

Low-income US children less likely to have access to qualified teachers

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Children from low-income families in the United States do not have the same access to qualified teachers as do wealthier students, according to a University of Missouri study. Compared to 46 countries, the United States had the fourth largest opportunity gap, the difference between students of high and low socioeconomic status in their access to qualified teachers.

Comparing eighth grade math teachers from around the world, the study defined highly qualified teachers as ones who have full certification, a degree in math or math education and at least three years of teaching experience. The study found that high-achieving countries have a larger percentage of students taught by highly qualified teachers than low-achieving countries.

“When students are not taught by highly qualified teachers, their opportunity to learn is considerably lower,” said Motoko Akiba, assistant professor of educational leadership and policy analysis in the College of Education at MU. “Previous studies have shown that students with similar backgrounds achieve significantly higher when taught by highly-qualified teachers.”

Other findings included:

-- 29.7 percent of U.S. eighth grade math teachers did not major in mathematics or mathematics education; the international average is 13.2 percent.

-- 60.3 percent of U.S. eighth graders are taught mathematics by teachers with full certification, who were mathematics or mathematics education majors and had at least three years of teaching experience; nearly 40 percent of U.S. eighth graders do not have access to highly qualified teachers.

-- In the United States, 67.6 percent of high-socioeconomic status students are taught by highly qualified teachers, compared with 53.2 percent of low-socioeconomic status students. This opportunity gap of 14.4 percent is significantly larger than the international average of 2.5 percent.

The study supports No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) requirement of full certification and subject-specific preparation. However, Akiba said NCLB's requirements will not be enough to close the opportunity gap without providing equal and continuous learning opportunities and resources for instructional improvement.

"The intention of teacher quality requirements in NCLB is good, but it is not enough," Akiba said. "There is a gap in learning opportunities for teachers. In order to close the opportunity gap in the United States, teachers should have equal opportunities to learn and to expand their knowledge in their field."

Many countries in this study ensure equal student access to highly qualified teachers through equal distribution of educational resources. In the United States, however, there is a major funding gap between low-income and high-income districts. In high-poverty areas, districts may not have resources or the capacity to recruit highly qualified teachers.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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