

# Learning loss from Covid-19

## Can a generational threat be averted?



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The United Nations has called it the “longest disruption to education in history” worldwide. In Bangladesh, schools remained closed non-stop for 543 days from March 17, 2020 to September 11, 2021. World Bank estimates that learning loss from Covid-19 could cost USD 17 trillion in life-time earning loss globally for the affected students. This amounts to 14 percent of the world’s GDP today. Educationists warn that the pandemic’s educational effects are a generational danger, which calls for immediate and longer-term measures at least to mitigate the threats, since averting them totally may not be possible (UN, 2020; World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, 2021).

To understand the nature and depth of the crisis and to do something about it, it is necessary to define and gauge learning loss, look at what and how adequate has been the response to it,



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and consider what more can be done in the short and longer term. Volumes can be written about these complex topics. An overview of where we stand and what may be done, based on recent discourse internationally and in the context of Bangladesh will be attempted in this article.

### Learning loss

The educational crisis induced by the Covid-19 pandemic refers to the loss of learning students have suffered directly because of the prolonged closure of schools and indirectly from the health, emotional, and economic impact of the pandemic on the students, their families and their teachers. The assumption is that, when schools operate normally, students make progress in learning and with the closure of schools, that progress has been halted and students have fallen behind. It is also assumed that mitigating alternatives such as distance learning and direct contact with teachers have not significantly compensated the loss for most students, especially in the resource-poor systems of education in developing countries. It is recognised that the loss can have longer term adverse

▲ **Learning recovery of students in Bangladesh as well as the overall reform in the education sector must be a top priority for the authorities concerned.**

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effects on students unless effective recovery measures can be taken. Again, the poorer countries find themselves at a disadvantage.

Measuring the extent of loss depends on the existence of a system of learning assessment that may provide data for the status of students’ skills and competencies at least in some defined core areas such as language and math and the amount of progress students were expected to make during the period schools remained closed. The assessment system and the data are often not available in the poorer education systems.

The World Bank came up with the concept of “learning poverty,” defined as the percentage of 10-year-old children who cannot read and understand a

simple story in their first language. The premise is that this ability is a proxy measure of how the education system is performing and whether the system helps the child to become a self-reliant learner. In the low- and middle-income countries, the pre-pandemic learning poverty rate was 53 percent in 2019, according to the World Bank, calculated from available national data. For Bangladesh the rate was estimated to be 56 percent, that is, this proportion of 10-year-olds could not read with understanding a story in Bangla. This is roughly consistent with the results of the National Student Assessment carried out under the auspices of the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (but, quite different from the high pass rates reported for Primary Education Completion Examination). World Bank, UNICEF and UNESCO estimates that the learning poverty rate may have reached 70 percent in the low- and middle-income countries, “given the long school closures and the ineffectiveness of remote learning to ensure full learning continuity during school closures.”

World Bank economists have come up with a calculation of the economic effects of the learning loss in the form of foregone earning of the pandemic-affected students. “This generation of students now risks losing USD 17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value. This projection far exceeds the USD 10 trillion estimates released earlier in 2020,” when it was hoped that the pandemic would end or abate sooner, according to the World Bank.

Educationists would argue that the calculation of educational loss and the consequent economic loss are based

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