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# The Filipino child

Global study on child poverty and disparities: Philippines

## Why is the dropout problem important?

Dropout is a problem for many reasons. From the efficiency perspective, dropout is a concern in at least two dimensions. One, at the aggregate economy level wherein education is known to be an important determinant of economic growth and premature dropout means loss of potential productivity. And two, within the education sector, dropout raises the cost of achieving a targeted proportion of the population having some level of schooling (Hanushek, Lavy, and Hitomi 2006). The other area where dropout is a problem—and perhaps the more important one—is from the equity perspective. Dropouts may appear small in number but they are preponderant among the poor which thereupon turns the wheels of intergenerational transmission of poverty against them.

At the personal level, dropping out of school will mean consigning one to a future of low-income trajectory. Given a choice, one will obviously not opt for this. However, we see a considerable number of school-aged children who are not in school and most probably, it is not of their own choice.

## What do we know about the dropout<sup>1</sup> problem?

Using data from the National Statistics Office's (NSO) Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS) of 2004, the school-aged children 6–11 years old (elementary) not attending school is about 6 percent of the cohort of 12.6 million children. For children aged 12–15 years old (secondary), 11 percent of the cohort of 7.9 million children are not attending school (Table 1). There is some disparity by sex which is more pronounced among those aged 12–15 years old (15% for boys vs. 8% for girls) compared with those in the elementary school age group (7% vs.

# A glimpse at the school dropout problem

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5%, respectively). By income groups, as expected, a large proportion of those not attending school are from the poorest quintile. Among the bottom 20 percent income groups, school nonattendance rate is 35 percent at the elementary school and 28 percent at the secondary level while among the top 20 percent income groups, school nonattendance at the elementary level is only 4 percent and at the secondary level, just 5 percent.

## Why are school-aged children not in school?

The APIS is one of the few nationally representative surveys that ask for reasons for not being in school for the school-aged population of 6–24 years old. The explicitly mentioned reasons for dropping out of school reveal interesting pieces of information. Table 2 provides the distribution of the explicitly mentioned reasons for dropping out of school for elementary and secondary school-aged children. The most popular reason, particularly at the elementary level, is lack of personal interest. It is important to note that the proportion citing this particular

reason declines rapidly from the elementary school-aged children (35%) to the secondary school-aged children (16%). The next most popular reasons—which is not surprising—are economic in nature, i.e., high costs and looking for work or doing housework. But what is seemingly surprising is that these reasons are popular even at the

<sup>1</sup> To avoid possible confusion, it is useful to recognize that there is a difference between the dropout rate as officially defined and the indicator used in this Brief. Official dropout rate is defined as the ratio of pupils who failed to finish the school year as well as those who finished the school year but did not enrol in the succeeding year to students enrolled in the previous year (DepEd website). Data available, however, using this definition will not allow relating dropout to individual and household characteristics. Since this Brief is trying to explain the reasons for dropout, we are thus defining dropout as pertaining to those who are not attending school according to a nationally representative data set, particularly the Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS) being regularly conducted by the National Statistics Office (NSO). The estimate of the dropout rate, according to the official definition for school year (SY) 2004–2005 is 6.98 percent for the elementary level and 7.99 percent for the secondary level.

**Table 1. School attendance and nonattendance characteristics, 2004**

	Elementary School-age (6–11 yrs)		Secondary School-age (12–15 yrs)	
	Number	%	Number	%
Total school-aged population	12,590,805	100	7,891,213	100
Proportion attending school	11,840,330	94	6,994,888	89
Proportion not attending school	750,474	6	896,325	11
Not currently attending by sex				
Female		5		8
Male		7		15
Not currently attending by income quintile				
Bottom 20%		35		28
Lower middle 20%		32		32
Middle 20%		18		22
Upper middle 20%		10		13
Top 20%		4		5

Source of basic data: Annual Poverty Indicators Survey 2004, National Statistics Office.

**Table 2. Reasons for not attending school by age group, 2004**

Reason	Elementary <sup>a</sup>		Secondary <sup>b</sup>	
	%	Rank	%	Rank
Lack of personal interest	35.1	1	16.3	3
Economic				
High cost of education/ parents cannot afford expenses	22.1	2	29.0	2
Employment/looking for work	20.8	3	32.1	1
Housekeeping	9.7	4	13.2	4
Accessibility of school				
Schools are very far/no school within the barangay	1.8	8	0.4	9
No regular transportation	0.2	9	0.2	10
Others				
Others	5.3	5	5.8	5
Illness/disability	2.6	6	1.2	6
Cannot cope with school work	2.3	7	1.1	7
Finished schooling	0.2	10	0.7	8

<sup>a</sup> with some elementary education

<sup>b</sup> with some secondary education

Source of basic data: Annual Poverty Indicators Survey 2004, National Statistics Office.

elementary school level (22% and 21%, respectively) despite the fact that elementary school attendance is mostly in public schools where there are virtually no school fees. This highlights the commonly forgotten fact that there are other costs besides school fees that have prevented school-aged children from attending school. Another

revealing piece of information is that contrary to common assertion, availability of schools (lack of school or lack

of regular transportation to school) is hardly mentioned (only 2% for elementary and 0.4% for secondary) as a reason for dropping out of schools.

The reasons provided for not being in school by socioeconomic class reveal interesting differences. For the bottom 20 percent with some elementary schooling, lack of personal interest is the most oft-cited reason (36%) while for the top 20 percent, employment/looking for work is the most cited reason (38%) as seen in Table 3. Among those with some secondary education, high cost of education is the most cited reason (34%) for the bottom 20 percent while for the top 20 percent, employment/looking for work is again the most cited reason (45%), something that is certainly quite surprising given such income group.

Another notable piece of information in Table 1 is that boys have higher dropout rates than girls, particularly those with some secondary education.<sup>2</sup> It should be emphasized that this problem has been glossed over for years perhaps because the recognized global problem is that boys outperform girls in many other countries. It needs to be pointed out that the difference in the Philippine picture of boys being outperformed by the girls has already been going on for quite some time. For instance, various census and labor force survey data show that the proportion of adult population (25 years and above) with college education has been higher for girls than boys since 1975. And this gap is not narrowing but widening (Orbeta 1995).

The reasons for dropping out of school by sex show very interesting results. For instance, among those with some elementary education, there is a very high proportion (41%) of boys stating

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<sup>2</sup> See David, Albert, and Carreon-Monterola (2009) for more information on this issue.

lack of personal interest as a reason compared with 24 percent among girls citing such reason (Table 4). In terms of employment given as a reason, 26 percent of boys with some elementary schooling cited it while only 11 percent or less than half of the girls mentioned it as reason. Finally, a stark difference is shown between girls and boys insofar as housekeeping as a reason for dropping out is concerned. Among the girls, 26 percent gave it as reason while only less than 1 percent of the boys cited it. This confirms the known stereotype of housekeeping roles for girls even at an early age and continues to be true among those with some secondary education. Also among those with some secondary schooling, economic reasons such as employment/looking for work and high cost of education are the most cited reasons for both boys and girls.

### Implications for policy

The primary reason for dropout is lack of personal interest. Unfortunately, this particular reason is quite complex and may be due to several reasons. It may be due to demand-side issues such as poor information on the value of education. It may also be that the poor are very impatient<sup>3</sup> and do not see the returns to education (which may only be felt a few years down the road) as an attractive proposition. The reason can also be a supply-side issue where the education system is not producing relevant results for school-aged children and their families. And finally, lack of personal interest can be a result of the interaction of demand and supply-side issues such as the accumulation of frustrations in school because students are not able to cope with lessons due to poor school environment and/or poor

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**Table 3. Reasons for not attending school by level and by socioeconomic class, 2004**

	Elementary <sup>a</sup>		Secondary <sup>b</sup>	
	Bottom 20%	Top 20%	Bottom 20%	Top 20%
Lack of personal interest	35.7	27.0	17.9	16.0
High cost of education/parents cannot afford expenses	24.1	11.8	34.5	18.9
Employment/looking for work	13.8	38.1	18.4	44.9
Housekeeping	12.8	8.4	16.5	11.1
Others	7.2	4.1	9.1	5.1
Schools are very far/no school within the barangay	2.7	0.5	0.9	0.1
Cannot cope with school work	2.3	3.2	1.3	1.1
Illness/disability	1.3	5.5	0.7	1.7
No regular transportation	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.3
Finished schooling	0.0	1.0	0.6	0.8

<sup>a</sup> with some elementary education

<sup>b</sup> with some secondary education

Source of basic data: Annual Poverty Indicators Survey 2004, National Statistics Office.

**Table 4. Reasons for not attending school by level and by sex, 2004**

Reasons	Elementary <sup>a</sup>		Secondary <sup>b</sup>	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Lack of personal interest	40.8	24.2	22.1	10.4
Employment/looking for work	25.9	11.0	39.4	24.8
High cost of education/parents cannot afford expenses	21.5	23.3	29.9	28.2
Others	4.3	7.4	3.9	7.7
Cannot cope with school work	2.5	2.0	1.2	0.9
Illness/disability	2.1	3.5	1.1	1.2
Schools are very far/no school within the barangay	1.6	2.1	0.5	0.4
Housekeeping	0.9	26.4	1.0	25.4
No regular transportation	0.3	0.0	0.2	0.2
Finished schooling	0.2	0.1	0.6	0.8

<sup>a</sup> with some elementary education

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Source of basic data: Annual Poverty Indicators Survey 2004, National Statistics Office.

household environment. Unless we are able to understand this complex issue better, we cannot be precise on how to deal with it.

In this regard, only general proposals can be provided at this point. One, make the education system more relevant to the realities of the communities where the children live in. This can include improving the relevance of the curriculum and improving pedagogy. Remedial actions on students showing poor results may also help. Systematically provide more resources to schools with high dropout rate may also help. Finally, cooperation among community and schools for a concerted effort at

<sup>3</sup> High discount rate.

Given the preponderance of economic reasons for dropping out, sustained and inclusive economic growth would be the long-term solution. The ongoing conditional cash transfer programs which provide cash to poor families if they keep their children in school should be able to make a dent on the dropout problem, particularly for those citing employment or looking for work as a reason.

implementing better truancy laws will definitely help.

It is interesting to note that this reason of lack of personal interest starts early among those with some elementary education and is considerably lower among those with some high school education. This means that if we can only keep children in school longer, dropping out because of this reason will decline. Clearly, this is the predominant reason for boys and for those in the bottom 20 percent income groups. Thus, any attempt to target these groups would need to recognize this major reason.

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sustained and inclusive economic growth would be the long-term solution. The ongoing conditional cash transfer programs which provide cash to poor families if they keep their children in school should be able to make a dent on the dropout problem, particularly for those citing employment or looking for work as a reason. But only a rigorous impact evaluation can provide the answer on whether this intuitively appealing hypothesis will be validated.

Providing more schools may solve other schooling problems but it will not be an effective tool for reducing dropout as the nonavailability of schools is not mentioned by many as a reason for dropping out of school.

And finally, special attention to boys is warranted in solving the dropout problem. Their reasons given—lack of personal interest, employment, and looking for work—should be looked into more deeply. □

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