UNESCO SURVEY FINDS UNDER-PRIVILEGED CHILDREN ALSO DISADVANTAGED IN CLASSROOM
1246 words
28 May 2008
States News Service
English
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The following information was released by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):

A new study by UNESCO's Institute for Statistics (UIS) highlights the strong effect of social inequality on primary education systems in many countries and the challenge to provide all children with equal learning opportunities.

Entitled A View Inside Primary Schools, the report presents the results of a unique survey undertaken in 11 countries* in Latin America, Asia and North Africa. As part of the World Education Indicators (WEI) programme, the countries were involved in developing and conducting the survey to examine the factors shaping the quality and equality of primary education.

Fourth grade teachers and principals from more than 7,600 schools responded to detailed questionnaires on how schools function, how teachers teach, learning conditions and the support available to teachers and principals.

"This survey offers a wealth of data. On the one hand, we see the extent to which schools lack the most basic elements - running water or electricity - that are taken for granted in the developed countries," says Hendrik van der Pol, director of the Institute. "But the data also reveal how social inequality affects a child's opportunity to learn. And clearly, no country - rich or poor - is immune to these disparities."

The report reveals major gaps in resources between urban and rural schools. In India**, 27% of village schools have electricity compared to 76% of schools in towns or cities. Only about half of these rural schools have enough toilets for girls and less than 4% have a telephone.

In Peru, less than half of village schools are equipped with electricity, a library or toilets for boys or girls. Yet, in urban areas, nearly all schools have electricity, 65% have enough lavatories and 74% have libraries.

In general, village schools are in greater need of repair, according to the survey results. In Peru and the Philippines, for example, principals in rural areas report that about 70% of their pupils are in schools that needed major repairs or complete re-building. In Brazil, half the pupils in villages sat in run-down classrooms compared to less than 30% of pupils in urban establishments.

"It is disturbing to think that students get more or less resources based on where they live. But that is just part of the story," says Yanhong Zhang, one of the authors of the report. "The study shows that pupils in villages were more likely to come from disadvantaged homes. So the inequalities in school resources are linked to their socio-economic status. In effect, these children are subject to a double-jeopardy - with fewer resources at home and in school."

In the survey, teachers and school heads were asked to evaluate their pupils' backgrounds based on a range of factors - from family income and parents' education levels to the frequency with which these children missed meals. The information served as the basis for an index used to examine the links between socio-economic status and school conditions, including the learning environment.

One of the most important factors shaping learning environments is the engagement of teachers and pupils. According to the study, teachers and principals in schools serving socially-disadvantaged children tend to report lower levels of pupil motivation and more behavioural problems. This finding was most striking in Latin American countries and in the comparison between private and public schools.
These findings are based on perception and, therefore, must be interpreted with caution. Are disadvantaged children really less motivated learners? Or are difficult working conditions colouring teachers’ views of their students? Either situation is troubling, according to the report’s authors. Negative perceptions can lead to a vicious cycle in which teachers, parents and students expect and achieve less in the classroom.

The WEI survey of primary schools sheds light on how this cycle of reduced expectations can shape the learning and teaching environment. It provides detailed information on a range of issues - from the extent to which schools strive to ensure that all students realize their academic potential to parental involvement in their children's schooling.

The data indicate that working conditions were perceived to be more difficult in schools serving a majority of disadvantaged students. In these schools, teachers were generally dissatisfied with salary, parental support, class size and access to classroom materials.

The survey also included a specific questionnaire on the extent to which students are given real opportunities to learn in reading. In most countries, teachers with motivated and privileged students tend to use more challenging materials and activities. They also engage in more creative teaching methods. In contrast, teachers with disadvantaged students describe their teaching style as less demanding and more often based on rote learning.

As the authors point out, there is an urgent need to direct more resources towards schools serving under-privileged communities. However, building repairs and school libraries, for example, will not ensure that all children have the opportunity to fulfil their academic potential. Targeted policies are required to improve the learning environment of pupils and the working conditions of teachers and principals. Inequality involves a complex set of problems shaping society at large. But with proper support, schools can improve the chances of all pupils.

Quick facts from the WEI Survey of Primary Schools:

? More than one in five pupils were in schools without running water in Paraguay, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.

? No country had a library in every school. In India, Paraguay, Peru, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Tunisia, less than half the pupils were in schools with a telephone.

? Just over one-half of WEI-SPS pupils were in primary schools with a computer for administrative use. But relatively few pupils were in schools with such a resource in India, Paraguay, Sri Lanka and Tunisia. Chile had an impressive number of schools equipped with computers for pupil use and with access to the Internet.

? In Tunisia, the parents of one-third of pupils were asked to pay for textbooks. This was the case for 24% of pupils in Argentina and almost 10% in India. Sri Lanka was the only country to provide textbooks for free to virtually all students.

? Two-thirds or more of pupils in Argentina, Brazil, Malaysia, Tunisia and Uruguay were in schools where fewer than 70 percent of teachers had taught for at least five years indicating a problem with staff stability.

? The mean hours of instruction a year ranged from 754 in Paraguay to more than 1,000 in Chile, India, Malaysia and the Philippines. Disparities were acute in Chile, India and the Philippines where the differences in annual instructional time among children were 440 hours or more.

? The typical WEI-SPS Grade 4 teacher taught 23 hours per week in a single school. The overall teaching load for Grade 4 teachers working in only one school ranged from 14 hours (Malaysia) to 31 hours (Chile and the Philippines).
With the exceptions of India, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, most teachers expressed low levels of satisfaction with their salaries. India and Sri Lanka were also the only countries where more than one-half of pupils had teachers who considered their professional status higher than that of other professionals with similar educational qualifications.

*Argentina, Brazil, Chile, India, Malaysia, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Tunisia and Uruguay.

**The study was conducted in four states of India: Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu.

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