

Are we neglecting children's participation in school?

by Robert Cannon

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What is school participation?

Children's participation in school has been relatively neglected in many of the education development projects I have been associated with in the past 10 years. Of course, such a claim demands clarification when so much is being done to provide places for children through strategies such as school construction, equitable access to schools and support for the quality of learning and teaching. What more can be expected?

I believe we need to develop practices based on **holistic policies** to manage the participation of all children throughout their education.

I use 'participation' as an umbrella term which includes: enrolment; attendance; engagement in learning; the series of transitions that have to be made from home to school, from primary to secondary school, and from school to higher education or work; and preventing early school leaving. Participation takes account of the needs of **all children**, particularly those with special requirements.

Do we place children at risk?

Enrolling all children in school is considered highly desirable. National education systems formally sanction school participation and achieving universal primary education has been a major Millennium Development Goal as well as an Education For All Goal.

Our well-intentioned efforts to enrol all children in school should raise questions about the potential risks of requiring children to attend really poor quality schools. Such risks will have a strong impact on school participation, as we found in a study in Indonesian schools for USAID, *Transition to and Participation in Junior Secondary School*.

Further evidence we derived from this study shows that the failure of young people to **access** school at the appropriate age, to **engage in learning**, to make successful **transitions** between grade levels and between schools, and to **complete school**, places them at risk in later life. The risk comes from their not possessing sufficient life-skills and qualifications to engage effectively in family, social and working life. Apart from the personal costs of non-completion, there are long-term costs to society. Societies have a social and economic interest in ensuring that children complete a full program of education to maximize their contributions to society. Because low participation and academic failure in school are frequently problems of the poor, policies that both enrol and retain children in school will be highly pro-poor, according to a [World Bank analysis](#).

Major factors relating to low rates of education participation in our Indonesian study were found to be:

- Problems associated with late **enrolment** in school, combined with irregular **attendance** and **grade repetition**, resulting in a greater risk of early school leaving. Conversely, children who enter school at an appropriate age, attend regularly and progress normally through the grades, have a greater chance of completing their basic education.
- **Grade repetition** places children at risk. Grade repetition is now generally discredited and studies suggest that grade repetition is one of the most powerful predictors of early school leaving.

Young people's experiences have a lot to teach us about participation. After all, they alone directly experience all the circumstances of home, community and school that shape their levels of engagement with school. From a young person's perspective, these experiences embody:

- Their community and its attitudes to education
- Their parents, family and home circumstances
- Personal health
- Personal identity issues
- Poverty
- School, teachers, and their experience of learning and classroom teaching practices.

Significantly for the development of participation policies and practices, students who face major transitions perceive their environment to be 'riskier' with very challenging barriers to negotiate. This riskier environment is one explanation for the greater numbers of children who fail to make the transition from primary to secondary school.

Children are critical of some teachers for their negative manner, frequent absences from school, poor teaching skills and an ever-present fear of punishment. An alarming sense of fearfulness stands out from the analysis of what students have to say about school and the transitions they must make. The fear is based on the experience of punishment, humiliation and sexual exploitation. At school, the presence of fear is the very antithesis of an environment necessary for effective learning. These non-academic circumstances are often combined with academic failure and an absence of helpful feedback from teachers on the work that children do, which creates an even more fearful environment for the student and places them at even greater risk of leaving school early.

Children in our study told us how the negative behaviours of one or two teachers can destroy their school life. Significantly, children also report how just one positive and supportive teacher can help them remain in school and go on to succeed in life.

Parents and teachers are often ignorant of school conditions that have an impact on young people. Their 'silence' on the themes identified by all student groups in our Indonesian study suggests that change in schools will be difficult when parents and teachers appear to be so remote from understanding the experiences of the children for whom they are responsible.

What can be done?

To minimise participation risks, the lessons from our study show that piecemeal approaches are less likely to be successful than '**whole-school**' and '**whole-of-schooling**' approaches, accompanied by a strong focus on the needs of children.

What works in encouraging young people to engage and stay within the education system is access to good teachers and good schools. A focus on improved teaching is demonstrably successful and significantly improves the learning environment for students as well as their continuing participation. But good teaching alone is not enough.

Clear, child-focused participation policies and plans are necessary. Foremost among these is a 'whole-of-schooling' approach that develops the understanding and empathy of all teachers, together with parents and the community. The 'whole-of-schooling' concept, with leadership and support from local and regional government, recognises that transition and participation begins in the move from home to school and concludes with entry into the work force or higher education.

Whole-of-schooling participation policies need to address:

- The many transitions that occur throughout school life

- The importance of enrolling children in school at the correct age
- Supporting progress through the grades and reducing or eliminating grade repetition
- Empowering children to give them the life skills to manage their school participation and the risks they will inevitably encounter in life
- Addressing known barriers to participation including poverty, the provision of adequate toilets for all children and especially girls, and the physical and psychological abuse of children including sexual exploitation.

Good policy also recognises the needs of **all children**, including those with special physical and intellectual needs. These young people are too often forgotten and may not participate in education at all. There are an estimated 1.5 million children with disabilities in Indonesia, yet fewer than four percent of them have access to educational services, according to [Helen Keller International](#), Indonesia.

Mind your language!

We also need to be very careful of the language we use. One of the most insidious terms that persists in education is 'dropout'. Dropout implies that students exercise a clear, sudden choice to leave school. This is generally not the case at all; significant numbers of students are 'pushed out' or simply 'fade out' from school.

The term **early school leaving** better describes what is actually a longer-term process of **separating** from school, which young people work through over time. If educators, teachers and parents understood the processes leading to separation from school, they may become more pro-active in supporting positive and successful participation in school and be alert to early signs of separation. Finally, 'drop out' has currency in Australia as an insulting term that should have no place in informed and sensitive discussions of children at risk.

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