

Grade Retention at Primary School: What the Teachers in Zimbabwe Say

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Abstract: Primary education is the base of all advanced education levels, developments and innovations; it should therefore be meticulously done so as not to disadvantage the learners. In a bid to *do it well*, those involved in primary education have tried and are still trying strategies that can give the learners maximum advantage, for instance, grade retention and grade promotion. This research aimed at assessing the Zimbabwean primary school teachers' stance on grade retention. The researcher took the advantage of Block-Release students at Solusi University in April 2016 (these are teachers from all over Zimbabwe and other countries in Africa who come for their degree studies at Solusi University during the holidays) to collect data through interviews from a purposive sample of these teachers. Collected data was coded and analyzed descriptively. Findings showed that: 56% of the respondents indicated that retention is taking place at the primary schools where they are teaching but usually on a minimal scale since it is usually done upon parents' request; 67% of the respondents said that retention is necessary and helpful; retention can be most suitably done at infant grades (1-3); however, the effect of retention on pupils' performance is not clear due to other factors that affect performance. Findings also showed that the Zimbabwean Government is neither for retention nor grade promotion but for ERI (Early Reading Initiative) and PLAP (Performance Lag Address Programme) which have been recently introduced.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, Primary Education, Grade Retention, Grade Promotion, Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP), For ERI (Early Reading Initiative)

1. Introduction

Primary education is very important in Zimbabwe as it is elsewhere in the world. It is the base of all other advanced education levels. Passing primary education gives a pupil entrance to secondary education. In Zimbabwe, there are nine years of primary education, that is, two years for grade Zero A and Zero B, then seven primary school years of grade one to grade seven. Usually Zimbabwean children begin grade one at the age of six and a few slightly after this age especially in the rural areas where distances to school are long. The majority of the young people find themselves at school due to friendly Zimbabwe education policies, including free primary education where children are allegedly exempted from paying tuition in both rural areas and in urban areas. However, in essence, they do pay something; the tuition can be as 'low' as US\$5 in some ordinary primary rural school (Mapako and Mareva 2013). This democratization of education, which makes education available for all, is a great achievement of Zimbabwe's post-independence government as pointed out by Ndlovu (2013). Many young Zimbabwean people, therefore, go to school; at least up to grade seven.

The medium of communication and learning in Zimbabwean primary schools is English; this is true in urban areas where the medium of instruction is purely English while the vernaculars, mainly Shona, Ndebele and Tonga (in some parts of Zimbabwe), are taught as subjects. However, in rural schools, primary school pupils are usually first exposed to their vernacular (which is their home language) and are gradually exposed to English until at about the third and fourth year when all reading and writing is then expected in English. Since then, English becomes important in their education lives at school and even after.

The Zimbabwe primary school curriculum is nationalized under the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture with objectives that are English based. The curriculum is also examination driven (USAP 2012). At the end of primary education, pupils are expected to write a national examination under the Zimbabwean English examination from the Zimbabwe School Examination Council (ZIMSEC). The examination is in four subjects, namely: English, Mathematics, Shona/Ndebele/Tonga and Content (a combination of sciences and social sciences), all of which are written in English except for the vernacular. According to Marima (1994) Zimbabwean study, there is a relative consensus on teachers' ranking of the three most important subjects at primary school, that is, English, Mathematics and Vernacular. The fact that English occupies the first position in that ranking is an indicator of its importance in the Zimbabwean Primary school curriculum.

In the past decades, grade seven examinations in Zimbabwe were based on exclusively on multiple choice questions. Then, as Kapfunde, Mapolisa and Madziyire (2012) exposed, during the second half of the last century, questions were raised on the suitability and impact of such multiple choice examinations. They revolved mostly around the evaluation of its benefits and costs and the majority of the Zimbabwean educators went against multiple choice examinations. As a result, there was a paradigm shift in Zimbabwe in the way examinations were written at grade seven level, that is from solely multiple choice based to a combination of multiple choice and essay based examinations. However, as Kapfunde et al (2012) pointed out, it should be noted that essay examinations taken at the end of the primary school cycle in Zimbabwe are not new; the strategy was there for a long time during the colonial period but was abolished at independence in 1980.

The re-introduction of the essay examinations at Grade seven level in Zimbabwe has been in place for thirteen years to date, thus it appears to be relatively new in the country and is coupled with some writing problems. The writing problems are also aggravated by the fact that almost all of the pupils in Zimbabwe are learning English as a second language. As a result, educators need to take it seriously and put effort in it so as to achieve the quality of education intended. In order to improve performance at primary school level, educators have resorted to grade retention, this means that, a pupil only moves to the higher grade after passing the current one. Grade retention has been described by Mainardes (1999) as the repetition for one year of a particular grade level as a way of correcting academic deficiency. However, there is a hot debate globally on the effects of grade retention on the low-performing learners. Several studies demonstrate that retention is harmful and does not help students to improve their level of academic attainment (Holmes, 1989).

David (2008) highlighted that educators and policymakers have debated for decades whether struggling students benefit more from repeating a grade or from moving ahead with their same-age peers; the argument for retention is that students who have not met grade-level criteria fall further and further

behind as they move through the grades. Logically, a failing 2nd grader would be better aided by repeating that 2nd grade than by moving on to 3rd grade. However, in reality, school organizations could not manage to hold back the entire students who fall behind. Although a number of researches have been carried out on grade- retention at primary school level (because this is where retention normally takes place), it is very limited in Zimbabwe. This research therefore wants to fill in this gap findings out what is best for the Zimbabwean situation.

2. Related Researches

Research on retention is vast and concentration is on elementary education. The greatest debate is on grade retention versus grade promotion. Holt and Young (2012) researched on the attitudes of primary grade teachers and elementary principals about grade retention in USA. They chose this level because grade retention is typically initiated in the primary grades. They sent a paper survey to teachers and principals in one school district, inviting them to provide their perceptions about the reasons for grade retention, the most appropriate time to retain students, and the effectiveness of interventions in deterring the use of grade retention. Findings revealed that teachers and principals believed that pupils should be retained in the event of low performance and they recommended parental involvement. The respondents agreed that retention help prevent future failure and maintain standards and motivates students to attend school. Respondents also perceived a benefit to self-concept when pupils are retained in the primary grades. However, they differ on the most appropriate time to retain pupils.

Karweit (1999) investigated the correlates and consequences of grade repetition on pupils, academic progress and social and emotional development in USA. The study addresses four major topics, that is, the measurement, prevalence and demographics of retention, the timing of retention, the academic achievement and behavioral effects of retention and the context and content of retention. Findings showed that the first grade was the most frequent grade for retention and 18.4 percent of the children repeated a grade by the end of grade 3 and of the children who do repeat, most (90.5%) repeat a grade only one time.

The study also revealed background and demographic factors that substantially increase the chances of being retained in a grade. These are gender (male), race/ethnicity, student mobility, evidence of disability and poor health status, larger family size, and attending a high poverty school. Background and other factors that protect children from being retained in a grade included attending preschool, living in an urban area, having a more educated mother with a higher income, and being rated by the teacher as more motivated and not having trouble paying attention.

Goos, Damme, Onghena, Petry, and Bilde (2013) examined the effects of first-grade retention on children's academic growth, psychosocial growth, and future school career by following a cohort of first graders until the start of secondary school. The study was carried out in the Flemish educational context where primary school students were taught in uniform curricular year groups; the same curricular goals being set for all students, irrespective of ability. Grade retention was therefore used as the main way to cater for students not reaching the set goals. Results showed that first-grade retention was less helpful for struggling students than was generally thought and believed by parents and educators.

Roderick and Nagaoka (2005) studied the effects of the Chicago Public Schools policy that bases promotion in grades 3, 6, and 8 on standardized test scores. Using comparison groups of pupils who just missed the promotion cutoff, the researchers found that 3rd graders struggled during the repeated year, had higher rates of special education placement, and two years later showed no advantage over those who had been promoted. Retained 6th graders had lesser achievement growth than similar students who were not retained. The study by Jacob and Lefgren (2007) in Chicago concluded that students retained in 8th grade were more likely to drop out than their peers.

Wu, West and Hughes (2008) investigated the relatively short-term and longer term effects of grade retention in 1st grade on the growth of Mathematics and reading achievement over 4 years. Findings showed that when using grade standard scores, retained children experienced a quicker increase in the short term but a faster decrease in the longer term in both mathematics and reading achievement than did the promoted children.

Andrew (2014) studied primary-grade retention using propensity score matching and sibling fixed-effects models. The study evaluated evidence for primary-grade retention effects on high school completion and college entry and completion. Findings showed consistent evidence of a causal effect of early primary school grade retention on high school completion. Retained children, relative to promoted children, benefited from retention in both the short and longer term aspects. Pupils can continue to recover from the effects of grade retention through early high school through their academic achievements and their expectations of high school completion as well. Models suggest that early primary grade retention scars the educational career mainly at high school completion, though there are important, unconditional effects on college entry and completion as a result.

Mainardes (1999) carried out a content analysis study on grade retention on a global scale; the analysis of the retention practices in the world indicated that the grade retention is usually used in poor countries. This notion is also supported by SACMEQ (2010) study that exposed that 31.4% of grade 6 pupils repeated grade 6 in 2007; a little higher than 28.5% in South Africa and very much lower than 60.3% in Malawi.

Below is a tabulated a summary of reasons for and against retention according to Briggs (2013):

For

- Moving students forward before they are ready sets them up for further failure.
- Automatically promoting all students sends the erroneous message that they can get by without working hard.
- Mixing underprepared students with prepared students puts unnecessary strain on teachers, who must slow down or repeat new concepts for those who are behind.
- Letting underperforming students move forward gives parents a false sense of their children's progress.
- Holding students back in early education prevents them from being held back later on.
- Pressure to meet early education standards motivates teachers to do their jobs more efficiently.

- Although many retained pupils would have received an additional year or two of schooling as a result of being retained, the costs associated with holding them back at that early stage in education is actually less than most people assume.

Against

- Holding students back lowers their self-esteem and makes them feel inferior, in effect perpetuating their failure.
- Retention impairs peer relationships, cutting off friendships made through the year and subjecting grade-repeating students to ridicule and bullying.
- Students may view themselves as further alienated from school and academics rather than grateful for specialized help.
- Retained students are more likely to drop out of school.
- Studies show temporary increased achievement compared to promoted peers but loss of achievement over time as grade repeaters fall farther and farther behind other low achievers who were promoted.
- Retained students make for larger class sizes, which are more difficult for teachers to manage.
- The direct cost of retaining students in America exceeds \$12 billion annually.
- Research shows increased rates of dangerous behaviors such as drinking, drug abuse, crime, teenage pregnancy, depression, and suicide among retained students compared to similarly performing promoted students.
- The effects of having a greater number of grade-retained peers are detrimental to the standardized achievement outcomes of non-retained classmates, a phenomenon often referred to as “the spillover effect.”

It can be concluded that studies show that there are both pros and cons to grade retention. This study wants to find out the position of grade retention in Zimbabwe according to those in the education system, that is, the teachers. This study was guided by the Powell (2010) Perilous Policy Path of Grade Retention in the Age of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). The theory calls for commitment towards all children's education. It is based on the assumptions that children are always ready to learn so they need to be paired with ready schools. Also, children would be better served through a system, which meets individual needs. The theory is against comparison of pupils and grade retention because such acts perceive pupils as people who lack the necessary skills for them to succeed. Keeping them out and holding them in place because they do not have the same knowledge of peers who may have had more educational experiences and opportunities is thus unfair. Based on this argument, the researcher assessed grade retention in the Zimbabwean context.

3. Statement of the Problem

There are usually low performers at primary school level in Zimbabwe. Some educators call for retention of such pupils (Holt, Young 2012). However, there is empirical mounting pressure against retention in favor of student promotion and other within-grade remediation strategies. The study therefore wanted to find out what is beneficial for the Zimbabwean situation getting information from those in the system, that is, primary school teachers using the following research questions:

4. Research Questions

1. How prominent is retention at primary school level in Zimbabwe?
2. What are the effects grade-retention on pupils' academic performance?
3. Which are the advantages and disadvantages of grade retention?
4. Which grade/s can be beneficially retained?
5. What is the Zimbabwean Government's stance on grade retention?

5. Research Methodology

The researchers took the advantage of the April 2016 Block-Release students at Solusi University; these are teachers from all over Zimbabwe and other countries in Africa who come for their degree studies with Solusi University during the holidays. The researcher purposively selected primary school teachers in Zimbabwe and arranged interview schedules with them. With the aid of a structured interview sheet, the researcher interviewed the selected teachers recording their responses. Collected data was coded and analyzed and findings were written into a coherent narrative.

6. Findings and Discussion

1. How prominent is retention at primary school level in Zimbabwe?

Research findings indicated that retention is taking place in Zimbabwe primary schools on a relatively moderate rate; 56% of the respondents indicated that retention was taking place at schools where they were teaching (mainly at public primary schools), however, on a minimal scale since it is usually done upon parents' request. There were isolated cases when it was done per school arrangement without necessarily consulting the parents. This, when discovered by parents through other sources (perhaps from their child) brew parents' anger. One respondent gave an example of a parent (a father) whose child was to repeat grade 4 per school arrangement. When he finally got the news, the parent was bitter and due to this bitterness and anger, proposed the child be retained not in grade 4 (the proper grade) but to preschool that is grade zero.

On the other hand, 44% of the respondents said that retention was not taking place at both public and private schools where they were teaching. The majority of this percentage showed that other remedial techniques, for example, special classes and remediation within the class, that is, ERI (Early Reading Initiative) for infants and PLAP (Performance Lag Address Programme) for higher grades were employed at the schools. One respondent explained PLAP as follows:

Excerpt 1: Retention no longer takes place at the school where I am teaching. PLAP has taken over which is new to the school. WRAT (Wide Range Achievement Test) is given to the whole class at the beginning of a year and pupils are stratified into grades, for instance, grade 1,2,3,4 etc according to their test scores. They are then taught according to these stratifications, hence, "teaching grades within a grade". *Respondent 22*

2. What are the effects grade-retention on pupils' academic performance?

The research findings could not clearly show the impact of retention on overall pass rate of the schools, that is, grade 7 pass rate. Grade 7 pass rate for 2015 ranged from 20% to 67% for schools that practiced retention while it ranged from 26% to 57% pass rate for non-retention schools. This is so because there are other factors (other than retention) that affect the pass rate.

3. Which are the advantages and disadvantages of grade retention?

The majority of the respondents concurred for retention; 67% of the respondents said that retention was necessary and helpful. The reasons they gave for retention are as follows: Early correction serves time and money rather than letting a pupil go until failing “O” Level. Again, retention uplifts pupils’ academic standards for they regain (during the retaining year) what they had missed thus satisfaction of grade requirement. Maturity, due to the retention process, can also play a positive role, that is, development of the academic ability of the pupil enabling her/him to grasp concepts. It was also suggested that retained pupils can be zealous to study so that they catch up with their age mates.

Respondents also echoed some causes of poor performance that could warrant retention. They sighted teachers’ strikes, pupil’s illness, among others.

Excerpt 2: At times there is need for retention for pupils who are disadvantaged during hard times when pupils go without teachers, for instance, due to strikes, sit-ins, etc. There is therefore need to covering up the created gap. *Respondent 16*

In explaining retention, respondents usually compared it to its antithesis, that is, grade promotion. One respondent who supported retention said:

Excerpt 3: Retention is good. Promotion does not make sense; this is why there are nonreaders at secondary school. *Respondent 07*

Another respondent also argued on the same point:

Excerpt 4: It motivates the pupil to excel, unlike in the promotion system when a pupil with learning difficulties just “cruises” with the rest of the class gaining very little. *Respondent 02*

These findings concurs with those by Holt and Young (2012) who researched on the attitudes of primary grade teachers and elementary principals about grade retention in USA and found out that teachers and principals believed that pupils should be retained in the event of low performance and they recommended parental involvement. They also found out that respondents argued that retention helps prevent future failure and maintain standards and motivates students to attend school.

These findings for retention are also supported by Briggs (2013) who found that moving students forward before they are ready sets them up for further failure. Again, letting underperforming students move forward gives parents a false sense of their children’s progress. Therefore, holding students back in early education prevents them from being held back later on.

However, 33% of the respondents were against retention. The main sighted disadvantages of grade retention found from the study include the fact that the academically challenges pupils when retained can be demotivated with academic work. One respondent propounded that:

Excerpt 5: A pupil who is made to repeat a grade develops a negative attitude towards school and never improves. S/he can even decide to drop out. Respondent 01

Some respondents also argued that some students fail to improve even when they are retained which result in the increase of the failure rate in the retained class which was not originally the current teacher's responsibility. Others were worried with aging especially for girls if retention is repeated. One respondent highlighted:

Excerpt 6: Girls can age and reach puberty while still in the lower primary school grades and can eventually marry still at primary school. Respondent 11

Some respondents went beyond the impact of retention on the child and brought in the parent and the teacher factors. They argued that it is expensive on the part of the parent and, on the part of the teacher, it affect the teacher -pupil ratio especially in small schools. One respondent elaborated:

Excerpt 7: For instance, a class with 40 students, when 10 pupils are retained, it remains with 30, which becomes an underload since the official teacher –pupil ratio is 1-40. Respondent19

Other reasons given by the respondents against retention included the psychological impact of retention on the part of the pupil, for instance, low self-esteem and stigmatization. This in turn fuels poor performance. One respondent emphasized:

Excerpt 8: There is no retention where I am teaching for the school does not allow it due to its psychological effects on the part of the child; it demotivates the retained child. It is also associated with labeling and stigmatization. Respondent 9

These findings are supported by Goos, Damme, Onghena, Petry, and Bilde (2013) who examined the effects of first-grade retention on children's academic growth, psychosocial growth, and future school career by following a cohort of first graders until the start of secondary school. Their findings showed that first-grade retention was less helpful for struggling students than was generally thought and believed by parents and educators.

On the same note, Roderick and Nagaoka (2005) found that retained 6th graders had lesser achievement growth than similar students who were not retained. And Jacob and Lefgren (2007), studying in Chicago, concluded that students retained in 8th grade were more likely to drop out than their peers. Other findings against retention were found by Wu; West and Hughes (2008) who realized retention was just as a short term solution to poor performance.

4. Which grade/s can be usefully retained?

When asked the suitable period for retaining, unlike Holt and Young (2012) who found that respondents differed on the most appropriate time to retain pupils, the respondents seemed to agree that retention is more helpful to the pupils at infant level (grade 1-3) because it is at this stage when the pupils are taught elementary rubrics and numeracy. Failure to grasp these concepts means failure to grasp all other concepts for they build from these ones. Also, at higher grades, it is difficulty to teach elementary rubrics and numeracy when the pupils are expected to do challenging work like composition work and problems in Mathematics. One respondent elaborated:

Excerpt 9: Retention can be done at grade one when concepts are introduced so that the pupils do not proceed without the needed base since all the other higher grades are built on the infant level base. For example, in Mathematics, the concepts of units, tens, hundreds, thousands etc are sequentially taught. Thus missing the base means missing the whole concept. *Respondent 13*

Some respondents said that retention can be done at grade three, which is the bridging stage between junior and senior levels, thus another base. Still others thought that it can be done at grade 5 stage which is the introduction for the last primary school phase: grade 6 and 7.

These finding tally with Karweit (1999) investigations on timing of retention which showed that the first grade was the most frequent grade for retention and 18.4 percent of the children repeated a grade by the end of grade 3 and of the children who do repeat, most (90.5%) repeat a grade only one time.

Some respondents sadly noted that some pupils' poor performance is due to the work of unskilled teachers. They therefore recommended that only Infant trained teachers should teach infant grades for they know the requirements of the level and how they can be accomplished.

Also, some respondents recommended that retention should be done with precautions accompanied by counselling and explanations on the value of education and problems associated with attaining it, retention etc so that the pupil understands what is expected of him/her.

However, respondents did not agree on the number of times a can pupil be retained in a grade. Some argued that retention should be done a maximum of two times per grade then when a student fails again, she /he can be placed in a special class. On the other hand, others postulated that pupils have different maturity stages, so they should repeat until maturity.

Mainardes, (1999) carried out a content analysis study on grade retention on a global scale; and found that the grade retention is usually done in poor countries. This notion is also supported by SACMEQ (2010) study that exposed that 31.4% of grade 6 pupils repeated grade 6 in 2007; a little higher than 28.5% in South Africa and very much lower than 60.3% in Malawi.

5. What is the Zimbabwean Government's stance on grade retention?

The Zimbabwean Government seems to respond to Haddad (1979) who gave the following comment on the issue of grade retention and grade promotion:

To promote or not promote, therefore, is not the question. The real issue is how to improve the level of low achiever, and ultimately how to prevent failure. The original objectives hoped to be fulfilled by repetition, namely, achievement, motivation, improve grade homogeneity, high academic standards, etc are still valid educational concerns that need to be tackled by the development of an educational strategy based on a new set of assumptions derived from available research evidence (p. 31).

Haddad' above argument is that, the question is neither retention nor promotion but finding and implementing a strategy that can help a low achiever to improve. The Zimbabwean government has tried both grade promotion and grade retention and was not satisfied with both. Currently, they are for newer versions of trying to cope with slow performers: ERI (Early Reading Initiative) for infant grades and PLAP (Performance Lag Address Programme) which builds on ERI and is therefore for upper primary school grades.

ERI is concerned with effective teaching of reading and writing skills mainly for pupils in the infant grades. The programme is under Global Partnership for Education (GPE) is being sponsored by UNICEF (Mashavira, 2016). The GPE has provided training to 3,371 school leaders and 21,587 teachers on the early reading initiative by July, 2015 (GPE 6th Quarterly Report, 2015). Zimbabwe joined the Global Partnership for Education in 2013.

PLAP begins with a WRAT (Wide Range Achievement Test) which is given to the whole class and pupils are stratified into grades, for instance, grade 4,5,6 etc according to their test scores. They are taught according to these stratifications, for instance, a teacher plans, schemes and teaches grade 4, 5 and 6 within a grade 6 class. These means that those at lower levels than the grade level are "raised" to the required level by the teacher through remediation until they graduate to their actual grade level. Respondents explained that if a pupil fails to reach the expected level by the end of the year, academic records are passed to the next teacher for further assessment and assistance.

The implementation of both ERI and PLAP, according to the respondents, seems to have some variations in terms of commencement time and implementation strategies. One respondent said:

Excerpt 10: PLAP started this year (2016) at my school. Teachers have already been oriented into it through workshops. It started in Manicaland and is now spreading all over the country. *Respondent 2*

PLAP is different from ordinary remediation in that PLAP, as Mukoko and Mdlongwa (2014) explained. It is applied to pupils whose academic problems are believed to have cropped up from concepts missed at lower levels and are now affecting their present performance. In Zimbabwe, it is believed that the 2007 and 2008 economic crumple has mainly contributed to this academic problem. PLAP therefore aims at alleviating these academic problems in pupils which has caused a serious drop in grade 7 pass rate to as low as zero percent in some schools. Examples are for 2011 and 2012 where a total of 288 and 295 schools recorded 0% pass rate respectively (MOPSE Grade 7 Analysis 2011, 2012). Such a development in education, like PLAP, is in line with Zimbabwe Agenda for Social Sustenance and Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET) which aims at quality production.

However, PLAP has already met challenges in the places it has already been implemented mainly on the part of the teachers who found himself/herself in a laborious exercise as Kurebwa and Mabhandu (2015) found in a study in the Midlands Region of Zimbabwe. Their study findings were work overloads, lack of resources, laborious diagnosis of learner problems and continuous assessment of learners as challenges associated with PLA.

7. Conclusion

Findings show that retention was taking place in the primary schools of Zimbabwe at a relatively moderate level; 56% of the respondents indicated that retention was a practice at the primary schools where they were teaching but usually on a minimal scale since it was usually done upon parents' request. It usually takes place per school arrangement. Many respondents were for retention; 67% of the respondents said that retention was necessary and helpful. However, effects of retention on pupils' performance were not clear due to other factors (other than retention) that affect performance. In Zimbabwe, retention is done at all levels of primary school study but mainly at infant level (grade 1-3) because it is at this stage when the pupils are taught elementary rubrics and numeracy. Above all, the Zimbabwean Government is neither for retention nor promotion but for ERI (Early Reading Initiative) and PLAP (Performance Lag Address Programme).

8. Recommendations

This study recommends the responsible ministry and individual researchers to research more on this issue because the results of this study are not conclusive; apart from grade retention and grade promotion as strategies trying to improve pupils' performance at primary school level, the study realized other strategies (ERI and PLAP) that are currently employed as well whose impact is yet to be realized. The question therefore is neither on retention, promotion nor PLAP but on finding and implementing a strategy that can help a low achiever to improve.

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