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**Authors:** Meruyert Kabulova, Gulzada  
Pussurmanova, Dina Shaikhina, Assel  
Akhmedina, and Gulden Issina

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# Many Colors of Assessment: Participation Matters

MERUYERT KABULOVA, GULZADA PUSSURMANOVA, DINA SHAIKHINA,  
ASSEL AKHMEDINA, AND GULDEN ISSINA

The problem of non-attendance and lack of student engagement in class is a widely recognized issue in educational circles around the world, including Kazakhstan. One of the reasons is the neglect of class participation in the current assessment models. This policy brief outlines the significance of class participation, considers the relation between class participation and improvement of academic performance, reviews the existing assessment practices, and argues for the inclusion of class participation as one of the aspects of assessment system in Kazakhstani organizations for secondary education.

*Keywords:* class participation, assessment, engagement, educational system, policies, academic performance, (non-)attendance.

## Introduction

One of the changes that Kazakhstani secondary education system has undergone in the last thirty years is the shift from lecture-based classes to a student-centered approach. That is why class participation has become an important factor that influences students' academic performance. Class participation is one of the criteria that ensures positive classroom environment and effective learning by improving the quality of class communication (Gump, 2005). Class participation is a composite concept which is an integral part of the learning process.

Class participation includes two important aspects: physical attendance and student engagement in class (Fredricks et al., 2004). Student physical attendance simply means coming to school and being on time for classes. Student engagement is a complex concept that requires every student's contribution to create a supportive atmosphere through "involvement in learning and academic tasks and ... [including] behaviors such as effort, persistence, concentration, attention, asking questions, and contributing to class discussion" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 62). Having considered this, we may assume that class participation is crucial for learning since it is an active process. If students are engaged in the lesson, they are able to think about what is being learned, as well as to talk, write, analyze, and share the information. Thus, it is an essential aspect to be considered in order to improve the quality of teaching and to increase students' academic achievement.

## Class Participation and Student Learning

Class participation, including both school attendance and active engagement in class, is a topic of interest for many researchers and practicing educators because it has a great impact on daily classroom practices and environment. Cohen (1991) claims that "classroom participation, by bringing students actively into the educational process, provides one means for enhancing our teaching and bringing life to the classroom" (p. 699). Moreover, various studies have exemplified the correlation between class participation and students' overall performance and, as a result, their achievement (Brodbeck, 1985; Brokowski & Dempsey, 1979; Cohen, 1991; Gump, 2005; Ken, 2006; Weaver & Qi, 2005; Wright, 2014).

Along with the impact on students' academic outcomes, involvement in the lesson also "facilitates critical thinking and the retention of information that might otherwise be lost" (Weaver & Qi, 2005, p. 570). Wright (2014) also argues that when requiring class participation, teachers cultivate not only critical thinking and problem-solving skills, but also develop students' communication skills. A study by Clump, Bauer, and Whiteleather conducted in 2003 showed that class attendance positively influenced the student performance in general psychology courses. The researchers found that the results of the students who were attending class regularly increased, as reflected in their test scores (Johnke, 2013). Moreover, Johnke (2013) highlights a study of 3,812 students in grades 3, 4, 7, 8, and 10, in a school in an African-American urban district. The study examined the link between student non-attendance and their academic achievement in mathematics, social studies, communication arts, and science. The Missouri Assessment Program (MAP), a state standardized test, was used to measure students' achievements in these subject areas. The results of the study showed "a significant inverse relationship ... between absenteeism and test level performance on the MAP standardized test" (Moonie et al. as cited in Johnke, 2013, pp. 20-21). In Western Australia, the Office of the Auditor General stated that "a student who misses more than one full day per week on average would lose two years of education

over a 10-year period” (as cited in Purdie & Buckley, 2010, p. 3). Therefore, conducted studies suggest that class participation is equally important constituent as effective teaching strategies and access to learning sources.

Even though class participation has proven to be a crucial part of teaching and learning process, it is often neglected or simply not promoted in many schools. Consequently, this leads to non-attendance and lack of student engagement in class. The causes of this issue have also been widely studied. In the study conducted by Kinder et al., the following were found to be the main causes of students’ non-attendance and truancy:

- the influence of friends and peers;
- relations with teachers, often those lacking in respect for pupils;
- the content and delivery of the curriculum;
- family aspects (parents’ attitudes, domestic problems);
- bullying;
- the classroom context, for example lack of control or pupils’ learning;
- difficulties (as cited in Reid, 2004, pp. 61-62).

Moreover, research conducted in England secondary schools showed that factors causing students’ absenteeism focused on “school rather than home and included boredom, problems with lessons and teachers, anticipation of trouble, frustration at school rules, the size and complexity of secondary schools and fear of returning after a long absence” (Malcolm, et al., 2003, p. 8).

Considering lack of engagement and motivation to actively participate in class, Wright (2012) highlighted the following reasons:

- not enough skills to fulfill the assigned work;
- too high expectations to complete the assigned task;
- not motivating classroom instruction;
- absence of a reward worth to do the assigned work;
- lack of self-confidence to do the assigned work;
- lack of a positive relationship with the instructor;

Notably, in-school or classroom factors have their own significant position in the list of causes of non-attendance and lack of class engagement. Lack of teachers’ or school administration control are among these factors. When schools do not have an effective tool to manage student attendance and engagement in class, these important aspects of educational process are neglected. Jones (2008) supports this perspective by stating “when something is required, graded, or rewarded, students know that the professor thinks it matters” (p. 59). If teachers assess class participation, students will be aware of its significance and will accept it as one of the factors building their way to success. Thus, it follows that class participation issues should be regulated by schools.

The lack of class participation is widely recognized as an emergent issue in educational systems worldwide because its consequences dramatically influence students’ academic achievement, and as a result have a negative impact on their future lives. According to Davidson (as cited in Larkin, 2011), non-attendance “is a venue for disaster that leads to academic failure, dropping out of school, limited career options, and the inability for young people to earn a living to sustain themselves and their families” (p. 10). It is clear that students skipping classes or being passively present in class do not fully acquire the knowledge or develop necessary skills. Consequently, they miss the opportunity to succeed academically and socially. Generally, students’ constant participation and active engagement in class ensure both better academic performance and effective social interaction. These are the most important aspects in career and life success. Additionally, researchers found substantial correlation between truancy and crime as well as between school dropouts and criminal activity (Purdie & Buckley, 2010).

### **Urgency in Kazakhstan**

Kazakhstani educators also face the issue of students’ non-attendance and lack of engagement in the lessons. According to PISA ranking on student participation and school attendance, Kazakhstan was among the countries with an increasing percentage of student absenteeism, which means that student attitudes towards learning have become worse (OECD, 2013). The study revealed that more than 28% of students admitted that they arrived late at school from one to five or more times within two weeks. Based on the literature discussed above we assume that regular lack of punctuality is the first signal of future problems. Regular tardiness to

classes may be explained by students' socio-economic position or the reluctance to attend the school (OECD, 2013, p. 33). The report stated that quite often the parents of disadvantaged students may not be able to keep track of their child's punctuality due to lack of time or the child's need to help their parents with the work around the house. Usually students who arrive late at school show poorer performance at learning (See Figure 1).

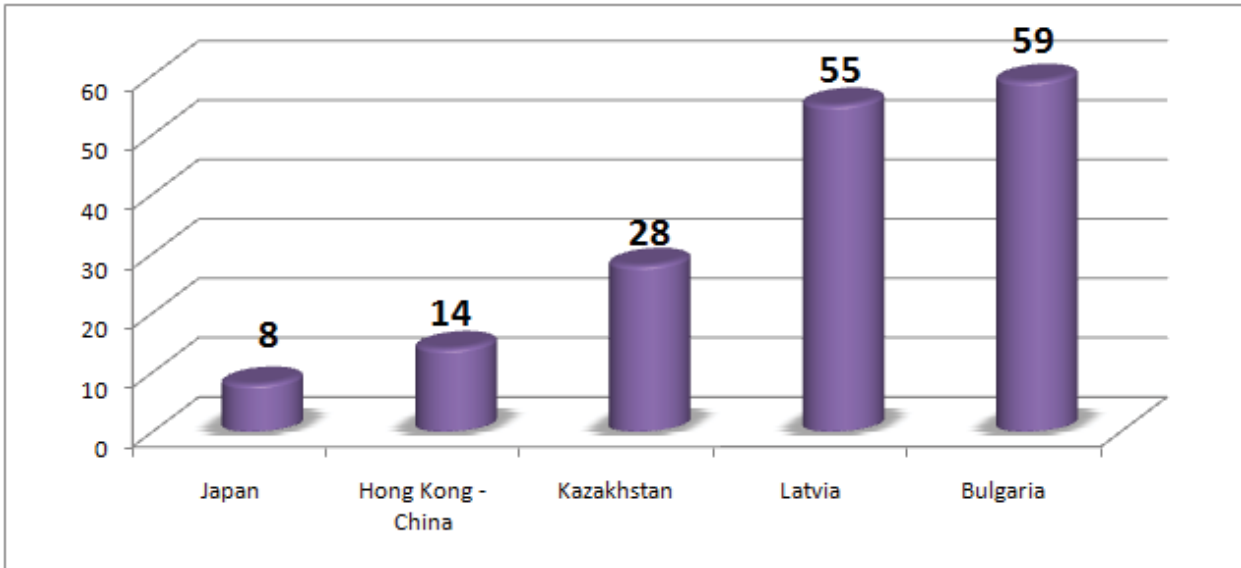


Figure 1. Percentage (%) of students who arrive late to school (OECD, 2013)

Another important issue is that students skip single classes or even whole school days. Regular absenteeism is strongly correlated with student learning opportunities, motivation to study and the relations with their classmates. The problem of absenteeism in Kazakhstan is not so pressing as in Bulgaria or Latvia, where 45 to 60 percent of students skip lessons or days of schooling. However, the situation in Kazakhstan is much worse than in the top ranking countries such as Japan, Korea and Hong Kong- China, where only less than 10% of students skipped the lessons once within the two weeks (OECD, 2013, p. 39). The problem in Kazakhstan could become even worse as the existing assessment system does not have any criteria for assessing students' participation or punctuality (See Figure 2).

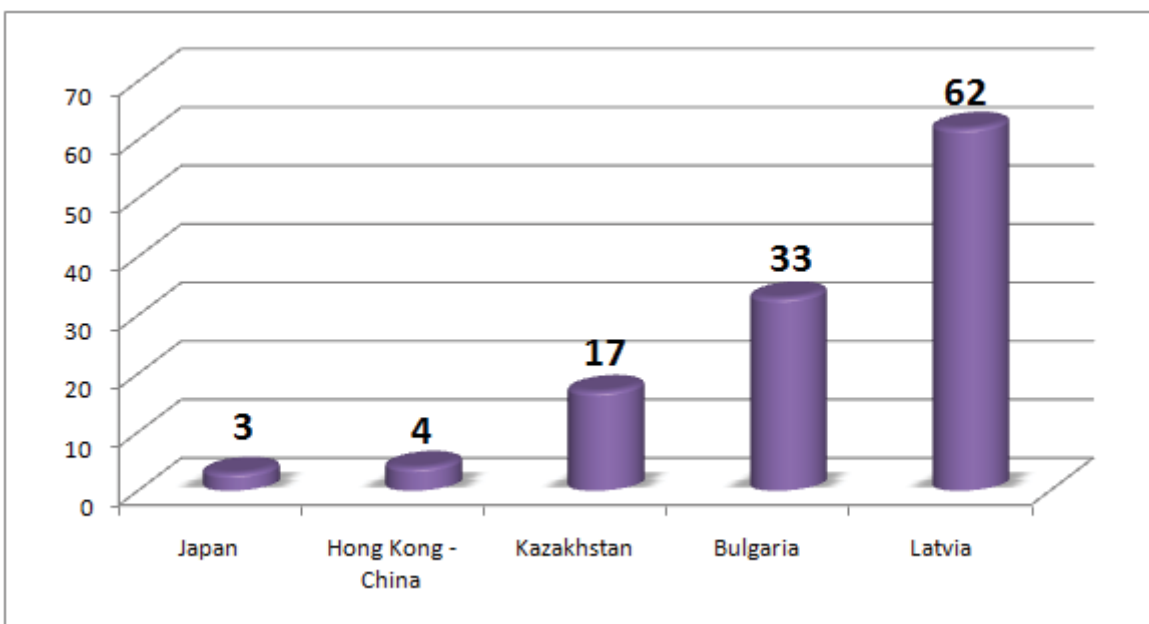


Figure 2. Percentage (%) of students who skip classes (OECD 2013)

Finally, students' engagement is of concern in Kazakhstan. The literature shows that teachers' classroom management strategies and student engagement techniques are extremely crucial in students' learning. The main aim of teachers should not be making students memorize the information but teaching them to think critically (Gortazar, 2014). These approaches could help to decrease the students' reluctance to attend lessons, as often students do not want to come to schools because the curriculum seems to be too challenging for them.

## Critique of Policy Options

Since researchers concur that the problem of absenteeism is urgent in the educational system of Kazakhstan, it is worth revising existing national assessment models and including attendance and engagement as criteria for student evaluation and grading.

### *Traditional 5-Scale assessment model*

Currently the criteria-based assessment is being implemented in Kazakhstani mainstream schools. However, earlier school teachers evaluated student performance using the 5-scale grading system on a regular basis. The system that was being used was developed during the Soviet times and is still applied now. According to one OECD report (2014) this “norm-referenced” approach, which is based on comparing students with one another (Santrock, 2011), has many disadvantages. Firstly, this kind of assessment is subjective because there are no clear criteria for student assessment. Secondly, teachers use the benchmarking approach relying only on their experience and assumptions. It cannot be considered valid, since the performance of students in one school cannot be compared with the performance of students in another school. Moreover, in the 5-scale grading system, attendance and participation of students are not taken into consideration when evaluating student academic achievement. Thus, despite truancy rates and other factors that prevent student attendance and participation, students get similar marks with those who have been engaged in the learning process on a regular basis. Based on our experience, this demotivates students to be actively involved in the learning process.

### *Integrated criteria-based assessment model in Kazakhstan*

Since 2016, all secondary schools in Kazakhstan have started working according to the integrated criteria-based assessment model that was piloted in Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools during the last seven years. This assessment model was developed in collaboration with Cambridge International Examination experts and was supposed to be used not only within Nazarbayev Intellectual schools, but in all organizations for secondary education in Kazakhstan (Mozhayeva et al., n.d.). “A criteria-based assessment model compares students’ achievements with clearly defined, collectively developed criteria, which are known to all participants of the process (teachers, students, their parents, education school administrators) in advance” (OECD, 2014, p. 118) and therefore, can be considered rather reliable.

The criteria for both formative and summative assessment types are based on evaluating students’ achievement in content comprehension and key skills development such as inquiry, creating and designing, and problem solving (Mozhayeva et al., n.d.). However, it is clear that class participation aspects such as engagement with the lesson and attendance are not taken into consideration. At the stage of classroom assessment, often referred to as formative assessment, a teacher should pay attention to students’ progress in subject acquisition, their skill development as well as their level of possible progress. Summative assessment is oriented on checking the level of gained knowledge. At both assessment stages the significance of class participation is neglected and not reflected at all. A good illustration of this concern could be an ordinary formative assessment task assigned to a pair or a group. Normally students are evaluated according to the criteria from the course plan, which does not reflect the volume of each member’s contribution. Thus, it is vitally important to integrate attendance and engagement as part of the assessment process.

### *E-learning project*

One of the actions taken to address the issue of attendance in schools is implementing an e-learning project in Kazakhstan. Launched by the government in 2011 in order to ensure equal access to educational resources and to increase the quality of teaching by using modern technologies (MES, 2013), one of its main functions is improving the monitoring system of attendance. According to chief executive of National Information Technologies Ruslan Yensebayev, e-learning was initially aimed to provide online access to the information about school attendance which allows parents to be involved in controlling the attendance of children (Nurseitova, 2013). As a result, schools and parents could communicate effectively in order to prevent the issues that absenteeism, lateness and low class participation might lead to. However, the e-learning project has been criticized by the government, as there were some issues at the implementation stage. Firstly, the main problem that arose while launching the e-learning was teachers’ information communication technology (ICT) competence. In other words, the majority of teachers, especially those from the rural areas, were not able to effectively use the system due to being computer illiterate. Another obstacle for successful implementation of e-learning in Kazakhstan could be related to insufficient equipment of schools (Nurseitova, 2013). Thus, it is clear that the issues of low attendance and student engagement in secondary schools of Kazakhstan cannot be fully tackled by implementing the project of e-learning.

### ***Evaluating current policies and projects in Kazakhstan***

The Kazakhstani educational system has experienced different assessment policies and projects during its existence, all of which have been tested by time, proving their benefits as well as deficiencies. One of the drawbacks is the neglect of assessment of students' participation and engagement in class.

Table 1

#### *Advantages and Disadvantages of Assessment Models*

Policy/project implemented in KZ	Advantages	Disadvantages
Traditional 5-scale assessment model	less time-consuming for teachers; quite effective for teaching content	no assessment criteria; subjectivity; benchmarking; attendance and participation neglect
Integrated criteria-based assessment model in Kazakhstan	compares students' achievements with clearly defined, collectively developed criteria; evaluation of students' achievement in content comprehension and key skills development	attendance and participation neglect
e-learning	access to education; paperwork reduction; effective use of technologies; immediate attendance monitoring	requires relevantly high ICT competence; requires sufficient technology equipment; engagement neglect.

### **A Successful Example**

Assessment of school participation has been successfully implemented in different educational systems around the world. Seattle University demonstrates one example of the positive impact of integrating class participation into assessment model. Bean and Peterson (2002) report that 93% of courses have included class participation as a component of class grade. Instructors admitted that it was challenging because it was difficult to measure student engagement in class, to interpret student behavior into grades, to keep record of scores and to justify them to students. However, professors of the University noted that grading class participation increased student motivation and promoted active learning and development of critical thinking, listening and speaking skills. Students, in their turn, valued the courses where their attendance and engagement were visibly graded (Bean & Peterson, 2002).

### **Policy Recommendations**

This section introduces policy recommendations for integrating class participation into the assessment system. It also discusses potential benefits and possible minor drawbacks of assessing students' engagement and regular attendance in class. Three main recommendations have been developed to address the issue of class participation assessment.

#### ***Include class participation as up to 20% of the total grade***

Having considered all the above-mentioned studies, we argue that class participation should be included into the assessment process. Attendance and engagement can constitute up to 10% each, which will comprise 20% of the total grade. It will raise students' awareness about the importance of attending and being actively involved in the classroom and its positive impact on their academic achievements.

Teachers can measure students' attendance by simply counting the number of the lessons skipped. Moreover, students should provide an official excuse for each skipped lesson such as a medical report from the doctor or other document-based evidence. In case of a student's long-term illness or other serious reasons,

students will utilize technologies for online attendance of the course, which teachers will use as an assessment tool.

The means of measuring engagement are unfortunately limited: there is not one common assessment system which can be applied to this aspect. However, some criteria and factors of classroom engagement can be revealed and used by teachers in the evaluation process. It is important to evaluate all three categories of classroom engagement, behavioral, emotional and cognitive.

Suggested Criteria to Evaluate Classroom Engagement:

- completing homework
- complying with school rules
- not fighting or getting into trouble
- involvement in academic tasks
- effort
- attention
- persistence
- concentration
- asking questions
- contributing to class discussions
- not discouraging others from contribution
- time management skills
- being prepared for classes

Every teacher is free to choose and adapt these criteria depending on the course objectives, its procedure, number of students and their personalities. It is crucial that teachers clearly communicate the requirements for classroom engagement to the students prior to the course. Ken (2006) claims that students “should be directly and clearly made aware of the behaviors...[teachers] desire and those behaviors [they] wish not to occur in the classroom” (para. 4). This step will help both teachers and students to achieve the desirable aims in educational process (Ken, 2006).

#### ***Apply multiple and diverse methods of participation assessment***

Teachers should provide multiple and diverse opportunities for students to be engaged in class. Since all children are different, educators need to take into consideration their peculiarities and personalities. Learners can be easily involved in the discussion and express their thoughts about the content, whereas others would rather listen to others and contribute to the work using their writing skills. It is crucial for teachers to understand that talking and sharing ideas are not the only ways to show active classroom engagement. The ability to ask high ordered questions on the content or intrinsic motivation to master one’s own skills can also be regarded as classroom engagement. Even observing a child’s mood or emotions can help the teacher to evaluate his/her engagement. Thus, using multiple and diverse assessment techniques to evaluate classroom participation is currently an effective option for teachers. Self- and peer-assessment would be effective in this vein because sometimes students themselves can help the teacher understand how engaged they or their peers are through these techniques.

#### ***Integrate participation assessment into university and teacher training curriculum***

Based on our personal experiences, the current system of teacher training courses in higher educational institutions does not properly prepare teachers to assess students’ participation in class. Thus, this third recommendation is addressed to the pedagogical universities’ administration. We suggest that higher educational institutions should include a course about classroom participation assessment techniques into the curriculum in order to prepare novice teachers to effectively apply the suggested assessment system in their future teaching practice.

Currently practicing teachers might also experience some challenges when evaluating students’ participation in class. Therefore, it would be useful for educators to learn these techniques at the annual professional development courses.

This recommendation presents an opportunity to address the issue of assessment of students' engagement and attendance in class at the initial stage. Only highly qualified and professionally prepared teachers can fully and properly implement the previous two recommendations in the assessment system.

## Conclusion

Non-attendance and lack of student engagement in class is a serious issue in Kazakhstani educational system because it leads to low academic performance and motivation loss. In this policy brief we have reviewed existing assessment models and came to the conclusion that they are not focused on this issue. In order to overcome the given issue, this policy brief suggests three effective recommendations: (1) class participation should constitute up to 20% of the total grade, (2) multiple and diverse methods of participation assessment should be applied at schools, (3) the classroom participation assessment techniques should be integrated into pedagogical university curriculum and teacher training courses.

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