COPENHAGEN, Denmark: Although dental caries rates among children have declined in several high-income countries over the last decades, the opposite trend has been noted for low-income countries. A survey conducted at the University of Copenhagen has shown, however, that school programmes can contribute significantly to a gradual reduction of inequalities in dental health.

Gingivitis and dental caries are the most common oral diseases among children, with the latter affecting 60–90 per cent of children globally. Pain and discomfort resulting from these diseases can compromise children’s concentration and their participation in school, thereby denying them the full benefit of schooling.

Through analysis of data from the World Health Organization’s Global School Health Initiative, a programme that was launched in 1995 in 61 countries to improve the health of students and other members of the community through schools, the researchers observed that about 60 per cent of the countries give formalised instruction on how to brush teeth.

However, not all countries have access to clean water and the necessary sanitary conditions, which constitutes a major challenge for the health and school authorities in Asia, Latin America and Africa in particular. “In addition, countries in these regions are battling problems involving the sale of sugary drinks and sweets in the school playgrounds, which is often a source of extra income for school teachers, who are poorly paid,” explained Dr Poul Erik Petersen, Chief of the WHO’s Global Oral Health Programme and a professor at the University of Copenhagen.

Petersen further pointed out that the greatest challenges to improving dental health in low-income countries are the lack of financial resources and trained staff. Additionally, they make only limited use of fluoride.

Overall, the survey showed that schools have a central role in promoting health and preventing diseases because healthy school environments that offer children education on dental health are generally well placed to set children on a path to a healthy lifestyle throughout their lives, Petersen explained.

Dental health inequalities may also arise in high-income countries. “Even in a rich country like Denmark, we see social inequalities in dental care. The socially and financially disadvantaged groups of the population show a high incidence of tooth and mouth complaints compared with the more affluent groups,” he added.

The study, titled “Promoting oral health of children through schools—Results from a WHO global survey 2012”, was published in the December issue of the Community Dental Health journal.