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STATISTICAL COMMISSION  
Eighth session  
Item 3 of the provisional agenda

IMPROVING THE INTERNATIONAL COMPARABILITY  
OF STATISTICS ON ILLITERACY AND EDUCATION

(Memorandum prepared by the Secretariat of UNESCO)

Introduction

1. The General Conference of UNESCO, at its sixth session, Paris 1951, adopted the following resolution (8.23):

"The Director-General is authorized to study, with the help of experts and in collaboration with the United Nations, the Specialized Agencies, and competent international organizations, such standards and criteria as may be proposed to Member States to improve the international comparability of their statistics in the fields of education, science and culture".

2. Accordingly, the Director-General invited a Committee of Experts to meet at Unesco House, 5-9 November 1951, to study the question of standardization of educational statistics, including statistics of illiteracy, the latter subject having been referred to UNESCO by the United Nations.<sup>1/</sup>

3. The Secretariat of UNESCO, in preparation for the meeting of experts, had made certain preliminary studies on definitions, classifications and tabulations in statistics on illiteracy and education. These studies were presented to the Committee of Experts in the form of several working papers.

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<sup>1/</sup> Resolution 445 (V) of the General Assembly, referring to the Report on Education, A/1303/Add.1, of the Special Committee on Information transmitted under Article 73 e of the Charter.

4. The Report of the Committee,<sup>2/</sup> together with a revised version of the working paper on definitions, classifications and tabulations in statistics on education,<sup>3/</sup> were distributed in June 1952 to Member States of UNESCO for their information. They were also invited to send in their comments on the subject.

5. A Secretariat paper on Standardization of Educational Statistics<sup>4/</sup> was presented to the General Conference of UNESCO at its seventh session, Paris 1952, incorporating the Report of the Committee of Experts and comments received from Member States up to 30 September 1952.<sup>5/</sup>

6. The Secretariat was instructed to continue to study the possibilities of standardization in definitions, classifications and tabulations of statistics on illiteracy and education, and to report to the eighth session of the General Conference on the results of further study and consultations.

7. The activities of UNESCO in this respect will represent part of its efforts to bring about some improvement in the international comparability of statistics in the fields of education, science and culture. Accordingly, the present memorandum is presented for the information of the Statistical Commission.

8. The following sections contain the recommendations of the UNESCO Committee of Experts relating to statistics on illiteracy and education, and modifications proposed by the Secretariat of UNESCO in the light of comments received from its Member States and of its own experience in dealing with these subjects. The concluding section outlines some further action contemplated by the Director-General, subject to approval by the General Conference of UNESCO.

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<sup>2/</sup> Unesco/ST/R/4 rev. (Paris, 9 April 1952).

<sup>3/</sup> Unesco/ST/R/6 (Paris, 28 April 1952).

<sup>4/</sup> Unesco/7C/PRG/4 (Paris, 14 November 1952).

<sup>5/</sup> Comments received from these countries and from additional countries since October 1952 are reproduced in a separate paper available to the Commission.

9. The Commission may wish to record its views and comments on the various suggestions contained in the remaining sections of this memorandum.

#### STATISTICS ON ILLITERACY

##### A. Definitions

10. The Committee of Experts recommended the following definitions:

- "(i) A person is considered literate who can both read with understanding and write a short simple statement on his everyday life.
- (ii) A person is considered semi-literate, who can read with understanding, but not write, a short simple statement of his everyday life."

11. The definition of literacy recommended by the UNESCO Committee of Experts differs from that previously recommended by the United Nations Population Commission, viz. "that literacy should be defined for census purposes as the ability both to read and to write a simple message in any language."<sup>6/</sup> It is the opinion of the UNESCO Secretariat that, while the definition recommended by the Population Commission would seem to be adequate for general census purposes, there is need for a more precise definition in view of the various methods of measurement recommended by the UNESCO Committee (see paragraph 12 below).

##### B. Methods of measurement

12. The Committee went on to state that:

"To measure literacy as defined, the following principal methods of verification are recommended:

- (i) By complete enumeration in a general population census, either
  - (a) asking a direct question on literacy; or
  - (b) ascertaining literacy status by an indirect question on the number of successfully completed years of schooling.

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<sup>6/</sup> Report of the third session of the Population Commission, to the Economic and Social Council, E/805, Annex A, paragraph 8.

- (ii) By sampling surveys, either
  - (a) as in a complete enumeration, with a direct or indirect question; or
  - (b) using a standardized test of literacy which may be developed by each country.
- (iii) By estimation, based on either
  - (a) a school census; or
  - (b) regular school statistics."

13. The Secretariat of UNESCO feels that an indirect census question on the number of successfully completed years of schooling would be most useful, either in addition to, or in place of, a direct question on ability to read and write. It expresses the need for a more precise statement as to the minimum number of years of schooling successfully completed that may be taken as equivalent to literacy as defined. It further suggests that four years of formal schooling successfully completed might be proposed as satisfying the criterion of literacy for purposes of international comparison.

#### C. Classification and tabulation

14. The following recommendations were suggested by the Committee:

- "(i) Literacy status should be classified in the following groups: literates; illiterates, subdivided, where appropriate, into semi-literates and full illiterates.
- (ii) Each of these groups should be classified by sex and by the following age groups: 10-14, 15-19, 20-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65 and over.
- (iii) Where possible, the age group 10-14 could be broken down into single years.
- (iv) Where the detailed age groups given above cannot be adopted, at least the following groups should be separated: 10-14, 15-44, 45-64, 65 and over.
- (v) Additional classifications, where appropriate, could be made of
  - (a) locality groups, such as by urban, rural non-agricultural and rural agricultural;
  - (b) ethnic groups, by race, nationality, religion or language;
  - (c) groups by social or occupational status."

15. The above suggestions concerning tabulation of literacy data by sex and age groups are in conformity with the recommendations of the United Nations Population Commission.<sup>7/</sup> However, the Population Commission did not recommend the detailed tabulation by single years of age for the 10-14 year group; nor by the summary age groups 10-14, 15-44, 45-64, 65 and over. Additional classification by locality groups, ethnic groups, or groups by social or occupational status had not been recommended by the Population Commission.

16. In the light of the experience of the UNESCO Secretariat, there would seem to be no need for detailed tabulation of literacy data by single years of age. Nor does it seem advisable to limit the tabulation to four summary age groups. Rather it is felt that more effort should be devoted to encouraging the additional classification of literates and illiterates by locality groups, ethnic groups, occupational groups, etc.

#### STATISTICS ON EDUCATION

##### A. Definitions

17. The Committee recommended the following definitions applicable to statistics on education:

- "(i) Compulsory school age population is the population between the age limits of compulsory full-time education, apart from exceptions as provided in the law of each country (State, province, etc.).
- (ii) In countries where education is not compulsory, the school age population includes all children within the usual ages of entering and completing the typical primary school according to the practice of that country.
- (iii) A government financed school is one which is basically financed from official (federal, State or local government sources), whether or not supplemented by fees or incidental gifts.
- (iv) A government aided school is one which is partly financed from official sources.
- (v) An independent school is one which receives no financial support from official sources.

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<sup>7/</sup> Report of the fourth session of the Population Commission to the Economic and Social Council, document E/1313, Annex 2, paragraph 25.

- (vi) A school is a group of pupils or students organized as a single educational unit under one or more teachers with an immediate head.
- (vii) A class is a group of pupils who are usually instructed together by a teacher not necessarily the same teacher all the time.
- (viii) A grade (standard, form, etc.) is a stage on the educational ladder, of one school year's (or academic year's) duration.
- (ix) A student or pupil is a person enrolled for full-time or part-time education at any level.
- (x) A teacher is a person directly engaged in educating a group of pupils or students.

(Note: The number of teachers at any level of education below higher education is the number of full-time teachers, i.e. teachers engaged during the normal school day as provided in the time-table of that school, plus the full-time equivalent of part-time teachers)."

18. In the light of comments received from Member States and of its experience in collecting school statistics from different countries, the UNESCO Secretariat is of the opinion that some of the definitions recommended by the Committee of Experts might be modified as follows:

- (i) Compulsory school age population is the population between the age limits of compulsory full-time education, apart from exceptions as provided in the law of each country (State, province, etc.), and without regard to any provisions for part-time continuation schools as part of compulsory education.
- (ii) For purposes of international comparison, the school age population is defined as including all children between the ages of five and fourteen inclusive, irrespective of the requirements of compulsory education or the lengths of various types of schools.
- (iii) A public school is one which is owned and operated by a public authority (federal, State, or local government), whatever the basis of its financial support.
- (iv) A private school is one which is owned and operated by a non-governmental body (such as a religious or professional association or private persons), whether or not it receives financial support from governmental sources. Private schools which are not recognized by the government as conforming to the standards of efficiency or courses of study prescribed by public authorities may be excluded from international reporting.

- (v) Where appropriate, private schools may be divided into government aided and independent schools, according to whether or not they derive financial support from government sources.
- (x) A teacher is a person directly engaged in educating a group of pupils or students; headmasters or principals should be classed as teachers, but not school inspectors or supervisors. (Full-time and part-time teachers should, as far as possible, be reported separately.)

B. Classification

19. The Committee recommended that, "for purposes of international reporting, schools should be classified as far as possible, by level and type, as follows:

"(a) Education, by level.

- (i) A school of the first level (e.g. nursery school, kindergarten, infant school) provides education for children who are not yet ready to enter a school of the second level.
  - (ii) A school of the second level (e.g. elementary school, primary school) provides basic instruction in tools of learning, as well as education for the social and emotional development of the children.
  - (iii) A school of the third level (e.g. middle school, secondary school, high school) provides general or specialized instruction more advanced than that given at the second level. As to schools of the third level the education is subdivided into:
    - (iii a) general education, which does not aim to prepare the pupils for a certain profession or trade.
    - (iii b) vocational education, which aims to prepare the pupils directly for a certain profession or trade.
  - (iv) An institution of the fourth level is one which requires, as a minimum condition of admission, a certificate of completion of a school of the third level or its equivalent (e.g. an entrance examination). Institutions of this level include universities and higher professional schools.
- (b) Teacher education.
- (c) Special education is all general or vocational education given to physically or mentally handicapped, socially maladjusted, retarded or backward persons.
- (d) Supplementary education includes all education not included elsewhere (e.g. adult education)."

20. In the light of comments received and of its experience in collecting statistics on education on an international scale, the Secretariat of UNESCO is of the opinion that the classification proposed by the Committee is practical, although certain modifications might be advisable as follows:

(a) Education, by level.

(iii) A school of the third level (e.g. middle school, secondary school, high school) provided general or specialized instruction more advanced than that given at the second level. Where appropriate, this level may be subdivided into:

(iii a) a lower stage (e.g. junior middle schools) in which general instruction is given, with orientation of interests and aptitudes, leading on to various types of instruction at a higher stage;

(iii b) a higher stage (e.g. senior middle schools) in which some differentiation is introduced in the types of instruction provided, according to the interests and aptitudes of the pupils. Schools of the third level may also, where appropriate, be subdivided into:

(iii g) general education, which does not aim to prepare the pupils for a certain profession or trade;

(iii v) vocational education, which aims to prepare the pupils directly for a certain profession or trade.

(b) Teacher education.

(i) Institutions for the training of teachers which do not require, as a minimum condition of admission, the completion of the third level of education.

(ii) Institutions for the training of teachers which require, as a minimum condition of admission, the completion of the third level of education.

C. Tabulations

21. The Committee recommended that "the tabulation of educational statistics for international purposes should initially include the following data:



- (l) Number of schools and number of pupils by sex at the first level of education.
- (ii) Number of schools and classes, number of pupils and graduates by sex at the second level of education.
- (iii) Number of schools and classes, number of pupils and graduates by sex at the third level of education.
  - (a) General education.
  - (b) Vocational education.
- (iv) (a) Number of institutions and faculties, number of students by sex, and number of students preparing for a degree or diploma, at the fourth level of education.
  - (b) Number of students by nationality and number of first-year students enrolled at the fourth level of education.
  - (c) Number of students, by sex, obtaining degrees from institutions of the fourth level of education.
- (v) Number of institutions for teacher education, number of students and graduates by sex.
- (vi) Number of schools and classes and number of pupils, by sex, in special education.
- (vii) Number of classes and number of students by sex in supplementary education.
- (viii) Number of pupils and students by level and type of education and by sex and age.
- (ix) Number of teachers at the first three levels of education and in special education, by sex and qualification.
- (x) Number of teachers at the fourth level of education, by faculty (branch of study), by titular status and by sex.
- (xi) Public expenditure on education by level and type of education."

22. The Secretariat of UNESCO would propose the following modifications to the tabulations recommended by the Committee:

- (ii) Number of schools and classes, number of pupils and graduates by sex at the second level of education.
- (iii) Number of schools and classes, number of pupils and graduates by sex at the third level of education, divided where appropriate into:
  - (a) General education - lower and higher stage.
  - (b) Vocational education, by type of education.

- (viii) Number of pupils and students by level and type of education and either:
  - (a) by sex and age; or
  - (b) by sex and grade (standard, form, etc.).
- (xi) Number of teachers in institutions of teacher education, by sex.
- (xii) Public expenditure on education:
  - (a) by source of funds and object of expenditure; and where possible
  - (b) by level and type of education.

D. Forms

23. The Committee, in its report, also recommended the use of certain forms for the collection of educational statistics. Judging by the detailed comments of certain countries on these forms, and the experience gained by the Secretariat in the use of questionnaires for the collection of data from different countries, it is evident that more extended study and experimentation will be needed before UNESCO can recommend a set of standardized forms for the collection of educational statistics.

24. The Secretariat would therefore propose that the forms recommended by the Committee be further studied and experimented with, in order to discover the most practicable and acceptable ways in which the data needed for international purposes can be furnished by the countries.

FURTHER ACTION CONTEMPLATED

25. The Director-General of UNESCO intends to submit a further report on the standardization of educational statistics to the Eighth Session of the General Conference, Montevideo 1954, and, subject to the approval of the General Conference, to proceed with the following work plan relating to this project:

- (a) To prepare, as soon as possible, a draft manual of suggestions for the collection, compilation and publication of statistics relating to illiteracy and education, with a view to improving their international comparability.

- (b) To invite its Member States and competent international organizations to give their comments on the suggestions contained in the draft manual.
- (c) To submit to the Ninth Session of the General Conference a draft set of recommendations on the standardization of statistics relating to illiteracy and education, in accordance with the Rules of Procedure concerning Recommendations to Member States and International Conventions.

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