Merging schools has been promoted over a number of years. However, the resistance to change from local communities, school principals, and teachers with a vested interest is often high. The involvement of local communities and stakeholders in the policy-making and change process, coupled with strong political support from the district (such as a District Head Decree), and financial support to manage the transition has helped ensure success in merging schools in partner districts such as Kabupaten Semarang.

Multigrade teaching is standard in most countries, including in the developed world: the World Bank estimates that over 50% of children globally are taught in multigrade classes (2010). Meanwhile, past attempts to introduce the practice in Indonesia have encountered resistance and have generally not been sustained (Luschei & Zubaidah, 2012). Successful implementation of multigrade in partner districts such as Blitar is associated with stable leadership, intensive teacher training, ongoing mentoring of teachers, and the creation of special clusters for small schools implementing multigrade.

Flexible student intake. Another approach for very small, isolated schools is to adopt a two-year intake policy. Each class has a two-year age span, thus in a given year the school has three classes: Classes 1, 3, and 5, or Classes 2, 4, and 6.

Mobile teaching is becoming more common across Indonesia, as teachers require a minimum of 24 teaching periods per week to receive their monthly certification allowance (Peraturan Pemerintah No. 74, 2008).

Part-time teaching is another obvious and very viable solution to the oversupply problem. This is common in many countries and may be attractive to teachers with families. Current regulations and systems do not permit part-time teaching.

Group schools have been successfully developed in rural Papua. Very isolated small schools can be turned into satellite branches of a group school. In such cases, children can attend early grades in the branch school and, when they are a little older and able to walk to the group school, attend higher grades in the larger school.


School and class size

Based on the requirement for one civil-servant teacher per class, Indonesia currently has a national shortage of 412,509 primary school teachers (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015). Meanwhile the average student-teacher ratio of 16:1 suggests an oversupply. This apparent contradiction is explained by the large percentage of small schools and small classes.

Surprisingly, small schools are found not only in rural and isolated areas, but also in urban areas and on the heavily populated island of Java. As illustrated in Figure 2, below, in 13 of the sample districts, 20% or more schools are designated as small. In four districts, over 40% of primary schools are categorized as small: Wajo (55%), Madura (45%), Situbondo (43%), and Blitar (41%). Many of these have an average class size of eight or less (one-quarter or less than the standard maximum of 32), making a school enrolment of 48 or less.

In Blitar District in East Java, for example, 222 schools are designated as small. This district also has a shortage of 183 classroom teachers (including both civil servants and non-civil servants) for the number of existing classes. This means that 183 classes have no designated class teacher. In practice, these classes are taught by unregistered honorary teachers or in de-facto multigrade groups, although typically without an effective multigrade methodology.

Policy solutions for small schools

The Ministry of Education and Culture is also concerned at the national level with the problem of small schools. For the purposes of calculating national per-capita school operational grants (known as BOS), the Ministry defines a small school as one with fewer than 80 students. Under the current regulation, these schools receive a minimum grant based on a school population of 80, regardless if the actual population may be less than this number. According to Ministry data, some 19,800 Indonesian schools are currently categorized as small (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015b). This number represents over 13% of all primary schools.

Better Management for Small Schools

The policy solutions in 50 partner districts vary depending on local contexts. To date these include:

1. Merging small schools that are co-located or closely located,
2. Introducing multigrade classes in isolated schools,
3. Introducing part-time or mobile teachers to teach specialist subjects (physical education and religion) in two or more small schools.

Other solutions include: part-time teachers, multi-subject teachers, group schools and flexible student intake policies.