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## LEARNING TO STAY IN SCHOOL

*by Estrella M. Maniquis*

***Filipino researchers developing measures to keep pupils in school longer have caught the attention of educational policy makers.***

Although basic education is compulsory in the Philippines, one out of three children drop out of elementary school before grade 6. The reasons are mostly economic -- families are too poor to afford school supplies, much less food to take to school. Children help out with farming or younger siblings. Others lose interest after leaving school owing to illness, or because the teacher cannot meet individual needs. Some parents are not convinced of the importance of education.

Whatever the reason, school leavers are unlikely to return. A study by the National Education Testing Center shows that the earlier children drop out, the greater the likelihood of their reverting to illiteracy. A 1988 World Bank study showed most dropouts to be from rural, low-income families.

"These issues -- educational wastage primarily due to the dropout problem, and access to quality education regardless of socio- economic background -- are what we sought to address," says Dr Eligio Barasaga, leader of the project No-Dropout Learning System/Education for All (NODROPS). Dr Barsaga is senior research specialist of the Regional Center for Educational Innovation and Technology (INNOTECH), an agency created by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization.

"Simply put, project NODROPS aims to ensure that every child who enters elementary school stays until he or she becomes functionally literate and develops his or her learning potential," says Dr Barsaga.

Project NODROPS is one of several funded by IDRC to assist developing countries to follow up on commitments made at the Education for All conference at Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. IDRC provided critical input into conference preparations and follow-up activities.

NODROPS approaches education holistically, beginning with research to pinpoint the main reasons for dropping out as well as responses made. The INNOTECH team designed a learning system that responds to the students' socio-economic and psychological circumstances, is flexible in delivery, and is able to improve children's learning ability and equip them for self-education if obliged to leave school.

The system was piloted in disadvantaged schools in six ecological settings: lowland farming, upland farming, fishing, suburban, inner city, and slum communities.

To determine potential dropouts among elementary pupils, INNOTECH developed an instrument that considers the pupil's achievement in mathematics, English and Filipino, school attendance, fathers' education and the family's socio-economic status.

Pupils found to be slow learners or potential dropouts get special help in the form of learning modules.

Simple to use, the modules can be used for self-study or for tutoring by an older sibling or a classmate. Those who miss school can also use the modules to keep up with lessons and avoid having to leave permanently.

Family and community support being crucial, INNOTECH prepared training packages that develop parents' tutoring skills and stress parents' role in their children's education. Parents become partners through a "learning contract" with the school, promising to inform the teacher if a child will miss class, and ensuring that only unavoidable absences occur. Other assistance is in training for livelihood skills, incorporating environmental awareness and health and sanitation concerns, and provision of seed capital for community livelihood projects.

A key feature of the scheme is simplicity, with the least burden on pupil or teacher. "Most innovations are resisted because they place undue demands on the teacher," says Dr Barsaga.

Dr Ophelia Veniegas, assistant project director, describes her team's experience in one of the pilot sites. The fishing village of Tapian in Maguindanao province is "so depressed you will also get depressed (seeing it)," she says. Children drop out "simply because they have no money for pencil, paper or even food." She has seen children eat a lunch consisting only of rice with roasted *saba* (a banana variety). The classrooms were barren except for yellowed bulletin boards and flowers fashioned from cigarette foil. "To reach the school one has to cross an extensive coconut grove where you risk getting hit by falling coconuts," she adds. "We looked at how the teachers could be more creative -- how they could entice their pupils to stay in school. We planned together." The principal and one teacher went to Manila for training, and visited schools with remedial education programs. When they returned to Tapian, they opened their own resource centre with some funding from project NODROPS. A year later, Dr Veniegas found the once unkempt schoolyard had been landscaped. The local government paved the road to the school with coconut trunks to permit access by car. More importantly, the school leavers returned. "Show the way and everything will follow," says Dr Veniegas.

Community resources are tapped in the process. At the school in Metro Manila's Navotas district, the Parents, Teachers and Community Association and local government officials came together to solve the problem of schoolyard flooding during high tide, and to meet more of the children's classroom needs.

## **FEEDING INTO NATIONAL POLICIES**

Though conceived as "R&D and not as policy research," says Dr Barsaga, the project is expected to have substantial policy impact. In 1989, following then President Corazon Aquino's proclamation declaring 1990-1999 as the Decade of Education for All (EFA), a national plan of action was drawn up.

Project NODROPS' experience, notes Dr Barsaga, is particularly relevant to several policies and strategies adopted by the plan, including:

- alternative learning systems covering nonformal/informal educations;
- improvement of learning achievement stressing creative and critical thinking;
- upgrading teacher competencies;
- strengthening partnership among school, home, the community and local government;
- and self-reliance in resources generation.

The Philippine Development Plan (1993-1998) provides for the implementation of EFA programs, the adoption of alternative learning and delivery schemes, and the institutionalization of in-service teaching programs emphasizing science, math and English -- all issues that project NODROPS addresses.

The attention of planners and policy makers is also assured by the fact that the national committee for EFA has designated INNOTECH as the lead agency for three of four EFA national programs: educational technology for basic education, development of non- school-based minimum learning competencies and a pilot project for literacy in selected areas. Also, INNOTECH is a collaborating agency for the national program on dropout reduction.

Unicef has been an enthusiastic supporter of NODROPS. It is helping INNOTECH print its learning modules for distribution to schools that could not otherwise afford them.

The next step for the project is dissemination of research findings through meetings with top education officials, including national and regional administrators and policy makers. Dr Barsaga is hopeful about further policy impact. At the drawing board stage, his team met with bureau and regional directors, superintendents and school principals to help plan the research. Such involvement, Dr Barsaga believes, eliminates potential resistance and indifference that can result when intended collaborators have no participation from the outset.

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