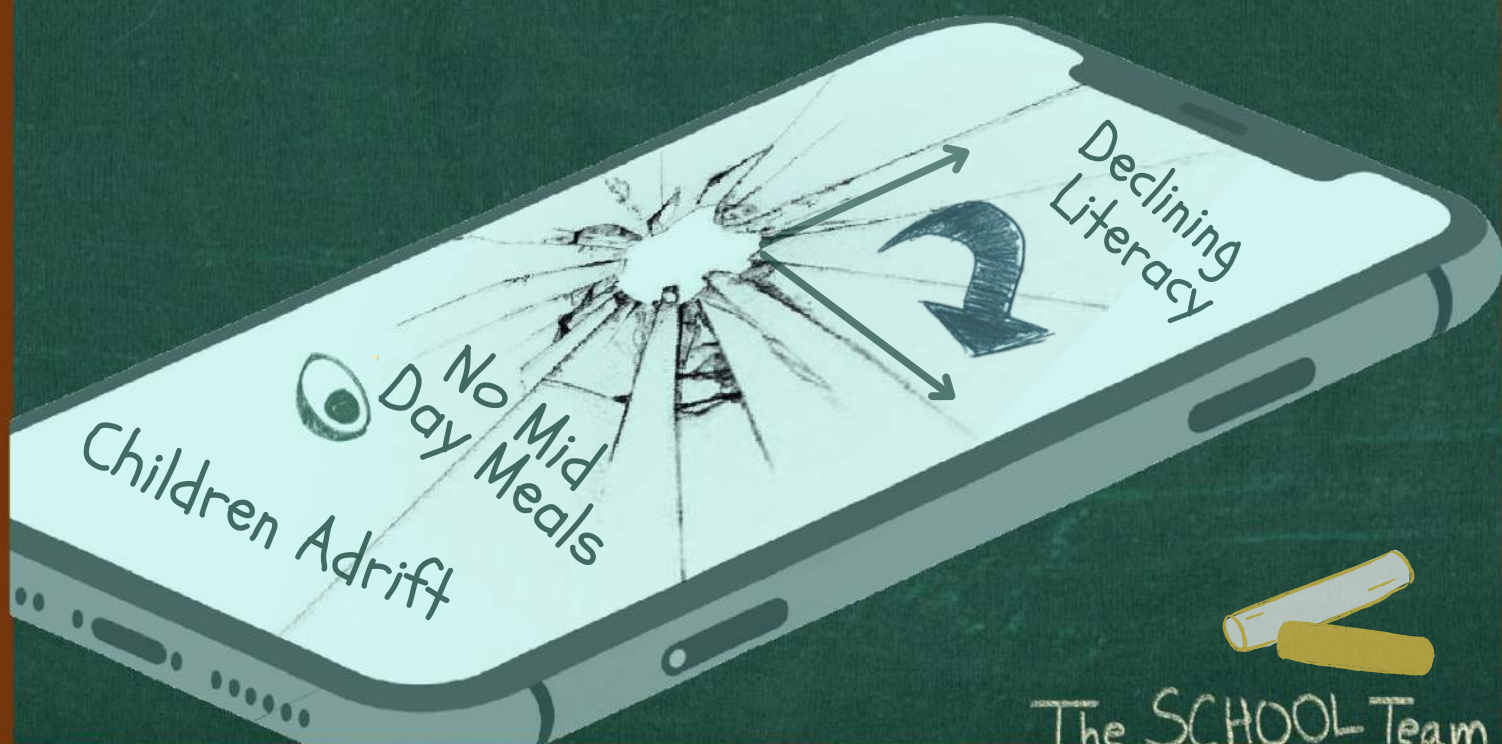


LOCKED OUT

Emergency Report on School Education



The SCHOOL Team

SCHOOL Survey 2021: Key Findings*

	URBAN	RURAL
Proportion (%) of sample children who:		
Are studying online regularly	24	8
Are not studying at all nowadays	19	37
Did not meet their teacher(s) in the last 30 days	51	58
Did not have a test or exam in the last 3 months	52	71
Are unable to read more than a few words	42	48
Proportion (%) of parents who feel that:		
Their child has adequate online access	23	8
Their child's reading abilities have declined during the lockout	76	75
Schools should reopen	90	97

* SCHOOL survey, first round, August 2021 (1362 households, 1362 children enrolled in Classes 1-8).

Abstract

A recent survey of nearly 1,400 school children in underprivileged households brings out the catastrophic consequences of prolonged school closure in the last year and a half. In rural areas only 8% of sample children are studying online regularly, 37% are not studying at all, and about half are unable to read more than a few words. Most parents want schools to reopen as soon as possible.



LOCKED OUT

Emergency Report on School Education*

6 September 2021

Primary and upper-primary schools in India have been closed for a full 17 months – more than 500 days! During this period, a small minority of privileged children were able to study online in the comfort and safety of their homes. The rest, however, were locked out of school without further ado. Some struggled to continue studying, online or offline. Many others gave up and spent months milling around the village or *basti*, when they were not working. They were deprived not only of the right to learn but also of other benefits of school participation such as a safe environment, good nutrition and a healthy social life. It is time to wake up to the catastrophic consequences of this prolonged “lockout”.

This emergency report presents the main findings of the **School Children’s Online and Offline Learning (SCHOOL)** survey. The SCHOOL survey took place in August 2021 in 15 states and UTs: Assam, Bihar, Chandigarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal (hereafter the “**SCHOOL states**”).

*The SCHOOL survey was a joint effort of nearly 100 volunteers across the country. This report was prepared by the coordination team (Nirali Bakhla, Jean Drèze, Vipul Paikra, Reetika Khera) with generous help from many volunteers including Ankita Aggarwal, Srujana Bej, Ashlesh Biradar, Krishna Priya Choragudi, Hindolee Datta, Aashish Gupta, Pallavi Kumari, Jessica Pudusser, Arati Tawade, Kanika Sharma, Tejaswini Tabhane and Garima Topno. Companion surveys by other organisations (including Azim Premji University, Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti and MV Foundation) are in progress.

The survey focused on relatively deprived hamlets and bastis, where children generally attend government schools. In each of the 1362 sample household, we interviewed one child enrolled at the primary or upper-primary level.

The picture that emerges from this survey is absolutely dismal, especially in rural areas. The key findings, summarised on the cover page, speak for themselves. In rural areas, only 28% of children were studying regularly at the time of the survey, and 37% were not studying at all (for further details, see Table 1). The results of a simple reading test are particularly alarming: **nearly half of all children in the sample were unable to read more than a few words.** Most parents feel that their child's reading and writing abilities have gone down during the lockout. They are desperately waiting for schools to reopen. Indeed, for many of them, school education is the only hope that their children will have a better life than their own.

Table 1: Are children studying?*

	URBAN	RURAL
Proportion (%) of SCHOOL children who are:		
Studying regularly	47	28
Studying from time to time	34	35
Not studying at all	19	37

*Status at the time of the survey (children enrolled in Classes 1-8). Very similar figures apply when the reference period is extended to the preceding 3 months.

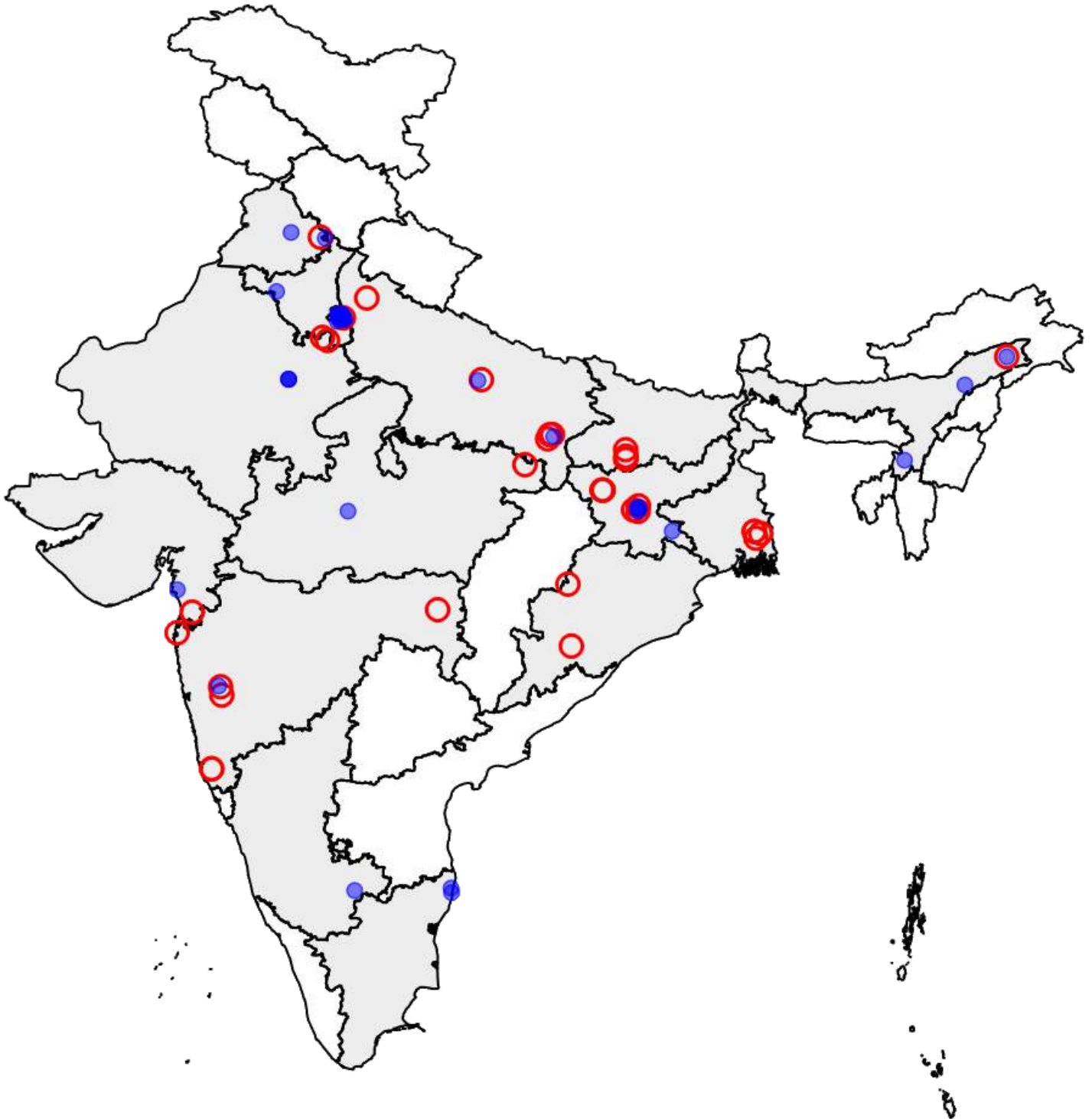
The SCHOOL Survey

The SCHOOL survey was conducted by volunteers (mainly university students) who responded to an appeal circulated in early August 2021. The survey guidelines requested them to conduct the survey in rural hamlets and urban *bastis* “inhabited by underprivileged families – the sort of families that send their children to government schools”. Within the selected neighbourhoods, they were asked to go from door to door (“skipping” households at even intervals in cases where time did not permit full coverage, and also skipping households with no child enrolled at the primary or upper-primary level). In short, the survey intentionally focuses on underprivileged households, and the findings should be read in that light.

Close to 1,400 households (defined as nuclear families) were interviewed. About 60% of the sample households reside in rural areas, and close to 60% belong to Dalit or Adivasi communities (SC/ST in the tables). Four states account for about half of the sample: Delhi, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. The sample children (hereafter “SCHOOL children”) are more or less evenly distributed by gender and grade. For further details of the SCHOOL sample, see Appendix 1.

In this emergency report, we present unweighted figures for all the SCHOOL states together, separately for rural and urban areas. A more detailed report is on the anvil.

SCHOOL Survey Locations



Rural and urban neighbourhoods are shown in red rings and blue dots, respectively. States where the survey took place are shaded grey.

Fiction of Online Education

The SCHOOL survey makes it clear that the reach of online education is very limited: the proportion of SCHOOL children who were studying online “regularly” was just 24% and 8% in urban and rural areas respectively. One reason for this is that many sample households (about half in rural areas) have no smartphone. But that is just the first hurdle: even among households with a smartphone, the proportion of children who are studying online regularly is just 31% in urban areas and 15% in rural areas. Smartphones are often used by working adults, and may or may not be available to school children, especially the younger siblings (only 9% of all SCHOOL children had their own smartphone). In addition, there are other issues of online access such as poor connectivity and lack of money for “data” (Table 2). The proportion of parents who felt that their child had “adequate online access” was just 23% in urban areas and 8% in rural areas. Another major hurdle, especially in rural areas, is that the school is not sending online material, or if it is, parents are not aware of it. Some children, particularly the younger ones, lack understanding of online study in any case, or find it difficult to concentrate.

Table 2: Multiple hurdles of online study

	URBAN	RURAL
Proportion (%) of SCHOOL children who:		
Live in a family with smartphone	77	51
Are studying online regularly	24	8
Main reasons why children are not studying online regularly, in households that have a smartphone * (%)		
Child does not have his/her own smartphone	30	36
Poor connectivity	9	9
No money for “data”	9	6
Online study is beyond child’s understanding	12	10
No online material is being sent by the school	14	43
Other	15	10

*As reported by the parents (two reasons were allowed).

Table 3 focuses on children who were studying online (regularly or occasionally) at the time of the survey, or “online children” for short. The learning experience of online children is far from rosy. A majority have connectivity problems, and almost half find online videos (or classes if any) difficult to follow.

Only a small minority of parents are satisfied with their child’s online study material. As discussed further on, two thirds of urban parents with online children feel that their child’s reading and writing abilities have declined during the lockout.

Table 3: Experience of online study among online children*

	URBAN	RURAL
Proportion (%) of online children who:		
Have their own smartphone	11	12
Watch live classes, not just videos	27	12
Have connectivity problems (often/sometimes)	57	65
Find online classes/videos difficult to follow	46	43
Proportion (%) of parents of online children who:		
Feel that their child has adequate online access	44	25
Are satisfied with the online study material	29	20
Feel that their child’s ability to read and write has declined during the lockout	65	70

*Online children are those who were studying online (occasionally or regularly) at the time of the survey – 25.5% of all children in the SCHOOL sample, with an urban bias.

Little Offline Study

Among “offline children” (those who were not studying online at the time of the survey), there is little evidence of regular studying. A large majority are either not studying at all, or just studying on their own at home from time to time. **In rural areas, nearly half of the offline children were not studying at all at the time of the survey.**

In many states (including Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh), virtually nothing has been done to help offline children to continue studying in one way or another during the lockout. In other states (e.g. Karnataka, Maharashtra, Punjab and Rajasthan), some efforts have been made, for instance by giving “worksheets” to offline children by way of homework, or by instructing teachers to visit parents’ homes from time to time for advice. Most of these efforts, however, are far from satisfactory, judging not only from the testimonies of parents and children, but also from the fact that children’s reading and writing abilities have been in freefall during the lockout (see below). The youngest children, e.g. in Grades 1 and 2, have been especially deprived of support.

Modes of Offline Study

The main modes of offline study were private tuitions (mainly in urban areas) and, more frequently, studying at home – with or without help from other family members. In most cases of home study, however, the child was studying “sometimes” rather than “regularly”. It is only for private tuitions, confined to a minority of relatively well-off children, that regular study is the norm (Table 4).

Table 4: Proportion (%) of SCHOOL children who are currently studying in different ways

	URBAN		RURAL	
	Regularly	Some times	Regularly	Some times
Online classes or videos	25	16	8	8
Watching TV	3	5	0.1	1
Private tuitions	24	6	14	4
Studying at home (with family help)	15	29	12	25
Studying at home (without help)	19	30	15	31
Studying with friends in each other's houses	2	13	3	11
Studying in any of the above ways				
Sometimes at least	81		64	
Regularly*	53		29	

*Minor discrepancy with Table 1 reflects the use of a different part of the survey questionnaire.

TV-based education, for its part, seems to be a flop show. There are regular educational broadcasts for school children on Doordashan, but **only 1% of rural children and 8% of urban children in our sample acknowledged TV programmes as a regular or even occasional mode of study.**

School Outreach

Table 5 presents further indicators of educational support from the local school (generally a government school) for offline children. Support is very sporadic, and in some states, virtually nil in rural areas. The main form of support is “homework”, a sensible step in principle but not always effective in practice. For instance, homework is often beyond the understanding of the child, and many children get no feedback on their homework. In any case, homework is a poor substitute for classroom learning, especially for children who are deprived of any help at home. Similarly, an occasional phone call from the teacher does not go very far, especially when it is about Aadhaar cards or food rations. In urban areas, 27% of offline children reported that some test or exam had taken place in the preceding 3 months, but the nature of these tests was not always clear. Sometimes, the main purpose seemed to be to help the teacher meet the reporting requirements more than to help the child. Other forms of support were rare.

Table 5: Educational support for “offline children” *

	URBAN	RURAL
Proportion (%) of offline children who benefited from the following educational support from the local school during the preceding three months:		
School arranged a test at home or elsewhere	27	16
Teacher gave the child some homework	39	25
Teacher came home to enquire about the child or advise	5	12
Teacher phoned to enquire or advise	36	13
Teacher helped the child at home	3	2
Any other educational support **	6	5

*Offline children are those who were not studying online at the time of the survey.

** Examples: classes were held in the school (e.g. in Punjab); *mohalla* classes; teacher helps on the phone; teacher lends his/her phone for online study; teacher gave story books; teacher recharges children’s phones; school provided a tablet; teacher motivates the child to study; teacher gives free tuitions; one-to-one help; parent-teacher meetings.

Teachers Out of Touch

A majority of children (51% in urban areas and 58% in rural areas) had not met their teacher at all during the 30 days preceding the survey. Few parents reported that the teacher had ever come home during the preceding 3 months, or helped their child to study. Many teachers seem to be out of touch with their pupils, except for symbolic online interactions like forwarding Youtube links by WhatsApp to some of them (or, more likely, their parents) from time to time.

Having said this, some teachers did go out of their way to help offline children. In fact, the survey uncovered an impressive range of initiatives taken by caring teachers. Some convened small-group classes in the open, or at someone's home, or even at their own home. Others recharged the phones of children who were short of money, or lent them their own phones for online study. Others still helped some children with their studies on the phone or even by visiting them. These were all valuable gestures, but they cannot make up for locked schools and still classrooms.

Exodus from Private Schools

About one fifth of the SCHOOL children were enrolled in a private school when the lockout began, in March 2020. During the lockout, many private schools tried to survive by switching to online education and continuing to charge the same fees. Poor parents often became reluctant to pay the fees and other costs (including smartphone and recharge), either due to depressed earnings or because online education did not work well for their children. Perhaps that is the main reason why many children switched to government schools – about 26% in our sample, among those initially enrolled in private schools. We also met parents who were still struggling to transfer their child to a government school because the private school insisted on all fees being paid before giving them a “transfer certificate”.

Midday Meals Discontinued

Midday meals have been discontinued in all the sample states with the closure of schools. Among parents with a child enrolled in a government school, about 80% reported receiving some food (mainly rice or wheat) during the preceding 3 months as a substitute for their child’s midday meals – see Table 6. But only a small minority received any cash, and a significant proportion did not receive anything during that period. Also, among those who received some food, there were frequent complaints or indications

that the parents had received less than what they were entitled to (100 grams per child per day at the primary level). All in all, the distribution of midday meal substitutes seems quite sporadic and haphazard.

Table 6: Midday meal substitutes in government schools

	URBAN	RURAL
Proportion (%) of children enrolled in government schools who received food or cash in lieu of midday meal in the preceding 3 months		
Food and cash	11	15
Food only	69	63
Cash only	0	8
Nothing	20	14

Note: Food (or cash) is counted as received whether it was given to the child or his/her parents. Food generally means foodgrain (e.g. rice or wheat). In some cases, negative responses may reflect the fact that distribution takes place at intervals of more than 3 months.

Reading Test

The survey included a basic reading test: children were asked to read a simple sentence printed in large font (“जब से कोरोना महामारी चल रही है तब से स्कूल बंद है”). The findings were alarming (Table 7): about half of the children currently enrolled in Grades 3–5 were unable to read more than a few words. In rural areas, 42% were unable to read a single word.

Table 7: Reading test (percentage distribution of children by reading ability) *

	URBAN		RURAL	
	Grades 3–5	Grades 6–8	Grades 3–5	Grades 6–8
Able to read fluently	31	58	26	57
Able to read with difficulty	22	23	19	19
Able to read some words only	13	8	13	8
Unable to read more than a few letters	35	12	42	16

*Excluding 44 children who were too shy to read. Column totals = 100% (or 101%, due to “rounding”).

Children in Grade 2 are not even included in Table 7 because most of them (65% in urban areas and 77% in rural areas) could not read more than a few letters if any. Remember, most of these children have never been to school (they were enrolled in Grade 1 last year, during the lockdown). Soon they will be in Grade 3.

Even at the upper-primary level (Grades 6-8), the proportion of children who are able to read fluently is just over half, in both rural and urban areas. Further details of the reading test, by age and grade, are presented in Appendix 2 – do take a look.

Decline of Reading Abilities

To some extent, the dismal results of the reading test reflect the poor quality of schooling prior to the lockdown. In addition to that, however, many children have forgotten much of whatever little they had learnt earlier (Table 8). An overwhelming majority of parents felt that their child's reading and writing abilities had declined during the lockdown. Even among urban parents with "online children", the proportion who felt so was as high as 65%. In the sample as a whole, only 4% of parents felt that their child's reading and writing abilities had improved during the lockdown – something that should have been the norm.

Table 8: Decline of children’s reading and writing abilities

	URBAN	RURAL
Proportion (%) of parents who feel that their child’s ability to read and write has declined since the lockout began:		
Online children	65	70
Offline children	82	76
Grades 1-5 *	78	79
Grades 6-8 *	72	70

*Refers to current enrolment.

Literacy Rates Off the Chart

To appreciate the gravity of the situation, we can also try to compare literacy rates among SCHOOL children with average literacy rates in the same age group from the 2011 population census. At that time, according to the census, average literacy rates in the age group of 10-14 years ranged from 88% to 98% in all the SCHOOL states raga except Bihar (83%); the all-India average was 91%. Ten years later, one would expect literacy rates above 90% to be the norm for that age group. Among SCHOOL children, however, literacy rates in the 10-14 age group are as low as 74% in urban areas, 66% in rural areas, and 61% for rural Dalits and

Adivasis (Table 9). The contrast is all the more startling as the official census definition of literacy (ability to read and write with understanding in any language) seems more restrictive than the definition used in Table 9 for SCHOOL survey figures. This contrast is too stark to be plausibly explained by the underprivileged background of SCHOOL children.

Table 9: Literacy rates in the age group of 10-14 years

	SCHOOL Survey, 2021			Census of India, 2011 (R + U)*
	URBAN	RURAL	RURAL SC/ST	
Persons	74	66	61	91
Male	74	66	61	92
Female	74	67	60	90

*Population-weighted average of state-specific figures for 15 SCHOOL states/UTs.

Note: In SCHOOL survey figures, a child is counted as literate if he or she was able to read the test sentence (see text), “fluently” or “with difficulty”. In the Census of India 2011, a person “who can both read and write with understanding in any language” is counted as literate – that seems more restrictive than the definition used here for the SCHOOL survey.

To look at this another way, the “illiteracy rate” in the 10-14 age group among rural SC/ST households in the SCHOOL sample (39%) is more than four times as high as the average for all children aged 10-14 in the SCHOOL states ten years ago (9%). Such are the combined effects of chronic inequality and a lopsided lockout.

Dalits and Adivasis: Locked Out More

As the literacy figures illustrate, the predicament of Dalit and Adivasi households was worse than average in the SCHOOL sample. This point is pursued in Table 10, for rural areas (similar patterns apply in urban areas). Even among underprivileged households, the figures are much worse for Dalit and Adivasi families than for others, whether we look at online education, or regular study, or reading abilities. For instance, **only 4% of rural SC/ST children are studying online regularly, compared with 15% among other rural children.** Barely half of them were able to read more than a few letters in the reading test. Among rural SC/ST parents, a full 98% wanted schools to reopen as soon as possible.

Table 10: Locked Out More: Dalits and Adivasis*

	SC/ST	Others
Proportion (%) of children who live in a house without a smartphone	55	38
Proportion (%) of children who are:		
Not studying at all	43	25
Studying regularly	22	40
Studying online regularly	4	15
Proportion (%) of online children who watch online classes, not just videos	5	29
Proportion (%) of parents of online children who are satisfied with the online study material	13	26
Proportion (%) of children who are unable to read more than a few letters	45	24
Literacy rate, age 10-14 years (%)	61	77
Proportion (%) of parents who feel that their child's ability to read and write has declined during the lockout	83	66

*Rural areas only; a very similar contrast applies in urban areas.

The survey also uncovered some eye-opening cases of discrimination against Dalits and Adivasis in the schooling system. To illustrate, in Kutmu village of Latehar district (Jharkhand), most of the households are Dalits and Adivasis, but the teacher belongs to one of the few upper-caste families in the village. Some members of these families openly asked the survey team, “if these [SC/ST] children get educated, who will work in our fields?”. The teacher lives in the nearest town, comes to school in her own sweet time, and takes it easy in the classroom. None of the 20 Dalit and Adivasi children we interviewed in Kutmu were able to read fluently. Their parents complained bitterly about the teacher’s irresponsible behaviour, but they were powerless to do anything about it.

Promotion Without Progress

In spite of the mass decline of reading and writing abilities, children are being promoted to higher classes – two grades above their pre-lockout level. In the higher classes, textbooks are way out of gear with their current learning levels. In some states, for instance, children currently enrolled in Grade 2, who have never been to school, are now expected to read English textbooks!

As schools reopen, children are all set to find themselves “thrice removed” from their grade’s curriculum. This triple gap consists of (1) the pre-lockout gap, (2) the decline of literacy and related abilities during the lockout, and (3) the onward march of the curriculum in that period. **For instance, a child who was enrolled in Grade 3 before the lockout, but actually did not master the**

curriculum beyond Grade 2 because of her disadvantaged position, and now finds herself closer to Grade 1 in that respect, is enrolled in Grade 5 today, and will be promoted to the upper-primary level in a few months' time! Dealing with this massive disconnect requires major changes in curriculum and pedagogy over an extended transition period – years rather than months.

Youngsters Adrift

One of the likely consequences of the lockout is a rising incidence of child labour. Judging from the SCHOOL survey, child labour is still unusual among children below the age of 10 years, but it is quite common in the age group of 10-14 years. A large majority of girls in that age group, for instance, are doing some household work. In rural areas, about one fourth of girls in the same age group had also done unpaid work in family fields in the preceding 3 months, and a substantial 8% had done some paid work. Similar patterns apply to boys in the same age group, with lower figures for household work.

Even as some children have become labourers, others are struggling with idleness, lack of exercise, phone addiction, family tensions and other side effects of being locked out. This was not the main focus of the SCHOOL survey, but many parents did share worries of this sort. For instance, some parents complained that their children had become undisciplined, aggressive or even violent.

Others, especially in urban areas, found it a burden to have children around the house most of the time, or worried about their child's outdoor activities and acquaintances. For mothers who work outside the house, the closure of schools is a calamity.

Clamour for Reopening of Schools

Most of the parents we interviewed want schools to reopen as soon as possible. In urban areas, a small minority (6%) had some hesitation about this, or even – in a few cases – opposed the reopening of schools. In rural areas, however, 97% of parents supported reopening of schools. When we asked whether they wanted schools to reopen, most of them felt that the answer was self-evident. As one startled mother put it, “*yah poonchne wali baat hai?*” – do you really need to ask this question?

A Looming Disaster

Schools are an essential service. It has been wisely said that they should be the last to close and the first to reopen. In India, the opposite has been happening: soon after the Covid-19 crisis struck in early 2020, all schools were closed without batting an eyelid and most of them are still closed today. When schools have reopened, the focus has been on higher classes instead of the younger children, who need their teacher's help the most. The fig leaf of online education masked the elephant of school exclusion for the

best of 17 months. The fact that this monumental injustice remained virtually unquestioned for so long is a telling indictment of India's exclusive democracy.

The SCHOOL survey gives an inkling of the colossal damage created by this extended lockout - one of the longest in the world. As we saw, the damage is not lost on parents themselves. "*Baccha ka life to khatam hi ho raha hai*" (the child's life is being ruined) is the sort of words many of them used to express their despair.

It will take years of patient work to repair this damage. Reopening schools is just the first step, still being debated. In fact, even preparations for that first step (such as repairing school buildings, issuing safety guidelines, training teachers, enrolment drives) are virtually invisible in many states. After that, the schooling system needs to go through an extended transition period not only to enable children to catch up with a reasonable curriculum but also to restore their psychological, social and nutritional wellbeing. As things stand, the system seems to be heading towards "business as usual" when schools reopen - this is a recipe for disaster.

Appendix 1: SCHOOL Households and Children

	Urban	Rural
Number of sample households	520	842
Household characteristics		
Proportion (%) in different categories		
SC	44	47
ST	5	20
OBC	16	20
Other	24	9
Unclear	12	5
Proportion (%) reporting various forms of employment as one of their “main occupations”*		
Farming	2	36
Non-agricultural self-employment	20	15
Casual labour	48	60
Contract work	12	7
Regular employment	12	5
Housework	16	14
Other	11	3
Proportion (%) owning a smartphone	77	51

*Two main occupations were allowed.

Appendix 1: SCHOOL Households and Children (Contd.)

	Urban	Rural
Child characteristics		
Gender distribution (%)		
Male	54	50
Female	46	50
Transgender	0	0
Grade distribution* (%)		
Grades 1-2	19	18
Grades 3-4	24	27
Grades 5-6	33	31
Grades 7-8	24	24
Proportion (%) enrolled in:		
Government school	74	84
Private school	21	11
Other	5	5

*Under-representation of Grades 1 and 2 may reflect enrolment issues during lockout.

Appendix 1: SCHOOL Households and Children (Contd.)

State-wise sample size	Urban	Rural
Jharkhand	32	182
Delhi	185	6
Maharashtra	3	160
Uttar Pradesh	5	155
Odisha	0	93
Haryana	39	49
Karnataka	70	3
Punjab	35	24
Assam	33	23
Bihar	6	46
Other states/UTs*	112	101

*“Other states/UTs” are those with fewer than 50 sample households each: Chandigarh (45), Rajasthan (40), West Bengal (38), Tamil Nadu (35), Madhya Pradesh (34), Gujarat (21).

Appendix 2: Reading Test

Percentage distribution of children by reading ability *

	Able to read fluently	Able to read with difficulty	Able to read some words only	Unable to read more than a few letters
Urban				
Grade 2	9	9	17	65
Grade 3	23	9	16	52
Grade 4	26	26	13	36
Grade 5	41	28	10	22
Grade 6	49	21	11	20
Grade 7	69	19	5	7
Grade 8	58	31	6	6
Rural				
Grade 2	7	13	3	77
Grade 3	11	14	14	61
Grade 4	31	26	7	36
Grade 5	33	19	17	31
Grade 6	48	20	9	22
Grade 7	59	23	6	12
Grade 8	66	13	7	13

*Excluding 44 children who were too shy to read. Figures add up to 100%, row-wise (99% or 101% in some cases, due to "rounding").

