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LEARNING AND LIVING DURING A PANDEMIC

INDIA RESEARCH SUMMARY REPORT AND POLICY BRIEFS

Impact of COVID-19 school closures on learning among children from marginalized communities in two southern states of India

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Children Believe, 2021

Front cover image: A young learner wearing a mask, looks off into the distance in India. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the education of many children in India, particularly those from marginalized communities. PHOTO BY SAHIL ALI

SUMMARY REPORT

To continue their education while schools are closed, children attend a Creative Learning Centre (CLC) operated by one of Children Believe's partners in southern India. Classes are held outside and masks are worn to ensure a safe learning environment. PHOTO BY SAHIL ALI

SUMMARY REPORT

INDIA RESEARCH STUDY

LEARNING AND LIVING DURING A PANDEMIC: Impact of COVID-19 school closures on learning among children from marginalized communities in two southern states of India

The dramatic onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led to the worst education crisis in India in a century. As of June 2021, the overall number of COVID-19 cases in India has surpassed 30 million, with 402,000 fatalities. The two states where Children Believe works, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, have crossed the four-million mark in cases (4,328,591 cumulative), with 70,619 cases currently active.

The closure of schools to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 was the logical solution for the government. Schools have been closed for one year as of June. Due to this extensive school closure and lockdowns, a large majority of students have had to remain out of school for an entire academic year, exacerbating already existing learning gaps. Children from vulnerable communities, whom, besides being socially marginalized, have further been devastated by the loss of jobs and family income due to the pandemic.

Children Believe and their non-governmental organization (NGO) partners have undertaken a study to determine the impact of COVID-19 school closures in the areas where Children Believe works.

The young people from these areas are part of marginalized populations who are in disadvantaged and/or vulnerable situations.

Children Believe is a child-centred international development organization that has been empowering children, their families and communities in India for the past 50 years.

The communities in which programs are implemented include 170 villages from five districts in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. The five districts are Tiruvallur, Tuticorin, Ramanathapuram and Virudhunagar in Tamil Nadu and Chittoor in Andhra Pradesh. People living in these villages are hampered by social and economic factors, particularly caste, and make up mainly the lower strata of the economic ladder.

Study objectives

- Understand the learning environment of children during school closures
- Assess the impact of distance, online or alternative ways of receiving an education
- Study the views and attitudes of children towards learning during school closures
- Assess the health, psychosocial and well-being challenges faced by children during lockdowns
- Understand other key issues that have arisen as a result of the pandemic
- Analyze and assess the data and identify gaps to improve program designs and make policy recommendations

Study relevance and scope

This study provides context and evidence to support the concern expressed in the United Nations' (UN) Policy Brief on the impact of COVID-19 on children, namely that:

"the harmful effects of this pandemic will not be distributed equally. They are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, and in the poorest neighbourhoods, and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations."

In addition, the study adds value to the efforts made to localize the monitoring of indicators for the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on quality education.

This is achieved by generating data at a micro level, specifically from socially marginalized and vulnerable communities from five districts located in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, identified earlier. The lessons learned from the study will also be useful for developing measurable local-level indicators under this goal.

Methodology and considerations

The methodology consisted primarily of surveys, which were further supplemented with key informant interviews (KIIs). Survey data was gathered from a sample of 500 respondents drawn randomly from Children Believe's five operational districts. It focused on children aged 10 to 18 from socially marginalized, rural communities in these areas. The survey yielded a response rate of 96 percent (481) and the distribution is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1: IMPACT SURVEY CONDUCTED BY CHILDREN BELIEVE'S PARTNERS IN FIVE DISTRICTS

Partner [1]	District	N	%
IRCDS	Tiruvallur	89	19
PAD	Ramanathapuram	95	20
PAD	Thoothukudi	101	21
SPEECH	Virudhunagar	96	20
ROPES	Chittoor	100	21
	TOTAL	**481**	**100**

In addition to the survey data, qualitative data was gathered from a smaller sample of primary sources through KIIs with 102 respondents, and data was collected from relevant secondary sources, as well.

[1] Integrated Rural Community Development Society (IRCDS), People's Action for Development (PAD), Society for People's Education and Economic Change (SPEECH), and Rural Organization for Poverty Eradication Services (ROPES).

A key informant interview (KII) being conducted with a local school teacher.

Study participants included children who are economically poor and historically socially deprived. The social dimensions of poverty that the study took into account are:

- **Social exclusion based on caste/race:** Caste and race-based discrimination and the marginalization of Dalits and Adivasis continue to be practiced in India. They play a significant role in perpetuating poverty. In the study, 38 percent of respondents belong to Scheduled Castes (SC/Dalits), 7 percent are from Scheduled Tribes (ST/Adivasis), 29 percent are from the Most Backward Castes (MBC) and 26 percent are from Backward Castes (BC). Eighty-six percent of the respondents follow Hinduism, 13 percent Christianity and one percent are Muslim.

- **Education and illiteracy:** The education levels of the children and parents involved in the study were considered. Illiterate families, in which parents and children have low education levels, tend to suffer greater poverty than do individuals/families with higher levels of education and skills. Thirty-two percent of the respondent children's mothers achieved primary-level education, 21 percent had upper-primary (middle school) education and 25 percent are illiterate. This indicates that 77 percent of the mothers have low education levels or are illiterate. A similar scenario was seen among the children's fathers. Seventy-six percent have low education levels or are illiterate: 32 percent completed primary-level education, 24 percent upper-primary and 20 precent are illiterate. Having someone reading books in the household is particularly important for children from the poorest quintile (Senechal and LeFevre, 2002), suggesting that these children are especially in need of learning support at home. However, this is impeded by the lack of education among mothers/fathers/caregivers, increasing the risk of perpetuating an intergenerational learning gap. Sixty-seven percent of the children who participated in the study shared that no one in their household is able to offer learning support at home. The study results align with The World Bank estimate, which identifies that 53 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries cannot read and understand a simple text by the end of primary school age.

- **Gender inequality and exclusion:** Discrimination based on gender and gender-based violence are widespread in India. The study focused on identifying the issues girls face, particularly girls from excluded communities. Fifty-one per cent of the child respondents in the study were girls. Questions relating to the prevalence of harmful practices at the community level during the COVID-19 lockdown were asked of children studying above the grade 8 level. Harmful practices include child marriage, child labour and domestic violence.

About half of the respondents indicated that they were aware of increases in child abuse relating to child marriage, child abour and domestic violence in their community during the lockdown.

However, the extent of the increases, even as rough estimates, have not been calculated. The study also found that children from marginalized communities had poor access to technology, online resources and a conducive environment to pursue their education during COVID-19, further heightening their experiences of exclusion.

The study was conducted within a limited time frame and scope, which focused on the access to learning during the COVID-19 school closures by children from five districts in two states. It did not focus on a learning assessment, which will be important to undertake in the context of the impact of COVID-19 on the learning levels of children. In addition to time and scope, lockdown restictions affected the size of the sample group, limiting it to 500 children.

The main findings

Coping with the lockdown

- The KIIs revealed that there was generally a decrease in demand for goods and services, leading to job losses and a reduction in salaries, and making it difficult for middle- and low-income as well as poorer families to make ends meet.

- Stresses and fears emerged as a result of the pandemic. The unknown nature of it bred concerns about how the virus came about, how it spread and how effective the treatment for it is. Some families adopted safety measures, like regular handwashing and taking baths upon returning home, while others consumed native immunity boosters like ginger tea, *Kabasura kudineer* and *Nilavembu kashayam*.[2] For very poor families affected by the loss of income, they were faced with survival concerns and resorted to borrowing funds, often at exploitative interest rates, putting them at risk of getting caught in debt traps.

- Other problems related to the reduced nutritional content of food intake, inability to afford essential online learning aids (e.g. android mobile phones, tablets, laptops and even paying a monthly subscription for TV channels) and venturing into risky behaviour to continue earning money (e.g. a hairdresser evading lockdowns and police detection in order to attend to clients).

Emergency food supplies being distributed in India. With the lockdown, job losses and school closures, many families have been struggling with food insecurity. PHOTO BY SAHIL ALI

- The major problems related specifically to health included respondents or their family members testing positive for COVID-19, difficulties accessing hospitals/health facilities and treatment in rural settings, fear of hospitalization and a reluctance to approach hospitals, fear of social stigmas related to COVID-19 and difficulties arising out of other medical conditions.

- Similar to the cases of diseases like HIV/AIDS, with COVID-19 there appears to be a stigma attached to the disease resulting in the ostracization of those who have/had it or are suspected to have it. This needs to be addressed with more local, culturally-focused communication efforts to bring about behaviour change.

Reading habits of children during school closures:

- Among the children surveyed, 74 percent of them either read rarely or not at all when schools were closed. This raises the concern that there may be longer implications on proficiency levels and the ability to perform complex literacy tasks in later ages.

Access to learning:

- Access to learning during school closures has mainly been through Creative Learning Centres (CLCs) run by Children Believe's NGO partners; 59 percent of respondents reported such access (children only between ages six and 14 attend CLCs; this age group comprises 73 percent of the survey sample). Another 17 percent reported learning through online means. However, the extent of making up for learning losses through such avenues is not known as that information is not readily available, warranting a learning assessment.

- The low access to online learning may be due to the lack of needed electronic equipment. The majority of Scheduled Caste and Most Backward Caste students sampled (70 and 60 percent, respectively) did not have the equipment needed to participate in online learning (e.g. mobile phone, laptop, internet, television or even electricity). These figures corroborate the statement made earlier about the pandemic exacerbating the marginalization of impoverished, vulnerable children.

- Lack of a conducive environment for learning at home may be another reason hindering education. This was

[2] *Kabasura kudineer* and *Nilavembu kashayam* are traditional herbal concoctions developed by the Siddha system of medicine and are believed to strengthen the immune system.

reported to be an issue for 82 percent of Scheduled Caste students. Both Scheduled Tribe (46 percent) and Backward Caste (48 percent) students also reported challenges with their home environment. Apart from a lack of necessary access to equipment, distractions at home may draw children's attention away from focusing on their studies.

Online learning:

- Two main issues related to online learning during school closures were reported. First, no online classes were conducted by the concerned schools, and second, even where online learning was made available, most of the children had no access to an android mobile phone, tablet, laptop or TV needed to participate.

School closures and alternative learning:

- As for school closures and online or alternative learning, the key issues reported related to: the uncertainty of the situation and the consequent uneasiness felt, schools generally not conducting online classes initially, many students unable to follow or participate in online classes, boredom or an inability to focus on studying remotely and a lack of support from parents or other family members in following online classes. There were also issues with technology, such as technical glitches, connection issues and a lack of equipment.

Teachers experienced difficulties with online classes related to preparing lessons for this new way of learning, a lack of technical skills in handling an online class format and an inability to oversee the learning of their students.

- Additionally, there were responses related to alternative learning methods, such as evening classes in CLCs. Here, learning was facilitated through uploading and playing online TV classes on tablets, reading books borrowed from libraries and learning art and vocational skills. A commendable initiative on providing alternative learning was reported by a *panchayat* (village council) President, who had appointed teacher volunteers to do the job of teaching students in the evenings.

Learning losses:

- Some parents have generally expressed that the progress made in their children's education has been lost, to the extent that their children do not remember how to write their names properly, and some students felt that they have forgotten all they were taught leading up to the lockdown. Some teachers have also echoed these concerns. One teacher expressed a concern that the learning loss is severe and describes a scenario of a student who had forgotten how to write his name when asked to sign his acknowledgement of receiving textbooks supplied by the school. However, there are also parents that seem nonchalant and think everything will be fine once schools reopen. No clear and specific information is available about the extent of the losses, for example, whether they relate only to writing or if they extend to other subjects, such as math, science, etc.

This lack of specificity and measurements point to the need for a learning assessment to be conducted. The information gained will help education providers develop suitable 'catch-up' programs.

Literate environment and intergenerational literacy gap:

- The survey revealed that nearly 67 percent of the respondents' parents did not provide their children with support in learning during school closures. This may be due to most parents being unable to help, as they are illiterate or have only studied up to primary or upper-primary levels but have lost this education over time.

- Reportedly, some parents did not utilize the learning opportunities for children provided by NGOs, such as CLCs. Perhaps this was done unwittingly as a result of taking their children to work with them.

It could also be due to parents not recognizing the value of continuing education for their children's future, since many of the respondents' parents are semi-literate or illiterate. Suitable parental education may remedy this situation, which, if left unchecked, may perpetuate an intergenerational learning gap.

- This is corroborated by the low or complete lack of literacy noted among a large number of households in marginalized and vulnerable communities. **Adult literacy** pathways should be considered as a possible solution.

Psychosocial problems faced:

- Key broader issues that were brought up include the problem of child marriage, domestic violence, the special needs of disabled children and the role of School Management Committees (SMCs) in tackling such concerns. Additionally, teachers expressed a fear of infection and felt ill-equipped to navigate the technology for online classes and respond to the psychosocial problems faced by their students.

- Specific examples of psychosocial problems reported include children not being able to go out and play with friends or visit relatives, especially those who fell ill; not being able to go to temples, churches or mosques and participate in festivals; feeling depressed as a result of isolation and boredom; older men getting drunk and quarrelling with family members at home, leading to violence; and boys falling into drug abuse and game addiction.

Fears have also been raised as psychosocial issues, such as the fear of becoming infected by COVID-19, of being hospitalized, of dying from infection and of being ostracized by others due to the stigma attached to the disease.

- The Thoothukudi project area reported a comparatively higher level of child abuse at the community level (89 percent) and also at the domestic level (72 percent) during the lockdown period. Thoothukudi and a few other southern districts have historically shown high levels of violence due to a strong presence of patriarchy. However, the causes for such high levels need further probing.

Reopening of schools:

- Overall, there is a general eagerness for schools to reopen. Teachers are keen to return to school and students are looking forward to meeting their friends again. However, hesitation and reluctance were also expressed. Some students have become accustomed to lazing around and were feeling happy about their "long holiday", while others, who started working and earning money, are finding work more fulfilling. Parents are feeling divided, to some extent. They have become used to their children working (casual labour – working with parents in agricultural fields and, in a few cases, cotton mills and salt industries) and contributing to the meagre family income.

They are also fearful of the possibility of COVID-19 infection once their children return to school and feel unsure if there will be adequate protective measures in place, which some students have also voiced.

Vaccination:

- The first round of KIIs did not include specific questions related to vaccination against COVID-19, however, references were made to the topic by some respondents while answering other questions. For the second round of KIIs, a lead question about vaccination was added since vaccines had been tested by that point in time and were publicly accessible from March 2021. The responses have been mixed. The variance ranges from a strong willingness to get vaccinated to a total rejection of the idea. Fear of the unknown, fear of side effects, of safety issues and a lack of clarity on several other issues seem to generate unwillingness and reluctance to get vaccinated on the part of many respondents.

To keep vulnerable communities healthy, Children Believe's partner, Rural Organization for Poverty Eradication Services (ROPES), organized vaccination clinics. PHOTO BY SAHIL ALI

School Management Committees (SMCs):

- SMCs seem to have done little on matters relating to online/alternative learning or economic and psychosocial pressures mainly because many of the committees have not met during the lockdown to discuss or to take action on these issues. For those whom have met, the discussions focused more on the safe reopening of schools after one full year of being closed.

Capacity building for teachers:

- There is a need for suitable capacity building for teachers in digital technology to support them in the preparation and conducting of online classes, and also in providing the needed psychosocial supports to children negatively affected by the pandemic.

Key recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, several recommendations have been made. Of these, the following six are considered as key, warranting urgent attention for further action.

1. **Conduct a learning assessment:** There is a strong case to study the impact of learning activities, such as online/distance learning and self-study, on the foundational skills of children. **A small-scale learning assessment of foundational education (reading and math) may be conducted to identify the extent of skills lost or gained during the year-long school closure.**

2. **Focused, evidence-based learning strategies:** As per the study responses, Children Believe and NGO partners did commendable work during the lockdown in providing services to marginalized and vulnerable groups. This included providing dry rations and protective gear, and uploading online classes to external drives and using them in evening classes run by CLCs to teach children (between ages six and 14) whom lack access to necessary equipment. The next step would be to **determine what has been the impact of the classes run by CLCs.** The results from the learning assessment suggested in recommendation one may shed light on what the **learning gaps** are, and that information can be used to develop **suitable content and learning strategies.**

3. **Improve life skills education:** Results from the learning assessment can be used to **further strengthen CLC interventions and better the alignment with SDG 4 on life skills education, including global citizenship education (GCED) and education for sustainable development (ESD).**

4. **Encourage learning:** While a learning assessment will provide an understanding of the extent of the skills lost among children, regardless of the outcome, children may still benefit from encouragement to learn. **Partners in the field can develop strategies to motivate children to self-learn and cultivate strong reading habits. Efforts to educate parents about their role in supporting learning at home**, such as utilizing NGO programs, will also be beneficial.

5. **Enhance parental literacy:** Parental/caregiver literacy is a critical element in providing learning support to children, especially in such scenarios as school closures. However, it has been observed in the study that most of the children from families living in marginalized and vulnerable communities did not receive support from their parents or caregivers due to their low-literacy levels. This is likely to perpetuate an **intergenerational learning gap. To address this, NGOs and the government should consider offering adult literacy programs.**

6. **SMCs, local panchayats and private partners' support to create a literate environment at the household and community levels:** Though help is being provided to vulnerable and marginalized children by NGOs and some panchayats through the supply of reading materials and tuition, a greater impact can be made with involvement from SMCs, a greater number of local panchayats and private partners. These groups can provide vaulable assistance by **establishing libraries in each village, providing support for extra tuition and learning materials, or setting up reading centres/mobile or digital libraries in targeted areas,** as part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. These initiatives will build a stimulating environment for children to learn and improve their reading habits.

POLICY BRIEF 1

POLICY BRIEF 1

POLICY BRIEF ON THE NEED FOR A LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Impact of COVID-19 school closures on learning among children from marginalized communities in two southern states of India

"The harmful effects of this pandemic will not be distributed equally. They are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, and in the poorest neighbourhoods, and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations."

- United Nations Policy Brief on the impact of COVID-19 on children

The importance of Children Believe's study to the context of the United Nations (UN) Policy Brief on the impact of COVID-19 on children

The dramatic onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the worst education crisis in a century in India. It has resulted in learning losses, further exacerbated by poverty and social marginalization among children from vulnerable communities, as indicated by the study recently conducted by Children Believe and local partners (namely IRCDS, PAD, ROPES and SPEECH)[1] in four districts in Tamil Nadu and one in Andhra Pradesh in southern India.[2]

Other interlinked issues

While looking at the learning crisis from the closure of schools, other interlinked issues also became apparent, such as the psychosocial consequences for children who were confined at home and had limited interaction with others.

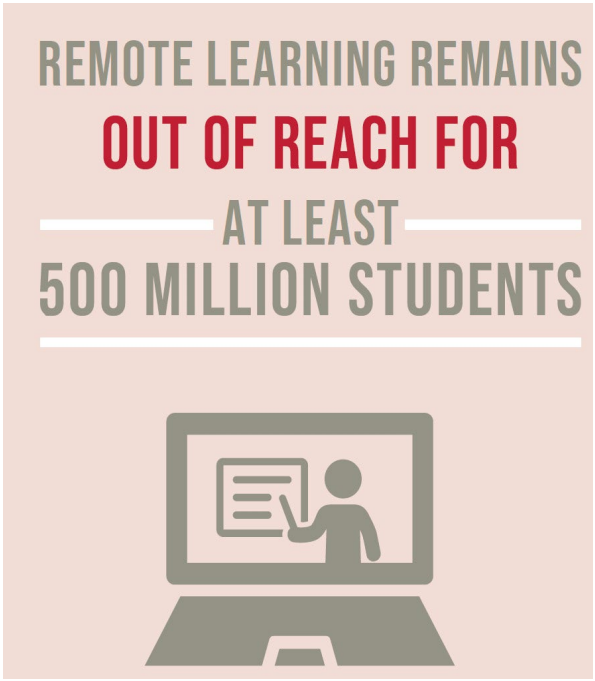
The loss of contact with friends, teachers and family members outside their home constituted serious threats to their physical and mental health, especially among children who are economically poor, vulnerable and socially marginalized.

Learning losses

Though 92 percent of the survey respondents reported continuing their learning through remote means or alternative methods during the lockdown (including through Creative Learning Centres run by Children Believe's partners), it is difficult to measure the learning loss in terms of literacy, numeracy and other life skills. This is due to the inconsistent use of hybrid or remote learning equipment, varying learning content covered in each method and intermittent connectivity.

[1] Integrated Rural Community Development Society (IRCDS), People's Action for Development (PAD), Rural Organization for Poverty Eradication Services (ROPES) and Society for People's Education and Economic Change (SPEECH).
[2] Children Believe works in one or two blocks in these districts, covering 170 villages.

With only 17 percent of students (10 percent girls and seven percent boys) reported attending online classes, unaffordability is the major reason for such low participation. This reflects the weak state of online education and illustrates that, as the global trend continues on the path of digital learning, the digital divide is a reality in India and a threat for children from marginalized communities.



(Source: UNDESA, 2020)

Measurement of learning loss

The qualitative data collected through key informant interviews (KIIs) has captured general expressions by the students, parents and teachers on learning losses during school closures. The key issues relate to parents feeling that the progress made in their children's education has been lost, to the extent that their children (10-13 age group) do not remember how to write their names properly, and several students felt they have forgotten all they were taught leading up to the lockdown.

Some teachers have also echoed these concerns. A typical response from a teacher is as follows:

"When some students were asked to sign a document, acknowledging having received free textbooks and notebooks distributed by the school, they were not able to remember how to write down their names."

However, no clear and specific analysis is available about the extent of the losses, for example, whether they relate only to writing or if they extend to other subjects such as math, science, etc. This lack of an in-depth analysis and measurements point to the need for a **learning assessment** to be conducted.

Learning assessments are necessary in order to give education providers details about learning gaps, enabling them to develop suitable 'catch-up' programs.

This effort should also address the principal concern of the Education 2030 Agenda (tied to Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education) that 'no one is left out' in the progress towards education for all.

What is a learning assessment?

A learning assessment is the gathering and use of empirical data on student learning to help refine programs and improve results.[3] An educational assessment seeks to determine how well students are learning and is part of the quest for improving education. It provides feedback to students, educators, parents, policy makers and the public about the efficacy of educational services.

Global context

The importance of testing student learning was first highlighted at the 1990 World Education for All (EFA) conference in Jomtien, Thailand. It was reiterated ten years later at the 2000 EFA conference in Dakar, Senegal. Over the last few decades, conducting student learning evaluations has received considerable attention across the globe (OECD, 2013;

[3] Allen, J.M., (2004). Assessing Academic Programs in Higher Education. Bolton, Mass.: Anker Pub. Co.

Benavot and Tanner, 2007),[4] including from the UN. The UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, to achieve equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030, calls for a continued and sustained focus on the monitoring of learning (Clark, 2017).[5]

The Education 2030 Agenda, an essential part of SDG 4, has contributed significantly to the growing attention given to learning assessments and puts a clear emphasis on learning outcomes and their measurement, which will direct the actions of countries to meet the intended goal.

The SDG 4 indicator framework **recommended specific points of measure to track global progress in learning outcomes**: *Proportion of children and young people: (a) in grades two or three; (b) at the end of primary education; and (c) at the end of lower secondary education achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex.*

However, there are no agreed upon standards of proficiency or tests to ensure that countries' measures are comparable with one another and over time.

National context: How did the survey districts perform in the national assessments?

In the absence of learning assessments in Children Believe's five project districts in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, this policy brief will examine what the two national assessments reveal about the overall performance of the project districts.

There are two main sources of data on learning outcomes at the school level in India. One is the **Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER)** produced by the non-governmental organization (NGO) Pratham, and the other is the **National Achievement Survey (NAS)** for grades three, five, eight and 10 by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

The 2018 ASER results are alarmingly low across the country. From Children Believe's project districts, Thoothukudi, Chittoor and Virudhunagar recorded only about 45 percent of their grade six to eight students being able to perform grade two math. The districts of Ramanathapuram and Tiruvallur had even lower results, with about 30 and 40 percent, respectively, attaining this performance level.

The low results can similarly be seen for reading proficiency. Although Children Believe's project districts recorded slightly higher results than other districts in the country, Tiruvallur was the highest performing with only about half of their grade six to eight students able to read grade two texts.

The situation is more worrying when we look at the proficiency levels of students in grades three to five. From Children Believe's project districts, the highest results came from only two districts recording just half of their students able to perform grade two math, and one district with 45 percent of students able to read grade two texts.

As for the **NAS** findings, the total mean for grades three, five and eight in both math and language across Children Believe's Tamil Nadu districts show a pattern of gradual decline in reading and numeracy skills from grades three to eight.[6]

At the individual subject level, a different pattern for grades three and five is shown for language and math. Chart 1 presents the average performance of grade three students in language from each district in Tamil Nadu. The performance of Children Believe's project districts are relatively similar. Among the four districts, Thoothukudi ranks the highest at 65 percent, while Ramanathapuram ranks the lowest at 61 percent. However, interesting to note, the performance in math for children in grade three shows Ramanathapuram ranking the highest (65 percent) and Thoothukudi the lowest (60 percent). The performance results from Children Believe's project districts are presented in Chart 2, with the results from other districts in Tamil Nadu.

[4] i. (2013). Synergies for better learning: An international perspective on evaluation and assessment. Paris: OECD. ii. Benavot, A. and Tanner, E. (2007). The growth of national learning assessments in the world, 1995–2006.
[5] Clarke, P. (2017). Making use of assessments for creating stronger education systems and improving teaching and learning. Background paper prepared for the 2017/18 Global Education Monitoring Report. Paris: UNESCO.
[6] The district comparisons for language and math performance are given for the Tamil Nadu districts only.

CHART 1: AVERAGE PERFORMANCE OF GRADE THREE STUDENTS IN LANGUAGE, BY DISTRICTS IN TAMIL NADU (NAS, 2017-2018)

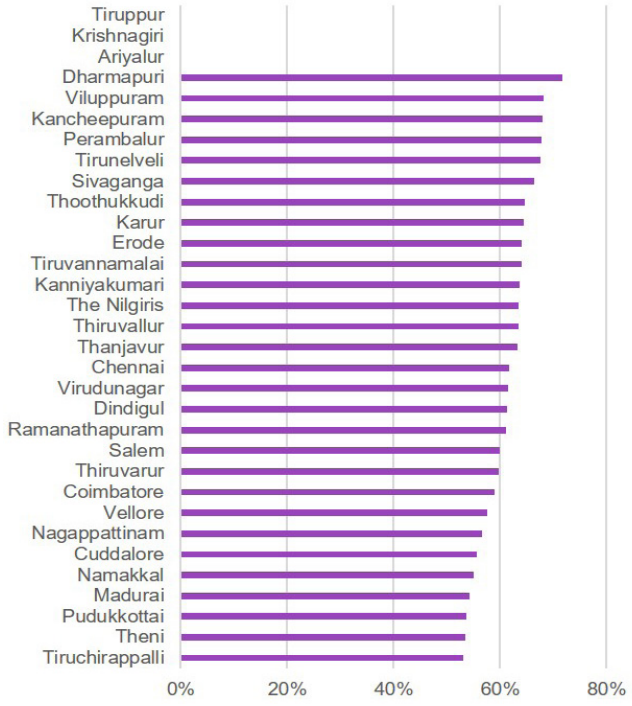
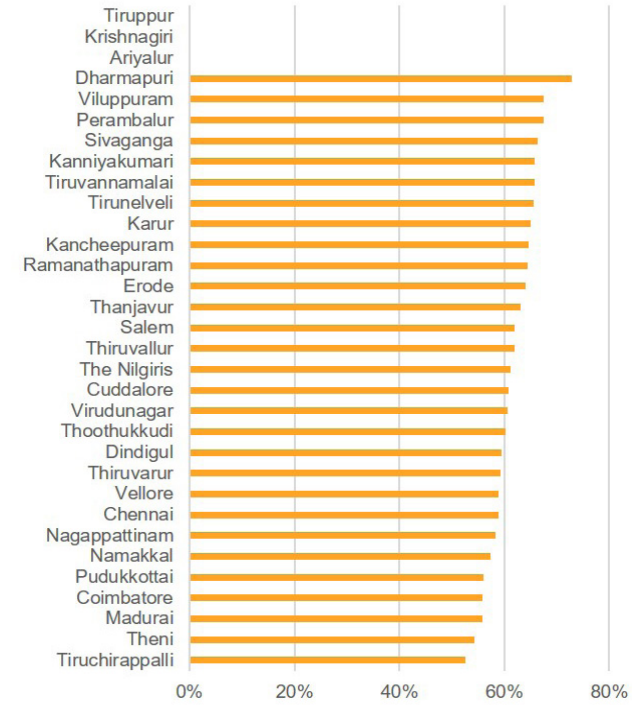


CHART 2: AVERAGE PERFORMANCE OF GRADE THREE STUDENTS IN MATH, BY DISTRICTS IN TAMIL NADU (NAS, 2017-2018)



Similar to the reversed pattern seen in the grade three performance for the two subjects, the data for grade five students revealed the same results.

What the NAS and ASER results suggest is that the percentages of children performing well in both language and math at the primary (three to five) and upper-primary (six to eight) grades are relatively lower than the performance for each subject individually.

Risk of proficiency levels worsening

The survey analysis revealed that due to the prevailing economic conditions of the marginalized communities, the low-literacy levels of parents and large family sizes contributed to children not learning well by themselves at home or attending programs of NGOs, such as Creative Learning Centres (CLCs).

This is likely to worsen the language and math proficiency levels of these children, which can result in long-term consequences of poor overall performance and low-skill levels. This can be a push factor for children dropping out of school and losing their advantage in the job market in later years.

The importance of literacy to the SDGs

In order to estimate the level of literacy, a literacy sample survey with specific cognitive testing needs to be conducted. Such a test should be able to assess the skill profile in terms of reading, writing, understanding and numeracy.

It must be noted that Target 4.6 of SDG 4 emphasizes that the principles, strategies, policies, plans and actions for this target are underpinned by a contemporary understanding of literacy not as a simple dichotomy of 'literate' versus 'illiterate', but as a continuum of proficiency levels.

Additionally, Target 4.7 understands literacy and education as not simply aprocess of acquiring basic cognitive skills, but as involvingthe use of these skills in ways that contribute to societies, economies and families/personal life situations.

Viewed from an angle of how literacy can be beneficial to achieve **inclusiveness** (SDG 4), it is important to highlight that literate parents are in a better position than are illiterate parents to help their children receive an education, leading to skills and gainful employment. Thus, breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty (SDG 1).

Education also enables parents to improve their children's nutrition and health (SDGs 2 and 3). Higher levels of education help women have a voice and choice (SDG 5).

In addition, educated families are more open to innovation, more likely to use natural resources sustainably and more likely to show environmental concern (SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15). Literacy and education also play a vital role in promoting human rights, diversity and conflict prevention (SDG 16).

Relevance to learning losses due to COVID-19 and school closures: Of particular relevance to this study is the fact that a suitable literacy assessment may be useful in measuring the extent of the learning losses sustained by students as a result of school closures.

The results of such an assessment will be useful in developing suitable programs that will help students that have been negatively affected make up for the learning lost. It will also further strengthen the CLC classes run by Children Believe's implementing partners and better **align with Target 4.7 of SDG 4, which focuses on global citizenship education (GCED) and education for sustainable development (ESD).**

Assessing the learning levels of children in Children Believe's project areas

Conduct a learning assessment: There is a strong case to study the impact of remote learning activities such as online/ distance learning or self-study on the foundational skills of children. **A small-scale learning assessment of foundational literacy (reading and math) can be conducted to assess the extent of skills lost or gained during the long school closure during COVID-19.** Such a study will help identify the specific gaps in learning related to reading and math, which will feed back into the development of programs to address these issues.

Other losses due to COVID-19

A 2020 report from The World Bank[7] warns that large-scale school closures and the ensuing economic recession caused by the pandemic are likely to increase the loss of learning by 63 percent, with an estimated additional 72-million primary school-aged children falling into this category.

This is further verified by a recent UNICEF study, which indicates that almost 1.2-billion schoolchildren are affected by the closure of schools.[8] This may put several countries off-track from achieving SDG 4 by the targeted year of 2030.

The World Bank also notes that without a clear strategy and immediate global action to recover and accelerate learning, this generation of students is at risk of losing about $10 trillion in future lifetime earnings, the equivalent of almost 10 percent of the global GDP.

Additionally, UNICEF draws attention to the food insecurity that has resulted from school closures across the world. As many as 369-million children are estimated to be missing out on daily meals provided by their schools, losing a valuable resource for maintaining good nutrition and health. In a 2020 study, UNICEF stated that "… prolonged closures disrupt essential school-based services such as immunization, school feeding, mental health and psychosocial support, and can cause stress and anxiety due to the loss of peer interaction and disrupted routines."

Related research on learning

It has been quite some time since schools in many countries around the world closed due to COVID-19, and there have

[7] The World Bank. (2020). Learning Poverty In The Time Of COVID-19: A Crisis Within A Crisis.
[8] UNICEF. (2020). Media factsheet: Unequal access to remote schooling amid COVID-19 threatens to deepen global learning crisis - An overview of South Asia.

been several research studies conducted on the educational effects of this closure. However, many of these studies are based on European, North American and Australian pandemic contexts, measuring mostly the short-term effects of the lockdown (Coe et al., 2020).[9] Also, wherever schools have reopened, they have been selective and subjected to restrictions.

Reverting to normalcy may take some time, provided that the overall downtrend in COVID-19 cases is maintained, couple with a steady implementation of vaccinations.

Previous studies on school absenteeism have identified the negative relationship between absenteeism and learning. There are other studies which have shown how learning is affected during prolonged school closures due to conflict-related issues or environmental disasters, such as floods and earthquakes (Abadzi, 2009).[10]

These assessments can help us understand the potential effects of recent/current school closures on learning and the mechanisms by which educational inequalities occur.

[9] Coe, R., Weidmann, B., Coleman, R. and Kay, J. (2020). Impact of school closures on the attainment gap : rapid evidence assessment. London: Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).
[10] Abadzi, H. (2009). Instructional time loss in developing countries: Concepts, measurement, and implications. The World Bank Research Observer, 24(2), 267–290.

POLICY BRIEF 2

POLICY BRIEF 2

POLICY BRIEF ON THE NEED FOR IMPROVING THE LITERATE ENVIRONMENT

Impact of COVID-19 school closures on learning among children from marginalized communities in two southern states of India

"The harmful effects of this pandemic will not be distributed equally. They are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, and in the poorest neighbourhoods, and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations."

- United Nations Policy Brief on the impact of COVID-19 on children

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. In support of this, Children Believe and non-governmental partner organizations have undertaken a study to determine the impact of COVID-19 on learning among children at the household and community levels.

The findings corroborate that the lack of a literate environment at home can result in the loss of foundational skills relating to literacy and numeracy, which are essential to advance in life. This leads to an intergenerational learning gap. Breaking this cycle should be a strong policy agenda

Intergenerational learning gap

According to The World Bank, an estimated 53 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries cannot read and understand a simple text by the end of primary school age.[1]

The lack of a literate environment is more common in households of marginalized and vulnerable families. Having parents/caregivers who have not gained an education and are unable to provide learning support, further impedes children's education and perpetuates the learning gap.

Additionally, the lack of a universal standard of education poses a major disadvantage to children from marginalized communities.

Global research

A UNICEF study conducted in several countries shows that the number of children acquiring foundational skills (both in reading, Chart 1, and numeracy, Chart 2) is much larger in households where the mother/caregiver has completed at least primary education, than in households with a mother/caregiver who has not gone to school or dropped out before the end of their primary education.

[1] The World Bank. (2020). Ending Learning Poverty: What will it take?

CHART 1: CHILDREN AGED 7-14 WITH FOUNDATIONAL READING SKILLS, DISAGGREGATED BY MOTHERS'/CAREGIVERS' EDUCATION LEVEL (MCIS 2017-2019)[2]

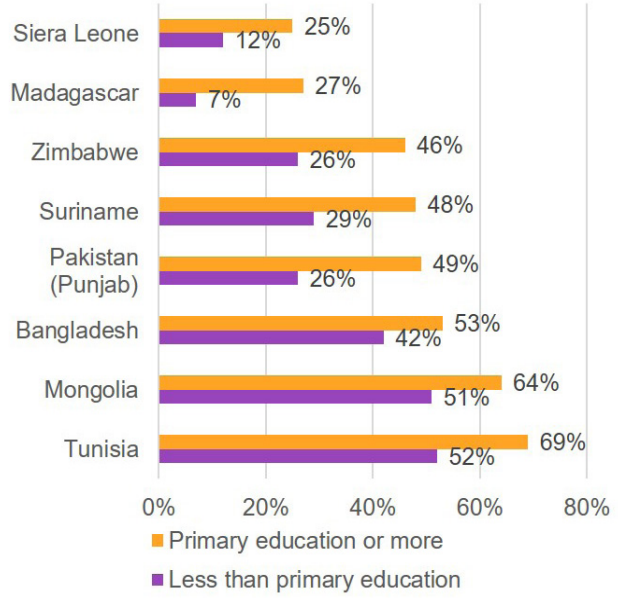
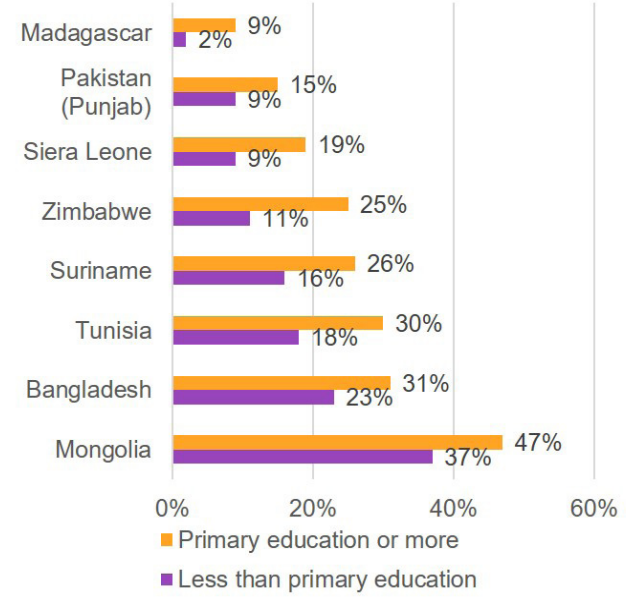


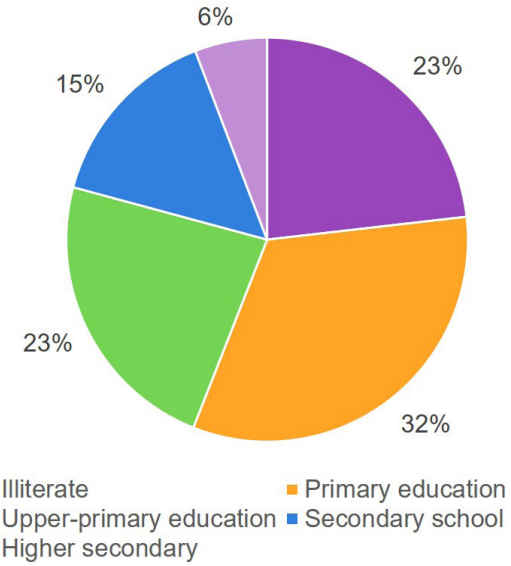
CHART 2: CHILDREN AGED 7-14 WITH FOUNDATIONAL NUMERACY SKILLS, DISAGGREGATED BY MOTHERS'/CAREGIVERS' EDUCATION LEVEL (MCIS 2017-2019)[2]



Children Believe's research

In Children Believe's study, data on the educational qualifications of the parents/caregivers of child respondents was collected as a possible indicator of the likelihood of parents/caregivers encouraging and helping their children read/study at home, providing equipment for online learning and helping in such learning sessions. Chart 3 illustrates the distribution of the educational status of mothers, fathers and/or caregivers in the sample.

CHART 3: EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS OF PARENTS/CAREGIVERS



The chart shows that 78 percent of the parents/caregivers are illiterate or have low levels of education. Relating these findings to UNICEF's study, the low educational status of parents/caregivers suggests that the likelihood for the poor acquisition of foundational skills (reading and numeracy) by the children in the sample group will be high. It is also likely that the loss in learning will be further exacerbated by long school closures. **Children Believe's study data supports this as it reveals that nearly 67 percent of the children surveyed reported never receiving learning support from their parents when schools were closed.**

[2] UNICEF. Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 6 for various countries, 2017–2019.

Thus, indicating that the literacy of parents/caregivers is a critical element in providing learning support to children and for the acquisition of foundational skills, especially in such scenarios as school closures.

Availability of reading materials at home

The reading accuracy, fluency and proficiency of children are linked to aspects of the family environment in which they grow up. This includes parents' educational attainment, how often parents read themselves and to their children, and the availability of reading materials (Davis- Kean, 2005; Johnson, Martin, Brooks-Gunn and Petrill, 2008; Kiuru et,al., 2013).[3]

Measurements of parents' direct and intentional involvement in teaching their children to read have shown a somewhat greater impact than parents' informal reading-related activities (Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2014).[4] Additionally, reading at home (e.g. shared reading, access to books, etc.) and a parent's education have demonstrated a positive impact on children's reading in early grades (level two), helping them achieve the minimum expected level of reading proficiency.

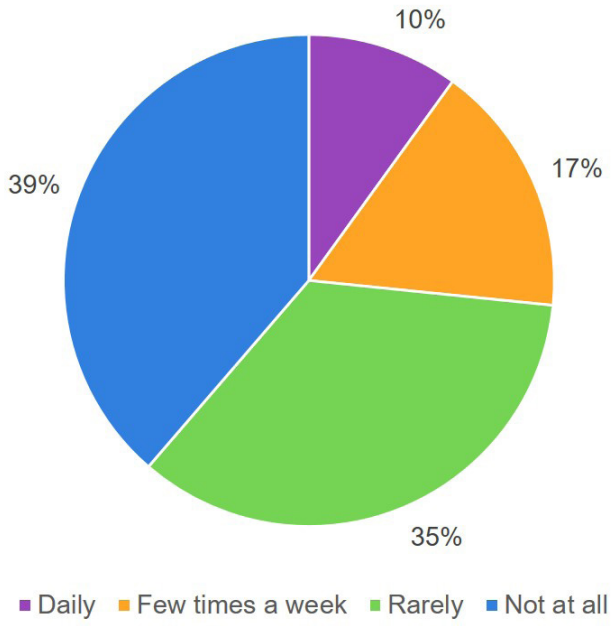
Research has clearly shown that the availability of reading materials at home is an indicator of the reading habits and literacy skill levels of household members. This is seen as a critical factor for young children who are likely to improve their proficiency levels in reading through access to different types of materials other than textbooks.

This question of a literate environment has been probed in some detail with Children Believe's survey sample group to determine the possible influence of variables such as the qualifications of parents and reading materials children have access to apart from school books.

The survey results reveal that only school textbooks are available in the majority of households in all the districts except Chittoor, which is not surprising when the economic and educational status of the majority of parents are considered.

Chart 4 presents the reading habits of the children surveyed.

CHART 4: READING HABITS OF CHILDREN



The data reveals that 74 percent of the children surveyed rarely or never read at home. Research has shown how such **low-reading practices by children is a major issue of concern, which may have implications on their proficiency levels and ability to perform complex literacy tasks at higher grades.** No major gender imbalances have been noticed in the reading habits between the female and male children surveyed. The following chart reflects this, though in the 'daily' category, females have an edge over males.

[3] i. Davis-Kean, P.E. (2005). The influence of parent education and family income on child achievement: The indirect role of parental expectations and the home environment. Journal of Family Psychology, 19(2), 294–304. ii. Johnson, A.D., Martin, A., Brooks-Gunn, J., and Petrill, S.A. (2008). Order in the house! Associations among household chaos, the home literacy environment, maternal reading ability, and children's early reading. Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 54(4), 445–472. iii. Petrill, S.A., Deater-Deckard, K., Schatschneider, C., and Davis, C. (2005). Measured environmental influences on early reading: Evidence from an adoption study. Scientific Studies of Reading, 9(3), 237–259.

[4] Senechal, M., and LeFevre, J. (2014). Continuity and change in the home literacy environment as predictors of growth in vocabulary and reading. Child Development, 85(4), 1552–1568.

CHART 5: READING HABITS OF CHILDREN, DISAGGREGATED BY GENDER

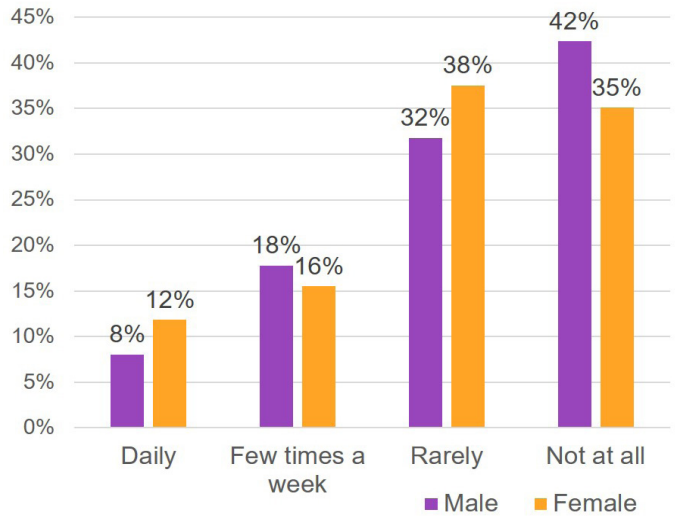
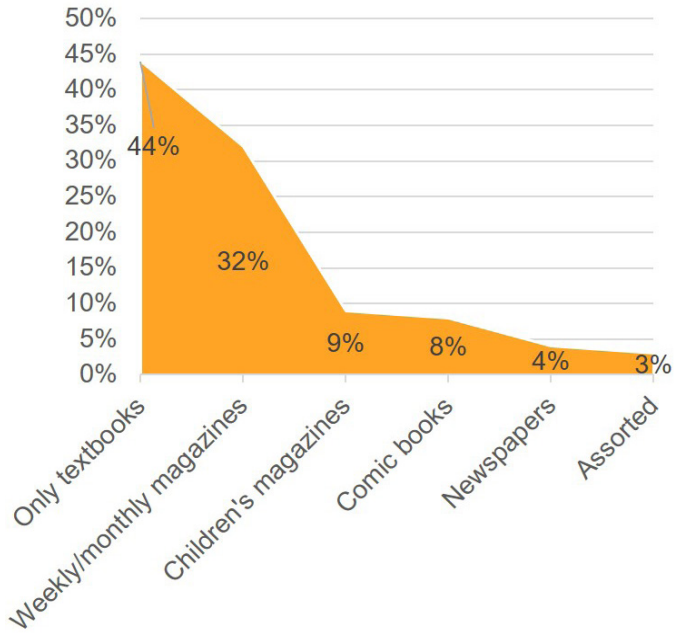


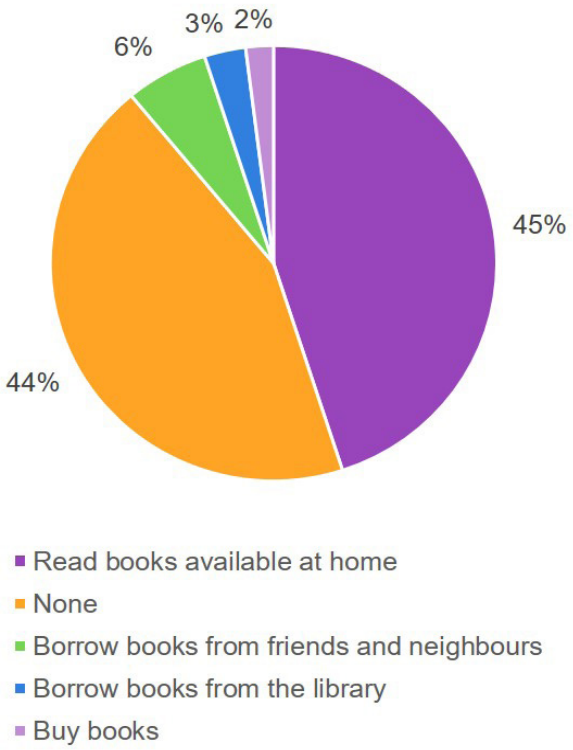
Chart 6 illustrates the availability of various reading materials in the households of the children surveyed. The chart indicates that the child respondents have little to no reading material other than textbooks at home.

CHART 6: AVAILABILITY OF READING MATERIAL AT HOME, DISSAGREGATED BY TYPE



Presented in Chart 7 is the varying efforts made by children, who may be interested in reading materials other than their school textbooks, to access and read books.

CHART 7: EFFORT CHILDREN MAKE TO READ BOOKS



From those surveyed, only 45 percent of the children read books available to them at home. However, since 44 percent of households only have school textbooks available (as identified in Chart 6), it becomes apparent that the majority of children who read books available at home are reading only school texbooks.

Therefore, for the children who only have access to texbooks at home and for the 44 percent of children in Chart 7 who make no effort to read books, their situations will contribute to a widening of the learning gap.

Lack of a literate environment at home

The lack of a literate environment at the household level is likely to affect the foundational literacy skills of children, especially in lower grades and while schools are closed.

Thus, this is an area that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and other stakeholders should consider and address through literacy programs for adults who have low-literacy skills or are illiterate.

Further strategies to strengthen children's reading habits should also be developed.

Creating a stronger literate environment and greater access to reading materials

The scenarios presented in this brief clearly outline the need for creating a literate environment at the household and community levels by: (i) improving the literacy levels of adults/parents, and (ii) creating access to learning resources for children to fulfill their learning needs, such as setting up libraries.

Hence, the following recommendations are provided for the Ministry of School Education, Minsitry of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj:

- To support the literacy of parents, the state government should revamp and accelerate its adult literacy/ continuing education programs through the Directorate of Non-Formal and Adult Education, and the State Resource Centre, as both are mandated with this purpose.
- To create a learning environment at the community level, the state government should establish village-level libraries in each gram panchayat in the short term and in each village where a primary school is located in the long term. The operation of the libraries should be managed by the local panchayats, which will help ensure they are accessible to children in the communities even during school closures or emergencies.

Children Believe is committed to extending its strategic support to government offices, networks and partners to promote physical and online libraries. Combined efforts will deliver critical outcomes that can help bridge the existing knowledge divides and learning gaps.

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Children Believe

Children Believe works globally to empower children to dream fearlessly, stand up for what they believe in — and be heard. For 60+ years, we've brought together brave young dreamers, caring supporters and partners, and unabashed idealists. Together, we're driven by a common belief: creating access to education — inside and outside of classrooms — is the most powerful tool children can use to change their world.

Children Believe is a member of ChildFund Alliance, a global network of 12 child-focused development organizations working to create opportunities for children and youth, their families and communities. ChildFund helps nearly 23-million children and their families in more than 70 countries overcome poverty and underlying conditions that prevent children from achieving their full potential. We work to end violence against children; provide expertise in emergencies and disasters to ease the harmful impact on children and their communities; and engage children and youth to create lasting change and elevate their voices in decisions that affect their lives.

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