

'School enrolment numbers high in last decade ... but there is a learning crisis here. Students in schools but not learning skills'

Earlier this year India announced that it would be ending its almost decade-long boycott of the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA), organised by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to rank countries based on learning levels of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science. The last time Indian students participated in this global assessment in 2009, they stood 72nd out of 74 participating countries. The World Bank's senior director for education and Peru's former education minister Jaime Saavedra spoke to Anam Ajmal about India's re-entry into PISA, why the Indian education system needs to shift focus from quantity to quality and what we can learn from other countries:

■ **When will India participate again in PISA, which ranks countries based on learning levels of 15-year-old students?**

India last participated in PISA in 2009 but the minister for human resources and development has announced that India will participate again in 2021. This is a very good move because international testing is critical to understand where a country stands. This is especially important for India because it aspires to be a competitive economy and be a part of the big league.

■ **How does India fare when compared to China, which also took PISA for the**

first time in 2009?

China's performance was considerably better but it is unfair to compare the two countries. It is true that India will have to make a much faster progress than what we have seen in the past and it needs to take intermediate steps. India sees a much higher incidence of teacher absenteeism and that has to stop. Classroom practices also have to improve and that's where the two countries diverge. But India has already identified the challenges. It can now only move ahead.

■ **What has changed since India's last participation in PISA in 2009?**

I think a strong culture has emerged where India is not scared to know where it stands, but instead wants to know its standing so that it can narrow disparities. More important than just PISA is the fact that India will now implement an annual National Assessment Survey (NAS), starting 2017.

There have been some very positive changes in education under this government because the NAS samples will now not be collected at the state level but at the district level. With this, the local capacities are going to improve because the approach is not generic any more.

Authorities will now be able to use the NAS results at micro levels to customise and improve education.

■ **What are some of the success models that can be incorporated to bring education in India on par with the international levels?**

When Peru first participated in PISA in 2012, it ranked last among 65 countries. This was a wakeup call for everyone because we knew where we stood. So, a strong four-pillar reformation system was implemented, focussing on teachers, pedagogical training programmes, management and infrastructure. In 2015, Peru's improvement was the fourth fastest in the world, which was very significant.

■ **What are some inherent flaws in the Indian education system?**

India has made huge progress in bringing children to school. So, school enrolment numbers have been very high during the last decade, particularly at the elementary level. In global terms, India is very important because of its size. So, for the world to do well, we need India to do well. But today we see that there is a learning crisis here. Increasingly, students are going to schools but they are not learning foundational skills that can help them in an increasingly competitive world. This happens because of several factors like lack of infrastructure, teachers, proper training programmes, etc.

■ **How can the government overcome these flaws?**

Not just in India but even globally, investment in education has been used to set up the basic infrastructure and to ensure the presence of teachers. But that is only the first step. India faces several challenges but the main issue is the quality of teachers. We need to promote the right interaction between teachers and students, improve the academic programmes, school management, decrease student dropout rates. But teacher training is the most important because we have to ensure that teachers have the right working environment where they have the scope for growth, the right professional development and proper incentive.

