

Youth Participation in Indonesia's Non-formal and Vocational Education Systems

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Abstract

This study explores youth participation in non-formal education (NFE) and vocational training (VT) programs in Indonesia, focusing on the socio-economic, institutional, and perceptual factors that shape access and engagement. Using qualitative, document-based analysis grounded in multiple theoretical frameworks—including Human Capital, Capability, and Institutional Theories—the research identifies key enablers and barriers affecting youth involvement. Findings show that while flexible and community-based models can empower marginalized youth, challenges such as policy fragmentation, underfunding, social stigma, and limited credential recognition persist. Youth generally perceive these programs as practical and transformative, yet their success is dependent on local relevance, institutional support, and inclusive design. The study contributes to the discourse on educational equity and policy reform by offering an integrated framework that highlights the interplay between structure and agency. Practical implications include recommendations for cross-sectoral coordination, youth-centered policy development, and program innovation to enhance both access and impact.

Keywords

Non-formal education; vocational training; youth development; educational access; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Youth development remains a central concern for emerging economies, with Indonesia confronting a complex intersection of demographic shifts and socio-economic challenges. As the fourth most populous country globally, Indonesia hosts a substantial youth population whose potential can serve as a demographic dividend or, if underutilized, a liability (World Bank, 2016). Traditional formal education structures, while crucial, have proven insufficient in bridging the gap between educational attainment and labor market demands (UNESCO, 2016). Consequently, non-formal

education (NFE) and vocational training (VT) programs have emerged as essential alternatives for equipping young Indonesians with market-relevant skills, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas (Billett, 2011). These programs offer a flexible and practical learning environment, enabling out-of-school youth and school dropouts to re-engage with education and improve their employability (Asian Development Bank, 2015).

The significance of NFE and VT is further amplified by Indonesia's persistent youth unemployment and underemployment issues. Despite an increase in school enrollment rates, the alignment between formal education outcomes and job market expectations remains tenuous (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004). Vocational education, especially outside formal settings, offers a pathway to immediate skill acquisition and self-employment opportunities, particularly within the informal economy, which accounts for a significant portion of Indonesia's labor force (ILO, 2014). Furthermore, initiatives like Paket C, community learning centers (*pusat kegiatan belajar masyarakat*), and private VT institutions have become pivotal in promoting lifelong learning and socioeconomic inclusion (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013, p. 27). However, despite their relevance, youth participation rates in these programs remain uneven and constrained by structural and cultural barriers.

From a theoretical standpoint, the role of NFE and VT in promoting human capital development and social mobility is widely acknowledged. Human capital theory posits that investments in skills and education enhance individual productivity and national economic growth (Becker, 1993, p. 89). Meanwhile, critical pedagogical approaches emphasize the empowerment aspect of non-formal learning, asserting its potential in challenging traditional hierarchies and fostering agency among marginalized youth (Freire, 1970). Empirical studies have underscored the transformative power of non-formal learning, especially in communities where formal schooling systems are weak or inaccessible (Rogers, 2005, p. 103). These insights align with Indonesia's evolving education policy, which increasingly recognizes the importance of inclusive, accessible, and context-specific learning strategies to reduce youth vulnerability and enhance national competitiveness.

Nonetheless, academic research in this field often overlooks the nuanced experiences of Indonesian youth participating in non-formal and vocational programs. Much of the literature either focuses on institutional policy analysis or offers broad, generalized evaluations without deeply examining participant motivations, contextual barriers, or regional disparities (Ardiwinata et al., 2015; Rahardjo & Santosa, 2016). There is limited scholarly attention on how cultural perceptions, local governance structures, and community involvement shape youth engagement in such programs. Additionally, research seldom distinguishes between various NFE formats, treating vocational training, literacy programs, and informal apprenticeships as a homogeneous category.

These gaps underscore the need for a more detailed, context-sensitive exploration that incorporates youth voices, educational praxis, and policy implications.

This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the key factors influencing youth participation in non-formal education and vocational training programs in Indonesia. It aims to understand the motivations, barriers, and institutional dynamics that govern youth engagement with such alternatives to formal education. Specifically, this research is guided by three primary questions: (1) What socio-economic and institutional factors influence youth participation in NFE and VT programs in Indonesia? (2) How do youth perceive the effectiveness and relevance of these programs to their personal and professional development? (3) What systemic challenges hinder broader and more equitable access to these educational pathways? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to policy discourse on youth empowerment, offers insights for program developers, and enriches academic understanding of non-formal education's role in contemporary Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of non-formal education (NFE) emerged as a global response to the limitations of formal schooling in addressing lifelong learning and inclusive development. Defined by its flexibility, learner-centered approach, and community-based implementation, NFE has been extensively studied in both developed and developing contexts (Rogers, 2005, p. 51). Within the Indonesian context, NFE plays a crucial role in national education strategies aimed at reducing illiteracy, providing alternative education for school dropouts, and addressing skill mismatches in the labor market (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013, p. 42). Studies emphasize that NFE is not merely a second-chance education system, but rather a transformative space that complements formal education through experiential learning, vocational skills, and citizenship training (Billett, 2011). These programs often operate through community learning centers, religious organizations, NGOs, and local government initiatives, each tailored to specific local needs.

Vocational training (VT), particularly outside formal school settings, has become a vital component of workforce development strategies across Southeast Asia. The theoretical foundation of VT lies in human capital theory, which asserts that investment in vocational skills enhances productivity and employability (Becker, 1993, p. 74). In the Indonesian setting, vocational education is often framed within national economic development agendas, aiming to create a labor force equipped with competencies aligned to industry needs (UNESCO, 2016). However, the literature also notes challenges such as inconsistent curriculum standards, underqualified trainers, and lack of coordination among stakeholders (ILO, 2014). Comparative studies reveal that while

vocational training improves employment outcomes, its effectiveness depends largely on contextual factors such as socio-economic background, regional infrastructure, and employer engagement (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004). These insights underscore the complexity of designing NFE and VT programs that are both inclusive and impactful.

Despite substantial scholarly attention, there remains limited empirical research focusing specifically on youth participation in NFE and VT in Indonesia. Previous literature tends to focus on macro-policy analysis or program evaluation, with insufficient attention to youth perspectives, gendered experiences, and informal forms of learning such as apprenticeships or community-based initiatives (Ardiwinata et al., 2015). Moreover, existing studies often conflate vocational training with formal vocational schools, thereby neglecting the diverse modalities of non-formal delivery. As Indonesia grapples with rapid socio-economic transitions and youth employment pressures, a more granular exploration of youth agency, access barriers, and localized implementation becomes essential. This research aims to fill this scholarly gap by analyzing how socio-cultural, institutional, and economic factors influence youth engagement in NFE and VT initiatives, offering a nuanced contribution to both academic and policy discourses.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of youth participation in non-formal education (NFE) and vocational training (VT) in Indonesia is best anchored in a combination of theoretical perspectives, each offering unique insights into the complex interplay between education, social structure, and agency. At the foundation lies Human Capital Theory, which posits that education and training enhance individual productivity and economic value (Becker, 1993, p. 84). This theory underpins national education policy frameworks that prioritize skill development as a driver of economic growth. In Indonesia, investment in VT is seen as a means to reduce youth unemployment and improve national competitiveness in the ASEAN labor market (ILO, 2014). However, while Human Capital Theory justifies the economic rationale for such programs, it often overlooks structural inequalities that hinder equal access to educational opportunities.

Complementing this is Social Capital Theory, which emphasizes the role of social networks, trust, and community engagement in facilitating access to resources and opportunities (Putnam, 2000, p. 290). This perspective is particularly relevant for analyzing youth participation in community-based NFE programs in Indonesia, where learning is often mediated through local networks, religious groups, or NGOs (Ardiwinata et al., 2015). Social capital influences not only program outreach but also the perceived legitimacy and value of non-formal learning within communities. Studies

indicate that when trust and community ownership are high, youth are more likely to engage and benefit from NFE and VT initiatives (Field, 2005, p. 122). Thus, social capital serves as both an enabler and an outcome of effective educational programming.

Critical Pedagogy, as advanced by Paulo Freire (1970), offers a contrasting lens by framing education as a tool for emancipation and social justice. This framework critiques the dominant, hierarchical structures of formal education and advocates for participatory, dialogical learning that empowers marginalized groups. In the Indonesian context, many NFE programs embody this philosophy by tailoring content to local needs, encouraging learner autonomy, and fostering critical consciousness (Rogers, 2005, p. 77). Programs such as Paket C or women's literacy circles often challenge traditional gender roles and enable learners to question and reshape their socio-economic realities. Critical Pedagogy is particularly useful in this study for analyzing how educational experiences within NFE can shift youth identities from passive recipients to active agents of change.

Also relevant is Capability Theory, developed by Amartya Sen (1999), which moves beyond economic utility to emphasize individual freedoms and the real opportunities people have to achieve valued outcomes. This framework is essential for assessing whether NFE and VT programs in Indonesia genuinely expand youth capabilities, not only in terms of employment but also in leading meaningful lives. By focusing on the "substantive freedoms" young people acquire—such as the ability to choose their profession, express themselves, or contribute to their communities—Capability Theory broadens the evaluative space of educational success (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 52). This perspective aligns closely with Indonesia's constitutional mandate for equitable and empowering education for all citizens.

Finally, Institutional Theory provides a macro-level framework for understanding how organizational structures, norms, and regulations shape the delivery and outcomes of NFE and VT. According to Scott (2008, p. 49), institutions consist of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that influence behavior and decision-making. In the Indonesian setting, the Ministry of Education and Culture, local governments, NGOs, and international donors all play roles in shaping the NFE landscape. However, bureaucratic fragmentation, inconsistent policy implementation, and funding constraints often limit program effectiveness (Rahardjo & Santosa, 2016). Institutional Theory thus helps explain why promising educational models may fail to scale or sustain despite apparent demand.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives—Human Capital Theory, Social Capital Theory, Critical Pedagogy, Capability Theory, and Institutional Theory—this study adopts a multi-dimensional approach to understanding youth participation in non-formal education and vocational training. These frameworks together provide a

comprehensive lens to analyze not just outcomes, but also processes, motivations, and structural conditions that shape the educational experiences of Indonesian youth.

Previous Research

Several prior studies have explored the significance and impact of non-formal education (NFE) and vocational training (VT), providing insights relevant to youth development in Indonesia. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2004) conducted a comparative global analysis highlighting that vocational education significantly enhances youth employability, especially in developing countries. Their study emphasized the role of VT in reducing skills mismatches and supporting economic inclusion, laying the groundwork for examining similar patterns in the Indonesian labor market. However, their work primarily addressed formal vocational institutions, leaving non-formal formats underexplored.

In 2007, Bennell and Segerstrom evaluated youth transitions in Southeast Asia, finding that informal and community-based education initiatives contributed substantially to rural youth empowerment. They argued that NFE could play a pivotal role in supplementing formal education, especially for marginalized communities. Their findings resonate with the Indonesian context, where geographic and socio-economic disparities hinder equal access to formal education structures. Yet, the study did not provide an in-depth analysis of Indonesia-specific programs or the institutional frameworks involved.

Field (2009) investigated adult and continuing education in community contexts and found that social capital and community engagement are essential for educational success in non-formal settings. His study is particularly relevant in understanding the Indonesian *pusat kegiatan belajar masyarakat* (PKBM), which function as community learning centers. Field emphasized that educational impact extends beyond employment, encompassing broader social participation and empowerment. This perspective supports a more holistic understanding of youth engagement in Indonesia's NFE ecosystem.

Ardiwinata et al. (2015) examined Indonesia's NFE policy landscape and evaluated its alignment with UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) goals. Their study underscored the pivotal role of national policies in shaping the delivery and reach of NFE programs. However, they identified weaknesses in program monitoring and institutional coordination, which constrained effectiveness. The relevance to this research lies in highlighting the gap between policy aspirations and grassroots realities that directly affect youth participation levels.

Rahardjo and Santosa (2016) focused specifically on vocational education in Indonesia and revealed that despite increased policy attention, VT remains underfunded and undervalued. They found that most vocational programs struggle with outdated curricula, poor infrastructure, and limited linkage to industry needs. Their study confirms the practical challenges facing Indonesia's non-formal vocational sector and adds depth to the institutional critique employed in this paper.

Lastly, UNESCO's (2016) global education report presented a comprehensive analysis of lifelong learning frameworks and emphasized the inclusion of NFE in national education systems. It recognized Indonesia's efforts in integrating non-formal pathways but also noted persistent disparities in quality and access. The report's data-driven insights align with the themes of this study and provide a benchmark for evaluating Indonesian practices in the global context.

Despite these contributions, existing research reveals several critical gaps. First, there is limited focus on youth-specific experiences and perceptions of NFE and VT in Indonesia. Second, studies often generalize non-formal education formats without distinguishing their unique pedagogical or institutional characteristics. Third, there is insufficient exploration of cultural attitudes and localized governance affecting program participation. This research addresses these gaps by investigating the socio-economic, perceptual, and institutional factors influencing youth involvement in non-formal educational spaces, aiming to generate a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of this educational sector.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative, document-based methodology, drawing upon existing scholarly literature, policy documents, and institutional reports to explore the factors influencing youth participation in non-formal education (NFE) and vocational training (VT) in Indonesia. The decision to use qualitative data stems from the study's aim to understand the meanings, perceptions, and contextual factors surrounding educational engagement rather than measuring quantifiable outcomes. As Patton (2002, p. 39) emphasizes, qualitative inquiry is well-suited for capturing the complexities and nuances of social phenomena such as motivation, access, and empowerment. The conceptual focus on subjective interpretation aligns with critical and constructivist theoretical perspectives that view knowledge as context-dependent and co-constructed.

The data sources for this study include international journal articles, Indonesian policy documents, theses, and books published no later than 2016. This range allows for triangulation of perspectives across academic, institutional, and practical domains.

Sources such as UNESCO, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Culture provide policy-level insights, while peer-reviewed academic literature offers theoretical and empirical foundations (UNESCO, 2016; ILO, 2014). Theses and dissertations from international universities were also selected to incorporate grounded, field-based findings. Indonesian sources from SINTA-indexed journals and national education reports ensure that the research remains locally grounded and policy-relevant.

The data collection technique employed is document analysis, focusing on the content, structure, and implications of relevant literature. Document analysis allows researchers to systematically interpret meaning and trends from existing records (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). Through purposive sampling, materials were selected based on thematic relevance to youth participation, NFE, and vocational education in Indonesia. The inclusion criteria emphasized publications that addressed structural barriers, program implementation, and learner experiences. This method offers the advantage of unobtrusiveness and broad temporal coverage, while ensuring coherence with the study's theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

To interpret the data, the study applies thematic analysis, which involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting recurring patterns within the selected texts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were developed inductively and deductively—based both on recurring issues within the literature and the theoretical frameworks of Human Capital, Social Capital, Critical Pedagogy, and Institutional Theory. The coding process involved categorizing content into themes such as "access and barriers," "youth motivation," "program effectiveness," and "institutional support." Thematic analysis ensures that findings remain close to the data while also facilitating theoretical interpretation. It also allows for intertextual dialogue across sources, making visible the interactions between individual agency and institutional structure.

Conclusion drawing was carried out through a process of synthesis and critical reflection. Findings were compared and contrasted across thematic categories, and analyzed in relation to the research questions posed in the Introduction. Following Miles and Huberman's (1994, p. 246) model, this involved identifying convergences and divergences in data, mapping theoretical connections, and evaluating implications. The aim was not merely to summarize but to interpret the deeper meanings and dynamics influencing youth participation in NFE and VT programs. The process culminated in an integrated analysis that connects youth experiences with broader educational, economic, and policy frameworks, forming a coherent narrative that informs both theory and practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Non-formal education (NFE) and vocational training (VT) initiatives in Indonesia operate at the intersection of individual agency, institutional structure, and community engagement. As demonstrated in the theoretical framework, youth engagement in these educational pathways can only be understood through an integrated lens that accounts for both structural constraints and enabling environments. Existing literature has emphasized the potential of NFE and VT in promoting employability and empowerment (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004; Field, 2009). However, this study's findings suggest that their effectiveness is highly dependent on localized implementation, youth perception, and alignment with socio-economic contexts. While programs like *Paket C*, vocational courses offered by *PKBM*, and faith-based learning initiatives have contributed to skill development, inconsistencies in delivery and recognition continue to hinder outcomes (Ardiwinata et al., 2015).

Drawing on the theoretical foundations of Critical Pedagogy and Capability Theory, this research illustrates that beyond economic returns, NFE and VT programs serve as platforms for identity formation, civic participation, and socio-cultural resilience. Youth participants, especially in rural and underserved areas, often use these programs not only as a means of employment but also as tools for navigating marginalization and redefining life trajectories (Freire, 1970; Sen, 1999). At the same time, Institutional Theory explains the fragmented delivery of programs and competing administrative mandates, which dilute their overall impact. Findings from government and NGO reports reveal that institutional disconnects, limited funding, and low awareness hinder enrollment and retention (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013, p. 30; Rahardjo & Santosa, 2016). These systemic challenges underscore the need for coherent, youth-centered policy reform.

The general narrative therefore situates this study within a dialogue between theory and practice. It affirms earlier scholarship on the transformative capacity of NFE and VT while introducing new perspectives grounded in the lived realities of Indonesian youth. This section now turns to the specific research questions, beginning with an exploration of the socio-economic and institutional factors shaping youth participation in these educational pathways.

1. Structural and Institutional Influences on Youth Engagement in NFE and VT

The analysis begins by addressing the first research question: *What socio-economic and institutional factors influence youth participation in non-formal education and vocational training programs in Indonesia?* Findings indicate that access to NFE and VT is largely determined by geographic location, household income, parental education, and institutional capacity. Youth from remote or

low-income areas often rely on government-subsidized programs, which are limited in scope and quality (World Bank, 2016). The lack of transport infrastructure, digital access, and program diversification restricts the outreach of even well-intentioned initiatives. Institutional limitations such as under-trained instructors and outdated facilities further undermine participation (ILO, 2014).

From the Institutional Theory perspective, the overlapping responsibilities among national ministries, local governments, and non-state actors contribute to policy fragmentation. For example, while the Ministry of Education oversees formal and non-formal education, vocational training often falls under the Ministry of Manpower, leading to inconsistent regulatory frameworks and program duplication (Rahardjo & Santosa, 2016). This fragmented governance model dilutes accountability and limits program scalability. Social capital theory also plays a role, as youth are more likely to participate in programs endorsed by trusted community leaders or local NGOs (Putnam, 2000, p. 285). Where social trust is low, participation drops even if programs are available.

Furthermore, socio-economic constraints remain a major deterrent. Many youth, especially those from families engaged in subsistence work, cannot afford to forgo income-generating opportunities to attend training sessions—even when these programs are free (UNESCO, 2016). Gender norms also influence participation, with girls often excluded due to domestic responsibilities or cultural expectations (Bennell & Segerstrom, 2007). These barriers are compounded by the lack of flexible scheduling and mobile learning units that could otherwise accommodate working youth.

In terms of institutional design, flexibility and local relevance emerge as crucial determinants of success. Programs that adapt their curriculum to local labor market needs—such as agriculture, fisheries, or home industries—tend to attract more participants and show higher completion rates (Ardiwinata et al., 2015). However, a significant number of existing NFE and VT centers continue to follow rigid, top-down models that do not reflect community realities. Human Capital Theory would suggest that this misalignment limits the economic returns of such training (Becker, 1993, p. 97), while Critical Pedagogy would argue it suppresses youth agency and creative potential (Freire, 1970).

On a more positive note, some community-driven models have demonstrated promise. PKBM institutions that are community-led and contextually embedded have succeeded in creating inclusive environments where youth feel valued and respected. These centers often offer personalized mentorship and peer learning, features that boost confidence and retention. Such successes support the idea that participatory institutional design and community ownership are

key for maximizing youth engagement (Field, 2009, p. 101). However, the scaling of such models remains limited due to lack of systemic support and recognition by national education authorities.

Lastly, data from international development programs underscore that successful NFE and VT models often incorporate multi-stakeholder partnerships. Collaborations between local governments, NGOs, private industry, and community leaders have produced hybrid models that balance technical training with soft skills development and job placement services (ILO, 2014). These findings validate the relevance of Institutional Theory in understanding both the promise and the limitations of current Indonesian initiatives. They also emphasize the need for integrated, youth-responsive policies that bridge the gap between structural conditions and educational innovation.

2. Youth Perceptions and the Transformative Value of Non-formal Learning

This section addresses the second research question: *How do youth perceive the effectiveness and relevance of non-formal education and vocational training programs in shaping their personal and professional development?* Evidence from the reviewed literature indicates that Indonesian youth who participate in NFE and VT programs often value the practical, hands-on nature of learning, which they view as directly linked to livelihood opportunities (Bennell & Segerstrom, 2007). Unlike formal schooling, which tends to be more theoretical and exam-oriented, NFE and VT offer flexible, context-responsive curricula that resonate with the real-world aspirations of youth, particularly those who have dropped out or never enrolled in the formal system (UNESCO, 2016).

From a Capability Theory perspective, this perceived relevance empowers youth to convert educational inputs into meaningful capabilities—ranging from vocational skills to increased self-confidence and agency (Sen, 1999). Many participants, especially from underserved regions, report that training programs helped them discover new interests, build social networks, and reimagine their futures. This transformative process is also supported by Freire's (1970) Critical Pedagogy, which posits that education should not merely deposit information but catalyze self-awareness and social engagement. Youth involved in participatory and dialogical learning environments within PKBM centers or NGO-run initiatives often describe their experiences as life-changing, citing improved decision-making and greater civic participation.

Nevertheless, perceptions of effectiveness vary depending on the program structure, institutional credibility, and post-training support. Programs lacking clear pathways to employment or further education tend to be viewed as less valuable. Youth are particularly critical of training that does not include job placement assistance or entrepreneurship guidance (Ardiwinata et al., 2015). Some also perceive a social stigma attached to NFE programs, which are often seen as a "second chance" or "last resort" rather than a legitimate educational track (Rahardjo & Santosa, 2016). This stigmatization affects participant motivation and social acceptance, especially in urban settings where formal education credentials carry higher prestige.

Gender and cultural expectations further shape perceptions. Female participants frequently note that vocational courses such as sewing, beauty care, or cooking are gendered in ways that reflect traditional roles rather than economic empowerment (Billett, 2011). Male participants, conversely, may view such programs as lacking status or financial potential compared to university education or formal employment. These findings reflect broader societal narratives about what constitutes "valuable" education and who is expected to benefit from it. To enhance the perceived legitimacy of NFE and VT, some programs have begun integrating certification schemes and industry recognition, though their reach remains limited (ILO, 2014).

The role of mentorship and peer networks also emerges as a crucial factor in shaping youth perceptions. Programs that offer guidance counselors, role models, or peer-to-peer learning foster stronger engagement and retention (Field, 2009, p. 115). Participants report that such support systems not only assist in skill acquisition but also reinforce their sense of belonging and purpose. This reinforces Social Capital Theory, which posits that trust-based relationships and community ties play a vital role in sustaining educational participation (Putnam, 2000, p. 292).

Youth also express the need for continuous learning opportunities beyond initial training. Many view NFE and VT as stepping stones rather than end goals and desire access to follow-up programs, internships, or advanced certifications. This demand aligns with lifelong learning frameworks advocated by UNESCO (2016), which emphasize continuity, adaptability, and learner autonomy. Unfortunately, the current system lacks robust pathways that connect non-formal learners to broader educational or professional ecosystems.

In conclusion, youth perceptions underscore the dual function of NFE and VT programs as both educational and transformational spaces. When implemented with contextual sensitivity, institutional credibility, and learner support, these

programs can profoundly impact personal growth and professional readiness. However, without structural reinforcement and social validation, their long-term effectiveness remains constrained. These insights call for policy and program reforms that align more closely with youth aspirations, social realities, and evolving labor market conditions.

3. Barriers to Equitable and Sustainable Access to NFE and VT Programs

This section examines the third research question: *What systemic challenges hinder broader and more equitable access to non-formal education and vocational training for Indonesian youth?* Despite their recognized potential, NFE and VT programs face persistent structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that restrict inclusive participation. One of the most significant issues is limited geographic reach, particularly in remote and rural regions where educational infrastructure remains underdeveloped. Many *pusat kegiatan belajar masyarakat* (PKBM) and training centers are concentrated in urban or semi-urban areas, leaving remote youth with few options beyond informal apprenticeships (UNESCO, 2016).

Infrastructure limitations are compounded by funding constraints, with most non-formal education programs operating under tight budgets and lacking consistent financial support from national and local governments (Rahardjo & Santosa, 2016). Unlike formal schools, NFE and VT initiatives are often seen as supplementary, and therefore less deserving of long-term investment. This perception results in poorly maintained facilities, outdated training equipment, and uncompetitive wages for educators and trainers. According to Institutional Theory, such disparities reflect broader governance issues, where fragmented administrative responsibilities and lack of regulatory coherence lead to sub-optimal policy implementation (Scott, 2008, p. 51).

A further challenge lies in institutional credibility and program recognition. Many NFE and VT programs do not provide officially recognized certificates, which limits the ability of graduates to transition into formal employment or pursue further education (ILO, 2014). Youth often express frustration at completing intensive training only to find that employers question the validity of their qualifications (Field, 2009, p. 123). This issue disproportionately affects participants from informal or NGO-led programs that operate outside state accreditation systems. As a result, youth may choose to disengage from non-formal learning in favor of short-term, unskilled employment with limited long-term prospects.

Social and cultural stigmas also act as powerful deterrents. Many communities, particularly in conservative or tradition-oriented areas, regard NFE as inferior to formal schooling (Billett, 2011). Girls face additional layers of exclusion, as domestic expectations, early marriage, or safety concerns often prevent them from participating in vocational training outside the home (Bennell & Segerstrom, 2007). These challenges are reinforced by societal norms that equate formal education with status and opportunity, rendering non-formal options as marginal or “for failures.” Addressing these perceptions requires deliberate policy communication and advocacy efforts that reframe NFE and VT as valid, respected, and essential educational paths.

Language and curriculum relevance also pose obstacles. Programs that fail to localize content or use language appropriate to regional dialects often alienate participants (Ardiwinata et al., 2015). Youth are more likely to disengage when learning feels disconnected from their lived realities or when instructors fail to contextualize knowledge. Theories of Critical Pedagogy and Capability further suggest that learner-centered and culturally responsive content is vital to fostering educational ownership and motivation (Freire, 1970; Nussbaum, 2011, p. 44). Yet many programs remain standardized and top-down in delivery, replicating the same shortcomings that make formal education inaccessible for vulnerable groups.

Additionally, policy inconsistency and lack of coordination between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders limits program scalability and sustainability. Ministries responsible for education, labor, and social welfare often operate in silos, with limited collaboration and data sharing (World Bank, 2016). This disconnect results in duplicative efforts, uneven resource allocation, and lack of integrated pathways for learners. Institutional Theory emphasizes the importance of inter-organizational alignment in ensuring effective service delivery, particularly in complex and decentralized systems like Indonesia’s (Scott, 2008, p. 58).

Despite these challenges, some innovative models offer promising solutions. For example, multi-stakeholder initiatives that involve local government, religious institutions, and private enterprises have successfully delivered localized vocational programs tailored to community needs. These partnerships leverage social capital and institutional support to create environments where youth feel both safe and valued (Putnam, 2000, p. 296). However, such models remain the exception rather than the norm, often dependent on charismatic leadership or donor support.

In sum, systemic barriers to equitable access are deeply embedded within Indonesia’s socio-political and educational landscape. They include material

deficiencies, governance inefficiencies, cultural stigmas, and policy fragmentation. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated, multi-level approach that prioritizes youth voices, decentralizes decision-making, and embeds flexibility and inclusivity into program design. Without such reforms, the transformative potential of NFE and VT for Indonesian youth will remain limited to isolated successes rather than becoming a sustainable national strategy.

This study examined the landscape of youth participation in non-formal education (NFE) and vocational training (VT) programs in Indonesia through a multi-theoretical lens, revealing complex interdependencies between individual agency, institutional frameworks, and socio-cultural dynamics. Each of the three research questions has been answered with thematic clarity. First, youth participation is heavily shaped by structural and institutional variables such as geographic accessibility, household income, government policy coherence, and community infrastructure. Theoretical engagement with Institutional and Social Capital Theory clarified how fragmented governance and weak social trust often undermine participation, while community-rooted programs exhibit more sustainable outcomes.

Second, youth perceptions of NFE and VT highlight their dual value as tools for both employment and personal transformation. Participants widely appreciate the contextual flexibility and practical skill development these programs offer. Drawing on Capability Theory and Critical Pedagogy, this study shows that such educational experiences not only enhance employability but also reshape youth identities, aspirations, and civic engagement. However, these benefits are conditional on institutional credibility, mentorship, and program quality—factors that vary significantly across Indonesia's regions and administrative levels.

Third, the study identified persistent systemic barriers that hinder equitable access. These include underfunding, policy fragmentation, lack of recognized certifications, and entrenched social stigma, especially in rural and gender-conservative contexts. The analysis underscores that without targeted reforms addressing these embedded constraints, the promise of NFE and VT will remain unrealized for large segments of Indonesian youth.

Theoretically, the research contributes an integrative framework combining Human Capital Theory, Social Capital Theory, Capability Theory, and Critical Pedagogy to analyze youth engagement in alternative education systems. This synthesis refines existing models by emphasizing the interplay between learner empowerment and institutional conditions. Conceptually, the research introduces a contextualized view of NFE and VT that centers youth agency within broader socio-structural forces.

Empirically, it fills a gap in Indonesian educational literature by drawing attention to the heterogeneity of youth experiences and the need for policy responsiveness.

Practically, the findings call for multi-stakeholder strategies to improve the inclusivity, scalability, and legitimacy of NFE and VT programs. This includes strengthening local governance, building institutional partnerships, expanding certification mechanisms, and launching nationwide campaigns to shift public perception. For policymakers, the study highlights the need for more cohesive inter-ministerial coordination and the decentralization of program management to better respond to regional needs. For educators and NGOs, it offers guidance on fostering learner-centered environments and community-based outreach.

CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the key factors influencing youth participation in non-formal education (NFE) and vocational training (VT) in Indonesia, revealing the sector's complex interplay of institutional frameworks, social dynamics, and youth perceptions. Synthesizing findings from theoretical models and empirical literature, the research confirms that NFE and VT programs serve not only as compensatory mechanisms for formal education gaps but also as transformative spaces for youth development and social inclusion.

The first research question was answered by identifying how socio-economic background, institutional coordination, and community context shape access to NFE and VT programs. Structural limitations such as inadequate infrastructure, policy fragmentation, and low public awareness hinder broad-based participation. The second question, addressing youth perceptions, revealed that when programs are contextually relevant, participatory, and empowering, they are viewed as effective vehicles for personal and professional growth. The third question highlighted systemic barriers such as social stigma, gender exclusion, and lack of accreditation—factors that restrict the equitable potential of these programs.

The study reinforces alignment with theories of Human Capital, Social Capital, Institutionalism, Capability, and Critical Pedagogy, thereby extending their application to the Indonesian non-formal education context. It contributes original insights by connecting localized youth experiences to national development frameworks, emphasizing the importance of integrated and context-sensitive educational strategies.

Based on these findings, this study recommends several practical actions: policymakers should prioritize cohesive regulatory structures and increase budget allocations for

non-formal learning. Educational institutions must adopt participatory, learner-driven methods and ensure that programs reflect local needs. NGOs and private stakeholders should support certification schemes and mentorship programs to bridge training with employment. Finally, future research should delve deeper into gendered participation and the long-term impact of NFE on life trajectories. By repositioning NFE and VT not as alternatives but as essential and equal components of the national education strategy, Indonesia can better harness the demographic potential of its youth and foster inclusive, sustainable development.

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