Unpacking Grade Repetition Patterns in Light of the Progression Policy in the Further Education and Training Phase

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1. Introduction

Grade repetition is considered to be a conceptually important measure of education since it is both an outcome of a previous failure, and a predictor of subsequent failure (Anderson, Case, & Lam, 2001). It has widely been used to afford underachieving learners with an opportunity to master the content of their current grade as well as acquire developmentally appropriate skills. Grade retention, or the practice of requiring learners to repeat a grade, has, however, been a controversial issue in the sector, with some defending it as a beneficial remedial practice to improve academic performance, while others argue against its detrimental effects (Peixoto, et al., 2016).

In the South African education system, repetition rates are known to be high from Grade 9 up to Grade 11, with Grade 10 recording the highest levels, at 22% in 2017 (Department of Basic Education, 2018). The Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System (LURITS) is also considered as a source providing accurate estimates of grade repetition figures, in which 25% of learners were repeating Grade 10 in 2015 (Department of Basic Education, 2016). These high repetition rates in the FET phase, which is from Grade 10 to Grade 12, are a cause for concern given the value attached to it in determining post-schooling outcomes and labour market access. The completion of Grade 12, as well as higher education, are directly related to employment outcomes (Moses, van der Berg, & Rich, 2017). In this regard, poor schooling outcomes in the FET phase are largely associated with lower productivity jobs and lower income levels, while good schooling outcomes are associated with high productivity jobs and higher incomes. The significance of the FET phase, therefore, cannot be overstated.

In 1998, the Department of Education adopted the *Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools* which stipulates that the guideline for repetition is "*one year per school phase where necessary*" (Department of Education, 1998). This implies that a learner who fails any grade in a single phase for the second time, cannot be retained in that grade, and should be allowed to progress to the next grade. Progression can, therefore, be used to prevent a learner from being retained in a phase for a period exceeding four years, provided that the underperformance of the learner in the previous grade is addressed in the grade to which the learner is promoted. The grade progression policy has been largely applied to the General Education and Training Phase (Grade R – Grade 9) since it was gazetted in 1998. However, it was only endorsed in the FET phase in 2013, since it was promulgated in the *National policy pertaining to the programme and*

promotion requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R – 12 on 28 December 2012 (Department of Basic Education, 2012)[1].

Using data from five waves of the National Income Dynamics Study (SALDRU, 2018), this paper seeks to unpack the grade repetition patterns and observe how these have changed, in light of the Progression Policy in the FET phase. It looks at those who have repeated at least once in the schooling system, those who have repeated more than once in any phase, and further, those who have repeated more than once specifically in the FET phase. Given the longitudinal nature of the panel dataset, the paper also unpacks the in-school and out-of-school transitions for cohorts of respondents before and after the policy was endorsed in the FET phase.

The analysis in this paper does indeed illustrate that there have been shifts in repetition patterns over time. We do not attempt to report any causal relationship between progression policy in the FET phase and grade repetition, however, we do report on the observable repetition patterns before and after the policy was endorsed. There are two broad trends that are emerging from the analysis. Firstly, repetition, in general, has been increasing i.e. when observing all respondents who have repeated at least once between Wave 1 and Wave 5. Through our analysis, we cannot, however, attribute this increase to any particular reason. Secondly, the proportion of those repeating more than once is declining, especially for those repeating more than once in the FET phase. Hence the introduction of the progression policy in this phase is resulting in the expected changes in repetition patterns.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides some background on the contentious grade retention versus grade progression debate, as well as some policy context relating to the progression policy. Section 3 goes on to describe the data used in this paper and also focuses on the sample construction for the analysis which is described in the subsequent sections. Section 4 looks at the general repetition patterns between Wave 1 and Wave 5, while section 5 specifically focuses on these repetition patterns just-before, and just-after the policy was endorsed in the FET phase at the beginning of 2013. Section 6 seeks to paint a picture of what the in-school and out-of-school transitions are for those who are enrolled in the FET phase after two years, and after four years. Section 7 then provides a summary of the discussion and concludes.

2. Background

Grade retention is defined as the practice of requiring a learner to repeat a particular grade when he or she does not meet the academic standards of the grade level they are currently enrolled in (Peixoto, et al., 2016). Grade retention holds an intuitive appeal – whereby, in lower grades, it is seen as a mechanism to ensure that learners master the basic skills required in higher grades; while in higher grades, it is advocated

[1] Last updated in December 2017

as a strategy to prevent learners who lack the requisite skills to become productive members of society from graduating (Martinez & Vandergrift, 1991).

The argument put forth for this "remedial" practice is to provide low-achieving students with an additional opportunity to meet such academic standards by allowing them to re-learn material, and catch-up with their peers (Chen, Zhang, Shi, Scott, & Liu, 2010). If this argument holds, we should expect to observe a relative improvement in learner achievement in the years subsequent to when they were retained. However, the efficacy of this practice is a controversial issue due to the contradictory research findings on the benefits and harmful effects of grade retention. There is an extensive body of literature pointing towards the benefits of repetition being largely short-term, with long-term effects being harmful to academic achievement, and ultimately on economic outcomes. There are also economic costs associated with the burden of financing an additional year of schooling, as well as capacity constraints in a grade to enrol additional learners.

Opponents of grade repetition argue that holding learners back does not improve, or can even be detrimental to their academic outcomes (for example, see Jimerson, 2001; Chen et al. 2010). Apart from these unfavourable effects on academic outcomes, grade repetition is also seen to have a negative impact on other educational and socio-emotional outcomes, such as low self-esteem (Martin, 2011), higher rates of school dropout (Jimerson & Ferguson, A, 2007), increase in aggression and disruptive behaviours (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007), and a lower likelihood of completing secondary school and pursuing post-secondary education (Fine & Davis, 2003).

Since 1998, the norm for repetition in the South African basic education sector has been restricted to one year per schooling phase where necessary (Department of Education, 1998), whereby progression has been used to prevent a learner from being retained in a phase for longer than four years. The *National policy pertaining to the programme and promotion requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R – 12* defines **promotion** as the movement of a learner from one grade to the next when that learner attains the minimum required levels of achievement per subject in a particular grade, as well as complies to the promotion requirements, as stipulated in the aforementioned policy document. **Progression**, however, is defined as the advancement of a learner from one grade to the next (excluding grade R), despite the learner <u>not</u> having complied with all promotion requirements (Department of Basic Education, 2012). Apart from ensuring that learners spend a maximum of four years in a phase, the policy also seeks to ensure that learners progress through a phase with the appropriate age cohort. In this regard, the policy advocates that a learner who is not ready to perform at the expected level, and who has been retained in the current phase for four years or more, and who is likely to be retained in the subsequent phase for four years or more, should receive the necessary support in order to progress to the next grade.

The grade progression policy has only been endorsed in the FET phase in 2013, since it was promulgated in the *National policy pertaining to the programme and promotion requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R – 12* on 28 December 2012. The policy further stipulates that progression in Grades 10 – 12 does not guarantee the final certification of a learner in Grade 12, and such a learner must comply

with the certification requirements of the National Senior Certificate (NSC) (Department of Basic Education, 2012). At this stage, there is no condonation of the minimum requirements that need to be satisfied. Currently, candidates who do not meet the minimum promotion and certification requirements may register for the supplementary examination in the following year for a maximum of two subjects. Candidates who do not qualify for the supplementary examination may re-enroll for the NSC as a full-time repeater candidate, provided that they are younger than 21 years of age; register as a part-time repeater candidate at a Public Adult Education Centre; or register for the Senior Certificate, which is a school-leaving qualification for adults and out-of-school learners. To this end, the Policy on a Multiple Examination Opportunity was gazetted in November 2017, in which progressed learners will be provided with an opportunity to write a limited number of subjects in the first sitting of the examination, and be allowed to write the remaining subjects in a subsequent examination (Department of Education, 2017).

In terms of learner support strategies, the progression policy highlights that districts and schools must have clearly articulated intervention strategies that include an early identification of low achievers or at-risk learners so that the school, district and province can develop and implement additional learning opportunities. In addition, the policy stipulates that the respective Provincial Education Departments are required to monitor the implementation of the progression policy across all schools in order to ensure compliance with the policy (Department of Basic Education, 2012).

There are, however, several challenges which have been highlighted in relation to the implementation of the progression policy. These include different interpretations of the policy across the system, resulting in varied implementation across schools; the dispensation relating to the Multiple Examination Opportunity was viewed by some as a mechanism to manipulate the pass rate of a school, given that the pass rate is based on learners that offer all subjects in the first examinations sitting; progressed learners are stigmatised and carry the label throughout their schooling years; and teachers are unable to provide differentiated support to progressed learners given their current workloads (Department of Basic Education, 2016). In addition, countries such as the United States of America and Canada have also adopted the practice of progressing learners, and concerns have been raised regarding the challenges faced by these progressed learners since they may lack the pre-requisite knowledge and skills to enable them to cope with the subject matter of the grade they have been progressed to. Essentially, this may result in learners becoming despondent, frustrated, and possibly dropping out of the schooling system (Reddy, 2016).

In light of the Department of Basic Education's Progression Policy, this paper seeks to unpack grade repetition patterns and observe how these have changed in the FET phase.

3. Data and sample:

The data used in this study comes from five waves of the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS). Wave 1 data were collected in 2008, Wave 2 in 2010/2011, Wave 3 in 2012, Wave 4 in 2014/2015 and Wave 5 in 2017. Data is collected for each household member in all five waves. All adults, aged 15 years and older, and currently residing in the household are administered an adult questionnaire, and a child questionnaire

is administered to the main caregiver(s) of all resident children between the ages of 0 to 14. These individual-level questionnaires collect educational information for the current interview year, as well as the previous year. A proxy questionnaire is also completed for all household members who are not available at the time of the survey. A household questionnaire is administered to the household head to collect information pertaining to income, expenditure, social-grant access and asset ownership.

The NIDS education module contains information regarding a respondent's progress through school, post-schooling choices, educational expenditure, and also collects retrospective information on items such as previous enrolment circumstances. Apart from the education module in these questionnaires, NIDS also collects information on birth history, parental education, household living arrangements, labour market participation, health and social assistance.

The focus of the analysis is to explore the schooling transitions of respondents, particularly in relation to grade repetition, and how these transitions have changed in response to the introduction of the progression policy which was endorsed in the FET phase in 2013. Using the NIDS panel dataset is advantageous as it allows one to track individual respondents across waves and observe such transitions, and if and how they have changed over time. Among the key variables of interest used in this study are whether an individual repeated any grade in school, and if so, which grades and how many times were each of these grades repeated. The Wave 5 dataset is comprised of the most useful information pertaining to grade repetition, since the respective repetition questions are asked retrospectively, and reflects some form of progression across all five waves. This is essential to understanding transitions in relation to the progression policy i.e. whether a repeating learner only repeats in one grade per phase or repeats more than once per phase – which is not in line with what the policy stipulates. These repetition questions were also asked in Wave 1 which allows one to observe these patterns for a few years prior to the commencement of NIDS data collection. The four phases under consideration are the Foundation Phase (Grades R – 3), the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 – 6), the Senior Phase (Grades 7 – 9) and the FET Phase (Grades 10 – 12).

The analysis largely focuses on the Wave 5 repetition variable. We, therefore, construct the analysis sample to include all those who were enrolled at any point (between Waves 1 to 5) and in any grade between phase 1 to 4, and for whom we have information for in Wave 5 i.e. those who were successfully interviewed in Wave 5. There were 17 422 such respondents in total. It is important to note that these respondents may have been enrolled in more than one wave, and this sample could also include a top-up sample in which individuals were added in 2017 (Wave 5) to increase the number of White, Indian, and high-income respondents. The analysis sample has been constructed broadly in order to maximise the sample size and avoid the small sample size challenge.

Table 1 below presents the number of respondents who were enrolled in Grades R to 12 at the time of the relevant surveys in Waves 1 to 5, and the proportion of those who were successfully interviewed in Wave 5. For example, 8 358 respondents were enrolled in a grade between phases 1 to 4 at the time of the Wave

1 survey, and 82% (6 820) of these respondents were successfully interviewed in Wave 5. We observe higher attrition rates of 22% and 26% for Waves 2 and 3 respectively.

Table 1: Respondents enrolled at the time of the survey in each wave and successfully interviewed in Wave 5

	Enrolled at the time of the survey	Were enrolled at the time of the relevant survey, and also has information in W5	
	Obs	Obs	%
Wave 1	8,358	6,820	82%
Wave 2	8,088	6,294	78%
Wave 3	12,987	9,667	74%
Wave 4	11,611	9,614	83%
Wave 5	12,348	12,348	100%

Table 2 below presents the proportion of respondents who were enrolled at the time of the survey in each wave by education phase and were successfully interviewed in Wave 5. For example, 30% of those who were enrolled in Phases 1-4 during the time of the survey in Wave 1~~,~~ and ~~also~~ have information in Wave 5, were enrolled in Phase 1. The proportion of those enrolled in Phase 4 in each wave is generally lower than the preceding phases of schooling. We attempt to largely focus on this phase throughout the analysis in this paper.

Table 2: Respondents enrolled in each wave, by phase, and successfully interviewed in Wave 5

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	n
Wave 1	30.0%	27.4%	23.6%	19.0%	6,820
Wave 2	23.0%	28.7%	28.1%	20.1%	6,294
Wave 3	34.3%	24.0%	23.5%	18.2%	9,667
Wave 4	33.4%	23.8%	23.6%	19.1%	9,614
Wave 5	33.2%	24.0%	21.9%	21.0%	12,348

4. Repetition patterns between Wave 1 and Wave 5

Before trying to unpack whether there have been any shifts in repetition patterns in response to the endorsement of the progression policy in the FET phase, we first look at what the general repetition patterns have been based on responses to the relevant questions in the Wave 1 and Wave 5 NIDS adult questionnaires. For this purpose, we do not restrict the analysis to the sample defined above, since the Wave 1 questionnaire allows us to observe retrospective repetition information for those who were not necessarily enrolled in any schooling phase between Waves 1 to 5.

The table below presents the proportion of 15 to 30-year-olds who have repeated any schooling grade at least once or more than once, and the proportion who repeated more than once in the FET phase. These adults were asked whether they had ever repeated any school grade – used as an indication of repeating at least once, and if so, which grades and how many times they repeated each of these grades – used to gauge the proportion of those who repeated more than once, as well as more than once in the FET phase. Overall, we observe higher repetition rates for respondents in Wave 5. We are particularly interested in how

the proportion of 15 to 30-year-olds who repeated more than once in the FET phase has changed. This is higher for those who responded to these questions in Wave 5 at 7.72% than those in Wave 1 at 3.86%. We would expect the proportion of those repeating more than once in the FET phase to decline since the endorsement of the progression policy in 2013. However, these repetition observations are not restricted to a particular time period, and given the retrospective nature of these questions, the observed repetition patterns may also include several years prior to when the policy was endorsed.

Table 3: Proportion of 15 to 30-year-olds that repeated a school grade

	Wave 1		Wave 5	
	%	N	%	N
At least once	42.10%	7,987	51.98%	11,811
More than once	15.17%	7,987	20.65%	11,811
More than once in the FET phase	3.86%	7,987	7.22%	11,811

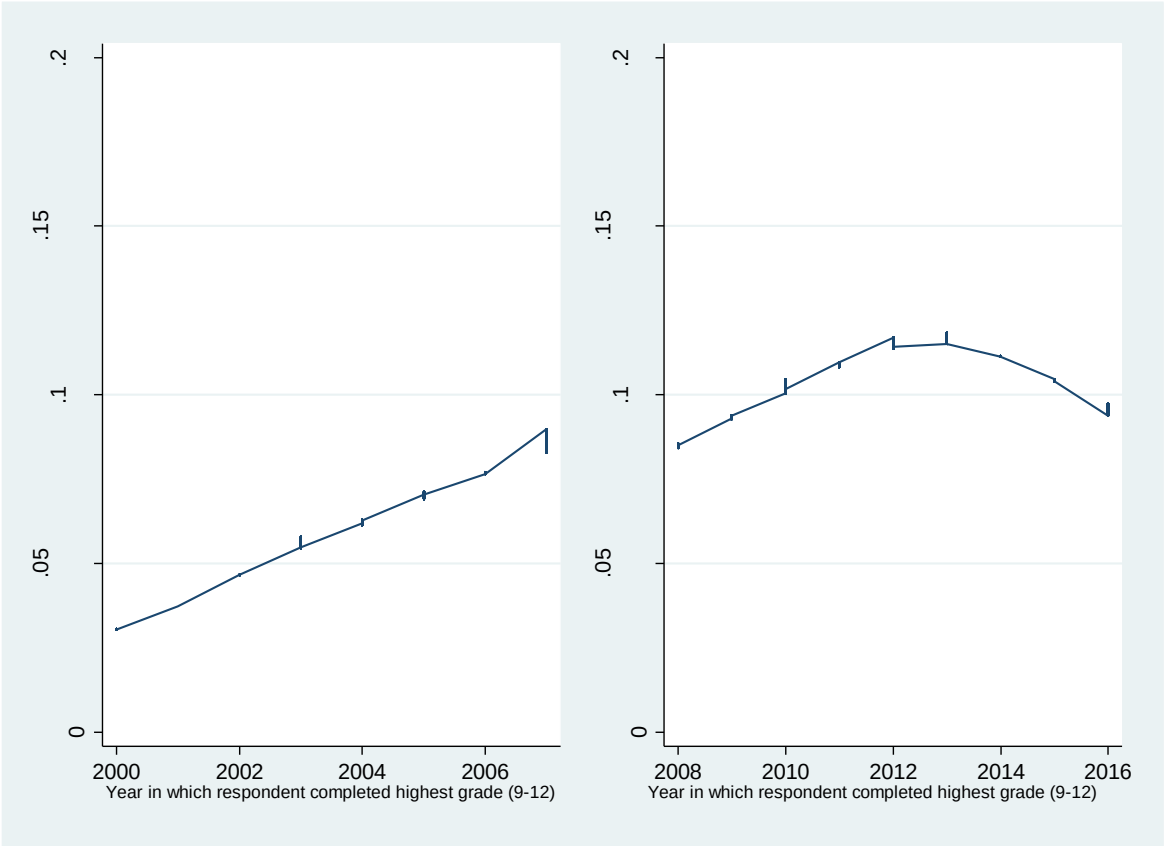
Notes: (i) Post-stratification weights are used.

The figure below illustrates how the proportion of 15 to 30 years who have repeated more than once in the FET phase has changed over time. The curves in the figure - smoothed using Locally Weighted Scatter Plot Smoothing (Lowess), essentially represents the proportion of 15 to 30 year olds who repeated a grade more than once in the FET phase by the year in which they completed their highest schooling grade (ranging from Grade 9 to Grade 12 to allow for repetition to be observed in the full FET phase). The observations are further restricted to those who are no longer in school i.e. respondents who were not enrolled in school at the time of the survey or reported education levels that were higher than Grade 12 to allow for a potentially full transition through the FET phase. Given that the Wave 5 questionnaire was administered in 2017, we look at those who completed their highest grade before 2017, and in and after 2008 for the Wave 5 sample. The number of observations were much lower for those who completed their highest grade before 2008 in Wave 5 – since we restricted the age of respondents to 15 to 30-years-old, and we would expect a 30-year-old to have completed their highest grade between 2005 and 2006, assuming they have not repeated a single grade. Similarly, the Wave 1 questionnaire was administered in 2008, hence, we consider respondents who completed their highest grade before 2008 and in and after 2000 (considering the same number of years in each wave while also taking into account that the number of observations were fewer for those who completed their highest grade before 2000, since we have restricted the age of respondents to those between 15 and 30 years old).

The shapes of these curves suggest that the proportion of 15 to 30-year-olds repeating a grade (Grades 10 to 12) more than once in the FET phase was increasing each year by the year in which respondents completed their highest grade i.e. the probability of repeating at least twice in this phase was increasing between 2000 and 2013. One of the reasons to expect such a trend is that the norm for repetition was restricted to one year per phase and applied to the GET phase since 1998. These learners were progressed through the system during the first three schooling phases, and as a result of potentially not being able to cope with content in the FET phase, repeated more than once in that phase. The proportion of 15 to 30-

year-olds repeating more than once in the FET phase seems to decline for those who completed their highest grade after 2013. During this year, the proportion of those repeating more than once peaked at approximately 12%, declining in the subsequent years thereafter i.e. if a learner already repeated once in the FET phase, they should be less likely to repeat again in this phase since the endorsement of the policy. This decline could, therefore, be attributed to a system response to the policy signal to reduce repetition in this phase in 2013. We attempt to unpack this by looking at whether or not there are significant differences in these repetition patterns before and after the policy was endorsed in the FET phase in 2013.

Figure 1: Proportion of 15 to 30-year-olds that repeated more than once in the FET phase by the year of schooling completed



Notes: (i) The figure shows the proportion of those who repeat a grade more than once in the FET phase (Grade 10 – 12) by year in which they completed their highest schooling grade (between Grade 9 – 12); (ii) The figure also focuses on those who are no longer enrolled in school i.e. not currently enrolled in an education institution or report current education levels that are higher than Grade 12; (iii) These trends are considered for the analysis sample under consideration; (iv) Post-stratification weights are used; (v) The endorsement of the progression policy in the FET phase was in 2013.

5. Pre and post-progression policy repetition patterns[2]

The progression policy is adhered to when a learner is prevented from being retained in a phase for a period exceeding four years. The most recent endorsement of the policy in the FET phase provides impetus to assess whether the policy has been largely adhered to; in particular, whether there have been any shifts in repetition rates in line with what one would expect in response to the introduction of this policy.

In order to unpack whether there are any significant differences in repetition patterns since the policy was endorsed in the FET phase in 2013, we look at repetition information and some respondent characteristics for the cohort of respondents who completed school just before the policy was introduced in the FET phase – those who completed their highest grade in and after 2009 and before 2013 (**Group 1**), compared to the cohort of respondents who completed school in and after 2013 and before 2017 i.e. the year of the Wave 5 questionnaire (**Group 2**). We restrict the first cohort to those who completed school in and after 2009 and before 2013 to have the same number of possible years of schooling completed among the two groups. We further restrict these cohorts to those who are no longer in school in order to observe whether or not they have repeated more than once in the FET phase, and those who are between the ages of 15 and 30 years old. The Wave 5 repetition variables are used for this analysis since it contains the retrospective repetition information for the time periods under consideration. The sample size for respondents in Group 1 is 4 015 and that of Group 2 is 3 780 respondents for the analysis sample under consideration.

Table 4 presents a comparison of the proportion of repeaters in Group 1 and Group 2, as well as a comparison of the mean characteristics for repeaters in each of these groups. It is interesting to note that the proportion of those repeating at least once and the proportion of those repeating more than once is significantly higher for the cohort of respondents who completed school before the policy was endorsed in the FET phase, compared to those who completed school post-introduction of the policy. The proportion of 15 to 30-year-olds who repeated at least once in the schooling system is high for both groups i.e. at 68% for Group 1 and slightly lower at 63% for Group 2. This is indicative of the fact that secondary schools, even with high levels of repetition in the Senior Phase (Phase 3), do not consider whether or not learners are coping with the curriculum in preparation for the final three years of school. The proportion of respondents repeating at least once in the FET phase (Phase 4) is also significantly higher at 46% for Group 1 compared to 23% for Group 2 after the policy was introduced. We are more interested in observing how the proportion of 15 to 30-year-olds repeating more than once in the FET phase has changed. If the progression policy has been implemented correctly, we should expect to see lower proportions of learners repeating more than once in the FET phase.

Overall, the proportion of respondents repeating more than once (in any phase) is significantly lower for Group 2 (post-policy) at 23% compared to respondents in Group 1 who completed school before the policy was endorsed at 31%. More importantly, the proportion of 15 to 30-year-olds repeating more than once in

[2] In relation to the endorsement of the progression policy in the FET phase in 2013.

the FET phase is significantly lower (12 percentage points lower) at 2% for Group 2 compared to 14% for respondents in Group 1 – and this is in line with what one would expect through the enforcement of the policy in this phase.

We further observe that the proportion of 15 to 30-year-olds repeating a grade at least once, or more than once, increases as learners' transition into higher phases. The proportion of respondents who repeated at least once in the FET phase before the policy was endorsed (Group 1) is much higher compared to the preceding phases for the same cohort. The proportion of respondents repeating more than once in Group 1 is also higher in Phase 4 compared to the preceding phases' pre-policy endorsement. These patterns prevailed as learners were progressed through the GET phase, and repetition was not restricted to once in the FET phase before 2013. It is interesting to note how the proportion of respondents who repeated more than once in Group 2 i.e. those who completed their highest grade in and after 2013, is low (between 2% and 3%) and consistent across all four phases. This could lead us to believe that the introduction of the progression policy is having its intended outcome on repetition patterns.

Table 4: Repetition information and individual, school and household characteristics

	Group 1: Completed school in and after 2009 and before 2013		Group 2: Completed school in and after 2013 and before 2017		Group 1 / Group 2 significantly different
	Mean	Obs	Mean	Obs	
Repeat at least once	0.68	3,695	0.63	3,648	***
Phase 4	0.46	3,668	0.23	3,639	***
Phase 3	0.19	3,669	0.24	3,639	***
Phase 2	0.12	3,669	0.18	3,639	***
Phase 1	0.11	3,668	0.16	3,638	***
Repeat more than once	0.31	3,684	0.23	3,645	***
Phase 4	0.14	3,668	0.02	3,639	***
Phase 3	0.05	3,669	0.03	3,639	***
Phase 2	0.02	3,669	0.03	3,639	***
Phase 1	0.02	3,668	0.03	3,638	***
Characteristics of those who repeated at least once					
Demographic characteristics					
Male	0.43	2,539	0.42	2,392	
Schooling					
Highest grade completed	10.74	2,531	9.10	2,391	***
Highest school grade in mathematics completed	9.96	2,487	8.89	2,362	***
Characteristics of those who repeated more than once					
Demographic characteristics					
Male	0.33	1,175	0.31	928	
Schooling					
Highest grade completed	10.51	1,170	8.62	928	***
Highest school grade in mathematics completed	9.76	1,148	8.53	916	***
Characteristics of those who repeated more than once in the FET phase					

Demographic characteristics					
Male	0.41	497	0.53	111	
Schooling					
Highest grade completed	10.93	495	10.31	110	***
Highest school grade in mathematics completed	10.02	490	9.33	110	***

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Notes: (i) Post-stratification weights are used for each of the respective waves; (ii) Wave 5 repetition variables are used for this analysis.

In addition, we attempt to unpack and compare the mean characteristics of respondents who repeated at least once or more than once in each of the two groups. It was unreasonable, however, to compare some of these characteristics, given the two separate time periods under consideration. For example, given that we are using the repetition variables from Wave 5, and these questions have been asked retrospectively, it is obvious that those in Group 1 will be significantly older than respondents in Group 2. Similarly, we do not compare mean household characteristics, such as household size and household income, since we expect older respondents to have moved out of the households they resided in while in school and be living on their own, as well as earning a higher income. In terms of comparing mean demographic characteristics across the two groups, we only consider looking at gender, in which males repeat more than females, but the difference between the two groups is not significant. We also consider the mean schooling characteristics, such as the highest grade that learners in each group completed[3], and the highest grade in which they completed Mathematics. Respondents in Group 1 who repeated at least once and those who repeated more than once in the FET phase completed Grade 11 on average, compared to those in Group 2, who on average, only completed Grade 9. Similarly, the highest grade which respondents completed Mathematics, for those who repeated at least once, more than once, or more than once in the FET phase, was Grade 10 on average for respondents in Group 1 but only Grade 9 for respondents in Group 2.

On average, respondents in Group 1 who completed school before the policy was introduced in the FET phase stayed in school for longer compared to those in Group 2 who completed school after the endorsement of the policy in 2013. Again, one of the possible reasons underlying this is that learners in Group 1 were allowed to be progressed throughout the GET phase (repetition restricted to once per phase) and into the FET phase – where they could repeat as many times as necessary. However, since the implementation of the progression policy in the FET phase in 2013, we may expect learners who have been progressed - despite not having complied with all promotion requirements, to not be able to cope with the subject matter in the FET phase. These repeaters in the FET phase may become despondent and drop out of the system, or alternatively, they may start moving into other alternatives, such as employment or technical and vocational pathways. Despite the benefits of successful outcomes, the FET phase, in and of itself has also been quite contentious in recent years. The current schooling system is designed to mainly prepare learners for higher education, with those who either drop-out or do not qualify for entrance at a

[3] Learners may have responded that their highest Grade completed was Grade 12. In addition, the Wave 5 adult questionnaire does ask if they passed with a Bachelor, Diploma or NSC pass when they wrote the NSC or if they obtained a University exemption after writing the Matric exam. However, we do not know for sure if they did indeed obtain their Grade 12 qualification – it could have been after several attempts at supplementary examinations.

higher education institution being left behind. Approximately 32% of the youth aged 15-24 are not in employment, education or training (NEET) in 2018 (Statistics South Africa, 2018). Public Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges are intended to provide seamless technical and vocational pathways after Grade 9, however, these institutions offer diplomas and certificates as opposed to degrees, which tends to make them less highly regarded academically, and these institutions currently see lower levels of enrolment compared to Universities (Branson & Kahn, 2016).[4]

Next, we look at the probability of repeating at least once or more than once through a series of Probit models (See Appendix A). We are less interested in the marginal effects of the covariates on the probability of repeating, but instead, are concerned about whether respondents who completed school post-policy are more or less likely to repeat after the endorsement of the policy. There are three dependent variables under consideration i.e. repeating at least once, repeating more than once, and repeating more than once in the FET phase. Our base category for the dependent variable in all regressions are those who do not repeat. The first regression for each of these dependent variables only includes the group that respondents were in - centred around the year in which they completed their highest schooling grade. The second regression includes controls for demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race, and province; while the third regression includes additional controls for school characteristics.

In the first regression for each of the dependent variables, the dummy variable for being in one of the two groups is highly significant in explaining repetition patterns for those who repeated at least once, more than once, or more than once in the FET phase. The results indicate that respondents in Group 2, who completed their highest grade after the progression policy was introduced in the FET phase, have a lower probability of repeating at least once, more than once, as well as more than once in the FET phase – compared to those who completed their highest grade before the policy was endorsed. The group that respondents are a part of becomes insignificant for those who repeated at least once, or those who repeat more than once in any phase when demographic and school level controls are added, suggesting that there is no direct relationship. It is interesting to note, however, that the group that respondents are a part of is significant at a 10% level for those who repeat more than once in the FET phase when additional demographic and school – level are controlled for. Post-progression policy, the probability of repeating more than once is indeed less than before it had been introduced in this phase.

[4] In response to these challenges, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) proposed a Three-Stream-Model for 2017 for learners from Grade 9 onwards. An academic stream which resembles the current schooling system; the technical occupational stream aimed at producing students who can complete Grade 12 and immediately enter the workplace with specific skills, for example, woodwork and hair dressing; and the technical vocational stream which includes subjects such as engineering and drawing.

We note that respondents who had completed their highest schooling grade after the policy was introduced in the FET phase were less likely to repeat more than once, but we also note that their highest schooling grade completed was, on average, lower compared to those who completed school before the policy was endorsed. We, therefore, attempt to unpack the in-school and out-of-school pathways followed by learners before and after the progression policy was introduced in the FET phase.

6. In-school and out-of-school transitions

We first explore the two-year in-school and out-of-school transitions for cohorts of respondents at the extreme ends of all 5 waves, and hence, observe these transitions before and after the policy was introduced in the FET phase. That is, respondents enrolled in Grades 9 to 12 in Wave 1 (2008) and successfully interviewed in Wave 2 (2010) compared to respondents enrolled in Grades 9 to 12 in Wave 4 (2014) and have information for them in Wave 5 (using information collected for 2016). This is presented in Table 5 below.

The blocked diagonal elements represent the proportion of respondents who were enrolled in a particular grade in the FET phase, and are progressing at the desired rate (for in-school transitions) of two-grades over a two-year period. The percentages below the blocked diagonal elements represent the proportion of those who are repeating one or more grades. We see that 54% of respondents who were enrolled in Grade 9 in 2008 progressed at the desired rate, while 44% of those enrolled in Grade 10 in 2008 progressed at the desired rate. However, close to 27% of the respondents enrolled in Grade 9 in 2008 are enrolled in either Grade 9 or 10 in 2010 and have therefore repeated a grade at least once. Similarly, approximately 32% of those enrolled in Grade 10 in 2008 are have repeated at least once by 2010. However, we observe lower proportions of respondents who are progressing at the desired rate for the cohort of learners who are exposed to the policy. Only 47% of respondents enrolled in Grade 9 in 2014 progressed at the desired rate, while this proportion was only 38% among those who were enrolled in Grade 10. The result being that we are seeing a greater proportion of those enrolled in these grades repeating more than once. In particular, 41% for those who were enrolled in Grade 9 and 44% for those who were enrolled in Grade 10 in 2014. We cannot, however, establish whether there have been any changes in the proportion repeating more than once in the FET phase from the two-year transition matrices.

It is interesting to note that more learners who have not completed Grade 12, after the policy was introduced in the FET phase, tend to enrol in post-schooling options that do not require a matric qualification (vocational training, certificates and diplomas without matric). For example, 2.9% of those enrolled in Grade 11 in 2008 were enrolled for a post-schooling diploma/certificate that did not require Matric. Similarly, 5.8% of those enrolled in Grade 12 in 2008 were enrolled in these post-schooling options after two years without completing their Matric. These proportions are higher post-progression policy, at 4.7% for those who were enrolled in Grade 11 in 2014 and 10.6% for those enrolled in Grade 12 in 2014 after two years. In addition,

the proportion of those completing matric and enrolled in post-schooling qualifications after two years is higher for those exposed to the policy compared to those who were not.

We also observe that more respondents who were enrolled in Grades 11 and 12 post-policy were employed compared to the first cohort. Further, the proportion of those who are not enrolled in an educational institution after two years and are no longer economically active is lower for those enrolled in Grades 9 and 10 post-policy i.e. in 2014 (5% compared to 11% for those enrolled in Grade 9 and 4% compared to 15% for those enrolled in Grade 10 in 2008). These are respondents that are likely to have dropped out of the schooling system without any additional post-schooling or employment opportunities. We do, however, acknowledge that we cannot attribute these changes directly to the progression policy, and they may simply be an outcome of external factors such as the general economic climate.

We further investigate the four-year in-school and out-of-school transitions for the cohort of respondents enrolled in Grades 9 to 12 in Wave 1 and successfully interviewed in Wave 3 (2012) compared to those enrolled in these grades in Wave 3 and successfully interviewed in Wave 5 (using information collected for 2016). The desired rate of progression regarding in-school and out-of-school transitions in four years is ideally through four grades, then progressing into post-schooling options with Matric.

Table 6 represents the four-year in-school and out-of-school transitions for these respective cohorts. We would expect participants who were enrolled in Grade 9 during the first year under consideration in each cohort to ideally be enrolled in post-schooling options (with Matric) after four years. However, approximately 33% of those enrolled in Grade 9 in Wave 1 and 15% of those enrolled in Grade 10 have repeated a grade at least once. The proportion of those repeating in the years after the policy are higher than those repeating pre-introduction of the policy, in which approximately 45% of those enrolled in Grade 9 in Wave 3 are repeating a grade at least once, while close to 16% of those enrolled in Grade 10 in Wave 3 repeat at least once.

An interesting observation is that the proportion of those exposed to the policy who are choosing to enrol in post-schooling options, such as vocational training and obtaining certificates and diplomas, with less than a Matric, are higher than for those who have not been exposed to the policy. These respondents who were enrolled particularly in Grades 10 to 12 in Wave 3 are choosing to enrol in post-schooling options instead of continuously remaining in the FET phase. This could perhaps be attributed to the increased options available to the learners in later years. In addition, more of these respondents are moving into employment as opposed to choosing post-schooling education opportunities, with the unemployment rate being lower for all respondents who were enrolled in post-progression policy. However, the proportion of those who are not employed and not economically active for those enrolled in Grades 10, 11 and 12 in Wave 3 is higher than for the group of respondents enrolled in the same grades in Wave 1. This could be indicative of the fact learners who were progressed could not obtain their Matric qualification, given that the promotion requirements need to be met to obtain the National Senior Certificate, and hence, their employment opportunities are limited, resulting in them being discouraged and no longer economically active. This is

simply one possible option, however, there are several exogenous factors that will need to be considered in order to fully understand how and why these transitions have taken place.

Table 5: Two-year in-school and out-of-school transitions

	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Certificates/ Diplomas (Less than Matric)	Post - schooling qualifications (With Matric)	Employed	Unemployed (Strictly and discouraged)	Not enrolled & not economically active	n
Wave 1 (2008) - Wave 2 (2010)										
Grade 9	3.50	22.97	54.14	0.48	0.91	0.26	2.44	4.21	11.08	389
Grade 10	0.73	5.33	25.77	44.22	0.47	0.17	4.95	4.88	13.49	443
Grade 11	0.00	0.84	5.04	17.42	2.94	6.92	12.01	29.85	24.98	350
Grade 12	0.00	0.00	0.23	3.07	5.78	17.31	19.49	28.80	25.32	305
Wave 4 (2014) - Wave 5 (2016)										
Grade 9	4.37	36.65	46.79	0.74	0.00	0.21	2.31	3.96	4.98	777
Grade 10	0.08	5.74	37.56	38.17	2.70	0.04	5.39	5.97	4.35	787
Grade 11	0.00	0.14	3.76	21.87	4.73	8.75	20.17	16.86	23.72	570
Grade 12	0.00	0.00	0.43	2.08	10.64	20.42	28.41	12.07	25.94	351

Notes: (i) Each row sums to 100; (ii) Point estimates weighted using panel weights; (iii) Transition errors were not corrected for; (iv) Respondents were successfully interviewed in subsequent waves.

Table 6: Four-year schooling and out-of-school transitions

	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Certificates/ Diplomas (Less than Matric)	Post - schooling qualifications (With Matric)	Employed	Unemployed (Strictly and discouraged)	Not enrolled & not economically active	n
Wave 1 (2008) - Wave 3 (2012)										
Grade 9	0.00	3.54	12.39	16.80	1.74	5.90	15.33	23.16	21.15	401
Grade 10	0.00	0.38	7.39	6.95	5.93	14.61	19.33	27.28	18.13	463
Grade 11	0.00	3.24	0.82	2.75	5.78	15.40	25.92	28.53	17.55	386
Grade 12	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.33	4.49	14.90	34.16	28.00	17.13	324
Wave 3 (2012) - Wave 5 (2016)										
Grade 9	0.20	5.20	17.77	21.66	1.94	4.43	17.48	14.98	16.32	737
Grade 10	0.00	0.03	5.18	10.66	9.58	12.35	23.49	15.56	23.16	689
Grade 11	0.00	0.00	0.56	2.54	9.08	16.31	34.67	17.63	19.21	560
Grade 12	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.00	10.62	15.12	35.82	17.57	18.88	385

Notes: (i) Each row sums to 100; (ii) Point estimates weighted using panel weights; (iii) Transition errors were not corrected for; (iv) Respondents were successfully interviewed in subsequent waves.

7. Conclusion

The analysis in this paper illustrates that there have been shifts in repetition patterns in light of the introduction of the progression policy in the FET phase in 2013. In particular, there are two broad trends that have emerged. Firstly, repetition, in general, i.e. those who have repeated at least once and more than once, has been increasing over time between Wave 1 and Wave 5. Secondly, the proportion of those repeating more than once has been decreasing since the introduction of the progression policy in the FET phase.

Some of the noteworthy observations include the following: (i) the proportion of respondents repeating at least once, more than once, and more than once in the FET phase is higher for those who responded to the Wave 5 adult questionnaire compared to those who responded to the Wave 1 questionnaire; (ii) the general repetition patterns between Wave 1 and Wave 5 shows that the proportion of 15 to 30-year-olds repeating more than once ~~grade~~ in the FET phase was increasing over time, and began to decline after 2013 which could be attributed to a system response to the policy signal to reduce repetition in the FET phase; (iii) a comparison of a cohort of 15 to 30 year old respondents who completed their highest schooling grade just-before and just-after the endorsement of the policy in 2013 reveals that the proportion of respondents who repeated more than once in the FET phase is significantly lower (12 percentage points) for the just-after policy cohort; (iv) repeating more than once per phase is lower and more consistent for the just-after policy cohort, while it is more concentrated in phase 4 for the just-before cohort; (v) the highest grade completed for the just-after cohort is significantly lower than the highest grade completed for respondents who completed school before the introduction of the policy; (vi) respondents who completed their highest schooling grade after the introduction of the policy have a lower probability of repeating at least once, more than once in any phase, or more than once in the FET phase than those pre-policy; and (vii) the proportion of respondents progressing at the desired rate is lower post-introduction of the progression policy.

This paper simply looked at repetition patterns, and whether or not the endorsement of the grade progression policy in the FET phase led to the expected changes in repetition. It is recommended that further research needs to be conducted to fully understand what the implications of progressed learners on Matric outcomes are – using more detailed Matric information, as well as the out-of-school outcomes for these progressed learners. It will also be interesting to observe differences in these outcomes for those who were allowed to repeat more than once in the FET phase compared to those who are now exposed to the policy.

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Table 7: Probit regressions of the probability of repeating

	Repeat at least once			Repeat more than once			Repeat more than once in the FET phase		
VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Group	-0.312***	-0.0438	-0.0647	-0.293***	-0.00909	-0.0179	-0.680***	-0.229*	-0.238*
	(0.0847)	(0.101)	(0.100)	(0.0890)	(0.110)	(0.114)	(0.107)	(0.133)	(0.136)
Controls									
Age		0.0388***	0.0543***		0.0422***	0.0577***		0.0930***	0.0907***
		(0.0124)	(0.0132)		(0.0147)	(0.0155)		(0.0180)	(0.0183)
Gender		-0.428***	-0.344***		-0.595***	-0.516***		-0.143*	-0.145*
Race									
Coloured		-0.439***	-0.527***		-0.436***	-0.513***		-0.896***	-0.897***
		(0.146)	(0.151)		(0.152)	(0.161)		(0.189)	(0.187)
Asian/Indian		-1.084***	-0.997***		-1.951***	-1.897***			
		(0.346)	(0.356)		(0.268)	(0.278)			
White		-1.000***	-1.048***		-0.324	-0.288		-1.018**	-1.050***
Province									
Eastern Cape		0.258*	0.0543		0.226	0.0425		0.103	0.0879
		(0.151)	(0.158)		(0.157)	(0.168)		(0.195)	(0.201)
Northern Cape		0.195	0.103		0.460***	0.405**		0.356*	0.349
		(0.154)	(0.169)		(0.167)	(0.179)		(0.210)	(0.213)
Free State		0.270	0.189		0.409**	0.340*		0.238	0.178
		(0.169)	(0.178)		(0.177)	(0.185)		(0.219)	(0.225)
KwaZulu-Natal		0.0949	0.0579		0.426***	0.436***		0.262	0.213
		(0.138)	(0.144)		(0.140)	(0.146)		(0.170)	(0.173)
North West		0.332*	0.254		0.213	0.145		0.192	0.155
		(0.181)	(0.191)		(0.181)	(0.190)		(0.209)	(0.212)
Gauteng		0.212	0.227		0.381***	0.423***		0.452***	0.418**
		(0.145)	(0.150)		(0.142)	(0.150)		(0.172)	(0.174)
Mpumalanga		0.345**	0.269		0.850***	0.825***		0.544***	0.487***
		(0.160)	(0.168)		(0.155)	(0.162)		(0.182)	(0.186)
Limpopo		0.602***	0.570***		0.997***	0.988***		0.775***	0.737***
		(0.161)	(0.169)		(0.153)	(0.162)		(0.173)	(0.179)
School characteristics									
Highest grade completed			-0.247***			-0.198***			0.00595
			(0.0295)			(0.0257)			(0.0315)
Highest school grade in mathematics completed			0.0320*			0.0153			0.0185
			(0.0187)			(0.0169)			(0.0200)
Constant	0.395***	-0.466	1.602***	-0.606***	-1.762***	-0.145	-1.150***	-3.652***	-3.804***
	(0.0344)	(0.321)	(0.420)	(0.0341)	(0.375)	(0.427)	(0.0421)	(0.464)	(0.520)
Observations	4,049	4,049	3,940	4,040	4,040	3,932	4,024	3,991	3,883
Pseudo R-squared	0.00568	0.0662	0.104	0.00451	0.101	0.130	0.0186	0.0962	0.0939

Robust standard errors in parentheses,
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1