

TO END GLOBAL EDUCATION CRISIS, GOVERNMENTS HAVE TO BECOME AWARE AND SENSITIVE TO WHAT STOPS ABOUT 50% OF THE GLOBAL STUDENTS POPULATION FROM GOING TO SCHOOL: A SNAPSHOT OF A REPLICABLE MODEL IN INDIA

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Abstract

India has the largest education system in the world with 1.5 million schools, 5 million teachers and 265 million students going to school. Then why is it that India also has one of the highest numbers of students out of school in the world, about 150 million? It is a fair assumption to make, that in a country where there are a large number of schools, a large number of young children, and a great amount of effort that has been deployed by the governments to enrol these children in schools, then a large number of them should graduate from schools and become the workforce for the world. But that is not the case for several reasons. Some of the reasons are obvious but many of the reasons are invisible and have not been given enough importance so far. In this paper, the author deals with the invisible reasons that make India human potential deficit.

Keywords: education for all, dropouts, equal opportunity, education for the poor, trauma-sensitive schools.

1 INTRODUCTION

Even before the pandemic of 2019-2021 hit, the world was already experiencing a learning crisis. The Global Education Monitoring report of 2017 stated that “Education is in crisis” as there were 258 million primary and secondary school-age children and youth worldwide that were out of school. Moreover, many children who were in school were learning very little, for instance, 53 per cent of all ten-year-old children in low and middle-income countries were experiencing learning poverty, which means that they were unable to read and understand a simple age-appropriate text. This scenario has worsened post-pandemic. As per the ASER report, 14.2 per cent of children in class III could do subtraction in 2014; the figure rose to 20 per cent in 2016; came down slightly in 2016 to 19.3 per cent; and, in 2021 it stood at only 9 per cent. As per the same report of 2022, 65.4% of teachers highlighted the problem of children being “unable to catch up” as one of their biggest challenges.

1.1 The problem with the pandemic

The pandemic has accelerated this learning crisis even further and children in almost every country have fallen behind in their learning. If urgent action is not taken, millions of students will have fallen so far behind in their learning, that they will be left behind and will get out of the education system altogether.

Learning losses have been high and inequitable as the recent learning assessments by UNICEF show that children in many countries have missed out on the learning of nearly two years that they would ordinarily have acquired in school, This problem is intensified in the case of marginalised children world over since they were behind anyway and lack of access to digital learning during pandemic pushed them behind even further. Students in São Paulo (Brazil) learned only 28 per cent of what they would have in face-to-face classes and the risk of dropout increased more than threefold. In rural Karnataka (India), the share of grade three students in government schools able to perform simple subtraction fell from 24 per cent in 2018 to only 16 per cent in 2020. According to the UNICEF and World Bank data, global learning crisis has grown even more because this generation of students now risks losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value terms as a result of school closures. In low and middle-income countries, the share of children living in Learning Poverty, already over 50 per cent before the pandemic, will rise sharply to 70 per cent, given the long school closures and the varying quality and effectiveness of remote learning.

When we zero down to discussing any issue relevant in India, it is impossible to ignore the huge numbers that exist. India has the largest education system in the world with 1.5 million schools, 5 million teachers and 265 million students going to school. India also has 150 million children out of school which is one of the highest numbers of students out of school in the world. The country has the world's largest youth population, with 356 million 10-24 year-olds. While many of the advanced countries are having to deal with an ageing population, India is sitting on a gold mine of human potential with the growing numbers of young human resources. Yet it also has about 53 million unemployed people as of December 2021. It is a fair assumption to make, that in a country where there are a large number of schools, a large number of young children, and a great amount of effort that has been deployed by the governments to enroll these children in schools, then a large number of children should graduate from schools and become the workforce for the world. But that is not the case for several reasons. This narrative of exclusion from the country's educational services is multidimensional (Govinda R, et al., 2010).

It is the outcome of a combination of several factors, and this paper highlights some of the critical issues faced by poor students in India. Some of the reasons are obvious but many of the reasons are invisible and have not been given enough importance so far. In this paper, the author will deal with the invisible reasons that make India, a human potential deficit.

1.2 The problem with the numbers

The problem in India has been its large numbers which can become the enemy of quality and impact. But the real problem has been the denial to look at the root of the issues that plague the education system of the country. India has come out with a path-breaking National Education Policy after 36 years of hiatus. This policy looks at the real purpose of education and how to create citizens that are rooted in their country's heritage and also ready for the global workplace. The policy has addressed the inclusion of poor children in the education system and has called for reducing dropouts. But like most Indian policies it has not looked at how best to implement it at the grassroot level. The only way to make this policy a practice is to understand and get into the shoes of the constituency that the education system addresses. If more than 60% of students in the country go to government schools because it is free, then the policy must address a working plan to make sure that these children complete their schooling, and either go on for higher studies or are employable at some level.

In this paper, the author would like to refer to 23 years of experience with the education of poor children in India and address some of the issues that pose challenges for them.

1.3 The problem with the policies

There are 1,083,678 government schools in India, 84,614 aided schools and 325,760 private schools. As per the Education Ministry, 65.2% of all school students in 20 states go to government schools. These include schools run by the state and the local government as well as the central government. 27 million children attend aided schools and 83 million go to private schools. Nearly 400,000 schools have less than 50 students and a majority of schools have a maximum of two teachers per school. Although the government has mandated a 1:30 teacher-student ratio in their schools, in reality, there is about a 1:100 teacher-student ratio in most schools. What makes it even more complicated is the multiple age and learning levels in one class. Around 115 million children in India study in such unviable schools.

It is, therefore, no surprise that the dropout of children from school is one of the highest in the world because nearly 75% of children drop out of the system and never complete schooling. However, there is no such thing as a national picture when it comes to school dropouts. If we create a national picture by mathematical aggregation, that picture is meaningless since regional variations are far too big. The numbers we get may be the result of schemes like Right to Education, Mid-day Meal, etc., but the hard fact is that these numbers are only on paper and not of true learners in schools.

While there have been many speculations as to why such a high number of children get disillusioned with the idea and practice of going to school, the author believes that it is not necessarily the hardware problems (distance from home, lack of toilets, lack of computers etc. in schools) but the software issues (sense of well-being, motivation, self-esteem and confidence) that plays a significant role in the children continuing education.

1.4 The problem with the “survival”

The author, therefore, suggests that government schools and any other school dealing with deprived children from urban slum communities should aspire to be recognised as trauma-sensitive schools to give their students a wholesome joyful learning experience in an environment that not only helps them survive but thrive in the education system. Educators need to acknowledge that poor children coming from deprived backgrounds are actually “pushed out” of schools rather than just “drop out” of schools because of a lack of interest. Educators, teachers, and policymakers must analyse the reason why poor students are being “pushed out” of schools.

The scope of this paper addresses the challenges that poor children face in completing their schooling, going for higher education and finally acquiring a highly valued job. The actors of this study are defined as “first-generation learners” (Awashti, G. et al, 2015). The challenges that this milieu of children face can be categorized into 4 segments: (i) socio-economic and cultural (ii) educational environment at home (iii) academic challenges inside the classroom and (iv) psychological and non-academic challenges outside the school.

The above four challenges are integrated with four segments in the student's development that pose as de-motivating factors: (i) the physical; the living conditions and neighbourhood of the students, (ii) the biological; the health and energy condition of the students, (iii) the intellectual; understanding of world view and critical thinking abilities and (iv) psychological; levels of self-esteem and wish to break the cycle of poverty.

This highly complex problem that children from marginalised homes face, leads us to question the much-quoted term “drop-out” and realistically replace it with the term “failing to survive” or “pushed out” from the education system. Once the denial ceases and some acknowledgement is made that schools have stopped giving children a joyful, happy experience, then it will lead the school administrators and teachers to devise methods to retain their students by helping them to *survive* the eleven years in school.

1.5 The problem with the understanding

None of the education policies of the past have addressed the question: Why is it that the children from poor backgrounds either in the villages or in the urban slums find it difficult to *survive* in a school and complete education? Educators, policymakers and implementers still lack an understanding of poverty with all its complexity and diversity. They are not sensitive to the intensity of multiple deprivations that poor children face, such as ill-health, hunger, malnutrition, alcoholism and violence and insecurity both at home and school. These children from poor communities find it difficult to *survive* deprivation and discrimination at all steps of their lives. It is this trait that the author identifies as the *trauma of deprivation*. So it would not be an exaggeration to state that underprivileged children going to the government and private schools for the poor carry with them varying degrees of trauma that needs to be addressed.

This crisis in education has happened because the policymakers, education administrators and school teachers have overlooked the need to understand the profile of the students that come to government schools. In a country with a total population of 1.3 billion people, it is easy to fall into the trap of looking at each student as a faceless number and very little attention is given to the student's individual needs. The author has worked with poor communities for over two decades and has tried to understand what stops a child from a poor community from performing well in school and being motivated to succeed.

2 THE ANATOMY OF THE POOR

While having all the tools and skills to be a trauma-sensitive school is very necessary it would help immensely if the schools could at least begin by trying to understand their students and the challenges they face. The author would like to like term this study the Anatomy of the Poor. This can be done by addressing the position and geography of poverty. Since this paper aims to understand the challenges of children coming from urban poor homes, a detailed approach to urban poverty is being taken. In urban areas one encounters a) *absolute poverty*, which is much below the poverty line where people lack necessities for survival, and b) *relative poverty* when people's way of life and income is much worse than the general standard of living. It classifies people as poor not by comparing them with a fixed poverty line, but by comparing them with others in the population under consideration. Then we

have the third category of poor called c) *secondary poverty* which is the lower end of the middle class. These categories of poor choose specific neighbourhoods for habitation because of affordability, tradition and familiar associations from the past. It is these neighbourhoods that also play a significant role in the development of the children from these communities.

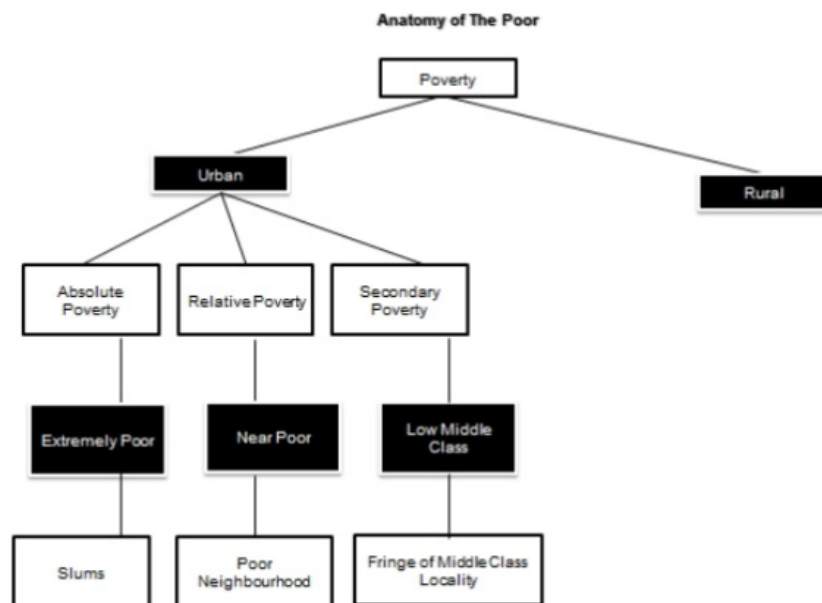


Figure 1 – Anatomy of the poor. Source – The Researcher.

2.1 Categories of poverty

Victims of absolute poverty or the extreme poor live in the slums. They may have been homeless when they arrived in the cities but have slowly picked up daily wage manual labour and moved gradually into the slums. Even in the slums, there is demarcation of houses depending on the nature of the jobs and the income of the households. The *near-poor* category lives in poor neighbourhoods which are denoted by limited civic amenities. In these neighbourhoods, toilet facilities are available on a shared basis. The *low middle class* category lives a little away from the slums but uses the same shops and public facilities like those used by the near-poor category. There is some mobility between the near-poor and the low middleclass category in the sense, that a few near-poor graduate to low middleclass neighbourhoods when steady employment is found and some low middleclass families move to poor neighbourhoods when they experience failure in their small businesses or loss of jobs. Comparatively, there is very little movement in the slums. Not many families move out of the slums once they find a place there. Even when in some households, the economic situation improves the families choose to stay in the slums because they have gotten used to staying there, developed a comfort level and do not see the need to move.

While low economic power is the single line common thread between these economic categories, each of these categories defined has an identity of its own and is distinctly different from each other.

The near-poor living in poor neighbourhoods are not illiterate but have minimal education with only one member of the family having completed school. The average size of the family is 5. They are owners of small struggling businesses or in poorly paid regular jobs. They aspire to send their children to low-end English medium private schools but often default in paying regular fees. This happened to most households during the pandemic when the earning member lost his/her job during the pandemic. They have no medical insurance and use their BPL (below poverty line) card for medical facilities in government hospitals. They are not eligible for any bank loans and are forced to take informal loans with high interest in cases of illness in the family. They try to save through chit funds and have no other savings. Awareness of the negativity of alcoholism is high and although a few members do take alcohol they cannot be termed alcoholics. There is sporadic domestic violence in the households and the children do witness it as the houses are small. There is a limited association of shame in their surroundings and life and only a few young members have the desire to escape.

2.2 Biometrics & psychometrics of the slums

The National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), India, defines a slum as a “Compact settlement with a collection of poorly built tenements, mostly of temporary nature, crowded together usually with inadequate sanitary and drinking water facilities in unhygienic conditions” (NSSO 2003). Also, there are two kinds of slums: notified and non-notified. Areas that feature as slums in maps made by the respective municipalities, corporations, local bodies or development authorities are treated as notified slums. A slum is considered as non-notified slum if at least 20 households live in that area but do not feature in the municipal or development documents.

3 PROFILE OF SLUMS

The people living in slums are mostly onto daily wage non-skilled jobs and therefore are in and out of jobs. This category has a history of generations of illiteracy. They own a BPL card but most do not own an Aadhar card and no PAN card.

To understand the dynamics of the slum dwellers we need to look at the features that impact their quality of life which are the aspects of physical, biological, intellectual and psychological parameters.

3.1 Physical deprivation

The **PHYSICAL** aspect is the quality of actual space and surroundings where they live. There is a lack of secure housing, lack of running water, lack of attached toilets, and proper sanitation. There is a lack of primary healthcare facilities and a lack of guaranteed meals. There is no access to quality education, no steady job and therefore no access to bank accounts and savings. There is no eligibility for structured loans as there are no collateral. There are only ‘vulture loans’ available from the local moneylender at high interest rate. There are instances where little children have been taken as collateral for loans during a family crisis and put to work to recover the loan.

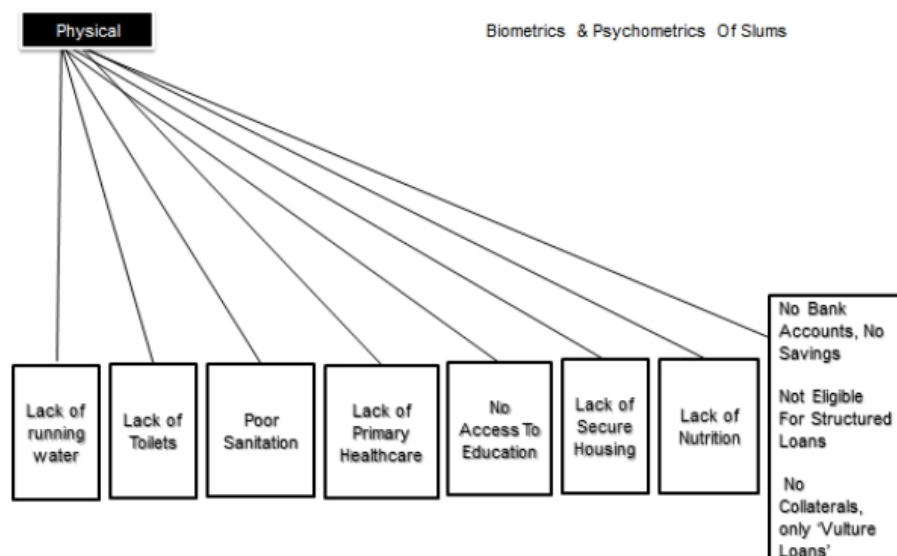


Figure 2. Source – The Researcher.

3.2 Biological deprivation

The **BIOLOGICAL** aspect is the health and nutrition level of the community in question. Health is a major challenge in slums due to these neighbourhood effects. There is low acceptance for prevention amid of other pressing challenges like food and shelter. Most people only realise the health need when it reaches a critical stage. They may seek healthcare when they are very ill, but most of them cannot afford existing medical services. In addition, the fluidity of the physical environment and a lack of a postal address pose unique challenges in following up on individuals with morbidities. So there is lack of immunity and people in the slums are prone to frequent illnesses. The most common childhood diseases reported at several Primary Health Centres are respiratory diseases, diarrhoea, gastritis, intestinal worms, anaemia, scabies, and ringworm. An adverse living environment characterised by

overcrowding, lack of ventilation in homes, and inadequate sanitation, water supply and water storage facilities no doubt contributes to the childhood diseases reported. There is also lethargy and lack of energy and disabilities due to delayed medical interventions. Children are exposed to abuse and witness frequent violence both inside and outside the home. There is good evidence to show that certain kinds of malnutrition and nutrition-related diseases can result in mental retardation and severe mental illness. Depression often leading to suicide is a common occurrence

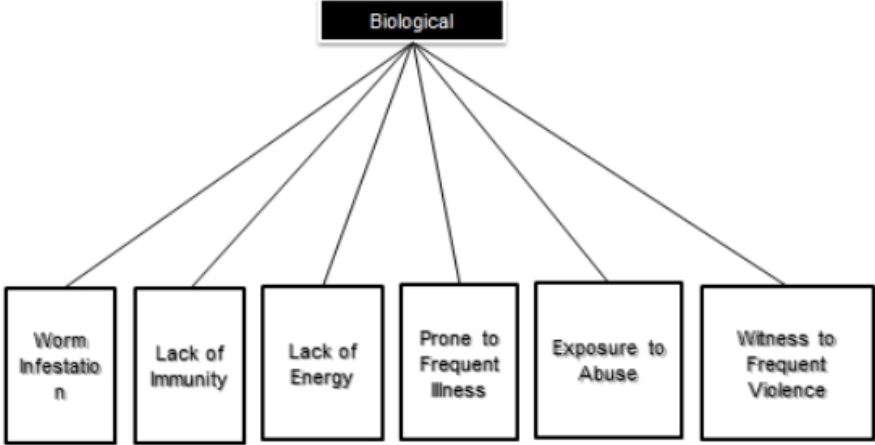


Figure 3. Source – The Researcher.

3.3 Intellectual deprivation

The **INTELLECTUAL** aspect deals with lack of exposure and lack of world view. People in the slums live in such confined and insulated spaces where the struggle is to survive daily by earning enough to buy food for the day, and staying safe by avoiding the rowdies and the police. This basic day to day struggle does not allow any space to do critical thinking and long term planning. Their only entertainment is B and C rated local movies and movie stars are their only role models. They get imbibed with dreams of quick money and overnight millionaires and find working with the underworld the only way to do so. Once they get entrapped in with rowdies they find it difficult to get out and begin to lead a risky, precarious life. Those that stay away from this underworld, spend their lifetime trying to avoid them. They are not in a position to make a road map of their lives and have a discussion on what life goals they have set for themselves. Even if there is one or two in a family that aspires to do better in life, they struggle because they have no one to talk to and the actions of the rest of the family impact their decisions.

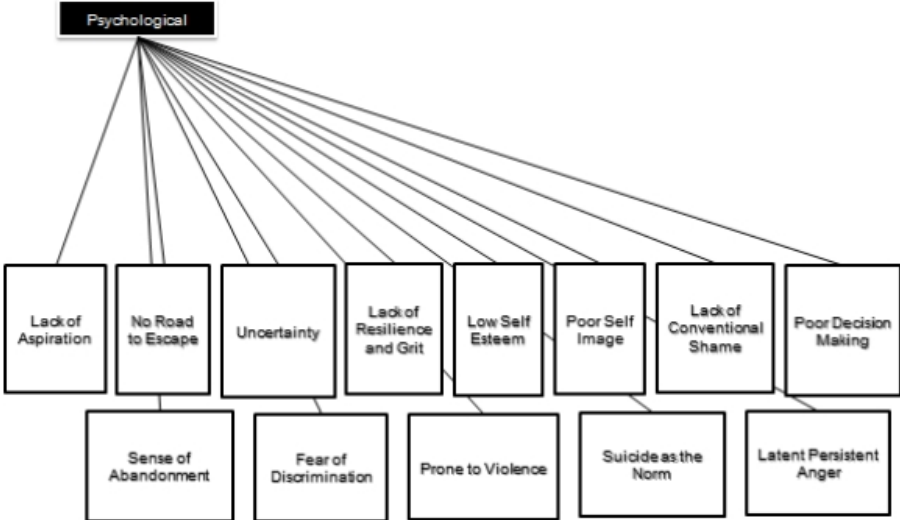


Figure 4. Source – The Researcher.

3.4 Psychological deprivation

The **PSYCHOLOGICAL** aspect is linked to the general mental status of the youth living in slums. It is typified by a lack of aspiration shaded with a sense of great uncertainty about the future. Their responses to situations are dominated by poor self-image and self-esteem and fear of discrimination which prohibits them from pursuing goals with grit and resilience. They have an overwhelming sense of abandonment and persistent despair that there is no escape from their life situation. Their attempt to forget leads to addiction of various kinds and since there is no shame associated with alcoholism and drugs they succumb to this addiction very easily. There is latent simmering anger which is expressed through alcoholic rage and leads to domestic violence and gang fights. Psychologist Carol Dweck refers to this attitude in her book, "Mindset: The New Psychology of Success" and refers to a concept of a growth mindset which is about self-perception or "self-theory" that people hold about themselves. This mindset has a profound effect on learning achievement, skill acquisition, personal relationships, professional success, and other dimensions of life.

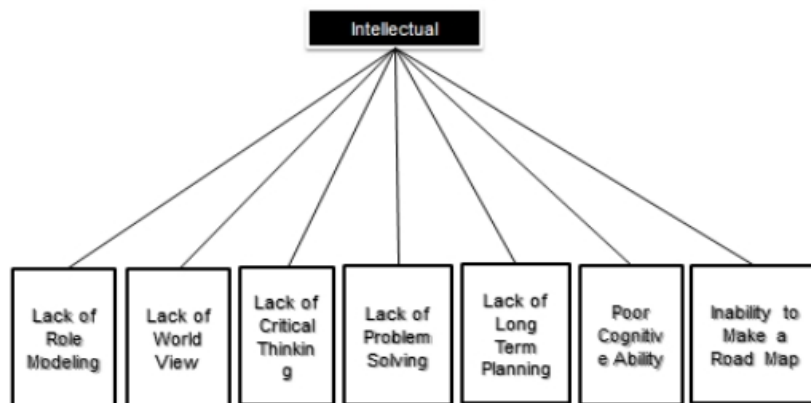


Figure 5. Source – The Researcher.

The author would link the Growth Mindset theory to a term called **Poverty of the Mind**. "In a fixed mindset, people believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent are simply fixed traits. They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing them. They also believe that "talent alone creates success- without effort". Dweck's research suggests that youth who have adopted a fixed mindset have the belief that they are either "smart" or "dumb" and there is no way to change this. Dweck's findings also suggest that when students with fixed mindsets fail at something, as they inevitably will, they tell themselves they can't or won't be able to do it ("I just can't learn Maths") or they make excuses to rationalize the failure ("No one in my family has learnt Maths").

3.5 Poverty of the mind approach



Figure 6. Source – The Researcher.

4 THE PROFILE OF STUDENTS GOING TO GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

- Most children that go to government schools or private schools for the marginalised have experienced varying degrees of trauma. Some of the common traditional causes of trauma in schools are bullying, community violence, physical abuse, sexual abuse, witness to domestic violence and suicides. The author would like to add to this list, the trauma caused by hopelessness, denial, insecurity and anxiety arising out of financial distress, persistent fear of authority and loss of dignity out of public humiliation.
- First-generation learners are under tremendous pressure to manage the conflicts arising out of opposing ideas and values between the school and the home. Their parents do not understand the demands of the school and create obstacles to their learning which makes them face the wrath of the teachers. Parents do not quite understand the necessity to be punctual at school and give priority to attendance and the children face the brunt of discipline in schools if otherwise.
- The learning experience of marginalized children in schools is very depressing. The way these children are treated in school is the extension of the larger context of social marginalization of the backward communities. The teachers look down on these students and do not provide a motivating environment to study. "Some teachers quite openly stated that formal education is not useful for children of the lower castes" (Anitha, B. K, 2000). Many teachers do not bother to know the names of their students and address them instead in a derogatory manner. Sensitive and shy students find dismissive gestures and references to their background as humiliating and finally stop going to school.
- These children are severely handicapped by the lack of real role models in their lives and therefore they do not have any benchmarks for growth. The number of suicidal deaths these children witness in their families and communities makes them vulnerable to desperate measures themselves. The insecurity and instability in the homes because of domestic violence, alcoholism, and abandonment, leave an indelible impact on the child that leads to disenchantment in moving further in life.

The author recommends that the teachers of government and low-end private schools should have a sustained training program to sensitise them to their students and that can only happen if they declare themselves as therapists rather than just teachers. Government schools should label themselves as trauma-sensitive schools and set up systems, curriculum, pedagogy and assessments that is conducive to dealing with children that are going through trauma but have the potential to overcome it with sensitive help (S. Bose, 2021).

It is recommended that every teacher must be trained on how best to work with reactivity and help guide traumatised students to a receptive state of mind in which learning can occur. Unfortunately, more and more children are experiencing trauma, and even the state of our world is so filled with the news of threats that learning these important insights and strategies has never been more important. In the current scenario of the raging pandemic around the world, many children are feeling threatened and a mental health crisis is slowly simmering. This feeling of despair is even more pronounced in poor homes where children have seen their parents lose their jobs and getting three meals a day has been a struggle.

When teachers are informed about the specific needs of their students, the entire classroom benefits. When all teachers are sensitised they can create a generative social environment in which all can learn. Teachers need to have an in-depth understanding of the trauma these children go through and then plan on how to optimize the learning in the classroom and the relational skills that a classroom environment can nurture.

Sensitive handling of children will lead to a healthier and happier school climate. It will also improve academic achievement and test scores. The teachers will have a greater sense of satisfaction and feel safer in school. It will definitely reduce student bullying and stress amongst the staff and students. All this will eventually lead to the reduction of absences, detentions and suspensions of students. And most importantly it will reduce dropouts.

The author presents the view that all teachers need to become special educators first, to bring compassion and empathy to the school environment. It is therefore, recommended that teachers of government schools need to look at themselves as therapists of traumatised children. It is only then that students will feel safe, nurtured and cared for in schools and want to come to school every day. The dropout rate in these schools will reduce because the school will collaboratively ensure that their

students *survive* the school system. And once students begin to survive and thrive in the school environment, their academic performance too will start to improve.

5 PARIKRMA CENTRES FOR LEARNING – AN INSIDE VIEW

Parikrma Humanity Foundation is an NGO that runs free schools for slum children in Bangalore, India. They have 5 Parikrma Centres for Learning close to the slums and are educating about 1800 children from economically challenged and marginalised backgrounds. These are K-10 schools with 2 years of Junior College as well. They have a track record which is not common in India with about 97% attendance, less than 1% dropout and even teacher attendance is more than 95%. The Parent Teachers meeting clock is about 90% attendance where the parents give up their daily wage to attend the meetings. The signature of Parikrma's success is how well their students do in the final Board and other competitive exams. Many of their alumni are software engineers, designers, nurses, lawyers, teachers, hoteliers and entrepreneurs.

When Covid19 ravaged the country and all the schools were closed for months, Parikrma managed to run online classes by distributing devices to all the children and teaching technology to all their teachers. When asked what is the magic potion for their accomplishments, their answer is simple... they have created schools where the children enjoy coming. This was achieved through what they call the Parikrma Way™ of doing things. The topmost ingredient in the list is creating empathy and compassion as a part of the school culture and climate. Their school motto is Love, Explore and Excel and this is practised every day. Each class takes up a Kindness project that becomes a badge of honour for the class. They even have a Dog Project where the children have rescued dogs from the streets and found homes for them in their school. Each school has two trained child psychologists to guide both the children and teachers. Parikrma's education philosophy encourages both teachers and students to explore, experience, express, expose and empathise. Special emphasis is given to reading and the whole school reads for forty minutes every morning in their classrooms and their libraries. There are Reading Clubs where students from a different class read world literature and critique it with similar age group students from other schools across the globe. This has built in an innate sense of joy for learning which is self-motivated. Keeping in mind where the students come from and the trauma and deprivation they experience special measures are taken by the teachers to ensure that the children feel safe and cared for. Each school has two trained child psychologists to guide both the children and teachers. All teachers have to go through a Personal Growth Lab to sensitise them to deal with children who are marginalised by first dealing with their own feelings, their biases and hurdles to their own growth and development. It is very clear to all teachers in Parikrma that they need to be more than teachers to their students and transform them to become coaches, mentors and sometimes even therapists. As a part of their School Orientation Program and Immersion into the Parikrma Way™ of doing things, they are expected to spend time in the slums with their student's families to truly empathise with their students and find directions for them.

All the Parikrma Way™ best practices have been documented as a practice manual and can be very easily replicated anywhere in the world.

6 CONCLUSION

If India is able to sort out the problem of attrition from schools that cater to the poor and marginalised children through deeper understanding of the challenges that these children face to come to school every day, then nearly half of world's young population will have a better future to look forward to. This would lead to reduction of global illiteracy and better livelihoods and therefore better economy.

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