microsystem: home environment ➤ Mesosystem: home and school relationship ➤ Exosystem: parent education
<p>RETENTION POLICIES</p> <p>I. Teacher training in policies</p> <p>II. National policies on retention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Exosystem: education policy
<p>PERSONAL EXPERIENCES</p> <p>I. Five retention-related cases recounted by the participants</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Macrosystem: beliefs and experiences

¹ In order to create a bio-ecological system for retained learners, ethical clearance to work with learners are required. As this study is not centred on individual learners, the researcher received ethical clearance to collect data from participating teachers, not learners and, therefore, this interpretation will not include learner-centred findings.

5.3 INTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.3.1 Teacher perceptions of retention

5.3.1.1 An understanding of the term 'retention'

According to the findings of this research study, foundation phase South African teachers regard learner retention as the intervention they are deemed by policy to employ when a learner is considered "not ready" to progress to the next grade. Teachers do not view learner retention as an academic failure, but rather as an academic intervention. As mentioned by Richardson (2010), teachers are reported to rather base their perception of retention on personal experience than on research.

When looking at the following statement, a child is

"...held back, because they do not have all the basic building blocks for the subject" (Q1, by P1).

However, it is clear that the teacher did not say that the learner failed to learn; only that they did not master all the required 'building blocks' or material for a specific subject. Teachers strongly feel that learner retention holds certain benefits to learners who are struggling to achieve the standard set out by the curriculum, and view learner retention as a second opportunity for struggling learners. During the second year in a specific grade-level, the learner is provided with ample time to master content and skills not mastered in the previous year. According to the research findings of similar study on teacher perspectives regarding learner retention, teachers support the implementation of retention and current research does not influence the views of retention practitioners (Range et al., 2012).

Teachers believe that retained learners feel a sense of empowerment in the classroom, because they know what to expect; they can recall certain topics and curriculum material, while it is new information to most of the class learners. However, teachers also consider learner retention to be ineffective for certain learners and take the learner's individual characteristics into account when they decide whether to retain. According to previous research studies, teachers believe primary grade learners are young enough to avoid the stigma of retention and consider early grade retention to be a formative and not a summative intervention (Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Silberglitt et al., 2006).

5.3.1.2 A justification for retention

Teachers can justify the practice of learner retention based on their previous experiences of retained learners. According to participant responses, teachers are more likely to employ retention as an academic intervention if they have witnessed positive effects thereof on previous learners. The following rather bold statement made by P2 briefly explains why teachers are able to justify their decision to retain a learner: it is “...*good to retain a learner, because at the end, they benefit from it*” (Q2). As mentioned by Richardson (2010), teachers are reported to rather base their perception of retention on personal experience than on research. Literature and previous research studies provide strong arguments against retention (Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012); however, according to Marsh (2016), studies reporting the negative effects of retention do not sufficiently control for pre-existing differences. A further study into why teachers are supportive of retention to such an extent that they consider their own experience of higher value than research findings might shed light on the positive effects of retention overlooked in previous studies.

P2 explained that teachers experience retention within their immediate classroom environment (on a first-hand basis) and are hereby able to personally witness the benefits thereof. Teachers can justify their belief in the practice of learner retention by taking the benefits and positive effects they have observed in the classroom into account when contemplating whether to retain a learner. P4 shared her justification of retention by stating the following: retention is sometimes “...*an absolute necessity to promote [the] holistic development of a child*” (Q7) and explained that allowing learners to progress to the next grade before they are truly ‘ready’ (by social promotion) does them an injustice. According to P4, social promotion holds the risk of leading to behaviour problems and a lower self-image by learners because they have not yet reached the required physical, mental, or academic maturity needed to cope at their academic grade-level.

Teachers truly regard retention as a justifiable, successful educational intervention. They regard the decision to retain a learner not as a punishment or an indication of failure, but rather as a calculated decision based on their personal experiences and observed benefits to retained learners. Teachers do seem to take into account that not all learners will benefit from retention equally, and that under certain circumstances, retention might not prove to benefit the learner at all. In order to identify these circumstances, teachers rely on their professional experience with learners and their parents/families. The study’s research findings indicate that teachers employ the practice of learner retention for the sole purpose of benefitting the learner in question. The process of learner retention involves significant time and effort on the

teachers' part, with various documents and administrative elements that need completing. Therefore, one can deduce that teachers will not retain learners without sufficient evidence of the necessity of the retention. Teachers are required by South African retention policy documentation to justify their decision for learner retention at length.

Range et al. (2012) list three key reasons for retention, according to teachers: retention prevents future failure, motivates learners to attend school, and increases parent motivation. According to Wilson and Hughes (2009), the main reason for retention is academic capability; however, the probability exists that teachers and parents believe an extra year in Grade 1 might likely benefit younger learners. Richardson (2010) mentions the following four factors potentially influencing teachers' decisions on learner retention: beliefs of learner potential, content knowledge, personal values, and school policies. Richardson further mentions a lack of readiness as another reason for learner retention.

Mwamwenda (1996, p. 123) describes readiness for learning as "*proper physical, mental, and emotional development, adequate experiential background, interest, and a willingness to learn*". According to this study's research findings, teachers cannot justify progressing a learner to the next grade-level before they have reached the necessary emotional skills or maturity level to cope in the higher grade and, consequently, retain the learner based on their lack of readiness. Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) report that school principals deem academic performance as the main indication of retention, but also considers the learner as a whole with regard to their maturity and social skills when deciding on retention. Furthermore, P4 stated that learners who progress to the next grade before they are 'ready' often develop behaviour problems and experience a lower self-image. According to the research findings of this study as well as previous research on learner retention (Silberglitt et al., 2006; Xia & Kirby, 2009; Wu, Hughes, & West, 2010; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2016), teachers retain learners due to low academic performance and/or a lack of readiness to successfully manage the emotional, academic, social, and/or physical requirements of the next grade-level.

5.3.2 Retention and social development

5.3.2.1 Possible effects of retention on retainees' social development

Social development is an important aspect of learners' lives as it enables learners to create and maintain trusting and caring relationships with teachers, family members, and friends (Elizabeth and Selman, 2012). A possibility argued by Wilson and Hughes (2009) is that, without adequate social-emotional skills, learners might not progress well in Grade 1. The present study endeavoured to shed light on possible effects of learner retention on the

social development of retainees, as experienced by foundation phase teachers. When prompted to elaborate on the observed effects of learner retention on the social development of retained learners, the teachers referred to several positive effects and limited negative effects on both the social development and the emotional development of retainees.

The teachers reported of learners who, after retention, experienced less teasing in the classroom because they were not struggling as much academically as they did the previous year. Furthermore, the teachers reported that retainees got along better with their peers and were emotionally stronger than during their initial year in that grade-level. P1 reported of a retainee who experienced an increase in his social capability during his second year in the same grade-level. According to her observations, "*He made friends more quickly...and he adapted well with the new Grade 1 learners*" (Q13). However, she explained that this new-found social capability was limited to his classroom only, and that he still experienced teasing on the schoolgrounds during break or when he encountered his previous classmates. According to Range et al. (2012), teachers agreed that first learner retention enhanced learners' self-concept.

When reviewing the following statements:

"He struggled a lot [emotionally]...He was a child who was generally bullied by other children, whether he was going to be retained or not" and he

"...was a child that other children did not like very much" (Q14, by P1),

one can infer that retention was not the sole reason for the learner's negative social and emotional experiences, as he was being teased before the onset of his retention. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1998), a learner's development is influenced by various environmental systems and how these systems interact.

Human beings cannot develop in isolation, and a reciprocal relationship exists between an individual and their surrounding environments, where one directly and indirectly influences the other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1998). A retained learner might exhibit certain characteristics after experiencing retention, and a learner might be retained because they exhibited certain characteristics.

The research findings of this study led to the following thought: the assumption that certain social-emotional effects observed in retained learners were caused by retention needs to be considered in conjunction with the possibility that a learner was retained for exhibiting

certain social-emotional behaviour (lack of readiness or inadequate level of maturity). West (2012) mentions that the disappointing outcomes observed in retained learners might mirror why they were initially retained, rather than be the result of retention. Another important factor to consider regarding retainees' social development is time. The participants of the present study were only able to report on their experiences within a short time-frame (one to two years). As human development is a continuing phenomenon that spans over many years (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Krishnan, 2010), the study's research findings can only demonstrate immediate social-emotional effects associated with learner retention.

5.3.2.2 Factors pertaining to social development

According to participant responses, the following factors presented in Figure 4 are pertinent to learner retention and the effects thereof on retainees' social development:

Social-development factors		
A. Learner personality	B. Grade level	C. The school

Figure 4: Social development factors according to teachers

An interpretation of each factor pertinent to the social development of learners is successively described:

a) Learner personality

According to the participants in the study, the effects of learner retention differ from learner to learner according to their personality (characteristics, personal strengths, and circumstances). The teachers are of the opinion that retention will not benefit all learners. Personality and personal circumstances should be considered when deciding to retain a learner.

b) Grade-level

The participants of the present study mention that the effect of retention on learners' social development further *"varies from grade to grade"* (Q17, by P2). Teachers advocate practising learner retention in the lower grade-levels more so than in higher grade-levels. According to

Renaud (2013) teachers advocate early-learner retention and recall positive experiences of retaining learners in the past.

P2 explained that Grade 1 learners do not know each other at the start of the year, so they are unaware if they have a retainees in their classroom; in fact, they might not even be aware of learner retention at all and, therefore, will not ask questions and tease their retained classmates. However, in the higher-grade levels, learners have become aware that certain learners are being retained and this might lead to teasing, shaming, and negative social behaviour by classmates. According to the teachers in the present study, it is better to retain at an earlier age/grade-level so as to limit the occurrence of negative social behaviour.

c) The school

Another factor that affects social development of retained learners emerged from responses by Participants 3 and 4. According to them, the school itself should be considered as an important factor relating to retainees' social development. The following statement recounts Participant 3's experience regarding school size:

One school "...had such a small playground that [foundation phase learners] were able to interact with most of the learners [on a daily basis] ...So the bullying was much worse than what it would have been at a larger school, on a larger playground, because then not all learners will see each other." (Q18)

Therefore, a larger school might pose a safer social environment for retainees, as it provides them with 'safety in numbers'. The more learners the school has, the easier it is for retainees to blend in and socialise. According to Elizabeth and Selman (2012), certain social skills like conflict resolution and empathy can help learners successfully manage situations outside the classroom and on the schoolground.

A different perspective of the school itself was provided by P4, who reported possible benefits to retainees in redoing their grade-level at a different school. P4 stated that she has noticed *"... many learners handle it better when they re-do the grade in another school"* (Q19). This suggests that retainees can enter a new school without peer- and/or teacher-bias, enabling them to start over with new teachers and classmates.

5.3.2.3 Possible advantages of retention on learners' social-emotional development

According to the research findings of this study, retention does impact the social development of learners and these effects differ from learner to learner. Although the participants shared a

limited amount of experienced positive effects of learner retention on social development, they still support the implementation of retention, as P4 argues: *“Most of the learners’ self-confidence grow, because they appreciate the fact that they are more able to complete tasks without the struggling of the previous year”* (Q16).

According to P4, learners who are happy become happy adults (Q8). Learners’ social-emotional development might progress if they experience school-related happiness in the form of academic success. In a newspaper article, Huebner (2010) states that promoting children’s happiness is an important educational objective, and that one way to achieve this is through academic achievement. If retention leads to better academic achievement as reported by the participating teachers of this study, retention can potentially improve learner happiness which, in turn, influences the social-emotional development of learners positively.

Camili, Vargas, and Barnett (2010) mention the current interest in the cognitive and affective advantages for learners at risk of early-grades school failure. Niehaus and Adelson (2014) state that teachers, school administrators, and policy makers regard the fostering of academic and social development of learners as their primary concern. Quinn and Duckworth argue that happiness and academic achievement are interrelated. Happy children perform well in school and learners who are performing well at school are happy children (Quinn & Duckworth, 2007).

5.3.2.4 Possible disadvantages of retention on learners’ social-emotional development

According to P4, retention *“...can have a negative effect on a child’s emotional and social development”* (Q31), depending *“...on the child’s emotional and social development”* (Q30). According to participant responses, learner retention will not impact the social development of all learners in the same manner, as the effects of retention are dependent on the learner’s prior and present social-emotional development skills and circumstances. Some learners might experience social-emotional difficulties independent of their retention, as explained by P1:

“He struggled a lot [emotionally]...He was a child who was generally bullied by other children, whether he was going to be retained or not” and he

“...was a child that other children did not like very much.” (Q14)

In the case of the learner mentioned above, retention did not improve or worsen his social-emotional experiences at school. However, P3 raised the topic of ‘bullying’ and stated that learners are negatively impacted by retention: *“During break...they can still*

experience being teased and that breaks them down emotionally” (Q32). According to P3, retained learners can experience negative social behaviour from peers outside the classroom, which can affect their social-emotional development negatively. West (2012) reports on how the opponents to retention are able to refer to a large body of literature indicating its many negative effects; however, teachers choose to retain based on learners’ competency, maturity, and parental involvement. Considering this study’s research findings, teachers decide on retention without much consideration to possible social-emotional development outcomes.

5.3.3 Possible academic advantages and disadvantages of retention

5.3.3.1 Possible academic advantages

“Consistently with a priori predictions, school retention (repeating a year in school) had largely positive effects for a diverse range of 10 outcomes (e.g., math self-concept, self-efficacy, anxiety, relations with teachers, parents and peers, school grades, and standardised achievement test scores).” (Marsh et al., 2017, p. 425)

According to the participating teachers in this study, retention allows learners to experience academic success during the second year in a grade-level. The participants argued that the content of the curriculum-stipulated learning material is known to the learner, allowing the learner to experience it for a second time. P3 stated that retained learners “...*once again get to learn it from the beginning” (Q25)* while being supported by their own prior knowledge of the subject, as outlined in the following response from P2: “...*is already there, it has been triggered, it must just be reinforced” (Q20)*. West (2012) mentions that retention allows for additional instruction before encountering higher-grade learning material. Marsh et al. (2017, p. 426) hypothesise the following:

“...because retained students have an extra year to learn the materials that originally led to their retention, they should be better able to learn those materials in the first year following retention and should also have more positive self-beliefs, giving them a stronger basis for learning new materials and for maintaining positive self-beliefs in subsequent school years.”

According to P4, the academic effect of retention “...*is mostly very successful, because learners rebuild the learning that was unstable” (Q24)*. Retained learners can complete tasks, experience academic success and satisfaction and, finally, master previously unmastered content. P4 made the following statement:

“When learners feel better about learning, they feel better about themselves and this motivates them to do and be more than the previous year.” (Q26)

According to this statement, learners are motivated to perform better and work harder at their academic work when they experience progress and achievement. According to the findings of this study, retaining a learner provides them with an opportunity to master their grade-level content and thus experience academic success. Marsh (2016, 2017) predicts that retention has a positive effect in the first year after retention has taken place, with specific regard to learners' Math self-concept. According to the research findings of this study, teachers regard retention as an effective way to improve academic progress in cases where learners might need more time to master unmastered content and skills. The participants of this study strongly advocated for retention above social promotion. According to their experience, passing a learner through to a higher grade without them being 'ready' leads to further academic failure at a higher-grade level, consequently prolonging a learner's academic struggle. The term 'ready' is discussed at a later stage in this chapter.

5.3.3.2 Possible academic disadvantages

The participants of this study agreed that retention would not lead to an improvement in academic achievement for all learners, as *"It does not help to retain everyone"* (Q23, by P1). P1 mentioned that learners might experience certain academic shortcomings when graded according to their curriculum grade-level criteria, but they *"...might still improve, so it might not benefit that learner"* (Q29), indicating that retention will not always lead to better academic achievement. In some cases, the learner might need more time to develop and improve their perceptual abilities and maturity level in order to master the curriculum content, and they might still achieve this in time to pass their grade-level. Therefore, it is important for teachers not to decide on retention too early, and keep in mind that the learner might still improve.

"Decades of research indicate that grade retention has numerous deleterious effects on student performance and long-term outcomes, and the empirical evidence fails to reveal any advantages of grade retention." (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012, p. 12)

According to numerous studies on retention, both new and dating back to the 1990s, retention has negative outcomes on school-completion and academic progress, with studies reporting that retention fails to improve the academic achievement of learners (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Westbury, 1994; Jimerson et al., 1997; Silbergliitt et al., 2006; Goos et al., 2011; West, 2012; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2016). The abundant presence of negative research findings both emphasises the importance of better initiatives to retention and contradicts the perceptions of retention-practising teachers.

5.3.4 Parents' responses and interventions

5.3.4.1 Parental involvement in homework and reading

The research findings indicated that teachers view parents as extremely important in preventing retention as well as providing support during retention. The teachers participating in this study argued that parents need to partake in their child's education in order for their children to experience academic success. Homework is one way to engage parents in their child's learning. Numerous research studies indicate the importance of parental involvement in learners' school success (Tomchin & Impara, 1992; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Wilson & Hughes, 2009; Range et al., 2012). When considering the effect of parental involvement in the social and emotional development of learners (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014), teachers should develop strong interrelationships between learners' school- and home-environments.

"Interestingly, teachers also believed that grade retention increased parents' motivation to work with their children, a reason not as prevalent in prior literature."
(Range et al., 2012, p. 10)

Range et al. (2012) affirm that parental involvement can reduce the risk of retention, and that learners benefit when parents consider their child's academic needs and provide support by assuming responsibility for their child's development. In demonstrating the long presence of retention in education research, McCoy and Reynolds (1999) report that low parent-school participation is one of the strongest predictors of retention. Despite the fact that these two research studies were conducted approximately 17 years apart, they report similar findings. P1 mentioned that if parents want their child to pass Grade 1, they need to read to and with their child. According to P1, *"If the child cannot read, then the child will eventually not pass at Grade 4 or 5. So that [reading] is according to me [the parents'] duty"* (Q33), indicating that parents need to prioritise reading. Early reading skills are an important indicator of possible future retention (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011). Wilson and Hughes (2009) mention that literacy is a crucial aspect to successfully progress in Grade 1, which strengthens the previous statements made by P1 regarding the importance of reading for a successful school experience.

P4 states that *"Parents are [also] liable for their child's development"* (Q34) and suggests that *"Parents must take the time to look at their child's work on a regular basis. Communicate with the teacher and school"* (Q35).

P3 claimed that parents do not provide learners with the necessary support at home and, therefore, the schoolwork *"...is not practiced at home, and nothing gets reinforced"* (Q37). This

statement suggests that non-completion of homework might enhance a learner's risk of being retained. The research findings indicate that parents are key influencers in learners' retention, according to teachers. Parents hold the position to prevent retention and provide the needed support to their child in the case of retention.

5.3.4.2 The home environment

The home environment of a learner forms part of their microsystem, present in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory, and therefore influences the learner's development directly. P2 and P4 mention the importance of a child's home environment in their development by claiming that parents should "*create a positive environment at home*" (Q40) and "*Make time for [their] child*" (Q42) in order for them to develop successfully at school. Therefore, if a learner is experiencing an imbalance of any manner in their home environment, it might influence other aspects of their development and, consequently, negatively impact their schooling.

5.3.4.3 Parent education

The education background of parents falls within the exosystem of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory and influences the development of learners. Wilson and Hughes (2009) report that retained learners' mothers have lower cognitive functioning, less education, and lower financial income; the latter directly affecting the home environment in the microsystem. P3 recalled her experience of parents who are unable to provide their child with the needed academic support, as they have received little education themselves and speak a language different to the language in which their child receives education (Q38). According to the research findings of this study, parents' own education can prevent retention or possibly enhance a learner's risk of being retained.

5.3.5 Retention policies

5.3.5.1 Teacher training and policies on retention

The participating teachers reported that they "*...receive quite a lot of training in policies and things we need to follow*" (Q46, by P1). All the participating teachers indicated that they are aware of the policy-regulations stipulated by the DBE, but they hold the following perceptions regarding retention and the policy-regulated processes they need to follow:

"*...retention is made almost impossible*" (Q47) due to "*...so much paperwork and admin that needs to be done*" (Q48).

Furthermore, teachers are aware of policy changes. One participant explained that a recent change in retention policy is that “...*mathematics is not a subject on which a learner may be retained*” (Q50). Teachers rely on the effectiveness of retention policy (Okpala, 2007). According to the NPA (DBE, 2017), teachers are required to complete performance schedules for learners and indicate within these schedules whether a learner is ready to progress to the next grade-level, giving reference to Q48 in the above-mentioned paragraph. The code ‘RP’ indicates that a learner is ‘ready to progress’, while the code ‘NRP’ indicate that a learner is ‘not ready to progress’. These schedules are, in turn, sent to the DBE for inspection, and the final decision to promote, progress, or retain a learner lies with the DBE.

Additionally, the researcher of this study has been directly involved with the retention of two learners in 2016, and hereby gained experience on the processes and procedures involved. When a learner is retained, their assessment-marks would indicate that they have not received the adequate achievement needed for promotion. Teachers grade learners’ work according to achievement levels specified by the DBE (2017).

The following table indicates how assessment is graded by teachers in South African schools (DBE, 2017).

Table 15: Codes and descriptions for recording and reporting in Grades R–3

Rating code/ Achievement level	Achievement description	Marks %
7	Outstanding Achievement	80 – 100
6	Meritorious Achievement	70 – 79
5	Substantial Achievement	60 - 69
² 4	Adequate Achievement	50 - 59
³ 3	Moderate Achievement	40 - 49
2	Elementary Achievement	30 - 39
1	Not Achieved	0 - 29

The rating codes/achievement levels 1–3 (highlighted in red) indicate that a learner requires academic support and assessment is necessary to determine the level of

² Minimum academic achievement for a home language subject to be met in order to be promoted to the next grade-level.

³ An academic achievement on this level or lower indicates that a learner is “not ready to progress”.

support needed (DBE, 2017). Rating codes/achievement levels 4–7 (highlighted in green) indicate that the learners have mastered the required content varying from adequate to outstanding and indicate promotion to the next grade-level. Teachers need to keep in mind that learner development takes place continuously (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and assessment marks might improve as learners develop.

According to this study, teachers take a learner's personal circumstances into account when studying their achievement and progress, as explained in the discussion of teacher experiences in Chapter 4. Learners' microsystems will influence each other: a happy home environment will influence a learner's school environment positively and, conversely, an unhappy home environment will have negative consequences for a learner's school environment as human development does not happen in isolation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When a learner's achievement level indicates possible retention, teachers are required to consult parents (DBE 2017, 2015). The interrelationship between school- and home environments form part of a learner's mesosystem and has an influence on the learner's development. Teachers and parents need to negotiate interventions to provide the learner with the needed support to show progress in academic achievement.

5.3.5.2 An interpretation of the reviewed policies

The exosystem in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory is the environment in which education policies exist, along with a society's school curriculum and education system. Albeit indirectly, the education policies and school curriculum does impact the development of learners. By applying policy analysis, one can explore the factors of a policy pertinent to the individual upon which the policy is implemented. For this reason, this study examined two South African policies (DBE 2015, 2017) relevant to learner retention. The two policy documents that were reviewed as part of the research study were the following:

- The National policy pertaining to the programme and promotion requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12 (NPPPPR); and
- The National Protocol for Assessment Grades R-12 (NPA).

Figure 5 represents an interpreted summary of two policies pertaining to learner retention and promotion, namely the NPPPPR (DBE, 2015) and the NPA (DBE, 2017).

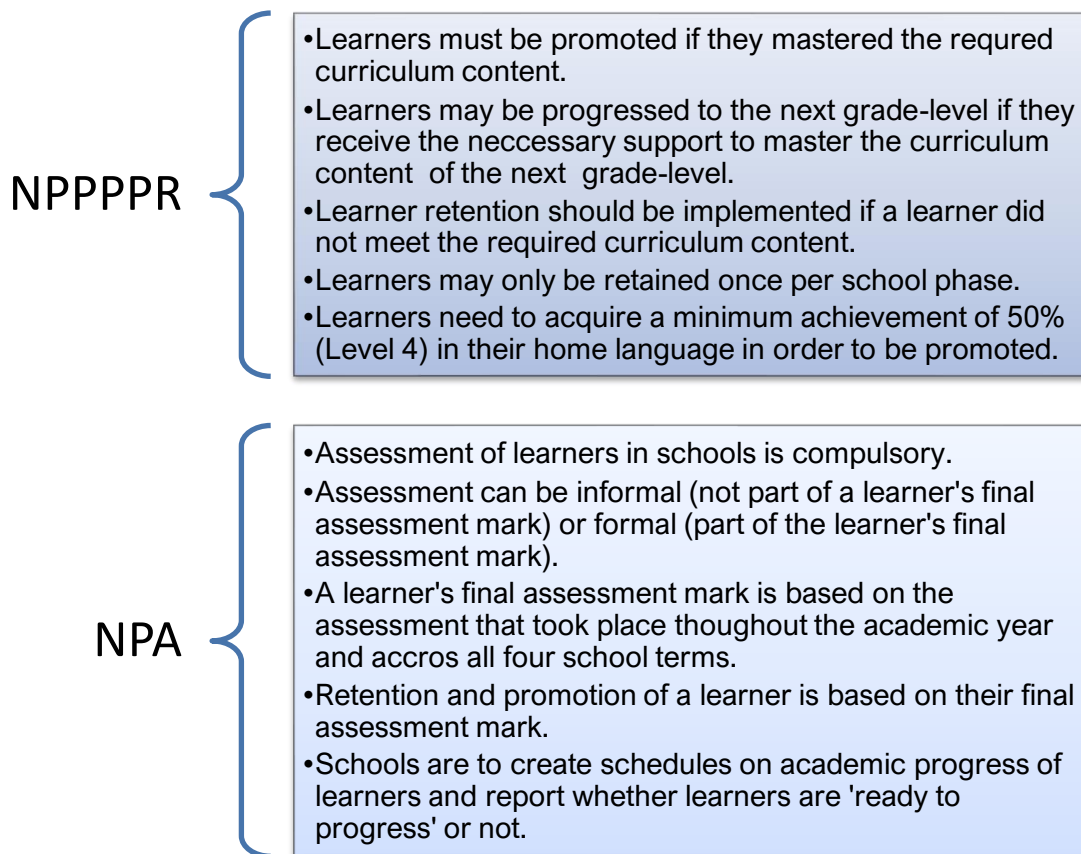


Figure 5: The researcher's interpretation of the NPPPPR and NPA

According to the findings of this study, assessment and retention cannot be considered separately, as each one can implicate and influence the other. From the summarised interpretation in Figure 7, retention seems to be a phenomenon of which the DBE is fully aware and school-based assessment is a key factor in learner retention processes and decisions.

5.4 AN INTERPRETATION OF PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES

The participating teachers reported on their experiences of retention, possible retention, and non-retention. During the focus group interviews, the participants were careful not to mention any names or characteristics that might lead to the identification of learners, and they were eager to share their experiences of retention. The following table presents the participants' experiences and is included in this research study based on the notion that teachers rely on their experiences when forming perceptions of retention (Haidary, 2013). Therefore, Table 15, presented on the following 6 pages, provides an added perspective to a comprehensive understanding of teacher experiences of learner retention in the foundation phase.

Table 16: Interpretation of participant experiences

Relating themes	Participant experiences	Conclusions with reference to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems
<p>Teacher perceptions of learner retention</p>	<p>Experience of P1: <i>"I saw that he was not up to standard."</i> <i>"I also witnessed perceptual problems (he shook/shivered when he was trying to write)."</i></p> <p>Experience of P2: <i>"...based on his marks, he has failed his year..."</i> <i>"...be retained, I think because of their emotional and social circumstances..."</i> <i>"... I believe at the end they will benefit from being retained."</i></p> <p>Experience of P3: <i>"...I had a boy that should have been retained that year according to me, but he wasn't..."</i> <i>"...he can't read or write it himself."</i> <i>"...his new teacher struggles a lot with him, he is definitely going to be retained this year."</i> <i>"I also think that he would have benefitted more if he repeated Grade 2, rather than Grade 3."</i></p>	<p>Teachers experience retention and progression in their classrooms, and their perceptions are based on these experiences, not on research theories or findings. Teachers may retain learners due to academic performance or under-achievement, social-emotional immaturity, a lack of basic learning skills, and perceptual and/or behavioural shortcomings. The factors influencing teachers' decision to retain a learner stem from the learner's microsystems, i.e., their individual circumstances, skills, and well-being. These circumstances are visible in the learner's home environment and school environment.</p> <p>Teachers are of the belief that retention will benefit learners, especially when retention occurs in the earlier foundation phase grade-levels. Teachers rely on their professional opinion and personal observations of learners' development and progress and may decide to retain a learner accordingly if they suspect that it will benefit the learner. The beliefs of teachers form part of the exosystem, influencing learner development.</p> <p>Teachers predict retention when they observe a learner performing poorly at school.</p>

Relating themes	Participant experiences	Conclusions with reference to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems
<p>Teacher perceptions of learner retention (continued)</p>	<p>Experience of P4:</p> <p>a) <i>"... this child did not achieve the necessary requirements. I spoke to the head of the foundation phase and said that this child needs to go back to Grade 1. It was not taken seriously. That child is in his 3rd school already."</i></p> <p>b) <i>"... during the year he did show progress, but his mom and I felt that it was not enough for him to progress to Grade 2."</i></p>	<p>Teachers observe learners' performance based on school assessment tasks.</p> <p>Teachers communicate with parents on the development and progress of learners.</p>
<p>Retention and social development</p>	<p>Experience of P2:</p> <p><i>"The boy has trouble adapting and has separation anxiety, he has had a few incidents at school where he threw tantrums in the corridors and shouted."</i></p>	<p>Teachers do not concern themselves much with the social development of learners after retention. This notion is present in the exosystem. The decision to retain a learner on academic performance is made regardless of their social development.</p> <p>The negative social behaviour portrayed by learners might have originated before retention took place. The social development of learners occurs in the microsystems and mesosystems.</p>

Relating themes	Participant experiences	Conclusions with reference to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems
<p>Retention and social development (continued)</p>	<p>Experience of P4: b) <i>"The mom then decided to move the learner to a smaller school." "He is very happy and has a much better self-image."</i></p>	<p>In some cases, a change in microsystem environments might prove effective in limiting learning problems experienced by learners at risk of retention, i.e., changing schools.</p>
<p>Possible academic advantages and disadvantages of retention</p>	<p>Experience of P1: <i>"During his almost two years in my class, he was never able to understand and recognise the sounds we learnt, so he could never really read properly or build words."</i></p> <p>Experience of P2: <i>"...but I believe at the end they will benefit from being retained."</i></p> <p>Experience of P3: <i>"I also think that he would have benefitted more if he repeated Grade 2, rather than Grade 3."</i></p> <p>Experience of P4: b) <i>"The learner is currently receiving 7's for all his subjects. He just needed a push."</i></p>	<p>Teachers felt that retention can benefit learners if implemented in earlier grade-levels. Nonetheless, based on personal circumstances, personality, and individual differences, retention might not benefit all learners.</p> <p>One teacher mentions a learner who spent the better part of two academic years in her classroom but did not show progress despite being retained.</p> <p>Another teacher mentions a learner who was almost retained but managed to improve his academic performance after changing schools. She believes the idea of being retained motivated him to work harder.</p>

Relating themes	Participant experiences	Conclusions with reference to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems
<p>Parent intervention and responsibility</p>	<p>Experience of P1: <i>"I met with the parents and explained to them that he will have to be retained."</i> <i>"There were reports of abuse, low financial income, his mother was bipolar, and his dad worked long hours. His dad also left their family for another woman in the middle of his first grade 1 year."</i> <i>"He was referred to a neurologist (by me), but they could not afford to take him."</i></p> <p>Experience of P2: <i>"The circumstances at home are not good."</i> <i>"The parents are divorced."</i> <i>"... the twins are 7."</i> <i>"Because the parents are separated, they decided to separate the twins as well."</i> <i>"...their home language is English."</i> <i>"The mother requested that both of them be retained..."</i></p>	<p>The teachers shared their experience of parental involvement concerning learner retention at length.</p> <p>According to teachers' experiences, parents can prevent retention if they provide academic support at home. Teachers rely on parents to complete homework with their children, especially homework in the form of reading. The extra time spent reading of reinforcing school material at home is beneficial to the learner's progress in school. Teachers advocate the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment at home.</p> <p>The household forms the home environment within the microsystem and impacts directly on the learner's development. According to their experiences, teachers consider an unstable home environment to be a large contributor to poor academic performance. Based on the experiences of teachers, learners at risk of being retained as well as retained learners might experience barriers to academic success due to the negative home environment in which they live.</p> <p>Emotional instability caused by a stressful home environment influences a learner's school environment in the microsystem, and negatively impacts the interrelations of the mesosystem.</p>

Relating themes	Participant experiences	Conclusions with reference to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems
<p>Parent intervention and responsibility (continued)</p>	<p>Experience of P3: <i>"He also had terrible circumstances. They are very poor, and they struggle to take care of him..."</i> <i>"...and he sometimes fails to attend school because they don't have money for petrol and can't bring him."</i> <i>"...his parents aren't able to help him. His mother is unemployed...his father is much older and is also not his biological father."</i> <i>"They also don't have money to have him tested or put on medication to improve his concentration."</i></p> <p>Experience of P4: b) <i>"...but his mom and I felt that it was not enough for him to progress to Grade 2."</i> <i>We began the process of retention and gathered all the administration and information. The mom then decided to move the learner to a smaller school. The learner is currently receiving 7's for all his subjects. He just needed a little push."</i></p>	<p>The financial position of a household may impact a learner's development. If a household cannot afford transportation to school, the learner might fail to attend school regularly enough to ensure academic success.</p> <p>Aspects of family dynamics also impact learners' development (parents' relationship/marriage, siblings, extended family members).</p> <p>Another home environment factor voiced by teachers is the education background of parents. If parents are not able to support their children's academic needs due to a lack of academic competence on their own part, it might affect their child's progress and academic achievement in school.</p> <p>The language of instruction at the school and the home language of a learner are also reported by teachers as important factors in academic success and progress. If the languages differ, learners might experience added pressure and complexity in mastering curriculum content.</p>

Relating themes	Participant experiences	Conclusions with reference to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems
<p>Retention policies</p>	<p>Experience of P1: <i>"I met with the parents and explained to them that he will have to be retained."</i></p> <p>Experience of P2: <i>"...based on his marks, he has failed his year..."</i></p> <p>Experience of P3: <i>"...should have been retained that year according to me, but he wasn't, and he moved on to Grade 3."</i> <i>"With support he can understand, if you read it to him he can understand and answer you, but he can't read or write it himself."</i> <i>"...even though his Afrikaans and English marks were very poor, his other marks were higher and then he was put through to the next grade."</i></p> <p>Experience of P4: a) <i>"I... said that this child needs to go back to Grade 1. It was not taken seriously."</i> b) <i>"We began the process of retention and gathered all the administration and information."</i></p>	<p>According to teachers, parents are taken into consideration when a school/teacher is deciding on retaining a learner.</p> <p>Teachers meet with parents and discuss possible retention and interventions and explain retention policy to parents.</p> <p>This interaction between a learner's home- and school environment occurs within the mesosystem.</p> <p>According to current policy (DBE, 2017), learners are to be retained based on their academic performance.</p> <p>Even though CAPS (DBE, 2011) allows for concessions in supporting a learner's academic journey, teachers are still expected to retain a learner if they have not mastered the required curriculum content.</p> <p>Schools have a role to play in ensuring the retention of learners who, according to teachers', require retention. Teachers rely on the support of the school regarding retention-related decisions. If a school decides against retention, teachers feel ignored. Learners were negatively impacted in terms of their academic work in cases where teachers suggested retention, but social promotion occurred instead. Teachers believe retention policies benefit learners.</p>

5.5 THE RESEARCHER'S ENDEAVOUR

The objective of the research study was to provide new information (Maree, 2014). By setting research questions, a researcher defines their path to collect, record, and report new knowledge. The answering of the following research question was the main objective of this study.

5.5.1 What are the perceptions of teachers regarding learner retention and its effect on the social development of learners in the foundation phase?

For further comprehension of the subject of learner retention, the following sub-questions formed part of the researcher's endeavour:

- How do teachers experience learner retention in the foundation phase?
- Which South African policies exist regarding learner retention?
- According to teachers, how does the implementation (and non-implementation) of retention affect learners' social development?

After in-depth analysis and interpretation of the data collected during the focus-group interviews, the researcher concludes the following.

South African foundation phase teachers are in favour of implementing learner retention. Teachers experience positive academic effects of learner retention in their classrooms, contradicting a vast number of previous research studies mentioned in this study's literature overview in Chapter 2. Teachers experience negative effects of learner retention on the social development of learners in the forms of bullying and teasing on the school playground. Teachers also experience positive effects of learner retention on the social development of learners i.e., an enhanced self-image of retainees and better peer-relationships in the classroom. Teachers believe that learner retention motivates retainees to perform better by working harder at school tasks. Policies impact on learner retention by stipulating the processes and requirement to be met in order for retention to take place. Teachers view the process of retention as stipulated by the DBE's policy on retention as complicated to implement due to extensive paperwork. As per the findings of this research study, certain learners will benefit from retention, while others will not show the expected progress. There is no absolute way to determine how retention will affect a learner.

5.6 A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

Much research has been done on learner retention in schools across various countries (see Chapter 2). Learner retention is implemented for various reasons, ranging from learner immaturity to a lack of specific skills, academic competence, and achievement. According to the experience of teachers, retention is implemented to benefit learners and limit their academic struggle in higher grades. Teachers agree that retention might be harmful to the social development of learners but advocate the necessity to retain if a learner did not meet academic requirements. Through consulting the literature and existing body of knowledge on learner retention, the researcher was able to gain a clear understanding of retention practices, beliefs, and policies, and study the theory against collected data in practice.

Two semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with teachers occupying a foundation phase position at the participating school. The teachers stated that they are advocates of learner retention and have experienced its necessity. Despite agreeing that retention has the potential to harm the social development of learners, they argue that the practice of learner retention is implemented to benefit the academic progress of learners. According to teacher experiences, however, the process of retaining a learner in South Africa is complicated by policy-required administration. When consulting the findings of previous research findings, the researcher found that the views and experiences expressed by the participating teachers of this study correlate with research findings proposed by other researchers: according to their own experiences, teachers believe in the implementation of learner retention and hold the perception that it is beneficial to struggling learners.

5.7 THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK'S RAPPORT TO THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study was theoretically framed against Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory (1979) based on the social nature of the research methodology. Bronfenbrenner's theory strongly emphasises that human development is dependent on internal and external factors of influence and centres on the idea that development cannot occur in isolation (Liddel & Rae, 2001; O'Toole, 2016; Kamenopoulou, 2016). The research findings of this study lend support to Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory by emphasising the importance of learners' individual personalities in their learning and development and by stressing the crucial role a home-environment plays in the social and academic development of learners. Furthermore, the importance of peer relationships and acceptance in a school-environment is addressed,

as well as the significance of the interaction between parents and their child's school/teacher. These findings call to attention Bronfenbrenner's microsystems and mesosystems and forms a link between theory and experienced practice.

Moreover, Bronfenbrenner's exosystem is signified in the research findings through the influence of education policy on the academic journey of learners, as well as the impact parent education potentially have on learners' development and academic success. Additionally, the macrosystem is represented by referring to the importance of societal perspectives and beliefs about retention (i.e. the perspectives of teachers and education researchers), within a South African context. Lastly, the chronosystem represents the timeframe of events and life transitions of learners as well as the participants of the study and influence their perspectives of matters through experience (time). Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory (1979) therefore set a solid theoretical foundation on which to construct the study and interpret the research findings.

5.8 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.8.1 Limitations of the study

Although this research study has reached its aims (see Chapter 1), qualitative research has unavoidable limitations. According to Atieno (2009), the main disadvantage of qualitative methods of research and data analysis is that the findings cannot be extended to wider populations, as is possible with quantitative analyses methods. Firstly, the research was conducted on a small number of participants due to time limitations. For this reason, the findings cannot be generalised to a larger group, but rather inferred as part of a specific context. In order for broader generalisation, the research must be conducted with a broader participant group. Secondly, the research findings rely heavily on human experience, as is prevalent in social studies and phenomenology. Finally, the findings led to the inclusion of a discussion of parental involvement, although parents did not form part of the research aims.

5.8.2 Recommendations

With reference to the study's research findings, the following recommendations can be made for foundation phase teachers, schools, parents, and further research studies on learner retention.

5.8.2.1 Recommendations for foundation phase teachers and schools

The value of teachers in the school system is immense. Teachers hold the potential to guide young minds and shape learner development. Teachers need to remember that they are dealing with individuals with diverse needs, strengths, and circumstances. Retention might hold benefits to learners who are performing below the standard in their academic work, but the implementation thereof must not be generalised to fit the needs of all learners exhibiting poor performance. A possibility exists that retention might benefit some learners but harm others. Further research on this phenomenon is important in establishing comprehension of why retention benefits and harms simultaneously. Schools hold the responsibility to inform teachers of retention policies and to ensure efficient teacher training in the implementation of these policies. Additionally, schools should consider pathways in limiting the habitude of retention by looking at alternative interventions to academic barriers to learning.

5.8.2.2 Recommendations for parents

Parents need to take the progress and development of their children's learning into account when establishing their home environment. According to teacher experiences, an unstable home environment negatively affects children's ability to succeed in school and contributes to learner retention. In order to prevent the possible retention of their child, parents need to provide academic support at home in the form of homework or reading. Parents hold the potential to improve their child's school success and academic achievement by implementing methods to support their child's learning at home, and further research on ways to realise this potential is necessary.

5.8.2.3 Recommendations for further research

"The policy and education communities would benefit greatly from rigorous research examining the longer-term effects of early grade retention, including its effects on such outcomes as high school graduation rates." (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011: p. 14).

According to the research findings of this study, parents have a significant importance in preventing learner retention. Accordingly, it is recommended that a study be conducted on parents' experiences and perceptions of retention. The role of the home environment should be explored with relation to its influence on learner retention. Such a study might shed light on ways to prevent retention according to parents and determine the extent to which parental circumstances and home settings influence a learner's academic performance. Furthermore, an investigation to evaluate the success of retention policies will be significant in determining the success of learner retention as educational intervention. The findings of such a study can

be used to create more effective policies and retention procedures. Additionally, further research on the social development of learners is necessary in determining how retention potentially affects peer-relationships and social skills, as suggested by Porter (2016). Schools might consider conducting a study on the success or failure of the implementation of learner retention according to learner progress, in order to investigate and understand the possible effects, benefits, or negative outcomes associated with retention. Such a study can then be shared with the Department of Basic Education and potentially provide significant data.

5.9 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The purpose of this study was to investigate teacher experiences of learner retention in the foundation phase within a South African context. By means of an in-depth literature study on learner retention and social development, the researcher discovered the positive perspectives held by teachers regarding retention as an educational intervention and the importance of healthy social development in school environments. Although the research findings of this study cannot be generalised, this study argues that teachers support retention due to academic underachievement based on positive experiences; an argument that receives support in literature.

5.10 SUMMARY

Chapter 5 presented an interpretation of the research findings of this study. The findings were interpreted and discussed with reference to the study's theoretical framework, namely Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory. Furthermore, the emerging themes were reorganised into a more convenient interpretation order and discussed accordingly. The policies analysed in Chapter 4 were construed and presented in Figure 6. Participant experiences were presented and extensively interpreted in table form. Finally, the researcher endeavoured to answer the research questions of this study, provided recommendations to stakeholders in education and, lastly, explained the limitations of this research study.

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6 LIST OF APPENDICES

- Appendix A:** Letter to the school principal⁴
- Appendix B:** Letter to participating teachers⁵
- Appendix C:** Permission from GDE to conduct research
- Appendix D:** Post-interview confidentiality form
- Appendix E:** Interview schedule
- Appendix F:** Transcription of focus group interviews raw data
- Appendix G:** Translated transcription of data (only Group A)
- Appendix H:** Participant responses final translation and grouping
- Appendix I:** Teacher experiences

⁴ The research title differs from the title on the letters to principal and teachers. These documents are the original documents sent to the school and therefore have an outdated version of the research title.

⁵ Signed documents not included for anonymity and confidentiality reasons, as they contain participant names and signatures.



LETTER TO REQUEST PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN PRINCIPAL'S SCHOOL

RESEARCH TITLE: *Teachers' perceptions of foundation phase learner retention and its effect on learners' social development*

Dear Principal

I am a student at the University of Pretoria, currently enrolled for my Master's degree in Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Education. I hereby wish to request permission to conduct research at your school.

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand teachers' view of learner retention in the foundation phase. A gap in South African literature exists with regard to the benefits and limitations of learner retention in the South African schooling system. The problem this study will address is the controversy surrounding learner retention that creates a dispute among teachers, parents, policy writers, researchers and even learners.

Education research and literature provides several opinions and research findings on learner retention and its effect on learner development; however, a lack of concrete evidence in support for retention is present. The existence of educated opinions and credible theories might enable stakeholders in education to form a deeper understanding of what learner retention means with regard to a learner's social development.

The aim of this study is to provide teachers, parents, principals and policy writers with new and current information on learner retention and progression in the foundation phase and the effects thereof on learner development as viewed by the teachers who implement, within an identifiable South African context.

This research project will involve a semi-structured focus group interview with teachers of your school. The interview will be conducted at your school (with your permission), as to suit the teachers. The interview will be recorded and transcribed by me for analytic purposes. The

interview will not outlast 1 hour. The information gathered will be handled with the strictest confidentiality, and used only for the purpose of this research study.

Find attached a copy of the interview schedule.

Participation is completely voluntary, with participants being able to withdraw from the research project at any time, should they wish to discontinue. The identity of the participants and school will be protected, and treated confidentially by me and my research supervisor. The data collected will be kept safe and locked up in my possession, or my supervisor's, for confidentiality purposes. No identifying information would be shared. Upon completion of the research project, the results and finalised thesis will be stored at the University of Pretoria, as well as sent to you electronically, providing valuable information subject to your specific school, teachers and learners. .

Should you allow me to conduct this research study at your school, please complete the consent form that is attached. For any questions or uncertainties, do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor via the information given below.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

MS. M. BEYERS (Researcher)

DR. R VENKETSAMY (Supervisor)

E-mail address:

E-mail address:

beyers.marelie@gmail.com

roy.venketsamy@up.ac.za



REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

RESEARCH TITLE: *Teachers' perceptions of foundation phase learner retention and its effect on learners' social development*

Dear Teacher

I am a student at the University of Pretoria, currently enrolled for my Master's degree in Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Education. I would like to ask you if you would be willing to participate in a research project I will be conducting.

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand teachers' view of learner retention the foundation phase. A gap in South African literature exists with regard to the benefits and limitations of learner retention in the South African schooling system. The problem this study will address is the controversy surrounding learner retention that creates a dispute among teachers, parents, policy writers, researchers and even learners.

Education research and literature provides several opinions and research findings on learner retention and its effect on learner development; however, a lack of concrete evidence in support for retention is present. The existence of educated opinions and credible theories might enable stakeholders in education to form a deeper understanding of what learner retention means with regard to a learner's social development. The aim of this study is to provide teachers, parents, principals and policy writers with new and current information on learner retention in the foundation phase and the effects thereof on learner development as viewed by the teachers who implement it, within an identifiable South African context.

What does participation entail?

- One focus group interview between the researcher (as interviewer) and teacher..
- The questions to be discussed will be predetermined.
- Every participant will have the opportunity to answer the questions according to their own point of view – feel free to answer truthfully and express your opinion. Your opinion is the reason for this project.

- The interview will be recorded, where one person will speak at a time.
- Please note that you cannot be identified based on the answers you provide – no personal information would be requested from you.
- The interview will (with permission from your principal) take place at your school, at a time that will suit all participants.
- The interview will not last longer than 1 hour.
- The interview will not interfere with planned school activities.
- You as participant may discontinue the project at any time, should you wish to do so.
- Your answers and opinions will be kept anonymous – so please share as much information as you feel comfortable with.

Your participation in this research project will enable other teachers and policy writers to better understand what teachers are dealing and struggling with. Please understand that your participation is completely voluntary and that you may withdraw from the study at any time if you choose to. The research findings will upon completion of the study be shared with the school principal. Note that you will not be mentioned personally, but referred to by pseudonyms such as Participant Nr.1, Nr.2 etc.

In the transcription of the recorded data, written research report and other possible academic communication, pseudonyms for all participants will be used and no other personal information would be mentioned. The information you choose to share will only be used for academic purposes, leading to the possibility of being published in an education related research journal. If you agree to participate in this research project, please fill in the consent form provided.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or my research supervisor at the E-mail addresses given below.

Yours sincerely

MS. M. BEYERS (Researcher)

DR. R VENKETSAMY (Supervisor)

E-mail address:

E-mail address:

beyers.marelle@gmail.com

roy.venketsamy@up.ac.za



GAUTENG PROVINCE

Department of Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	18 September 2017
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2017 – 29 September 2017 2017/262
Name of Researcher:	Beyers M
Address of Researcher:	PO Box 12487 Haakdoornboom Onderstepoort, 0110
Telephone Number:	04500087407
Email address:	beyers.marelle@gmail.com
Research Topic:	Teachers' perceptions of Foundation Phase learner retention and its effect on learners' social development.
Number and type of schools:	One Primary School
District/s/HO	Ekurhuleni North

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

M. M. M. M. M. 21/09/2017

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted;

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0400

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gag.gov.za

1. The District/Head Office Senior Manager's concerned must be presented with a copy of this letter that would indicate that the said researcher's has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
2. The District/Head Office Senior Manager's must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.
3. A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher's have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
4. A letter / document that outlines the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.
5. The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.
6. Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher's may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.
7. Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.
8. Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.
9. It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.
10. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationary, photocopies, transport, fares and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
11. The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organizations.
12. On completion of the study the researcher's must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.
13. The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.
14. Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards



Ms Faith Tshabalala
CES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 21/09/2017

APPENDIX E (1 page)

SCHEDULE OF THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW:

PLEASE TAKE NOTE THAT THIS INTERVIEW IS BEING VOICE RECORDED.

BACKGROUND TO THE TOPIC: LEARNER RETENTION	
1. What to you as educator/teacher understand regarding the term “learner retention”?	
TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF LEARNER RETENTION	
1.	What is your view of retention as an educational practice?
2.	Do you implement/have you implemented retention as an educational intervention/practice? Please elaborate.
3.	According to your experience, what emotional and/or social effects can be associated with learners who were retained?
4.	According to your experience, does ‘retention’ impact on a learner’s social development? (Peer acceptance, bullying, self-confidence etc.)
5.	According to your experience, what academic effects can be associated with learners who were retained?
6.	According to your opinion, should retention be practiced in schools? Please elaborate.
7.	By raise of hand, please indicate if you are ‘for’ or “against” the practice of retention.
8.	According to your experience, can retention potentially have any positive effect on learners? Please elaborate.
9.	According to your experience, can retention potentially have any negative effect on learners? Please elaborate.
10.	Would you as teacher object if your own child is advised to repeat an academic year?
11.	What is, according to you as teacher, the parents’ duty regarding their child’s retention?
12.	Do you know the policies that impact on learner retention?
13.	*Any teacher who is willing and able to share a story about a learner you’ve taught who were retained (either by yourself or in the preceding/succeeding academic year), please make yourself known to the interviewer by raise of hand.

APPENDIX F (8 pages)

TRANSCRIPTION OF VOICE RECORDED FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

ORIGINAL DATA: GROUP A

LANGUAGE OF INTERVIEW RESPONSES: AFRIKAANS

CODING AND KEY:

Focus group interview	Teachers	Coding
Group A	Participant 1	1.
	Participant 2	2.
	Participant 3	3.

1.A | What to you as educator/teacher understand regarding the term "learner retention"?

Dis wanneer 'n kind teruggehou word omdat hulle nie al die basiese boustene van die vak en so gekry het nie en omdat dit beter is vir hulle voor hulle kan aangaan dat hulle eers die fondasie reg lê.

Vir my is dit - hulle word ook gedruip nie net oor akademiese vaardighede nie, maar ook emosioneel en sosiaal ook. Ja.

1.B | What is your view of retention as an educational practice?

Kyk in sommige gevalle... ek het al 'n geval gehad waar ek 'n kind moes druipe en die kind het baie ontwikkel in daai tyd, dan het ek ook al 'n geval gehad waar ek 'n kind gedruip het en dit was toe op die einde 'n meer neurologiese ding so hy het nooit gevorder nie.

Ja, en die kennis wat hulle het, hulle voel half soos die leiertyes van die klas en help die kinders so hulle voel belangrik.

Ja ek dink ook dis goed as 'n kind druipe, soos ek sê, want, op die ou end baat hulle net meer daar uit. Ek weet party vind dit emosioneel baie erger want hulle maats gaan hulle spot en so aan, maar akademies is hulle dan nou, soos ek dit ervaar... is hy baie gelukkiger as wat hulle sou gewees het in Gr2, waar hy net nog meer sou sukkel.

Ja, en ek dink ook dat, soos... Dit is vir hulle 'n insisiele skok dat hulle gaan agterbly, maar kinders is so maklik aanpasbaar dat, die jaar wat hulle dan nou agter bly, die nuwe maats wat hulle maak, is op hulle sosiale vlak en denkwys-vlak, so dan pas hulle vinniger aan as wat ons dink.

2.	Do you implement/have you implemented retention as an educational intervention/ practice? Please elaborate.
<p>Ja.</p> <p>Ja hierdie is nou my eerste jaar wat ek dit toepas.</p> <p>Ja</p>	
3.	According to your experience, what emotional and/or social effects can be associated with learners who were retained?
<p>Een van my druipele wat die tweede jaar weer by my was, het baie beter met die maats oor die weg gekom. Hy het meer vinnig maats gemaak en ek dink die eerste jaar was baie moeilik en die maats het hom gespot en so. So die tweede jaar was hy saam met nuwe graad eentjies en hy het goed aangepas. Emosioneel was dit vir hom hard, want die kinders het hom nogsteeds gespot en die ouer kinders en gese "Ja maar jy is nou weer terug in Gr1", en so. So dit is positief en negatief.</p> <p>Ek ondervind ook, die kindjie wat nou agter gebly het by my, is baie sterker as wat hy laas jaar was, want sy eerste jaar was so half 'n proeflopie, so in die tweede jaar weet hy klaar wat wag en wat kom, en ja, hy is net emosioneel sterker. En sosiaal sterker en akademies sterker. So hy baat in al drie daai velde.</p>	
4.	According to your experience, does 'retention' impact on a learner's social development? (Peer acceptance, bullying, self-confidence etc.)
<p>Kyk, ek dink ook dit hang af van kind tot kind, want my spesifieke enetjie wat ek gehad het, het baie gesukkel want, hy was nie 'n kind wat...hy was 'n kind wat kinders oor die algemeen spot, of hy nou sou gedruip het of nie, hy was...sy taal was agter, alles was net agter. Hy lyk...baie groter as die ander so ek dink dit was nou maar net van selfsprekend, dit was 'n kindjie waarvan ander kinders nie baie gehou het nie. Dis hoekom hy emosioneel nie baie daarby gebaat het nie, maar sosiaal...Sosiaal het hy goed gevaar in die klas, maar nie met die ander maats nie, of die maats wat sy ouderdom was nie. So ek dink dit verskil maar van kind tot kind.</p> <p>Ja. Persoonlikheid tot persoonlikheid. Ek dink ook dit verskil van graad tot graad, want in Gr 1 vra niemand vir jou "Was daar al 'n maatjie in Gr1?"nie, waar, as hulle in Gr2 kom, dan weet hulle wie was in Gr 1 en hulle sal sien, "O, maar die maatjie is nie meer in Gr 2 nie, hy is nogsteeds by Gr 1". So in Gr 1 is die aanpassing baie beter, maar ek dink, by Gr 2 en 3 sal hulle bietjie meer afgeknou word.</p> <p><i>Almal is saam hulle op die skoolterrein, in die klas gaan dit dalk met hulle beter gaan, maar pouses en so kan hulle dalk maar nogsteeds baie gespottery ervaar wat hulle emosioneel afkraak.</i></p>	
5.	According to your experience, what academic effects can be associated with learners who were retained?
<p>Okay, wel akademies doen hulle beter, want dit is klaar daar, dit is klaar geprikkel, moet dit vasgelê word, maar dit hang ook af van skool tot skool, want party se assesseringstake verander nooit nie, waar die kind ook niks by gaan baat nie, waar by ons moet dit mos nou natuurlik elke kwartaal verander word, al was dit laas jaar reg... So, ja...</p>	

6.	According to your opinion, should retention be practiced in schools? Please elaborate.
<p>Ja, ek dink so.</p> <p>Ja, ek weet daar is sekere kinders wat dit definitief baat. Dit help nie jy drui almal wat jy weet dalk...ek meen kindertjies ontwikkel, tot en met Gr 3 ontwikkel hulle nog hulle perseptuele goedjies, so hulle kan dalk agter wees met dit en dit beïnvloed hulle, hulle skryfwerk en vingerspasies en allerhande sulke goedjies, maar dit sal tog optel, soos, dit sal nie daai kind baat nie, maar 'n kind wat regtig, jy kan sien, nog emotionele ontwikkeling nodig het en nog baie klein en jonk is, dit sal sulke kinders baat.</p> <p><i>Kinders kry ook nie die hulpverlening wat hulle behoort te kry by die huise nie, so...en by naskole nie, so as hulle nie gedruip word nie, dan word niks vasgelê nie, want dit word nie by die huis vasgelê of inge oefen nie, so daar is niks, geen vaslegging nie. So as hulle dan drui, dan word dit vasgelê, volgens my, want dan word dit weer van oor af behandel.</i></p>	
7.	By raise of hand, please indicate if you are 'for' or "against" the practice of retention.
<p>Al drie steek hul hande op as aanduiding dat hulle 'vir' retensie is.</p>	
8.	According to your experience, can retention potentially have any positive effect on learners? Please elaborate.
<p>Ja, in alle aspekte. Wel,, behalwe nou natuurlik soos ons genoem het by die ouer grade waar dit emosioneel bietjie, en sosiaal vir hulle erger kan wees. Maar, ag ja dit hang ook van die skool se omgewing af, dit hang af van die speel-omgewing en al daai aspekte ja.</p>	
9.	According to your experience, can retention potentially have any negative effect on learners? Please elaborate.
<p>Ja.</p> <p><i>By die vorige skool waar ek was, was dit baie...die speelterrein was baie kleiner, so daar was nie 'n rugbyveld nie. Die seniors was apart en die juniors was apart, so die juniors het so klein terrein gehad dat hulle basies op 'n daaglikse basies elke pouse met meeste kinders kon interact', as jy hoor wat ek sê. So, die gespot daar was baie erger as wat dit sou wees by 'n groter skool, waar hulle, waar die juniors op 'n speelterrein kan speel waar dit groter is want dan soms sien die kinders mekaar nie, so dan kan hulle mekaar sosiaal en so nie spot nie. So dan dink ek daai kind baat daarby as dit 'n groter skool is.</i></p>	
10.	Would you as teacher object if your own child is advised to repeat an academic year?
<p>Nee, want, omdat ons dit nou, sal ek sê "first hand" beleef,, van ons kant af sal dit anderster wees, maar as ons nou nie self ervaar het hoekom 'n kind moet drui en wat die bates en voordele daaraan is nie, as ons nie dit beleef het nie, sou ons tien teen een daarteen gewees het, want ouers is maar aan die begin "in denial".</p>	

Ja, ek dink ook maar dit hang af wat jy doen met jou kind by die huis. Help jy hom? Sit jy in van jou kant af, dit wat die onderwyser probeer insit, , dink ek, dan sal 'n kind...Ja, ek as ouer , as ek weet van my kant af help ek my kind en by die huis kom my kind reg, maar by die skool kom hy nie reg nie, dan moet jy begin dink jy weet, wat is die probleem nou eintlik? Gaan my kind daarby baat om te druipe, want ek sit die moeite in en hy kom reg?

Ja, ek dink ook dit is belangrik dat die onderwysers al die bewyse het, soos die boeke en alles om vir die ouers te kan wys 'dit is wat aangaan"en die assessering te wys. Want, sonder die bewyse kan ju hulle nie regtig oorreed o in te stem met jou keuse nie.

Ja.

Maar ek dink as ouer moet jy ook besef waarvandaan kom hierdie kind, meer, op hierdie. Jy gaan moet weet "is dit jou huisomstandighede? Verstaan? Want dit kan ook 'n invloed he. So, ek as ma sal gekant wees daarteen as ek weet dit is my huislike omstadighede wat my kind beïnvloed. As ek weet dit is my kind se intellektuele vermoë, dan is dit 'n ander storie, maar dit hang af watter rede daar is agter die druipe.

11. | What is, according to you as teacher, the parents' duty regarding their child's retention?

Kyk, soos ons by Gr1, ons het nie regtig huiswerk nie, ons doen baie leeswerk, dit is die kinders se huiswerk. So ek voel net, as hulle wil he hulle kinders moet ten minste Gr1 deurma, gaan hulle moet In die aande met hulle kinders stories lees, en die kinders gaan vir hulle moet lees, want dit is daai...as die kind nie kan lees nie gaan die kind in elkgeval dalk hier by Gr4 en 5 nie deurma nie, so dis vir my half hulle plig. So ek kan nie regtig se hulle moet huiswerk saam doen nie, maar hulle moet leeswerk saam doen. En in anderr grade, as hulle nie in 'n naskool is nie, wie gaan die huiswerk saam met die kinders doen?

Ja, soos by ons Gr3. Ek het 'n dogtertjie in my klas, haar eerste taal is Afrikaans, haar tweede taal is Zulu en haar derde taal is Engels,so sy sukkel met engels, so wat beteken...en haar ouers kan nie een Engels praat nie en sy gaan nie na 'n naskool toe nie so daar is geen inoefening geen vaslegging, geen niks van Engels by die huis nie, so dit wat sy by die klas kry, dit is al wat sy kry. So ek dink ouers se rol is ook dat hulle hulself te leer sodat hulle hulle kinders kan help.

Ja. En...die... wat ook belangrik is van 'n ouer, is motivering en om 'n positiewe omgewing by die huis te skep, want as 'n kind nie gelukkig by die huis is nie, gaan hy nie lekker aanpas by die skool nie. En dit is die ouers se verantwoordelikheid om seker te maak dat hy kan aanpas, sosiaal by die skool. En as hy nie gelukkig by die huis is, of 'n positiewe omgewing het nie, gaan hy nie daai wilskrage hê om aan te pas by die skool nie.

12. | Do you know the policies that impact on learner retention?

Ja kyk ons kry redelik baie opleiding in 'policies' en goed wat ons moet volg. Ek weet dit het nou verander, dat Wiskunde ook nou by ons nie meer 'n druipe-vak is nie. So, net as jy Afrikaans of Engels druipe kan dit gesien word as 'n druipevak. Dit het nou by ons hier is Suid-Afrika verander.

13. *Any teacher who is willing and able to share a story about a learner you've taught who were retained (either by yourself or in the preceding/succeeding academic year), please make yourself known to the interviewer by raise of hand.

So, laas jaar en die jaar voor dit het ek 'n suentjie in my klas gehad wat gedruip het. Ek het in die middel van die jaar, in die derde kwartaal, 'n ander juffrou se klas oorgeneem en toe gesien dat hierdie kind...nie op standard was nie. So toe ontmoet ek met die ouers en verduidelik vir hulle dat hy gaan drui. Maar ja, ek moet sê, hierdie kind het van aaklikge huis-omstandighede gekom. Daar was klagtes van mishandeling, lae finansiële inkomste, sy ma was bipolar en sy pa het lang ure gewerk. Sy pa het ook hulle gesin gelos vir 'n ander vrou in die middel van sy eerste Graad 1 jaar. Ek het ook perseptuele probleme by hom raakgesien. Hy het gebewe as hy probeer skryf het. In die amper twee jaar wat hy in my klas was kon hy nie die klanke wat ons leer herken nie, so hy kon nooit regtig lees of goed woorde bou nie. Ek het hom na 'n neuroloog verwys maar hulle kon nie bekostig om hom te vat nie...

Ek will julle vertel van 'n kind wat hierdie jaar gaan drui, hy was nog nie gedruip nie wat ek weet hy gaan hierdie jaar drui. Hy het 'n tweeling sussie. Die omstandighede by die huis is nie goed nie. Die ouers is geskei. Sy jongste boetie is 19 jaar oud en sy oudste boetie is 28. En dan is die tweeling 7. Omdat die ouers geskei is, het hulle besluit om die tweeling ook te skei, so die sussie bly by die ma en die boetie by die pa. En ook, hulle taal by die huis is Engels. Die seun sukkel om aan te pas en is angstig...hy het skeidingsangs of iets. Soos daar was al 'n paar gevalle by die skool waar hy 'tantrums' gegooi het op die stoepe en gekree het. En nou, volgens sy punte het hy hierdie jaar gedruip, maar sy sussie is net deur. Die ma het gevra dat ons altwee terughou, ek dink oor hulle emosionele en sosiale omstandighede. SO altwee van hulle gaan nou agterbly. Nou en dan bly altwee van hulle by die ma. So ja, hulle het slegte omstadighede, maar ek glo hulle gaan aan die einde daarby baat om te drui.

Laas jaar het ek 'n kind in my klas gehad wat moes drui volgens my maar hy het nie en hy het aangegaan na Graad 3 toe. Hierdie was in Graad 2. Hy het ook aaklige omstadighede gehad. Hulle is baie arm, en hulle sukkel om na hom te kyk en partykeer kom hy nie skool toe nie want hulle het nie geld vir petrol nie en kan hom nie bring nie. So, dis al klaar 'n problem wat maak dat hy agter raak...hy kan nie regtig lees nie, hy kan nie Engels doen nie, hy sukkel baie. Met hulp kan hy verstaan...as jy dit vir hom lees kan hy verstaan en jou antwoord, maar hy kan dit nie self lees of skryf nie. So, alhoewel sy Afrikaans punte en Engels punte baie swak was, was sy ander punte hoër en toe is hy deurgesit na Graad 3 toe. En nou...sy nuwe juffrou sukkel baie met hom. Hy gaan definitief hierdie jaar drui. I dink ook dat hy daarby sou baat om eerder Graad 2 te gedruip het eerder as Graad 3. Nog 'n ding is, sy ouers kan hom nie help nie. Sy ma is elke tweede week sonder 'n werk en sy pa is baie ouer, en dit is ook nie sy regte pa nie. Hulle het ook nie geld om hom te laat toets of op medikasie te sit om sy konsentrasie te verbeter nie. Hy is baie hiper-aktief en kan nie stil sit nie, so dit help ook nie.

TRANSCRIPTION OF VOICE RECORDED FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

ORIGINAL DATA: GROUP B

LANGUAGE OF INTERVIEW RESPONSES: ENGLISH

CODING AND KEY:

Focus group interview	Teachers	Coding
Group B	Participant 4	<u>4.</u>
	Participant 5	EXCLUDED

1.A	What to you as educator/teacher understand regarding the term “learner retention”?
<u>Learner retention is the procedure that takes place when a learner did not achieve the necessary outcomes, requirements and goals for a specific grade. For younger learners like Gr RR and Gr R it can also happen... that the learner is not emotionally or socially ‘ready’ to go to the next class...A Gr R learner can also not be ‘school ready’ and therefore the learner will have to stay another year in Gr R.</u>	
1.B	What is your view of retention as an educational practice?
<u>It is my meaning that sometimes retention is an absolute necessity to promote holistic development of a child. It is also my meaning that a lot of learners are...put through to the next class or grade when they are not ‘ready’ - learning is then built on an unstable foundation and then...most of these learners develop behaviour problems that leads to an even worse self-image.</u>	
2.	Do you implement/have you implemented retention as an educational intervention/ practice? Please elaborate.
<u>Yes, I have. There is so much paperwork and admin that needs to be done that retention is almost made impossible. It is my meaning that the best grades for retention is Gr R, Gr 1 and Gr 4. Look, many teachers feel that they have failed if a learner needs to repeat a grade. This is not the case at all. A teacher did fail if he or she knows that the learner is not ready for the next grade and...put the learner through.</u>	
3.	According to your experience, what emotional and/or social effects can be associated with learners who were retained?
<u>So...I believe that the emotional and social effects depend on the child’s emotional and social development. I have noticed that many learners handle it better when they re-do the grade in another school.</u>	
4.	According to your experience, does ‘retention’ impact on a learner’s social development? (Peer acceptance, bullying, self-confidence etc.)

Unfortunately, it does impact the learner's social development...especially if they remain in the same school. Children can be very mean. But still...

Most of the learner's self-confidence grows, because they appreciate the fact that they are more able to complete task without the struggling of the previous year.

5. According to your experience, what academic effects can be associated with learners who were retained?

The academic effect is mostly very successful, because learners...rebuild the learning that was unstable. When learners feel better about learning, they feel better about themselves and this motivates them to do and be more than the previous year. If a learner is retained when they have to be retained, they mostly just have to re-do one year.

6. According to your opinion, should retention be practiced in schools? Please elaborate.

Yes, it should be practised. We can't just build on an unstable foundation of learning. If this is done, then we are not teaching lifelong learners. Like...A happy child is a happy adult.

7. By raise of hand, please indicate if you are 'for' or "against" the practice of retention.

P4 indicated that she is 'for' retention.

8. According to your experience, can retention potentially have any positive effect on learners? Please elaborate.

Yes, it can. Retention creates an opportunity for a child to rebuild his learning foundation. Like...for example: Reading is the foundation of all learning. A child can't be put through to Gr 2 if he or she doesn't know the letters and sounds of the alphabet.

How must a child be able to build words or...write sentences if the recognition of sounds is not even mastered yet?
How must a child do mathematics if he doesn't know the difference between, say...a 6 and a 9?

9. According to your experience, can retention potentially have any negative effect on learners? Please elaborate.

If you look at bullying, then it can have a negative effect on a child's emotional and social development.

10. Would you as teacher object if your own child is advised to repeat an academic year?

No, I will not.

11. What is, according to you as teacher, the parents' duty regarding their child's retention?

Well...some parents are open for retention and some are not. Parents are also unfortunately liable for their child's development...say, like...they need to make sure that they get all the help they need for their children. Some people don't have the money for a therapist and psychologist, but there are a lot of resources on the internet. Also, for

example...parents must take the time to look at their child's work on a regular basis and communicate with the teacher and school. Say like...attend parent meetings...and...

Make time for your child. Prepare him and her for the process. Don't lie to your child! Have his and her back and set new targets with your child.

12. Do you know the policies that impact on learner retention?

Yes, I do.

13. *Any teacher who is willing and able to share a story about a learner you've taught who were retained (either by yourself or in the preceding/succeeding academic year), please make yourself known to the interviewer by raise of hand.

I once had a child in Grade 2 with me. So...when we did the base line assessment in the beginning of the year, this child did not achieve the necessary requirements. Then I spoke to the head of the Foundation Phase and said that this child needs to go back to Grade 1. It was not taken seriously and now... That child is in his 3rd school already. Another child was in Grade 1 and during the year he did show progress, but I and the mom felt that it was not enough for him to progress to Grade 2. So, then we began the process and gathered all the admin and information. And then the mom decided to move the learner to a smaller school. Luckily because now...the learner is currently receiving 7's for all his subjects. He just needed a little push. He is very happy and has a much better self-image.

APPENDIX G (3 pages)

TRANSLATED TRANSCRIPTION OF VOICE RECORDED FOCUS GROUP

INTERVIEW (Group A)

1.	What to you as educator/teacher understand regarding the term “learner retention”?
1.	It is when a child is held back, because they do not have all the basic building blocks of the subject and so on, and also because it is better for them to lay a proper foundation before progressing on.
2.	For me, a child is not only retained due to academic skills, but also emotional and social skills as well, yes.
1.	What is your view of retention as an educational practice?
1.	Look, in some cases I have experienced scenarios where I had to retain a child, and the learner developed a lot during that time. But then also, I have had a case where I retained a learner and at the end, it turned out that it was a neurological thing and so the learner never showed progress. Yes, (in relation to Participant 3’s response) ...with the knowledge they (the retainees) have, they almost feel like the leaders of the class and help the other learners, which makes them feel important.
2.	Yes, I also think that it is good to retain a learner, because, at the end, they benefit more from it. I know that, emotionally, some learners experience it worse, because their peers are going to mock them and so on, but academically, as I perceive it, they are much happier in the retained level, than in the next grade, where they would have only struggled more.
3.	Yes, I also think that, like... Initially it is a shock to them that they will be held back, but children are so good at adapting, the year that they stay behind – they make new friends on their own social level and thinking-level, so they adapt quicker than what we think.
2.	Do you implement/have you implemented retention as an educational intervention/ practice? Please elaborate.
1.	Yes/
2.	Yes, this will be my first year that implement it.
3.	Yes.
3.	According to your experience, what emotional and/or social effects can be associated with learners who were retained?
1.	One of my retainees that spent his second year in my class, got along much better with peers. He made friends quicker, I think the first year was difficult and his peers mocked him and so on, so the second year, he adapted well with new grade one learners. Emotionally it was hard on him, because the learners still mocked him, and the older learners said “Yes, you are in Grade 1 again!”. So, it is positive and negative (emotionally and socially).
2.	I also experience that the learner who was kept behind and is now in my class, is much stronger than he was last year, because his first year was almost ‘a trial run’ so in the second year he already knows what to expect and what is coming and yes, he is emotionally stronger. As well as socially stronger and emotionally stronger. So, he benefits in all three of those areas.
4.	According to your experience, does ‘retention’ impact on a learner’s social development? (Peer acceptance, bullying, self-confidence etc.)
1.	Look, I think it depends from learner to learner, because my specific one that I had, struggled a lot...because he not a child that...he was a child who were generally bullied by other children, whether he was going to be retained or not, he was...his language was behind, everything was just behind. He looks...much bigger than the other so I think...it was inevitable, he was a child that other children did not like very much. That is why he did not benefit from it emotionally, but socially...he fared well in his new class, but not with the other children or his same-age peer group. So, I think it varies from child to child.

2. Yes. Personality to personality. I think it also varies from grade to grade, because in Garde 1, no one asks you if you had been in Grade 1 before, where as they reach Grade 3, they know who was in Grade 2 and then they will see that this child is not in Grade 3, but still in Grade 2. So, in Grade 1 the adjustment is much better, but in Grade two and three they will get bullied some more.
3. *Everyone is together on the school ground, in the classroom they might fare better, but during break and so on, they can still experience being mocked and that breaks them down emotionally.*

5. According to your experience, what academic effects can be associated with learners who were retained?

2. Okay, well academically they do better, because it is already there, it has been triggered, it must just be reinforced. But it also varies from school to school, because some [schools'] assessment tasks never change, where the child will not benefit from it, where at our school it has to change every term, even though it was fine the previous year, so yes...

6. According to your opinion, should retention be practiced in schools? Please elaborate.

2. Yes, I think so.

1. Yes, I know that there are certain children who definitely benefit from it. It does not help to retain everyone...I mean learners keep developing, they still develop perceptual stuff up to Grade 3, so they might be behind and that might influence them...their writing and finger spaces among other things, but it still might improve, so it might not benefit that learner, but a learner who really...you can see it...they still need emotional development and they are small and young, it will benefit these learners.

3. *Children also don't receive the support they should get at home, and at aftercare, so if they are not retained, nothing would be reinforced, because it is not practiced at home, and nothing gets reinforced. So then if they are retained, according to me, they once again get to learn it from the beginning.*

7. By raise of hand, please indicate if you are 'for' or "against" the practice of retention.

All participant indicate that they are "for" retention.

8. According to your experience, can retention potentially have any positive effect on learners? Please elaborate.

2. Yes, in all aspects. Well, except of course as we already mentioned about the higher grades, where it can be worse for them emotionally and socially. But, it also depends on the schoolgrounds, it depends on the play-area and all those aspects yes.

9. According to your experience, can retention potentially have any negative effect on learners? Please elaborate.

2. Yes

3 *At the previous school I worked at, it was very...the schoolgrounds were much smaller so there was no rugbyveld. The seniors were separate from the juniors, so the juniors had such a small playground that they basically on a daily basis were able to interact with most learners, if you hear what I am saying... So the bullying was much worse than what it would have been at a larger school, where they, where the juniors can play on a larger playground because then not all learners will see each other, so then they can't bully each other socially and so on... So I think that a learner might benefit from it if it is a large school.*

10. Would you as teacher object if your own child is advised to repeat an academic year?

2. No, because we experience it 'first hand', from our side it would be different. But if we hadn't any personal experience why learners are retained and what benefits and positives it holds, and if we did not experience it, we would probably have been against it, because most parents are in the beginning in denial'.

3. *Yes, I also think it depends on what you do with your child at home. Do you help them? Do you put enough in from your side as the teacher puts in? I think then a child shall...Yes, if I were a parent, and I know that on my part I help my child enough at home and at home they succeed, but at school they don't, then you should start to think about what the problem truly is. Would my child benefit from it, because I already do the effort and he succeeds? Is it not maybe a teacher problem?*

2. Yes, I also think that it is important for the teacher to have all the necessary proof, like the workbooks and everything, to be able to show the parents what is going on and also to show them the assessment tasks. Because without it, you won't be able to persuade them to agree with your choice [of retention].

3. Yes.

1. But I think, as parent, you have to understand where this child is coming from. Is it circumstances from home? Understand? Because that can have an effect. So, I as a mother would be against it if I know it is because of my home environment affecting my child. If I know that it is due to my child's intellectual abilities, then it is a different story, but it also depends on the reason behind the choice of retention.

11. | What is, according to you as teacher, the parents' duty regarding their child's retention?

1. Look, as with us in Gr1, we don't really have homework, we do a lot of reading, that is the children's' homework. So I feel, if they want their children to at least pass Grade 1, they will have to read stories with their children in the evenings, and the children have to read to them, because it is that...if the child cannot read, then the child will eventually not pass at grade 4 or 5, so that is according to me their duty... So I cannot really say they must do homework together, but they have to do reading together. And in the other grades, if they don't attend aftercare, who will do the homework with the children?

3. *Yes, like with us in Grade 3...I have a girl in my class: her first language is Afrikaans, her second language is Zulu, and her third language is English. So she struggles with English, which means...also, her parents cannot either speak English and she does not attend aftercare, so there is no reinforcement, no English at home, therefore that which she gets at school is all she gets. So I think parents' duty is also to teach themselves so that they are able to help their children.*

2. *Yes. And...what is also important from parents are motivation and to create a positive environment at home, because if a child is not happy at home, he will not be able to adapt at school. And it is the parents' duty to ensure that he can adapt, socially, at school. And if he is not happy at home, or does not have a positive environment, he will not have the will power to want to adapt at school.*

12. | Do you know the policies that impact on learner retention?

1. Yes. See we receive quite a lot of training in policies and things we need to follow. I know that it just recently changed, so that Mathematics is not a subject on which a learner may be retained. So only if you fail Afrikaans or English, can it be seen as a retainable subject. That has now changes here in South Africa.

13. | *Any teacher who is willing and able to share a story about a learner you've taught who were retained (either by yourself or in the preceding/succeeding academic year), please make yourself known to the interviewer by raise of hand.

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APPENDIX H (6 pages)

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APPENDIX H follows on next 6 pages.

Focus group interview question	Participant responses			
	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
1. What to you as educator/teacher understand regarding the term "learner retention"?	It is when a child is held back, because they do not have all the basic building blocks of the subject and so on, and also because it is better for them to lay a proper foundation before progressing on.	For me, a child is not only retained due to academic skills, but also emotional and social skills as well, yes.		Learner retention is the procedure that takes place when a learner did not achieve the necessarily outcomes, requirements and goals for a specific grade. For younger learners like Gr RR and Gr R it can also happen that the learner is not emotionally or socially ready to go to the next class. – A Gr R learner can also not be school ready and therefore the learner will have to stay another year in Gr R.
2. What is your view of retention as an educational practice?	Look, in some cases I have experienced scenarios where I had to retain a child, and the learner developed a lot during that time. But then also, I have had a case where I retained a learner and at the end, it turned out that it was a neurological thing and so the learner never showed progress. Yes, (in relation to Participant 3's response) ...with the knowledge they (the retainees) have, they almost feel like the leaders of the class and help the other learners, which makes them feel important.	Yes, I also think that it is good to retain a learner, because, at the end, they benefit more from it. I know that, emotionally, some learners experience it worse, because their peers are going to mock them and so on, but academically, as I perceive it, they are much happier in the retained level, than in the next grade, where they would have only struggled more.	Yes, I also think that, like... Initially it is a shock to them that they will be held back, but children are so good at adapting, the year that they stay behind – they make new friends on their own social level and thinking-level, so they adapt quicker than what we think.	It is my meaning that sometimes retention is an absolute necessary to promote holistic development of a child. It is also my meaning that a lot of learners are put through to the next class or grade when they are not ready- learning are then build on a unstable foundation and then most of these learners develop behaviour problems that lead to an even worse self-image.
3. Do you implement/have you implemented retention as an educational intervention/practice? Please elaborate.	Yes	Yes, this will be my first year that I implement it.	Yes.	Yes, I have. There is so much paperwork and admin that needs to be done that retention are almost made impossible. I t is my meaning that the best grades for retention

				<p>is Gr R (emotional, social and motor development), Gr 1 (Foundation of reading and writing) and Gr 4.</p> <p>Many teachers feel that they have failed if a learner needs to repeat a grade. This is not the case at all! A teacher did fail if he/she knows that the learner is not ready for the next grade and put the learner through.</p> <p>Some parents are open for retention and some are not.</p>
<p>4. According to your experience, what emotional and/or social effects can be associated with learners who were retained?</p>	<p>One of my retainees that spent his second year in my class, got along much better with peers. He made friends quicker, I think the first year was difficult and his peers mocked him and so on, so the second year, he adapted well with new grade one learners. Emotionally it was hard on him, because the learners still mocked him and the older learners said "Yes, you are in Grade 1 again!". So it is positive and negative (emotionally and socially).</p>	<p>I also experience that the learner who was kept behind and is now in my class, is much stronger than he was last year, because his first year was almost trial so in the second year he already knows what to expect and what is coming and yes, he is emotionally stronger. As well as socially stronger and emotionally stronger. So he benefits in all three of those areas.</p>		<p>The emotional and social affect depends on the child's emotional and social development.</p> <p>I have noticed that many learners handle it better when they re-do the grade in another school.</p>
<p>5. According to your experience, does 'retention' impact on a learner's social development? (Peer acceptance, bullying, self-confidence etc.)</p>	<p>Look, I think it depends from learner to learner, because my specific one that I had, struggled a lot...because he not a child that...he was a child who were generally bullied by other children, whether he was going</p>	<p>Yes. Personality to personality. I think it also varies from grade to grade, because in Grade 1, no one asks you if you had been in Grade 1 before, where as they reach Grade 3, they know who was in Grade 2 and then they will</p>	<p>Everyone is together on the school ground, in the classroom they might fare better, but during break and so on, they can still experience being mocked and that breaks them down emotionally.</p>	<p>Unfortunately, it does impact the learner's social development- especially if they remain in the same school. Children can be very mean. Most of the learner's self-confidence grows, because they appreciate the fact that they</p>

	to be retained or not, he was...his language was behind, everything was just behind. He looks...much bigger than the other so I think, het was a child that other children did not like very much. That is why he did not benefit from it emotionally, but socially...he fared well in his new class, but not with the other children or his same-age peer group. So I think it varies from child to child.	see that this child is not in Grade 3, but still in Grade 2. So in Grade 1 the adjustment is much better, but in Grade two and three they will get bullied some more.		are more able to complete task without the struggling of the previous year.
6. According to your experience, what academic effects can be associated with learners who were retained?		Okay, well academically they do better, because it is already there, it has been triggered, it must just be reinforced. But it also varies from school to school, because some [schools'] assessment tasks never changes, where the child will not benefit from it, where at our school it has to change every term, even though it was fine the previous year, so yes...		The academic effect is mostly very successful, because learners rebuild the learning that was unstable. When learners feel better about learning, they feel better about themselves and this motivates them to do and be more than the previous year. If a learner is retained when they have to be retained, they mostly just have to re-do one year.
7. According to your opinion, should retention be practiced in schools? Please elaborate.	Yes, I know that there are certain children who definitely benefit from it. It does not help to retain everyone...I mean learners keep developing, they still develop perceptual stuff up to Grade 3, so they might be behind and that might influence them...their writing and finger spaces among other things, but it still might improve, so it might not benefit that learner, but a learner who really...you can see it...they still need emotional development and they are small and young, it will benefit these learners.	Yes, I think so.	Children also don't receive the support they should get at home, and at aftercare, so if they are not retained, nothing would be reinforced, because it is not practiced at home, and nothing gets reinforced. So then if they are retained, according to me, they once again get to learn it from the beginning.	Yes, it should be practised. We can't just build on an unstable foundation of learning. If this is done, then we are not teaching lifelong learners. A happy child is a happy adult

<p>8. By raise of hand, please indicate if you are 'for' or "against" the practice of retention.</p>	<p>All participants raised their hands indicating 'for' retention.</p>			
<p>9. According to your experience, can retention potentially have any positive effect on learners? Please elaborate.</p>		<p>Yes, in all aspects. Well, except of course as we already mentioned about the higher grades, where it can be worse for them emotionally and socially. But, it also depends on the schoolgrounds, it depends on the play-area and all those aspects yes.</p>		<p>Yes it can. Retention creates an opportunity for a child to rebuild his/her learning foundation. For example: Reading is the foundation of all learning. A child can't be put through to Gr 2 if he/she doesn't know the letters and sounds of the alphabet. How must a child be able to build words, write sentences if the recognition of sounds is not even mastered yet? How must a child do mathematics if he/she doesn't know the difference between a 6 and a 9?</p>
<p>10. According to your experience, can retention potentially have any negative effect on learners? Please elaborate.</p>			<p>At the previous school I worked at, it was very...the schoolgrounds were much small so there was no rugbyveld. The seniors was separate from the juniors, so the juniors had such a small playground that they basically on a daily basis were able to interact with most learners, if you hear what I am saying... So the bullying was much worse than what it would have been at a larger school, where they, where the juniors can play on a larger playground because then not all learners will see each other, so then they can't bully each other socially and so on.. So I think that a</p>	<p>If you look at bullying, than it can have a negative effect on a child's emotional and social development.</p>

			learner might benefit from it if it is a large school. .	
11. Would you as teacher object if your own child is advised to repeat an academic year?	But I think, as parent, you have to understand where this child is coming from. Is it circumstances from home? Understand? Because that can have an effect. So, I as a mother would be against it if I know it is because of my home environment affecting my child. If I know that it is due to my child's intellectual abilities, then it is a different story, but it also depend on the reason behind the choice of retention.	No, because we experience it 'first hand", from our side it would be different. But if we hadn't any personal experience why learners are retained and what benefits and positives it holds, and it we did not experience it, we would probably have been against it, because most parents are in the beginning in denial'. Yes, I also think that it is important for the teacher to have all the necessary proof, like the workbooks and everything, to be able to show the parents what is going on and also to show them the assessment tasks. Because without it, you won't be able to persuade them to agree with your choice [of retention].	Yes, I also think it depends on what you do with your child at home. Do you help them? Do you put enough in from your side as the teacher puts in? I think then a child shall...Yes, if I were a parent, and I know that on my part I help my child enough at home and at home they succeed, but at school they don't, then you should start to think about what the problem truly is. Would my child benefit from it, because I already do the effort and he succeeds? Is it not maybe a teacher problem?	No, I will not.
12. What is, according to you as teacher, the parents' duty regarding their child's retention?	Look, as with us in Gr1, we don't really have homework, we do a lot of reading, that is the children's' homework. So I feel, if they want their children to at least pass Grade 1, they will have to read stories with their children in the evenings, and the children have to read to them, because it is that...if the child cannot read, then the child will eventually not pass at grade 4 or 5, so that is according to me	Yes. And...what is also important from parents are motivation and to create a positive environment at home, because if a child is not happy at home, he will not be able to adapt at school. And it is the parents' duty to ensure that he can adapt, socially, at school. And if he is not happy at home, or does not have a positive environment, he will not have the	Yes, like with us in Grade 3...I have a girl in my class: her first language is Afrikaans, her second language is Zulu, and her third language is English. So she struggles with English, which means...also, her parents cannot either speak English and she does not attend aftercare, so there is no reinforcement, no English at home, therefore that which she gets at school is all she gets. So I think parents' duty	Parents are also unfortunately liable for their child's development: They need to make sure that the get all the help they need for their children. Some people don't have the money for therapist and psychologist, but there are a lot of resources on the internet. Parents must take the time to look at their child's work on a regular basis. Communicate with

	<p>their duty... So I cannot really say they must do homework together, but they have to do reading together. And in the other grades, if they don't attend aftercare, who will do the homework with the children?</p>	<p>will power to want to adapt at school.</p>	<p>is also to teach themselves so that they are able to help their children.</p>	<p>the teacher and school. Attend parent meetings. Help to get the paperwork reading. Provide the needed paperwork. Go and sign the paperwork. Send the paperwork back. Make time for your child. Prepare him/her for the process. Don't lie to your child! Have his/her back and set new targets with your child.</p>
<p>13. Do you know the policies that impact on learner retention?</p>	<p>Yes. See we receive quite a lot of training in policies and things we need to follow. I know that it just recently changed, so that Mathematics is not a subject on which a learner may be retained. So only if you fail Afrikaans or English, can it be seen as a retainable subject.. That has now changes here in South Africa.</p>	<p>Nods in agreement with P1's response.</p>	<p>Nods in agreement with P1's response.</p>	<p>Yes, I do.</p>
<p>14. Any teacher who is willing and able to share a story about a learner you've taught who were retained (either by yourself or in the preceding/succeeding academic year), please make yourself known to the interviewer by raise of hand.</p>	<p>Responses not included in this document. Responses were transcribed in accordance with a faithful translation method, and then paraphrased into case studies.</p>			

Teacher experiences

Teacher experiences as quoted by participants

P1.

Last year and the year before, I had a boy in my class that were retained. I took over another teacher's class in the third term and I saw that he was not up to standard. I met with the parents and explained to them that he will have to be retained.

I have to say that this boy came from terrible circumstance at home. There were reports of abuse, low financial income, his mother was bipolar, and his dad worked long hours. His dad also left their family for another woman in the middle of his first grade 1 year.

I also witnessed perceptual problems (he shook/shivered when he was trying to write). During his almost two years in my class, he was never able to understand and recognize the sounds we learnt, so he could never really read properly or build words. He was referred to a neurologist (by me), but they could not afford to take him.

P2.

I want to tell you about a learner who is going to be retained this year, he has not been retained yet, but I know he will be this year. He has a twin sister. The circumstances at home are not good. The parents are divorced. His youngest brother is 19 years old, and his oldest brother is 28 years old. And then the twins are in 7. Because the parents are separated, they decided to separate the twins as well. The sister stays with the mother and the brother stays with the father. On top of that, their home language is English. (Not Afrikaans, the school's language of instruction).

The boy has trouble adapting and has separation anxiety, he has had a few incidents at school where he through tantrums in the corridors and shouted. And now, based on his marks, he has failed his year, but the sister just passed. The mother requested that both of them be retained, I think because of their emotional and social circumstances.

So both of them will be staying behind. Now and then they both stay at their mother's house. So yes, they have bad circumstances, but I believe at the end they will benefit from being retained.

P3.

Last year I had a boy that should have been retained that year according to me, but he wasn't, and he moved on to Grade 3r. This was in Grade 2. He also had terrible circumstances.

They are very poor, and they struggle to take care of him and he sometimes fails to attend school because they don't have money for petrol and can't bring him. So, already this problem caused him to fall behind...he can't really read, he can't do English, he struggles a lot. With support he can understand, if you read it to him he can understand and answer you, but he can't read or write it himself.

So even though his Afrikaans and English marks were very poor, his other marks were higher and then he was put through to the next grade. And now, his new teacher struggles a lot with him, he is definitely going to be retained this year. I also think that he would have benefitted more if he repeated Grade 2, rather than Grade 3.

Another thing is, his parents aren't able to help him. His mother is unemployed every second week, his father is much older, and is also not his biological father. They also don't have money to have him tested or put on medication to improve his concentration. He is very hyper-active and can't sit still either, so that doesn't help.

P4.

Learner 1:

I once had a child in Grade 2 with me. When we did the base line assessment in the beginning of the year, this child did not achieve the necessary requirements. I spoke to the head of the foundation phase and said that this child needs to go back to Grade 1. It was not taken seriously. That child is in his 3rd school already.

Learner 2:

Another child was in Grade 1 and during the year he did show progress, but his mom and I felt that it was not enough for him to progress to Grade 2. We began the process of retention and gathered all the administration and information. The mom then decided to move the learner to a smaller school. The learner is currently receiving 7's for all his subjects. He just needed a little push. He is very happy and has a much better self-image.