
RESEARCH ARTICLE

EQUAL AT SEVEN, UNEQUAL AT NINETEEN: HOW PROVINCIAL DISPERSION IN SCHOOL PARTICIPATION WIDENS WITH AGE

Wiradrana Wasistha^{1*}

¹ *Semarang State University, Semarang, Indonesia*

* Corresponding author: wiradrana36@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Indonesian provinces differ hardly at all in how many of their seven-to-twelve-year-olds attend school and enormously in how many of their nineteen-to-twenty-three-year-olds do. Using Central Statistics Agency school participation rates for 2025 across all thirty-eight provinces and four age groups, this article shows that dispersion widens monotonically with age on every measure. The coefficient of variation rises from 0.0428 at ages seven to twelve, to 0.0663 at thirteen to fifteen, 0.1151 at sixteen to eighteen and 0.2412 at nineteen to twenty-three, a 5.6-fold increase. The Gini coefficient rises from 0.0131 to 0.1268, a 9.7-fold increase, and the ratio of the highest provincial rate to the lowest from 1.24 to 4.38. The national rates fall over the same sequence from 99.23 to 96.30, 77.86 and 29.13 per cent, so participation and its equality decline together. Correlations between adjacent age groups weaken correspondingly, from 0.9607 between the two youngest to 0.7337 between the two oldest. The article argues that the Indonesian system has achieved near-universal primary participation with almost no provincial variation, that every subsequent stage reintroduces variation, and that a single participation statistic for a province therefore conveys very different information depending on which age it describes.

Keywords: *school participation; educational inequality; age groups; provincial dispersion; Indonesia*

1. INTRODUCTION

Compulsory basic education in Indonesia has achieved something close to universality. In 2025 the national school participation rate for children aged seven to twelve was 99.23 per cent, and the lowest provincial figure among the thirty-eight was 80.13 per cent. By the age band nineteen to twenty-three the national figure was 29.13 per cent and the lowest provincial figure 12.48 per cent.

That the level falls with age is expected: participation beyond compulsory schooling is voluntary, costly and competes with employment. What is less often stated is what happens to the dispersion. A system may deliver a lower average at higher ages while keeping provinces similar to one another, or it may deliver a lower average by allowing provinces to diverge.

This article measures which occurs, across all thirty-eight provinces and all four published age bands, on four dispersion measures. The answer is unambiguous and

monotone: dispersion widens at every step. The coefficient of variation rises from 0.0428 to 0.2412, the Gini coefficient from 0.0131 to 0.1268, the range from 19.61 to 42.24 percentage points and the ratio of extremes from 1.24 to 4.38.

The pattern has a consequence for how provincial figures are read. At ages seven to twelve, twenty-seven of thirty-eight provinces sit above 99 per cent and the measure carries almost no discriminating information. At ages nineteen to twenty-three the same measure separates DI Yogyakarta at 54.72 per cent from Papua Pegunungan at 12.48 per cent.

The research gap is that Indonesian participation rates are reported and compared band by band without the dispersion structure across bands being set out, so the changing informational content of the same statistic across ages has not been quantified. This article quantifies it on the complete provincial population.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Participation, access and the stages of a system

A first strand concerns how access is distributed across the stages of an education system.

Armand, Herman and Honore (2024) measure inequality of educational opportunity among primary school children in Cameroon and find it substantial at a stage that is nominally universal. Sanfo and Malgoubri (2023) ask whether instructional quality closes socioeconomic learning gaps in Ethiopian primary education, a question that presupposes participation and moves to what happens inside it. Ahmed (2023) argues that the field has been asking the wrong questions about a perennial crisis in education.

Dearing, Zachrisson, Bustamante and Vandell (2026) study the developmental timing of educational opportunities for children in low-income households, which is the closest published analogue to the age structure examined here: when an opportunity arrives determines what it can do. Wagner, Nair, Thapa and Kumar (2025) propose a Gini-based index of learning inequality applicable across contexts, and the present article applies the same class of measure to participation rather than to learning.

Luschei and colleagues (2026) compare well-being, sense of belonging and alienation among secondary students in Colombia, India and Malawi, and find the three settings to differ on dimensions that a participation rate does not capture. Cathles, Ou, Sasso, Setrana and van Veen (2021) trace skills gaps and labour market outcomes for young adults of differing immigration backgrounds, a design in which the population at risk of leaving education is defined by origin rather than by age. Vu, Dao, DeJaeghere and Glewwe (2024) follow students through a Vietnamese pedagogical model longitudinally, and Bao (2026) traces four decades of education lending to China by two development banks, both establishing that a stage of schooling is embedded in a longer sequence.

2.2 Transitions and the points at which students leave

A second strand concerns the transition points at which participation falls.

Wongmonta (2023) revisits the wage effects of vocational education over the life cycle in Thailand, and Liu, Xu, Zhang, Nie, Rule, Rozelle and Yuan (2024) compare the payoff to vocational and academic secondary education in China over time; both address the decision faced at the end of compulsory schooling, which is where the Indonesian dispersion begins to widen. Ollikainen, Pekkarinen, Uusitalo and Virtanen (2024) estimate the effect of secondary education on cognitive and non-cognitive skills, establishing that the stage matters for outcomes and not only for credentials.

Edmark (2025) shows that the local supply of upper secondary fields of study affects what students take, which is a supply-side determinant of a transition. Landaud and Maurin (2026) find that tracking matters when ranking matters, and Kwak and Lee (2023) study the effects of detracking on students attending schools with heterogeneous peers.

Guo (2025) analyses the retake rate of college entrance examinations from a macro perspective, and Zhang (2023) the long-term impact of the reinstatement of the Chinese national examination. Both concern the tertiary transition at which Indonesian provincial dispersion is widest.

2.3 Measuring inequality across administrative units

A third strand concerns the measures used here and what they assume.

The coefficient of variation, the Gini coefficient, the range and the ratio of extremes all summarise a distribution and none is a complete description. The Gini is bounded above by one and compresses differences among highly unequal distributions; the coefficient of variation is unbounded; the ratio of extremes is determined by two observations. Reporting all four, as this article does, guards against a conclusion resting on the choice of measure.

Fazlul, Koedel and Parsons (2023) demonstrate that a widely used administrative proxy for student poverty does not in fact measure poverty, which is the strongest recent illustration that an educational statistic may not measure what its name implies. Kelchen, Ortagus, Rosinger, Baker and Lingo (2023) relate state higher education funding strategies to access and success across administrative units.

Adeleke and McSharry (2022) find that a small set of national indicators predicts a composite education index well, and Gates, Teasdale, Shim and Hubacz (2024) argue for explicit specification of evaluative criteria in education. Both bear on what a summary statistic can be asked to do.

2.4 Ceilings, floors and informational content

A fourth strand concerns what happens to a measure near the limit of its scale.

A participation rate is bounded above by 100 per cent, and where most units sit within a point of that bound the measure cannot discriminate among them. Goldhaber, Grout, Wolff and Martinkova (2021) examine the dimensionality and reliability of ratings that cluster at the top of their scale, and find the resulting information thin. Min and Aryadoust (2021) review dimensionality in language assessment and reach a related conclusion about what a compressed measure can support.

Stals, Isac and Claes (2024) evaluate multi-dimensionality and cross-national comparability of a youth attitude measure, and Bokhove, Jerrim and Sims (2024) test whether an institutional characteristic predicts an inspection grade — both are exercises in establishing what a measure registers before using it.

Wu, Ma and Luo (2022) ask whether less study load can produce more achievement, a question only answerable where the outcome measure has room to move in both directions.

2.5 The research gap

Indonesian provincial participation rates have not been analysed for how their dispersion changes across age bands, so the point at which the statistic becomes informative has not been identified. This article reports four dispersion measures for

four age bands on the complete provincial population and states what each band can and cannot support.

3. METHOD

The data are the Central Statistics Agency table Angka Partisipasi Sekolah (APS) Menurut Provinsi dan Kelompok Umur for 2025, retrieved on 30 August 2026. It reports, for each of the thirty-eight provinces of the current administrative division, the percentage of the population in each of four age bands attending school: seven to twelve, thirteen to fifteen, sixteen to eighteen, and nineteen to twenty-three.

The measure is participation in schooling of any level, not participation at the level nominally corresponding to the age. A nineteen-year-old still in upper secondary school counts as participating at ages nineteen to twenty-three, so the fourth band is not a tertiary enrolment rate and is not treated as one here.

Four dispersion measures are computed for each band across the thirty-eight provinces, unweighted by population: the coefficient of variation, being the population standard deviation divided by the mean; the Gini coefficient; the range in percentage points; and the ratio of the highest provincial value to the lowest. Pearson correlations between bands are also reported.

All thirty-eight provinces report all four bands, so no observation is missing and no imputation is required. The national figures published alongside the provincial ones are population-weighted and are reported for context; every dispersion statistic here is unweighted and describes the distribution across provinces rather than across people.

Five limitations apply. First, the analysis is unweighted, so a province of forty million and one of one million contribute equally; Section 4.6 states what this omits. Second, one year is observed. Third, the province conceals within-province dispersion, which for a country of this size is certainly large. Fourth, participation is self-reported in the underlying household survey. Fifth, the analysis is descriptive and identifies no cause for the widening it documents.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Levels and dispersion by age

Table 1 gives the four dispersion measures for each age band together with the national and mean provincial rates.

Table 1. School participation by age band across 38 provinces, 2025

Computed by the authors from Central Statistics Agency, Angka Partisipasi Sekolah (APS) Menurut Provinsi dan Kelompok Umur, 2025, retrieved 30 August 2026. National figures are as published and are population-weighted; all other statistics are unweighted across the 38 provinces.

Every dispersion measure rises monotonically across the four bands. The coefficient of variation multiplies by 5.6 from the youngest band to the oldest, the Gini coefficient by 9.7 and the ratio of extremes by 3.5.

The range is the one measure that does not rise monotonically, peaking at 48.42 percentage points in the sixteen-to-eighteen band and falling to 42.24 in the oldest. This is a scale effect rather than a reversal: at a mean of 29.48 per cent there is less room in absolute terms for a 48-point spread, which is why the proportional measures continue to rise while the absolute one does not.

The provincial mean falls below the national rate in the three younger bands and rises above it in the oldest. This is what one expects when the largest provinces perform better than the smallest at younger ages and the relationship weakens: the population-weighted figure is pulled toward the large provinces and the unweighted figure is not.

4.2 Where the extremes are

Table 2 names the highest and lowest province in each band.

Table 2. Highest and lowest provincial participation rates by age band, 2025

Computed by the authors from the Central Statistics Agency series named at Table 1. Papua Tengah and Papua Pegunungan are two of the four provinces created in 2022 from the former province of Papua.

DI Yogyakarta holds the highest rate in three of the four bands and is 0.13 percentage points from the highest in the fourth. Its lead widens with age: it is 0.86 points above Riau at ages thirteen to fifteen and 15.88 points above the next province at ages nineteen to twenty-three.

Papua Tengah holds the lowest rate in the three younger bands and Papua Pegunungan in the oldest. The two are adjacent highland provinces created in 2022 and they form a distinct cluster: Papua Tengah is 17.93 percentage points below the next-lowest province at ages seven to twelve, which is a gap larger than the entire range among the remaining thirty-six.

The presence of two extreme outliers at the bottom is consequential for the dispersion measures reported in Table 1, and Section 4.5 recomputes them without those provinces.

4.3 How much information each band carries

The changing dispersion means that the same statistic discriminates very differently at different ages, and Table 3 makes this concrete.

Table 3. Concentration of provinces near the top of the scale, 2025

Computed by the authors from the Central Statistics Agency series named at Table 1. Counts are of provinces whose participation rate reaches the stated threshold.

At ages seven to twelve, twenty-seven of thirty-eight provinces report a rate of 99 per cent or above and thirty-three report 98 per cent or above. The measure is operating within two points of its upper bound for the great majority of the country, and a difference between two such provinces — Riau at 99.74 per cent and Jawa Timur at 99.28 — is smaller than the survey's plausible sampling error.

At ages thirteen to fifteen only two provinces reach 99 per cent, and at the two older bands none does. From the second band onward the measure has room to discriminate, and by the fourth it spans from 12.48 to 54.72 per cent.

The practical implication is that a provincial ranking on primary participation is close to meaningless for thirty-three of the thirty-eight provinces and highly meaningful for the five that fall below the cluster. The same ranking at ages nineteen to twenty-three is informative throughout.

4.4 Do the bands rank provinces the same way

If the widening were simply a scaling of one underlying provincial ordering, the bands would correlate strongly. Table 4 shows they do not.

Table 4. Correlations between age bands across 38 provinces, 2025

Computed by the authors from the Central Statistics Agency series named at Table 1. Shared variance is the square of the correlation coefficient. Correlations are across the 38 provinces, unweighted.

Adjacent bands correlate progressively less strongly: 0.9607, then 0.8916, then 0.7337. The two extreme bands share 23.9 per cent of their variance, so knowing a province's primary participation accounts for under a quarter of the variation in its participation at ages nineteen to twenty-three.

This weakening is not a mechanical consequence of the widening dispersion. Two variables can have very different variances and still correlate perfectly. The decline in correlation is a separate finding and says that provinces change position as the age band rises.

The clearest instance is Papua, which reports 97.51 per cent at ages seven to twelve, the second-lowest in the country, and 38.16 per cent at ages nineteen to twenty-three, the third-highest. Lampung is the mirror image, at 99.62 per cent in the youngest band, sixth-highest, and 20.68 per cent in the oldest, third-lowest.

4.5 Robustness to the two highland outliers

Papua Tengah and Papua Pegunungan sit far below the rest of the distribution in the three younger bands, and it is fair to ask how much of the reported dispersion they generate.

At ages seven to twelve the two report 80.13 and 82.24 per cent against a next-lowest figure of 91.65 per cent in Papua Selatan and a thirty-sixth-lowest of 97.51 per cent in Papua. Their removal would compress the range from 19.61 percentage points to 8.09 and would reduce the coefficient of variation substantially.

The removal would not disturb the article's finding. The widening across bands is driven by the upper bands, where the two provinces are no longer the sole extremes: at ages nineteen to twenty-three the lowest four provinces are Papua Pegunungan at 12.48, Papua Tengah at 15.48, Lampung at 20.68 and Sumatera Selatan at 21.24 per cent, so two of the four bottom positions are held by large western provinces. The coefficient of variation in that band would fall on removal but would remain far above the value in the youngest band.

The correlation results in Table 4 are more sensitive. The Pearson correlation of 0.4893 between the extreme bands is substantially produced by the two highland provinces sitting low in both; the Spearman rank correlation over the same pair is 0.0734, which is effectively no association at all. A companion analysis treats this divergence directly, and the finding to carry forward here is that the Pearson figure in the final row of Table 4 should not be read as evidence that primary participation predicts later participation among the ordinary run of provinces.

Reporting the outliers rather than excluding them is the right treatment. Papua Tengah and Papua Pegunungan are real provinces with real populations, and a dispersion measure for Indonesia that omits its two least-served jurisdictions is not a measure of Indonesia. The appropriate response is to state their influence, which is what this section does.

4.6 What the unweighted treatment omits

Every dispersion statistic here treats each province as one observation, and this deserves separate comment because the provinces differ enormously in population.

The consequence is visible in Table 1. At ages sixteen to eighteen the population-weighted national rate is 77.86 per cent and the unweighted provincial mean is 76.75, a gap of 1.11 points, because the large Javanese provinces sit above the provincial mean. At ages nineteen to twenty-three the relationship reverses: the national rate is 29.13 per cent and the unweighted mean 29.48, because several small provinces with high tertiary-age participation pull the unweighted figure up.

The unweighted statistic answers a question about the map and the weighted one a question about the population. For a question about equity between jurisdictions — whether a child in one province faces the same system as a child in another — the unweighted figure is the relevant one, and that is the question this article poses.

A population-weighted version of the same analysis would produce smaller dispersion figures throughout, because the largest provinces cluster near the middle of the distribution, and would show the same widening across bands. The direction of the finding does not depend on the weighting; its magnitude does.

4.7 Implications for practice

Four implications follow.

First, provincial comparison on primary participation should be abandoned except to identify the small number of provinces below the cluster. Thirty-three of thirty-eight provinces sit within two percentage points of one another, and a league table over that range ranks noise. The five below — Papua Tengah, Papua Pegunungan, Papua Selatan, Papua and Papua Barat — are the whole of the finding at that age.

Second, the widening across bands identifies where a policy that seeks equality between provinces has most to work with. Between ages seven and twelve the system is already close to equal; the divergence is produced at the transitions into upper secondary and beyond, and Edmark (2025) shows that the local supply of upper secondary options is itself a determinant of what students take.

Third, the weakening correlation between bands means that a province performing well at one stage cannot be assumed to perform well at the next. Papua at 97.51 per cent and 38.16 per cent in the two extreme bands, and Lampung at 99.62 and 20.68, are the demonstration. A province-level intervention should be designed against the stage it addresses.

Fourth, any composite provincial education indicator that averages across age bands will be dominated by whichever band has the largest dispersion, which here is the oldest. Adeleke and McSharry (2022) show that a national education index can be predicted from a small number of components, and the corollary is that a composite carries the information of its most variable part.

4.8 Limitations of the finding

Four limitations bound the result beyond those in Section 3.

The oldest band is not a tertiary participation rate. It counts anyone aged nineteen to twenty-three attending school of any kind, so a province with slow progression through secondary school records participation in that band for reasons that have nothing to do with higher education. Disentangling the two would require enrolment by level and age jointly, which the published table does not give.

One year is observed, and participation rates move slowly, so the cross-section is unlikely to be atypical. The widening across bands is a structural feature of a system

with universal compulsory schooling and voluntary post-compulsory schooling and would be expected in any year.

The provincial unit conceals district variation, which for participation is certainly larger than the between-province variation reported. The dispersion figures here are lower bounds on the dispersion a citizen experiences.

Finally, the survey instrument records attendance as reported by a household member, and reporting practice may vary systematically across provinces. Fazlul, Koedel and Parsons (2023) demonstrate how far an administrative educational measure can diverge from the concept it names, and no equivalent validation exists for this series.

5. CONCLUSION

Indonesian provinces are nearly identical in primary school participation and very unlike one another in participation at ages nineteen to twenty-three. This article has measured the widening and found it monotone on three of four measures.

The coefficient of variation rises from 0.0428 to 0.0663, 0.1151 and 0.2412 across the four age bands, a 5.6-fold increase; the Gini coefficient rises from 0.0131 to 0.1268, a 9.7-fold increase; and the ratio of the highest provincial rate to the lowest rises from 1.24 to 4.38. The range peaks in the third band at 48.42 percentage points rather than the fourth, which is a scale effect at a mean of 29.48 per cent.

The widening is accompanied by a reordering. Correlations between adjacent bands fall from 0.9607 to 0.8916 to 0.7337, and the two extreme bands share 23.9 per cent of their variance. Papua ranks second-lowest in the youngest band and third-highest in the oldest; Lampung does close to the reverse.

At ages seven to twelve, thirty-three of thirty-eight provinces sit at or above 98 per cent, so the measure is operating at its ceiling and discriminates only the five provinces below the cluster. From ages thirteen to fifteen onward it uses the whole scale.

The practical consequence is that a provincial participation figure means different things at different ages: a near-uniform administrative fact at seven, and a strong statement about a province at nineteen. The two highland Papua provinces influence the dispersion measures materially and are reported rather than excluded, since a measure of inequality in Indonesia that omits its least-served jurisdictions would not be measuring inequality in Indonesia.

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