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POLICY IDEAS No.14

DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL IN MALAYSIA:

What we know and what needs to be done

By Tamanna Patel

Abstract

In 2013, IDEAS conducted a survey on education, also known as Giving Voice to the Poor, to uncover the needs and aspirations of parents from low-income households around Malaysia. The survey covered over 1,200 respondents of which 150 respondents had at least one child who had dropped out of school. This paper takes a closer look at this group of 150 in an attempt to further understand issues that parents perceive as the reasons for a child dropping out. These reasons include a lack of interest for school, the inability to pay for education-related expenses, and poor academic performance among others. Involvement of parents in a child's education related activities at home, frequency of interaction of parents with school teachers, management and PTA, and parents' opinions of education including technical and vocational education pathways are also considered.

While data from the Ministry of Education show that the dropout rates are low in Malaysia, the absolute number of students leaving the system before completing a full secondary education reaches into the thousands. A majority of these students are from low-income households, hindering their ability to improve upon their socio-economic status.

This paper hopes to add to the existing literature on dropouts in Malaysia and provide a more contemporary look at the issue and proposes that the issue of dropouts in the country deserves a re-examination in the form of a more comprehensive study.

Introduction

As a country becomes increasingly developed, the reach and, presumably, the quality of education and attainment of education outcomes rise along with income levels. Malaysia seems to fit this trend with many key education indicators showing tremendous improvement since the country achieved independence in 1957. At that time, over half of the population had no formal schooling, 6 percent had some secondary level schooling and only 1 percent had attained a post-secondary education.¹ In 2011, the enrolment rate at primary level had shot up to 96 percent and enrolment at secondary level was at 86 percent, both of which are commendable.²

While enrolment is a key indicator of the reach of education, it does not necessarily reflect on the quality and effective implementation of education policies and initiatives of a country. Other indicators such as level of dropouts, attrition, completion and transition rates are equally important to gauge not only access to education but quality, equity and even efficiency of the system. Other indicators and areas which should be considered include student performance (national and international comparisons) and the connection between education policies and the creation of adequate human capital needed for the economy.

TABLE 1: THE DROPOUT RATE³ IN MALAYSIA SPANNING BACK TO 1995

Year	GDP per capita (RM)	Dropout rate (percent)	
		Primary	Secondary ⁴
1995	13,672	1.21	5.52
2005	12,776	0.23	2.53
2010	17,717	0.16	2.65
2012	27,925	0.19	1.93
2013	33,540	0.10	1.96

Source: Adapted from Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD), Malaysia Ministry of Education (MOE) and World Bank Data

Defining Dropouts

The definition and calculation of dropouts followed by the Ministry of Education is the one that is used by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics. The dropout rate by one year is defined as: the proportion of pupils from a cohort enrolled in a given grade at a given school year who is no longer enrolled in the following school year.⁵ The annual dropout rate for primary then becomes the total of the dropout rate by each year (1 to 6). This figure is then divided by the total primary enrolment to give the dropout rates listed in Table 1.

Transition rates are also an indicator of the number who leave the system annually, during critical phases of education. This includes the annual transition between Year 6 to Form 1 – the move to secondary education and the move from Form 3 to Form 4 or the transition from lower to upper secondary school. It should be noted that the transition phase only indicates those who leave the mainstream government schooling system and does not give any indication as to whether these students discontinue studying or enrol into private institutions.

1 *Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025*, Putrajaya: Ministry of Education, 2013.

2 These enrolment rates include students attending public and private institutions.

3 Dropout rate defined as pupil leaving the government school system before completing full cycle of primary or secondary education.

4 Secondary school is from Form 1 to Form 5.

5 *Education Indicators*. <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/eiguide09-en.pdf>

In IDEAS Giving Voice to the Poor survey,⁶ we looked at the issue of dropouts through the perspective of parents from low-income households who had at least one child who had dropped out. The survey captured information from about 150 dropouts, as defined by those who had discontinued schooling with no intention of enrolling in any further educational programme or those who had already begun to work i.e. those who had permanently left the education system. While this sample size is not large enough to reflect the issues faced by dropouts on a national level, it does provide some insight to better understand reasons for and factors associated with school dropouts.

The last comprehensive study looking into the issue of dropouts was the Dropout Report 1973 (Murad Report) by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), which covered over 22,447 adolescents between the ages of 10 to 14 in Peninsula Malaysia with various levels of education.⁷ The report had numerous but rather unexpected findings. For example, dropout rates in rural areas were higher than urban areas, and progressively higher levels of education correlated with better paying jobs. Other more interesting findings listed in the report were: “about one fifth of an age-group drops out at the end of primary school” and “there is a strong relationship between poverty and school leaving: about one-tenth of the poorest children as contrasted with nine-tenths of the most

prosperous are enrolled in school at age 15+.”⁸

These findings were followed by a whole host of recommendations, many of which are still very relevant to the present context. One recommendation called for parent and community educational programmes to ensure that a child’s out-of-school environment is conducive to learning and supports formal education in schools. Another recommendation stated that welfare officers be appointed to schools to assist school guidance teachers as well as address issues a child may be facing outside of school hours in order to “enable the child to realise his maximum potential in school.”⁹

The UNESCO publication which summarised these findings had some further recommendations in light of the report’s findings, including the following:

“While the problem was negligible at the primary level, wastage at the lower secondary level and especially during the transition between the primary and the secondary levels was serious enough to cause private and public concern. It has also demonstrated that through ad hoc, as well as systematic and integrated intervention measures, the problem has largely been overcome.”

However, the author also went on to say:

“Firstly, it is extremely difficult to delineate activities which have been structured specifically to overcome the problem. This is because activities directed towards general quality improvement, be they pedagogical or non-pedagogical, also directly or indirectly help to overcome educational wastage.”

This paper looks deeper into the issue of dropouts in an attempt to highlight this issue, as one of the many challenges facing the education system today including quality of education in relation to students who drop out of school. It also proposes possible next steps that can be taken to address the problem of students dropping out.

National education statistics tell a story of much improvement in the area of dropouts. For example, in 1989, according to the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB), the dropout rate in primary school stood at 3 percent and a little over two decades later, this rate has fallen to an impressive 0.1 percent as shown in Table 1. The dropout rate at secondary level is 1.96 percent as shown in Table 1, which is commendable. However, it does not take into account students who leave the mainstream schooling system during key transitions phases (such as the move from Year 6 to Form 1). Little information is available about these students that leave the system and where they end up. This means that the true cost of dropouts is difficult to calculate.

6 The methodology and main findings of the survey were published in a Policy Ideas titled, “Malaysian Education: What do Poor Malaysians Really Want?”

7 Lee Meow Fatt, “Peninsular Malaysia,” *The Drop-out Problem in Primary Education*, Bangkok: UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Asia and the Pacific, 1984, page 132, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0006/000623/062375eo.pdf>.

8 Ibid

9 Lee Meow Fatt, “Peninsular Malaysia,” *The Drop-out Problem in Primary Education*, Bangkok: UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Asia and the Pacific, 1984, page 149, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0006/000623/062375eo.pdf>.

The cost of dropouts

Many studies have been conducted on the opportunity costs of dropouts. The United States is currently faced with a staggering dropout rate with almost 1.3 million students dropping out from high-school¹⁰ each year. Studies indicate that a high school graduate would earn on average 50 to 100 percent more than his counterpart who drops out. Additionally, estimates indicate that if the current number of dropouts was reduced by 700,000, it could bring an annual net benefit to the economy of USD 90 billion due to a higher earning potential and reduced dependence on state and federal welfare programmes, and reduced crime rates as dropouts are more likely to be involved in crime.¹¹

Setting aside economic disadvantages, dropping out is a problem that disproportionately affects those who are from lower socio-economic status backgrounds and those who are hardest to reach such as the Orang Asli. For example, the dropout rates for Orang Asli remains high with 25 percent dropping out in the transition from primary to secondary school and the dropout rate for secondary school is 26 percent.¹² In order to increase social mobility and improve the quality of life for this group of the population, this issue needs to be examined more closely. The MOE has been taking steps to address the dropout issue within these communities. For example, the Ministry has been running a

programme known as *Kelas Dewasa Orang Asli dan Peribumi*, or KEDAP, to improve the literacy of parents from various indigenous groups, such as the Penan (indigenous to Sarawak) in order to help them better understand the value of keeping their children in school.¹³ However, as the sample size was limited, the survey did not capture many Orang Asli with children who had discontinued schooling.

According to the Malaysia Millennium Development Goals 2010 report, over 90 percent of those who are of lower secondary age and are not in school are from the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution.¹⁴ The same report states that 75 percent of those who are of upper secondary school age and not in school are from the bottom 40 percent. While the economic and financial costs of dropouts in Malaysia have not been calculated, it could prove to be a large opportunity cost in the future as the country is already facing a shortage in many key economic growth areas, many of which include service and manufacturing jobs which would require a more highly skilled and educated workforce.¹⁵

The problem of dropouts is greater in the transition from Year 6 to Form 1, between the ages of 11 to 12 years, and then within the subsequent years in secondary schooling.

10 High-school in the United States is from Year 9 up to Year 12, upper-secondary school would be the Malaysian equivalent.

11 Henry M. Levin, Cecilia E. Rouse, "The True Cost of High School Dropouts," *New York Times* 25 January 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/26/opinion/the-true-cost-of-high-school-dropouts.html?_r=0, 2012

12 *Malaysia Education Blueprint Annual Reports 2013*, Putrajaya: Ministry of Education 2014.

13 Ministry of Education, May 2012, http://www.moe.gov.my/cms/upload_files/circularfile/2012/circularfile_file_000972.pdf.

14 *The Millennium Development Goals at 2010*, United Nations Country Team Malaysia, April 2011, page 18, <http://www.unicef.org/malaysia/Malaysia-MDGs-Progress-Report-2010.pdf>.

15 Institute of Labour Information and Market Analysis http://www.ilmia.gov.my/custom/dashboard/core_indicators.php?bin=jobs

Understanding the Malaysian case

Our dropout issue may not seem as dire as that of the United States but neither is it anywhere close to countries whose success we aspire to emulate. For example, 98 percent of those in Korea between the ages of 25 to 34 have completed the equivalent of a high-school degree¹⁶ indicative of a negligible level of dropouts from the system. In 2011, only 56 percent of the working age population in Malaysia had an SPM qualification or higher. A majority of these, 65 percent, had only an SPM qualification.¹⁷

The Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD), MOE, tracks cohorts in order to gauge how many students complete their primary or secondary schools and how many leave the mainstream schooling system. According to the MEB, approximately 36 percent of each cohort does not reach the “minimum achievement level desired of all students.”¹⁸ This means that the students from one particular cohort are no longer enrolled in the system or have not passed core SPM subjects. In upper-secondary level this one-third is broken down into those who are out of the system (8 percent) which includes dropouts and those who may have left the mainstream schooling system and gone to private education institutions which do not use national curriculum (e.g. international schools), and those who have failed to meet minimum standards for one or more

subjects at SPM level (28 percent).¹⁹ Interestingly, another 11 percent do take the national-level exams but do so as “non-public school candidates.”

The story is similar at the PMR level where 7 percent of students are listed as dropouts or those who have transferred to private education institutions that do not utilise national curriculum, while another 32 percent fail one or more core subjects. At this stage, 7 percent of candidates who take the PMR do so as “non-public school candidates.”²⁰

The focus on dropouts from secondary school is due to a few key reasons. Firstly, the dropout rate in primary schools as mentioned before and shown in Table 1 is extremely low at 0.1 percent, which is a great achievement. It should be noted here that completion of primary education is mandatory. However, by the time students reach UPSR level disappointment starts to set in as 33 percent fail at least one subject at this level.²¹ This leads to many students leaving the system, either as dropouts or as enrollees in private education system post-UPSR. This recurs as students progress to and through secondary school – this is commonly referred to as the attrition rate.²²

Secondly, most students drop out or leave the mainstream schooling system in the transition from primary to secondary school or at some point during their secondary education. Dropping out during secondary school is most common and is supported by the IDEAS’ survey in which 95 percent of the sample

of dropouts had completed their primary education and dropped out during secondary school.

Thirdly, the Malaysian education system provides a unique challenge in that students from vernacular primary schools have to integrate into secondary schools taught in a completely different language (unless they attend a private Chinese secondary school following a primary education in Mandarin). It is widely noted in the literature that the language of instruction can influence the rate of dropouts and repetition of classes, and that these rates are lower if the language of instruction in early years is in both the student’s first and national language.²³ While this is the case in vernacular schools all over Malaysia, there still remains a problem of literacy in the national language. For example, in 2012 approximately 5.7 percent of students who should have been in Form 1 were in Remove classes for literacy reasons.²⁴ According to the Government Transformation Programme Roadmap 2010:

“... research by the MOE reveals that one factor that contributes to drop-out rates is the inability of students to cope with the syllabus being taught... if we can give children a good grasp of basic literacy and numeracy skills early in life they will be less likely to drop out of school.”²⁵

16 “Korea,” *OECD Better Life Index*, <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/education/>

17 Institute of Labour Information and Market Analysis http://www.ilmia.gov.my/custom/dashboard/core_indicators.php?indp=1.%20Labour&indc=Education

18 *Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025*, Putrajaya: Ministry of Education, 2013. 3-15

19 Ibid

20 Ibid

21 Ibid

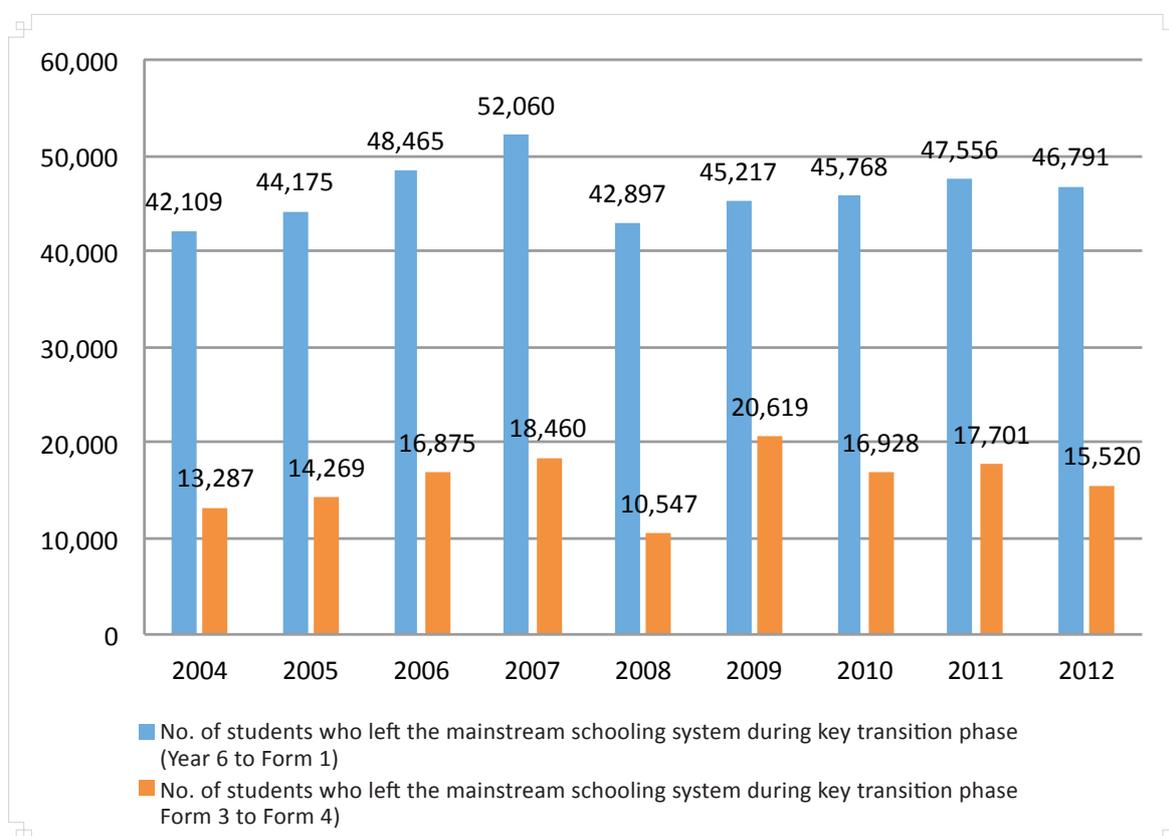
22 Ibid

23 Frances Hunt, *Dropping out from School: A Cross country Literature review*, Consortium for Research on Education Access and Transitions and Equity (CREATE), University of Essex, May 2008.

24 Based upon calculations using data from EPRD, Education Management Information System, Malaysia Education Statistics 2012 booklet.

25 “Chapter 8: Improving Student Outcomes,” *GTP Roadmap*, Prime Minister’s Office of Malaysia, http://www.pmo.gov.my/GTP/documents/GTP%20Roadmap/GTP%20Roadmap_Chapter08.pdf

CHART 1: NUMBER OF THOSE WHO HAVE LEFT THE MAINSTREAM SCHOOLING SYSTEM DURING TRANSITION PHASES ANNUALLY FROM 2003 TO 2012



Source: Adapted from EPRD Education Management Information System, Malaysia Educational Statistics 2012 booklet

The problem of dropouts is greater in the transition from Year 6 to Form 1, between the ages of 11 to 12 years, and then within the subsequent years in secondary schooling. This is also indicated by data produced by the EPRD at MOE, which shows that the transition rate from primary to secondary in 2012 was 90.42 percent – little changed from the 2003 rate of 90.31 percent. The number of students who left the government schooling system in transition phases are summarised and shown in Chart 1. The rate of

transition is the portion of students who continued schooling through the critical transition phase between Year 6 to Form 1 (post-UPSR) and Form 3 to Form 4 (post-PMR, now PT3). In absolute terms, thousands of students are still dropping out from the mainstream schooling system.

Literature on dropouts notes that dropping out is not a one-off occurrence, but is a process and students end up discontinuing school due to a variety of push and pull

factors.²⁶ Poverty is more commonly known as a push factor, while the temptation to enter the labour force is more commonly known as a pull factor.²⁷

²⁶ Frances Hunt, *Dropping out from School: A Cross country Literature review*, Consortium for Research on Education Access and Transitions and Equity (CREATE), University of Essex, May 2008.

²⁷ Ibid

Giving Voice to the Poor Survey Methodology

Methodology

To ensure robustness of the research, both focus group discussions (qualitative research) and a survey (quantitative research) were conducted to collect data from low income parents across Malaysia.

The study was designed in a 'modular' form, to allow it to be implemented once sufficient resources were made available for each stage.²⁸

Stage 1 – Focus group discussions

Seven focus group discussions (FGD) were held in different states to tease out the appropriate dimensions to be used within a larger scale survey. Three FGDs were held in the Klang Valley to capture the views of the urban poor from three different ethnicities. Three more FGDs were held in Kelantan, Perak and Negeri Sembilan to understand the views of the poor from different ethnicities in rural areas. The remaining FGD was held in Sabah to capture the views of the poor in East Malaysia.

The findings were summarised in IDEAS Policy Ideas entitled, "Giving Voice to the Poor."²⁹ The information collected at this stage was used to craft the quantitative questionnaire for Stage 2.

Stage 2 – Quantitative nationwide survey

A sample of 1,207 people were interviewed across Malaysia to ensure the survey findings were statistically significant.³⁰ Of these, 150 were dropouts from six different states, which represents 12.4 percent of the entire sample.

Low-income parents from across the four regions in Peninsula Malaysia (North, Central, South, East) and East Malaysia were interviewed. A face-to-face survey methodology was used to ensure completeness, which meant the survey was a comprehensive nationwide undertaking. This fieldwork took place from August to September, 2013.

The selection of locations was based on a combination of the incidence of poverty, and ability of the demographic of the state to represent the region. The eligibility of the respondents was based on median income as it is a better predictor of the cost of living as compared to the mean income (which is often skewed due to very high earners at the very top). The household income level was not to exceed 40 percent of the median income of each state and is listed in Table 2.

TABLE 2: MAXIMUM HOUSEHOLD INCOME LEVEL BY STATE

Location	Household income of respondent to not exceed
Kedah	RM 800
Klang Valley ³¹	RM 2,300 (urban) or RM 2,000 (rural)
Terengganu	RM 850
Johor	RM 1,200
Sabah	RM 800
Sarawak	RM 950

Source: e-Kasih database figures and IDEAS calculations

The exact locations and neighbourhoods for sampling within the selected states were identified based on the statistics provided by e-Kasih database.³² This was applied for all the states, except for Klang Valley where Projek Perumahan Rakyat³³ were the main target areas for fieldwork.

Each respondent was also required to be 21 years and above, with at least one child under their responsibility who is of school going age (between 7 to 17 years old) and they had to be involved in and/or make decisions with regards to the child's education. If they had more than one child they answered questions with regards to only one child.

28 Giving Voice to the Poor project was funded by ariseAsia, ECM Libra Foundation, Yayasan Sime Darby and Yayasan Tinggi.

29 Wan Saiful Wan Jan, *Giving Voice to the Poor*, IDEAS, <http://ideas.org.my/?p=6509>, (February 2013).

30 Confidence level at 95% with margin of error +/- 10%

31 Klang Valley here refers to Selangor and Kuala Lumpur.

32 E-Kasih the Malaysian National Poverty Data Bank

33 Public housing areas.

Stage 3 – Validation roundtables and final analysis

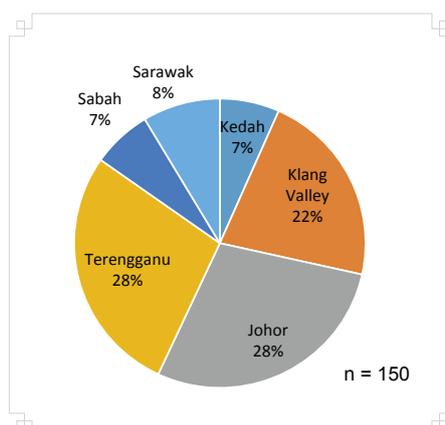
Following the results of the quantitative survey conducted in Stage 2, two roundtable discussions were held involving education and community development experts, NGOs and other key stakeholders from government and non-government bodies, to delve deeper into the identified issues and fine-tune our final recommendations.

The roundtables allowed us to speak directly about specific issues with experts, uncovering the emotional aspects and reasons that were not able to be fully explored in a large-scale survey. This helped to validate and strengthen the findings from the previous two stages.

Giving Voice to the Poor Survey – an overview of dropouts

The IDEAS survey captured 150 parents of dropouts from a total of 1,207 parents interviewed. Of these, 89 were from urban areas and 61 were from rural areas. Most of the dropouts were from the states of Johor, Terengganu, and the Klang Valley.³⁴ Chart 2 below shows a breakdown of the dropouts captured by states in the sample.

CHART 2: A BREAKDOWN OF ALL DROPOUTS IN SAMPLE BY STATE

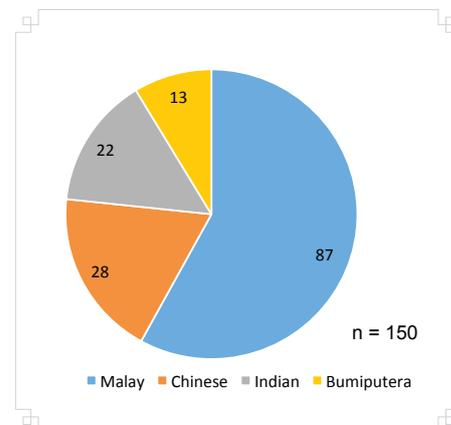


Source: IDEAS Giving Voice to the Poor survey

It was interesting to note that the percentage of parents who had a secondary education varied by state: 50 percent in Terengganu, two-thirds in the Klang Valley and three-quarters in Johor.

The ethnic breakdown of the sample is shown in Chart 3. The majority were Malay, followed by Chinese and Indians and the remaining were Bumiputera from East Malaysia.

CHART 3: ETHNIC BREAKDOWN OF DROPOUT SAMPLE



Source: IDEAS Giving Voice to the Poor survey

The current age of those who have dropped out is approximately 17 years old, and they were commonly the eldest child in the family. It must be noted that what is not clear from the survey is whose decision it was to dropout i.e. whether it was the parents' decision or if it was left solely to the child to decide.

On average, each family had three children and the monthly income of families with a child who had dropped out ranged between RM 300 to RM 2,200 as shown in Table 3.

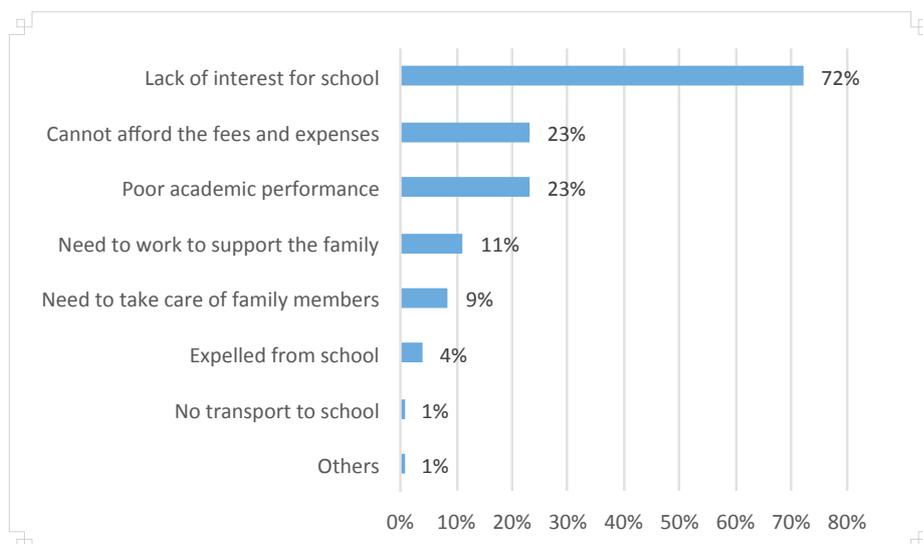
The families who had a monthly household income between RM 1,001 and 1,500 were either from Johor or Klang Valley, while those in the highest income range were all from Klang Valley.

³⁴ Klang Valley includes Kuala Lumpur and Selangor.

TABLE 3: INCOME RANGE OF FAMILIES WHO HAD A CHILD WHO HAD DROPPED OUT

Income range (monthly household income)	Number of families within the income range
RM 300 to 1,000	110
RM 1,001 to 1,500	16
RM 1,501 to 2,200	24

CHART 4: REASONS PARENTS GIVE FOR THEIR CHILD DROPPING OUT



Source: IDEAS Giving Voice to the Poor survey

Why drop out?

The IDEAS survey found that the main reason for dropping out was a lack of interest for school. This was followed by other reasons such as poor academic performance and inability to afford school related expenses.³⁵ Chart 4 lists all the reasons given for students dropping out.

Dropping out due to lack of interest

Parents were asked why their child dropped out and most responded by citing 'lack of interest for school'. However, they were given the choice to choose more than one reason and many also chose 'cannot afford fees and expenses' as well as 'poor academic performance'. While none of these reasons are new to explaining the phenomenon of dropping out, it is interesting to note

that 72 percent, or an overwhelming 108 out of a sample size of 150, cited lack of interest as a reason for discontinuing schooling. The average monthly household income of these 108 families was RM 993.

A recent study on truancy, carried out by two academics who are also psychologists, with a sample of 472 students, while not directly related to dropouts could provide some insight into why there is such a high level of lack of interest. The study revealed that the main reasons students played truant were they did not like teachers or found the way subjects were taught to be uninteresting.³⁶

A lack of interest is not an uncommon reason, and is cited frequently as a reason for dropping out globally as noted in this American paper:

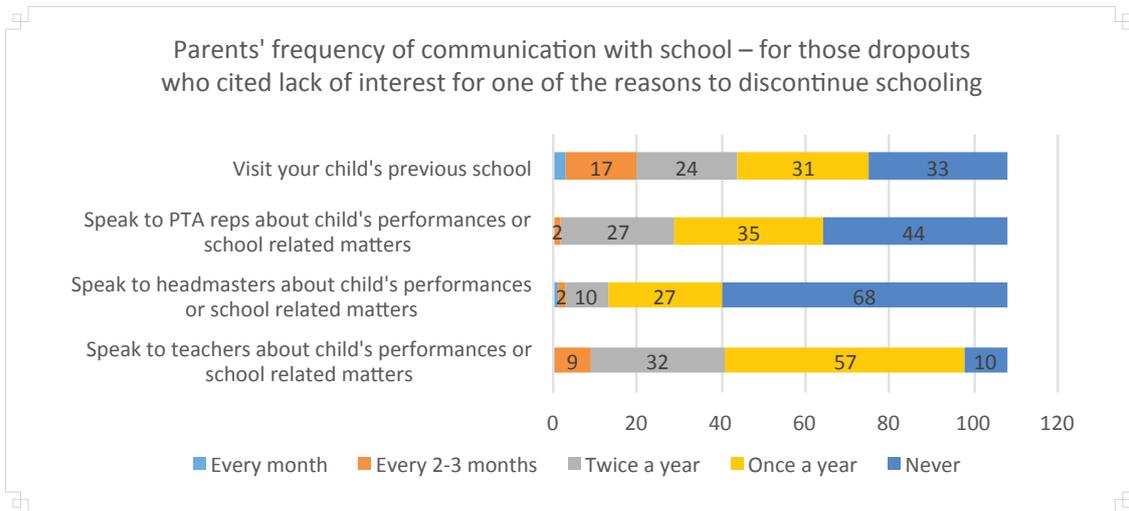
"Students regularly report, for example, some measure of school disengagement as the primary reason for leaving school. The commonality of these responses ("did not like school" and "classes were not interesting") is often cited as a reason that schools must become more "relevant" and that teachers must learn to structure curriculum and pedagogy so that it is more "interesting" and "engaging" to students at risk of dropping out. Both suggestions may be completely on the mark and, if enacted on a wide scale, might reduce dropout rates."³⁷

³⁵ The MOE has abolished school fees, but many compulsory payments such as annual payments for Parent Teachers' Association remain.

³⁶ <http://www.universitypublications.net/jte/0202/pdf/H3V180.pdf>

³⁷ John H. Tyler, and Magnus Lofstrom, "Finishing high school: Alternative Pathways and Dropout Recovery," *America's High Schools*, 19 (2009): 77-103, *The Future of Children*, <http://futureofchildren.org/publications/journals/article/index.xml?journalid=30&articleid=49§ionid=174>.

CHART 5: HOW OFTEN PARENTS OF DROPOUTS WHO LACKED INTEREST IN SCHOOL COMMUNICATE WITH VARIOUS LEVELS OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT



Source: IDEAS Giving Voice to the Poor survey

While pedagogy is very important, the lower socio-economic status and location of the families surveyed may have prevented them from accessing better schools. When asked whether they preferred their child's school they responded either with: *'This is the school that is allocated to my child'* or that *'This is the only school with easy access'*.

Another interesting find was that approximately 45 percent of those who dropped out due to a lack of interest for school also had a head of the household who was an unskilled blue collar worker (this includes jobs such as, but not limited to, guards, waiters, labourers and cashiers).

Many parents also observed that despite their children having dropped out due to *'lack of interest for school'*, their child *'enjoyed his or her day at school'*. This applied to 57 percent of the 108. However, for the remaining dropouts who cited lack of interest for school, parents observed that their child was *'not interested in going to school'* or their *'child often skips classes'*. These are signs

of those who are at risk of dropping out, something that should not be ignored by parents or schools.

For the 108 who lack interest for school, parents of 63 felt that they required academic support outside of school hours in the form of additional classes or tuition because their child was not performing well enough. However, Chart 5 indicates how often parents communicated with various stakeholders with regards to such problems. Most parents only spoke to teachers, headmasters, or parent-teacher association (PTA) representatives between one to two times a year and a handful never spoke to schools about their child's progress.

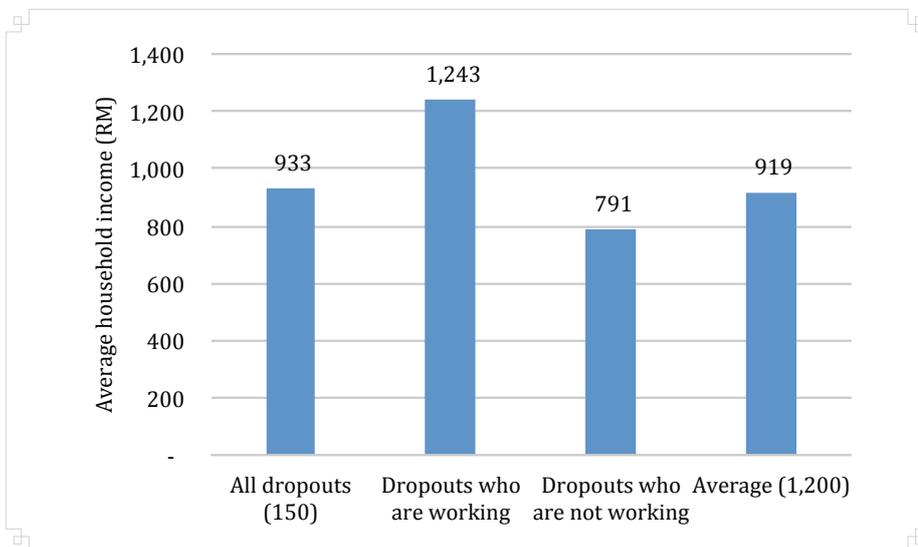
Of those who dropped out citing lack of interest among other reasons, two-thirds are neither working nor actively seeking any alternative form of education.

Dropping out to work

Many parents of those who had dropped out and had begun working cited financial reasons for doing so. Financial reasons meant the inability to afford the fees and expenses associated with education (these are items such as transport fare, school uniforms and shoes, books and stationary, and food and pocket money) and the need to work in order to support their family.

Interestingly, the monthly household income of dropouts who had begun working was much higher at RM 1,243 than the monthly household income of those who were neither studying nor working which stood at RM 791. Additionally, around three-quarters (34 dropouts) who had begun working were from urban areas, and the rest (13 dropouts) were from rural areas.

CHART 6: AVERAGE MONTHLY HOUSEHOLD INCOME FOR DROPOUTS WHO ARE WORKING, NOT WORKING, ALL DROPOUTS, AND THE ENTIRE SAMPLE OF GIVING VOICE TO THE POOR SURVEY



Source: IDEAS Giving Voice to the Poor survey

Of the 47 dropouts who had begun working, about a third of them entered the same vocation as the head of the household. This is an indication of the poverty cycle as the social mobility of these individuals has been stunted due to financial reasons and compounded by a lack of interest for school. However, parents believe a majority of those who have begun working are happy with their jobs, which may suggest that a typical school education or syllabus may not have catered to their particular skill-set or interests.

The remainder, 103 dropouts, who were not working did not seek out alternative education because they were unable to afford it or were simply uninterested to continue studying.

Parents of all 150 dropouts in the survey clearly understand the importance of education in securing a good future for their child; in fact, 94 percent of parents noted it was important or very important. The survey also asked parents to list, in order of importance, the skills

they thought their child should possess upon leaving school, listed in Table 4 below. Academic skills and good command of English were ranked as the most important while the vocational and technical education skills were not seen to be as valuable, being ranked fifth out of the list of six skills.

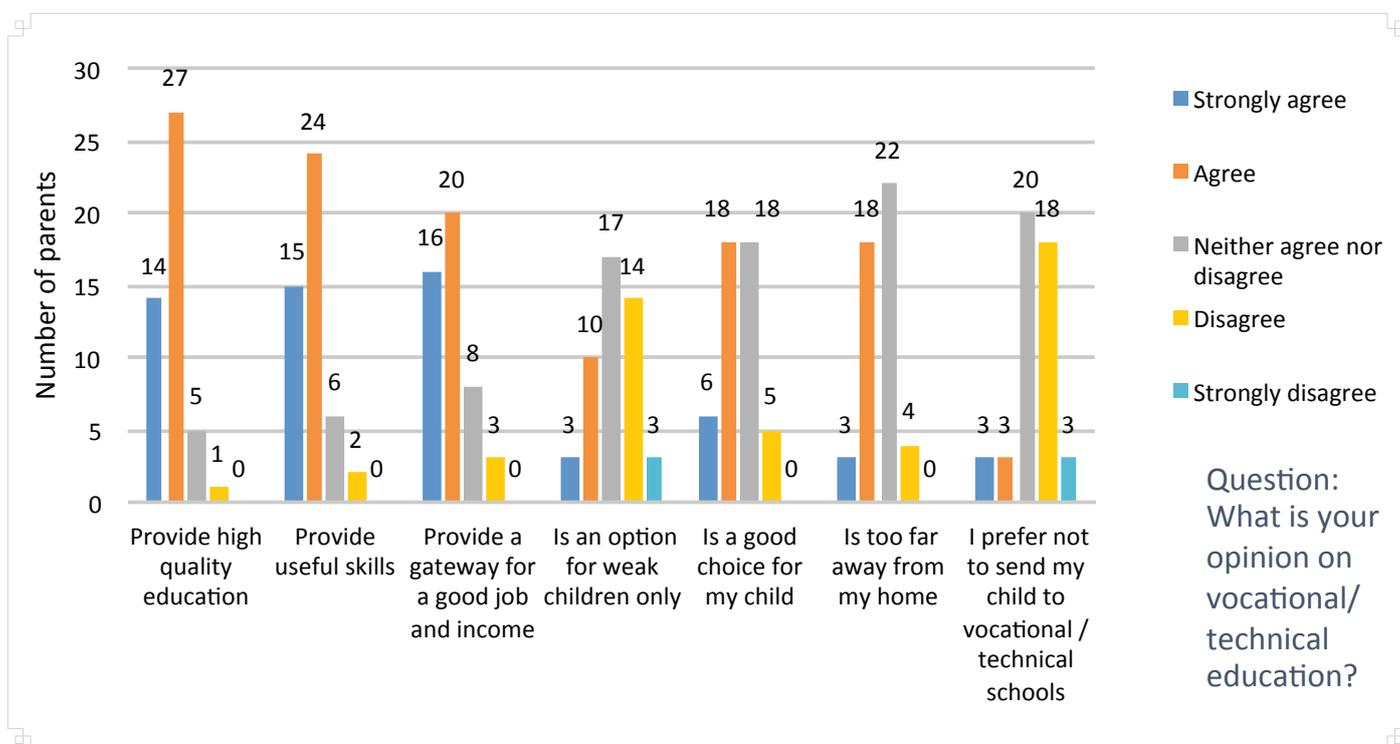
TABLE 4: SKILLS PARENTS THINK THEIR CHILD SHOULD HAVE UPON LEAVING SCHOOL, RANKED IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE

Rank	Skills
1	Academic skills
2	Good command of English
3	Well-mannered (e.g. polite, respect elders)
4	Excel in co-curricular activities
5	Vocational/technical skills
6	Soft-skills (e.g. communication skills)

Source: IDEAS Giving Voice to the Poor survey

Academic skills and good command of English were ranked as the most important while the vocational and technical education skills were not seen to be as valuable.

CHART 7: PARENTS' OPINIONS OF VOCATIONAL/TECHNICAL EDUCATION – FOR THOSE WHOSE CHILD HAD DROPPED OUT DUE TO LACK OF INTEREST AND WAS WORKING



Source: IDEAS Giving Voice to the Poor survey

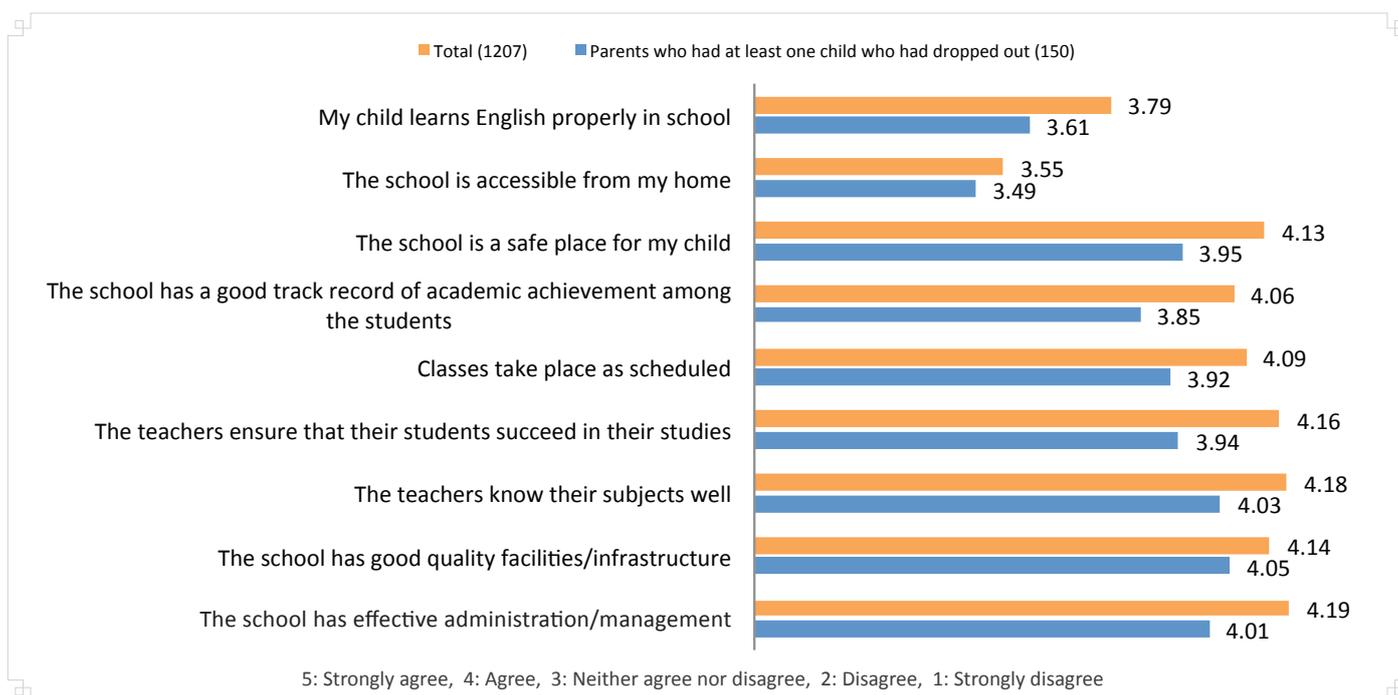
Regardless of the fact that parents of dropouts ranked vocational/technical skills low relative to other skills, they still see these skills as potentially very valuable for their child as highlighted in Chart 7. Presumably, they believe that while these skills are important, schools are unable to impart knowledge related to these specific skill-sets. Parents seem to be more evenly split in their opinions when asked if vocational/technical education 'is for weak children only' or 'it is a good choice for my child'. This uncertainty may present an opportunity to educate students as well as their parents about the benefits of taking these education pathways.

Dropouts and parents

Both parents of dropouts and parents of children who did not drop out have a positive view of school teachers, management and facilities as shown below in Chart 8. Parents are satisfied with the school environment and with teachers. However, when asked 'if their child was learning English properly' at schools and 'if the school is accessible from their homes', all parents are less likely to agree with these statements.

Parents' positive attitude towards schools is reflected in the frequency of their visits to school. Most parents, or 110 out of 150, visit their child's school two times or fewer in a year. Communication with teachers was most frequent while communication with headmasters and PTA representatives was much lower as shown in Table 5.

CHART 8: PARENTS' AVERAGE RATINGS OF SCHOOL STAFF, MANAGEMENT AND FACILITIES



Source: IDEAS Giving Voice to the Poor survey

TABLE 5: FREQUENCY OF PARENTS' COMMUNICATION WITH SCHOOL TEACHERS, HEADMASTERS, PTA AND SCHOOL VISITS – FOR DROPOUTS

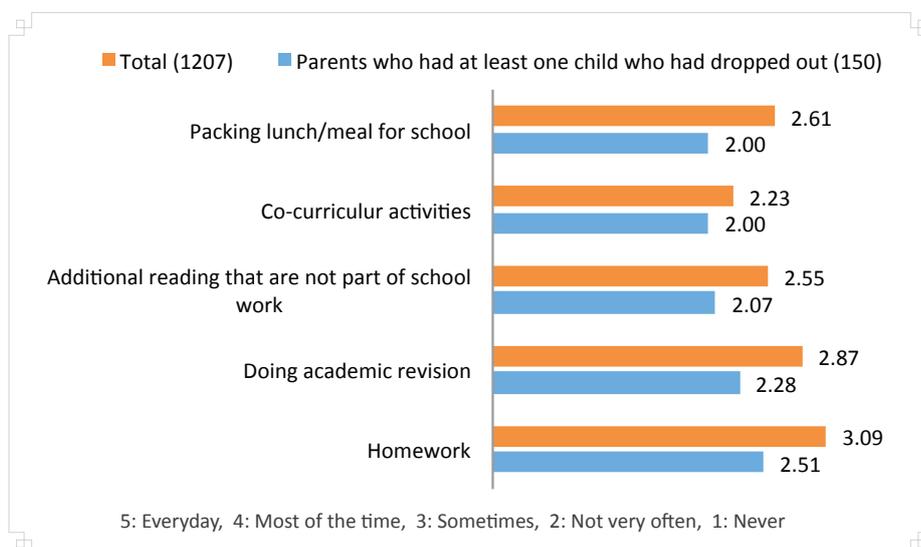
How often do you speak to PTA representatives about your child's performance or school-related matters	How often do you speak to teachers about your child's performance or school-related matters	How often do you speak to headmaster about your child's performance or school-related matters	How often do you speak to PTA representatives about your child's performance or school-related matters	How often do you visit your child's previous school
Every month	1	2	1	5
Every 2-3 months	28	5	6	35
Twice a year	35	16	29	30
Once a year	72	48	60	37
Never	14	79	54	43
TOTAL	150	150	150	150

When asked if they wanted to increase the number of visits and frequency of communication with school teachers, management or PTA, 130 out of 150 parents said “no” because they ‘trust that the teachers know better about how to educate their child’ and that they receive ‘enough information about the school from their child’.

As for any child in school, there are numerous experiences that influence their behaviour and preferences. While schools play a large part, it can be argued that experiences at home and in the community play an even larger role. The IDEAS survey indicates that parents’ interaction with the child in learning or school-related activities is low for households in the bottom 40 percent. However, interaction of parents with a child who went on to drop out is relatively lower compared to the entire sample as indicated in Chart 9. The mode for parents of dropouts was consistently either one (never) or two (not very often) indicating that meaningful interaction to support academic learning was very minimal.

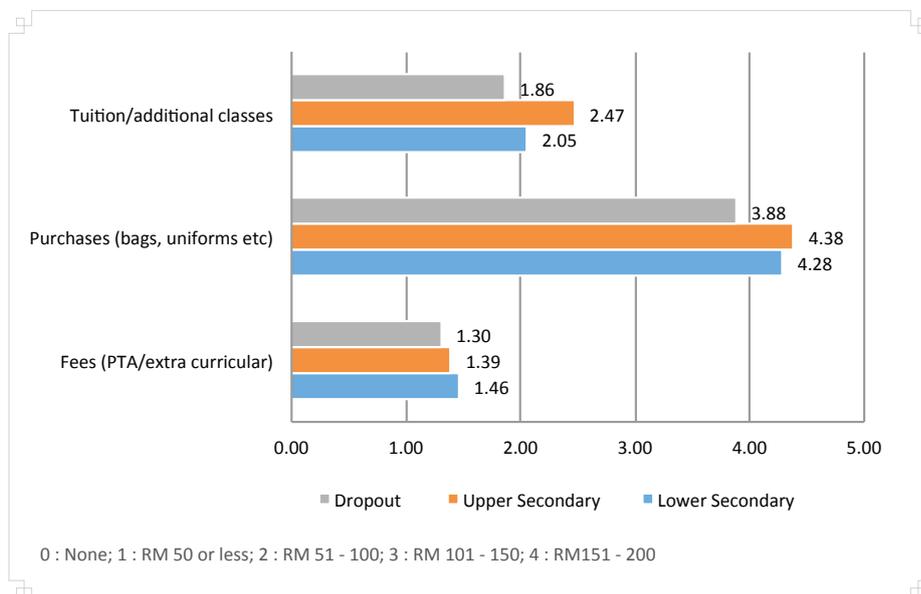
Another interesting comparison is that the amount spent on fees, purchases of bags and other bare necessities to attend school, and tuition and additional classes was consistently lower for dropouts as Chart 10 indicates. This may have been a function of low income, which then may have led to their child dropping out and, in some cases, opting to work.

CHART 9: FREQUENCY OF PARENTS’ INTERACTION WITH THEIR CHILD AT HOME



Source: IDEAS Giving Voice to the Poor survey

CHART 10: PARENTS’ SPENDING BEHAVIOUR FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS AND DROPOUTS



Source: IDEAS Giving Voice to the Poor survey

Moving forward

While it is difficult to obtain official rates and data on dropouts, it is clear that the education system does need to re-visit this problem. The sample of dropouts from the IDEAS Giving Voice to the Poor Survey was small. However, it does show that out of the 1207 people surveyed, 150 parents had a child who dropped out, representing 12.4 percent of the target sample. This is robust enough to show that every 12 in 100 parents surveyed in this low-income category had at least one child who dropped out.

It is evident from the survey that parents are optimistic about the role education can play in improving their child's future. However, it seems that they are unable to prevent their child from dropping out due largely to reasons including a lack of interest for school, inability to afford school related expenses and poor academic performance. Those who had a child who dropped out citing lack of interest also had minimal interaction with the child's school. They spoke to teachers, headmasters, PTA or visited the school at most only twice a year. Additionally, the IDEAS survey indicates that parents who have a child who has dropped out engaged less with their child at home (e.g. homework and reading activities) when the child was attending school. They also spent a lower amount on school related expenses on their child (before the child dropped out) compared to their peers with a child in secondary school.

Dropouts who had begun working showed some indication of the continuation of the poverty cycle. They tried to supplement the family income by leaving school before completing a full

secondary education and many ended up working in the same unskilled occupations as the head of the household. Parents of these children viewed vocational and technical education positively. These education options should be explored further as a means to boost their child's skill and income level.

In the study, the other main reasons cited for dropping out were '*poor academic performance*' and '*cannot afford fees and expenses*'. Both reasons are multifaceted and inter-related with lack of interest, and could be due to a myriad of push-factors such as poor pedagogy, lack of literacy or inability to cope with a transition from vernacular school to the curriculum or language in national schools. Pull-factors such as the '*need to work to support the family*' or '*need to take care of family member*' could also contribute to a child losing interest and performing poorly at school. All these factors are essentially a function of poverty and distract from a child learning effectively and staying in school.

Both developed and developing countries face the issue of dropouts in the education system and have various approaches to addressing the problem. In the United States, the effectiveness of intervention measures was studied, and the most successful ones were found to be The Perry Preschool Programme and First Things First.³⁸ The former is a study that began in 1962, where three to four year olds from poor African-American families were assigned to two groups – one which received high quality early childhood care and education and the other which received no early childhood

care and education. The results show that those who received quality care and education are approximately 20 percent more likely to graduate from secondary school. Overall the intervention programme produced 19 additional graduates for every 100 students involved.

First Things First is less effective than The Perry Preschool Programme but produces an extra 16 students per 100 that are involved in the programme. The programme is around school reform and creates small learning communities where there is close interaction between teachers, students and their families. Additionally, teachers work together to improve instruction to make classes more engaging. The programme demonstrated a higher level of attendance, graduation rates and test scores when compared to schools that did not take part in the programme.³⁹

In developing countries, conditional child support and scholarships have been used to address the problem of dropouts. Conditional child support provides support for a child's family in monetary or other forms in exchange for enrolment and attendance of the child at school. For example, Bangladesh introduced a Food-for-Education programme where a grain ration is provided based on the family's household income and the attendance at school of at least one child of primary-school age. An evaluation of the project found that this increased a child's school attendance by 21 to 28 percent and also improved the duration of the child's schooling by two years.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid

³⁸ Marcella R. Dianda, Ed.D, *Preventing Future High School Dropouts*, National Education Association, 2008, <http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/dropoutguide1108.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Frances Hunt, *Dropping out from School: A Cross country Literature review*, Consortium for Research on Education Access and Transitions and Equity (CREATE), University of Essex, May 2008.

A study on scholarships given out to students from low-income households, specifically during the economic crisis in Indonesia, significantly reduced the dropout rates at the lower-secondary level. Students at this level of schooling were, before the crisis, most susceptible to dropping out.⁴¹

As for Malaysia, a comprehensive study on dropouts and those at risk of dropping out is first needed and should be done to provide more breadth and depth to the issue at hand. This would include making data collected publicly available and also providing clear definitions and statistics for dropouts. This standardisation in definition would also help us better understand where those who leave the mainstream schooling system are going (private schools, religious schools or into the formal or informal economy). This would also help formulate policy proposals or develop initiatives to address dropouts from low-income households.

While the IDEAS survey provides an insight to the issue of dropouts, a re-examination of the issue on a larger scale would prove beneficial not only for those who have dropped out and their families, but also for those at risk of dropping out in the future and for the country's growing economy which is facing a shortage of skilled labour.

⁴¹ Lisa A. Cameron, *An analysis of the role of social safety net scholarships in reducing school drop-out during the Indonesian economic crisis*, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy, December 2000, <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/iwp82.pdf>

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