

UNICEF oPt Monthly Update

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Overview: Focus on education

In 1994, the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) inherited the education system from the Israeli Civil Administration. Since then, MoEHE has focused its efforts on improving the education system. It has established the first unified Palestinian curriculum; developed a new five-year education strategic plan for 2008-2012; built approximately 900 schools to accommodate the increase in student population; improved the education management information system and built the capacity of teachers, principals, supervisors and other ministry staff.

During 2010/2011 scholastic year, there were 1,140,157 students attending 2,647 schools across the occupied Palestinian territory (1971 schools in West Bank / 676 schools in Gaza). There are 967,300 students enrolled in basic education and 149,691 enrolled in secondary education. More than 64 per cent of the total number of basic education students attend government-run schools; 27 per cent attend UNRWA schools and 8.6 per cent attend private schools.

However, despite these achievements, the ministry still faces many challenges. The primary school net-enrolment ratio dropped from 91.7 per cent in 2001 to 83.9 per cent in 2007, and the primary school net-attendance ratio is 92 and 91 per cent for girls and boys respectively.

Learning outcomes have been declining. In the West Bank during the second semester of 2010, almost 67 per cent of fourth grade students attending governmental schools passed their Arabic exam and only 43 per cent passed their mathematics exam. In Gaza, during the same semester, 59 per cent of fourth grade students passed their Arabic exam and only 47 per cent passed their mathematics exam.

During the 2009/2010 scholastic year in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), 22 per cent of children were not enrolled in secondary education. This amounts to 25,544 children, 75 per cent of whom are males and 25 per cent females.

Reasons for not being enrolled in the education system or for dropping out of school include early marriage, poor scholastic achievement, and/or joining the labour force.

VACCINATION DRIVE TARGETS HARD TO REACH CHILDREN



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The Ein Al Beida clinic in the northern West Bank was overcrowded as mothers rushed to get their children vaccinated during Regional Immunization Week. Mother-of-two Iman Talal came to the clinic determined to vaccinate her son Mohammed. The week – organized as part of the WHO Vaccination Week in the eastern Mediterranean – was supported by the Ministry of Health, UNRWA, WHO and UNICEF, with funds from the Japanese Government. To view the webtext story, please visit: http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/oPt_58415.html

In East Jerusalem, students are at risk of not attending school due to the lack of more than 1,000 classrooms, and in Israeli-controlled Area 'C' of the West Bank, students face many obstacles, including restricted access to their schools, long walking distances, and substandard classrooms due to a restrictive permit regime.

This monthly update focuses on an ethnographic study of six basic-level public schools in the West Bank, which will assist the MoEHE and others in dealing with the decline in the quality of education.

Ethnographic study of Palestinian schools

In partnership with A.M. Qattan Foundation and MoEHE, UNICEF supported an ethnographic study of six public schools in Hebron and Ramallah. The study aims at better understanding the various aspects of daily practices in a public school and their relationship with student learning. In consideration of the socio-political context and the Education reform, this study delves into the everyday practices of the six schools (3 urban and 3 rural), to better understand how teachers, students, principals, supervisors and parents understand their roles and how those roles influence the learning process.

Given that the quality of education is declining, the findings of the study will inform and guide MoEHE and other stakeholders in advancing the quality of

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education for almost 1.2 million students across oPt. The qualitative study, the first of its kind, provided indicative information based on a sample of six basic-level public schools in Ramallah and Hebron districts. As an initial study, it has not intended to provide a comprehensive quantitative picture of the overall education system.

The methodology: Following extensive training on research methodologies, a group of seven trained teachers carried out the research, using various data collection tools. They observed ten classes covering science, mathematics and Arabic; they interviewed teachers, principals, supervisors, students and parents; they evaluated class teaching methodology; and they reviewed school related documents, including policies and test results.

Main findings: Eight major categories were surveyed, which clearly indicate that there is a need for a more comprehensive review of educational policies, pedagogy and research that will advance quality education, coupled with improvements in the work conditions of teachers.

Finding one: The supervisory system

Since 1994, the supervisory system has evolved, facilitating a more comprehensive follow up to the needs of students, teachers, school principals and caretakers. The current supervisory system includes interviewing students and principals; observations of school environment; follow up on students' test results and discussions with teachers and parents in relation to students' achievement in an attempt to develop remedial plans. Meanwhile, other supervisors evaluate teachers' pedagogies, plans and testing procedures.

There is a misconception about the role of supervisors. While the study showed that supervisors understand their role, which is supportive of teachers' professional development and is helpful in improving students' achievements and acts as an official channel of communication between MoEHE and teachers. Teachers, on the other hand, reported that the role of supervisors is perceived as authoritarian.

While 70 per cent of teachers reported that training programmes were not relevant to their work, they said that training programmes on assessments and evaluations were still very useful. The perceptions of mainly new teachers (three years of experience or less) towards their supervisors was positive, indicating that supervisors are seen as a source of knowledge, either in terms of content or pedagogy.

Finding two: The evaluation system

MoEHE uses unified tests to pinpoint students' weaknesses in the tested subjects that enable them to address these weaknesses. However, only fifty per

EMPOWERED ADOLESCENTS



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Rafah, Gaza Strip. Adolescents participating in life skills based education activities.

cent of teachers reported positively on international and MoEHE administered exams. They stated that exams are a good tool to identify students' ability; to motivate students to improve; and to encourage teachers to complete the curriculum. The remaining fifty per cent reported that the exams are beyond the cognitive level of students; and those are not reliable tools to measure the students' performance.

Supervisors, on the other hand, reported that exams are important for having reliable results on students' achievement. While school principals reported that exams are a supportive measure for raising students' achievement, school principals of lower elementary schools complained about 4th grade exams. A review of a sample of unified exams collected for this study revealed that most of the questions do not exceed the comprehension and application level of thinking of students and that the exams rarely provide students with the opportunity to analyse, criticise or evaluate knowledge.

Finding three: The curriculum

While teachers, school principals and supervisors showed pride in the curriculum, teachers expressed that it is beyond the cognitive level of students; that it is too long in comparison with number of school days; and that there is no integration between different textbooks. In contrast to higher elementary level grades, teachers in the lower elementary schools reported that the content of the textbooks is very important for the child and can be taught easily. Teachers at both higher and lower elementary school levels agreed that the curriculum does not provide students the opportunity to think creatively. While half of the supervisors were satisfied with the curriculum, the other half showed similar dissatisfaction as reported by teachers. Students reported that the textbooks are difficult, are crowded with subjects and are gearing them towards rote learning (learning by repetition) especially when it comes to exams.

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Finding four: Teachers' practices

While most teachers observed showed a relatively good knowledge of the subjects taught, they lacked the skills to translate the knowledge into useful learning experiences. The majority of teachers adopted traditional means of teaching, using lecturing as the predominant means of teaching rather than facilitation skills. Teachers' practices did not allow space for students to explore, reflect on, construct, criticise and communicate knowledge. Most of the time, students were passive learners, and teaching-learning was exclusively formulated in relation to the exam. However, there were some teachers who enabled their students to express their ideas, using various learning methods including drama, role play, group work and integration of new subject matter with students' previous knowledge.

Finding five: The local community

The local community plays a pivotal role in supporting the education system. Given that salaries consume 90 per cent of the MoEHE expenditure, school principals rely on the support provided by parent-teacher associations, village / municipality councils and non-governmental organizations. Not only do they provide support to improving school environment by equipping schools with much-needed educational tools, they also carry out extracurricular activities that motivate students to learn.

Finding six: Work environment

The school environment is impacted by the centralized system within MoEHE and the Israeli occupation. Teachers, school principals and supervisors also complain that the MoEHE centralised decision making system not only denies them the opportunity to participate in the decision making process, but allows for decisions to be misinterpreted due to the hierarchal communication flow. Moreover, all have reported that they are under-paid and that their salaries are not sufficient to meet their basic needs, pushing them to work after school.

Teachers and students, whose schools are located next to Israeli settlements, outposts and 'barrier', reported difficulties in reaching their schools on time and safely. Other teachers and students reported feeling anxious due to unexpected measures by Israeli security forces at checkpoints, mainly during Israeli holidays. Due to the political instability, and the worsening economic situation, teachers reported that students are working after school to help their parents earn a living, which impacts negatively on their learning abilities.

Finally, given that the permissible rate of failing is very low, teachers reported modifying students' grades to enable them to pass their grades, which eventually exacerbates the problem of poor learning outcomes.

JOY FOR CHILDREN



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Hebron, West Bank. Children enjoying their lunch break at Fahd al-Qawasmeh School for Boys.

Finding seven: Accountability & standardisation

In its belief that quality is measurable by students' achievement and score, the MoEHE is implementing a high stake standardisation and examination philosophy, involving supervisors in the formulation of standardised exams. Supervisors reported job satisfaction when their expectations that teachers raise students' achievements are met. However, students reported dissatisfaction with the extension of school days or shifting arts and sports classes with core subjects in order to finish the curriculum on time. Teachers also reported that a test-driven teacher-student relationship threatens teaching and learning.

Finding eight: Negotiating roles

Teachers and supervisors reported that their relationship is defined by mutual trust and respect, and that they see their profession as a means to raise a decent, educated and literate generation that will uphold cultural values of their community. Students reported that their favourite teachers were the ones who were passionate, joyful, and flexible; used practical experiences in class; and had a strong and respectful personality.

Recommendation

The study recommended that MoEHE leads a comprehensive review of the educational assessment and evaluation systems to better understand the impact of students' testing procedures on quality learning. It also highlighted the need to create networking opportunities between schools to enable teachers and students to exchange experiences and learn from each other; to open a constructive dialogue and partnership with the local community for the best interest of students and teachers; and to develop a more inclusive curriculum that encompasses students' experiences, extracurricular activities and classroom activities.

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FEATURE: Educators, parents pull together amidst growing Palestinian education crisis

HEBRON, occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), 19 May 2011 - "Past! Present! Imperative!" shout out the fifth graders in Yusef Titi's Arabic language class. They are learning the complexities of Arabic grammar by dramatizing the role of the parts of speech.

Ahmed Jabari, 11, is hoisted on the shoulders of his classmates to the sounds of cheers. "I was carried because I was acting as the subject, and the subject carries the accent," he explains. "I love school," Ahmed goes on. "Arabic taught this way is easy."

That response is exactly what Palestinian educators and officials are seeking from students as they struggle with declining success rates in a community that was once one of the best-educated in the Arab world.

FALLING SCORES

Despite years of investment in a national plan for education, standardized tests and other markers show that students in the occupied Palestinian territory are doing increasingly poorly in school. The 2008 results of the International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) showed that 61 per cent of students in oPt scored below the low benchmark in mathematics, down from 54 per cent in 2003. In 2008, 54 per cent were below the mark in science, also a decline from 34 per cent in science four years earlier.

In part, educators point to the years of violence and increasing poverty that marked the second Palestinian uprising that began in 2000. But other challenges include crowded classrooms, low incentives for teachers and an increasingly centralized, unresponsive system, educators say.

UNSUCCESSFUL POLICIES

"They [the Ministry] established the broad outlines for education in the 2008-2012 strategic plan," says Muhammed Kneibeh, principal of the Fahed al-Qawasmeh boys school in Hebron, where Titi is using drama in the classroom.

"We fill in the details of the programming. But we would love to participate in writing the new plan. We are the ones in the field. We know the work."

Kneibeh's school is clean and well-lit, its halls full of flowering plants and the walls outside painted with bright pictures by the students.

He says he works hard with the teachers at his school and students' parents to develop a curriculum that will

teach children not only learning by repetition, but also life skills.

Pointing out a line of blooming roses leading into the school's main foyer, Kneibeh says it took education about the environment to keep the boys from plucking the flowers.

"We teach them that this tree is for you, and your comrade and for those who come here after you," says curriculum director Omar al-Wawa.

BUILDING A LEGACY

Al-Wawa uses Classroom-based Intervention to try to handle the violence that students sometimes manifest.

"Not all the problems that we face are from the occupation," he says. "Our society is also impacted negatively from the violence and fighting in films, for example. We can't get rid of that, but we try to teach the boys alternative methods for handling their problems."

The Fahed al-Qawasmeh boys school is one of 100 UNICEF-designated "Child-Friendly Schools" that are inclusive, healthy, effective and involved with the community.

In 2011, and in order to improve quality education, UNICEF is supporting 200 schools to become child-friendly. Through this initiative, MoEHE and UNICEF aim to safeguard the well-being and rights of children as learners, by developing a child-centered learning; creating an inviting school environment; ensuring parental and community participation; and equipping girls and boys with the knowledge and skills to adopt healthy lifestyles that will enable them to take an active role in decision-making, as they transition to adolescence.

"When I come and visit a school like this, I enjoy it very much," says parent Muhammed Zeitun, 45. "If there is a problem with a student, the principal gets involved. He studies the situation at home – not to be nosy, but to see how he can help."

A member of the school's parent support organization, Zeitun is critical of long-standing policies that sometimes prevent teachers from failing students who achieve marks below passing. "It's like they are trying to get them out of the system," he says. Nor are high marks always a sign of knowledge, he believes. "Sometimes the grades show if the student knows how to study, not whether he understands the material."

These and other issues are crucial to the debate underway over how to best educate Palestinian children for the future.