

# 'INDIA'S LEARNING POVERTY HAS SHOT UP'

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

*World Bank's Global Director for Education Jaime Saavedra, who was in India last week to meet Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan to discuss concerns over learning losses for children due to the COVID-19 pandemic, spoke of the impact of school closures in India, and the need for reassessment of learning levels as schools reopen after two years.*

## **What was the agenda of your visit to India?**

We met the Minister of Education [Dharmendra Pradhan] to share with him that as the World Bank, we emphasise a lot on the work that is needed both globally and in different countries and to bridge the learning losses due to the impact of the pandemic. Globally, we were living in a learning crisis even before the pandemic. Now, with this gigantic shock we have had of two years of children out of school, there has been a dramatic effect on their learning and their well-being. Obviously, they share these concerns and we will continue working with them in order to accelerate the learning process. We visited Gujarat, which is doing a lot of progress on how to accelerate the process of learning recovery. Then, we were in U.P. to visit schools and in Delhi we had meetings with NGOs and think tanks.

This is in the context of the very large support of the World Bank to India which includes a portfolio of \$2.1 billion to the country.

## **What is your assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on education in India?**

We see the impacts of the pandemic in all countries, but definitely much more in countries in which the closures have been the longest such as in South Asia and Latin America. According to our learning poverty calculation, we have found that if before the pandemic, about 53% of children were not able to read a simple text by the age of 10, which is already a crisis, unfortunately, with the pandemic, this has shot up to 70%. In India, learning poverty has shot up from 54% to 70%. We don't have real data, these are simulations.

According to Pratham's ASER survey, in rural Karnataka, the share of Grade 3 students in government schools able to perform simple subtraction fell from 24% in 2018 to 16% in 2020. We have seen that roughly what has been lost was the equivalent of the extent of the school closures.

That is why we need to worry about making sure that we don't create inter-generational inequality. If we don't do something now, this generation will have lower productivity, lower earnings, lower well-being in the future and that is what we need to avoid.

## **How can schools work to bridge learning gaps?**

The first action is to open schools. Most countries by now have opened schools but still there are those that have only opened partially. However, that schools are open doesn't mean automatically kids are coming back. We need to reach every child to ensure that all of them re-enroll. We need very aggressive enrollment campaigns to ensure that they bring kids back to school [as] many kids are now working, or doing household chores. The second key action is to assess learning to know where kids are today. Third, we need to prioritise teaching the fundamentals. Many countries have very rich and dense curriculum with many subjects, but we need to make sure that at least in the beginning, children are focusing on the fundamentals.

Fourth, we need to increase catch-up learning which will require very effective instructional time. [To achieve this] teachers will require a lot of support . And finally, we really need to work on emotional support for both children and teachers .

**Surveys have shown that many students have been forced to withdraw from private schools and enrol in government schools with a decline in household incomes. But there are vast quality gaps in private and public schools. How can governments respond to this transition?**

This is something we see globally. Two things have happened — small private schools have closed, and parents don't have resources to pay. This has put more pressure on government schools. This could be a mixed blessing. Government and private schools will have to increase the quality of their offering to cover the needs of these children and increase resources or increase efficiency of their resources or a mix of both.

**In response to the pandemic, there is a major thrust by the Indian government on digital literacy. But given issues in access resulting in widening of losses for those on the margins, is this a step in the right direction?**

The fact that education television and radio came back after being abandoned for many years is a good development. We need resilient systems because we don't know what the next natural disaster is going to be.

On the digital front, educational technology in general has the potential to be a great equaliser, but it is still a divider around the world. This divide has to be closed by all countries by investing in not the software or the hardware but the entire ecosystem. But investing in educational technology by itself is not a solution.

The pandemic has taught us that the magic of learning happens in the interactions between students and teachers which will never be replaced by technology. But technology can make the work of teachers more impactful and effective.

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