

# THE BUSINESS STANDARD

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## Six million school-going children risk of learning loss: PPRC & BIGD Study

This risk of learning loss is more pronounced for urban secondary school-going children - 26% for females and 30% for males - and poorer groups, with secondary school-going males from extremely poor families being at the highest risk of 33% - possibly as a result of the Covid-19 induced economic shock.



Some 19% of primary and 25% of secondary school-going children are at risk of learning loss.

This finding came out in joint research by Power and Participation Research Center (PPRC) and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University.

The national three-phase rapid telephonic survey between April 2020 and March 2021 to assess the poverty impact of the Covid-19 crisis was reported in "Covid Impact on Education Life of Children". Findings from Part II of the third phase survey were jointly presented today by Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, Executive Chairman, PPRC, and Dr Imran Matin, Executive Director, BIGD.

Part II of the survey focused on a subset of the larger third phase sample of 6,099 households with around 4,940 households, consisting of school-going aged children. For each module, three aspects were examined - type of school (primary/secondary), spatial (urban slum/rural) and gender (male/female) differences across extreme poor, moderate poor, vulnerable poor and non-poor households. However, salient differences were highlighted.

Even in pre-pandemic times, a greater proportion of secondary school-going children were out of school (21%) than primary (14%). More children were out of school in urban slums than rural at both primary and secondary levels. For those enrolled in schools, closures during the pandemic threw all that was routine into chaos. While some children ceased to study entirely, others resorted to six key ways of keeping up with their education. These included unsupervised self-study, studying with the support of family members, distance learning through online or television classes, private/coaching, and shifting to Madrasahs. Even then, in many cases, irregularity in current studies persisted.

The study created an important framework to capture Covid-19 induced learning loss risk amongst school children, a form of long term vulnerability. This risk is the combination of not studying and more unreliable modes of studying - self-studying without supervision, and irregular studying. At a minimum, 19% of primary and 25% of secondary students face learning loss risk. This risk of learning loss is more pronounced for urban secondary school-going children - 26% for females and 30% for males - and poorer groups, with secondary school-going males from extremely poor families being at the highest risk of 33% - possibly as a result of the Covid-19 induced economic shock. Without targeted remedial measures, this will lead to reduced learning capacity or risk of dropouts in future.

The survey reveals very low access to distance learning through both public and private channels with only around 10% of students who had access to or used distance learning opportunities to compensate for school closure. Government TV channel classes were viewed by only around 2%. 51% in primary and 61% in secondary went to coaching or private tuitions which has been the dominant coping mechanism. However, it was lower in urban compared to rural primarily due to higher costs. Studying with parents or siblings, especially for primary was also a crucial coping mechanism. Mothers in particular played an important support role for primary students (28%). The shift to Madrasah was four times higher and Madrasah enrollment was double for primary school-going children than secondary.

While more than 95% of guardians are eager to send their children back once schools reopen, the economic costs of education post-pandemic are significant. Between June 2020 to March 2021, the out-of-pocket expenditure for education increased 12 times. The crisis has increased the opportunity cost of investing in education. 8% of school-going boys and 3% of school-going girls are in some form of income-earning activity.

The survey further revealed the psychological costs of the pandemic - children aged between 10 and 20 in urban slums are twice as stressed (15.7%) as those in rural areas (8.4%). The survey also examined parental attitudes and concerns. More guardians displayed concerns about the learning (48%) and motivation loss (59%) and the expense burden education entails (46%), and less worry about contracting the coronavirus (14%).

"A significant portion of school going children are at risk of learning loss. Thus, school reopening must be coupled with a set of remedial measures to cover the learning loss and help children to cope up." shared Dr Imran Matin.

In his final remarks, Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman stressed the need for discussion on the three main consequences of school closures – learning loss, education cost burdens, and multidimensional social alienation. "Amidst the uncertainty we are facing, taking into consideration the second wave of COVID, PPRC-BIGD is recommending an early reopening to prevent learning and motivation loss and allay parental fears around education," said Dr Rahman.

"A big policy message is to ensure that outside class hours, additional programmes are required as a learning loss recovery strategy to mitigate the loss as part of a post-COVID human capital agenda. Otherwise, a large part of our population will not only be far removed from education but also become deskilled."

As a final policy message, Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman recommended that existing primary and secondary stipend programmes be used to redress the out-of-pocket education cost burdens. Using the established database, the government can quickly provide a cash boost by allocating Tk 2960 crore in the 2021-22 budget.

Prominent researchers, academicians, and journalists also attended the event and shared their comments.