

EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES WITHIN URBAN SECTOR

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Despite the free education system introduced as early as the mid 1940's and subsequent expansion of educational programmes, there are wide educational disparities among the various population groups on a variety of dimensions; the Urban-rural, being one such dimension. The urban sector population has more and better educational facilities and educational achievements than the rural sector; but the disparities within these sectors have not been fully studied and explored. It is believed that educational achievement is lower among the poor living in slums and shanties than others in the urban sector.

This study attempts to assess the relative position of children among the urban poor in Colombo in terms of primary school enrolment. It also tries in terms of primary school enrolment to identify the possible reasons for differences between the poor of Colombo city, the overall Colombo district Urban Sector, and the national average.

The methodology was by a survey conducted in 4 purposively selected slums and shanty gardens in Dematagoda Ward—a ward with a fairly high level of slum and shanty population in Colombo. Data was collected through a questionnaire by interviewing all families in the 4 gardens. (Population in these 4 gardens covered 6.7% of the total slum and shanty population in the Ward). National and regional data obtained from the Census of Population and Housing in 1981 was also used for the comparative analysis.

The survey data reveals that while the rate of primary school attendance among this urban poor (84.4%) is lower than overall Colombo district urban sector (86.2%) by about 2 percent it is yet marginally better than the national average (83.2%).

Among the significant findings uncovered by the survey was that the reasons for a relatively poor primary school attendance among these urban poor was not economic conditions and physical disability of children as generally believed. The level of non-attendance for both these reasons was only 14.6 percent for each. On the other hand, a more significant contributory factor for non-school attendance among these children was found to be the incapacity of the formal school system to absorb all children seeking school admission, with 25.4% not attending school for this reason. The next factor in importance was parental negligence in admitting and sending their children to school, with 21.8% not attending school for this reason.