



# Deaf students speak out:

Experiences of education in West Bengal  
during the COVID-19 pandemic

# About Deaf Child Worldwide

We are the UK's leading international charity for deaf children in developing countries. Deaf Child Worldwide works with partners in developing countries, enabling deaf children and young people to be fully included in their family, education and community life.

## Acknowledgements

Pallabi Seth, Survey Coordinator  
Ronita Chattopadhyay, Case Study Researcher

### **Khaghenhat Welfare Organisation**

Amit Kumar Biswas  
Deepak Saiba  
Santosh Roy  
Parimal Roy

### **Graham Bell Centre for the Deaf**

Asma Sarkar  
Sauvik Kumar Ghosh  
Santanu Patra

### **Children in Need India**

Ajmira Khatun  
Nirupama Samanta  
Abira Bhowmick

# Contents

Background to this research .....	7
What others are already saying .....	9
Methodology .....	10
The result .....	15
Key findings .....	32
Recommendations to education policymakers and funders .....	35
Appendix .....	36
References .....	55

# Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted learning across the globe. All children have been affected, but the most vulnerable have been the most disadvantaged.

Before the pandemic, we knew that deaf children in developing countries can experience a delay of up to 10 years in developing their first language.<sup>1</sup> This isn't because deafness is a learning difficulty. It is because most deaf children do not receive the support they need to develop language early on, in order to communicate and learn key concepts and ideas.

Ninety percent of deaf children are born to hearing families, and although their families usually identify early on that there is something different about their child, formal diagnosis can be as late as six years old. This means deaf children grow up in environments where language is largely inaccessible to them, causing delays in development of language, communication and understanding.

We wanted to understand the experience of what education has been like for deaf learners from low income communities during the pandemic. We conducted research with three partners in West Bengal, India, who had started a secondary education project just before the pandemic. We chose this region as it offered the opportunity to see potential differences between rural and urban areas.

Although this research is focused on a specific context, our experience of working in low income countries in South Asia and East Africa has shown us that many issues for deaf children are shared. Through this research, we intend to contribute to the global discussion about what needs to be done for deaf learners as we 'build back better.'

At Deaf Child Worldwide we use the term 'deaf' to refer to all levels and types of deafness and hearing loss from mild to profound. For the purpose of this research we refer to deaf learners, who represent the

deaf children and young people who were involved in a survey and case study process. We have chosen to emphasise their position as learners as this research focuses on their experience of learning during the pandemic.

Of the 300 deaf learners in the secondary education project, 171 who were in secondary and higher secondary years were asked about their learning experience during the pandemic, their preferred materials and modes of support, and their plans for the future. They were aged 15 to 28 (some deaf learners remain in school due to early delays). The majority of the deaf learners surveyed have received language, communication and educational support throughout primary school. Despite coming from low income backgrounds, this makes them a relatively privileged group of deaf young people compared to the many who have not received any of the intensive language late diagnosed deaf children require.

The majority of these learners are in mainstream schools; only 18 attend a school for the deaf. However, they all receive specialised support from Learning Centres at least once a week, where they get help with their studies from educators who explain concepts in sign language and by creating visual materials.

Our learning from the survey was enhanced by eleven case studies, which provided more detail about learners' experiences.

This research invested significant efforts to ensure that the survey and case study process was accessible to the communication styles the deaf learners use. The survey was made available in both written Bengali accompanied with Indian Sign Language videos. The case studies were collected during a series of in-depth interviews conducted by Deaf Role Models, who are familiar with these deaf learners and are able to communicate directly with them, without the need for an interpreter.

# Key findings

## Access to digital devices was uneven

The majority of the deaf learners were able to access a smartphone for their learning. By contrast, very few had access to a TV. Almost a third had no access to any devices, meaning online and hybrid learning was not an option for them.

## Non-governmental organisations have been filling the gap in educational support

The survey made clear that support has overwhelmingly been provided to these young learners by Deaf Child Worldwide's partner organisations. Without them, deaf learners would have had little to no educational support during the pandemic because they did not receive support or received very little from their schools. It is also clear that the support provided by partners was also identified as being more helpful than support from school. Learning Centres were the most preferred source of support.

## Learning Centres were a key source of support

Learning Centres are run by Deaf Child Worldwide partner staff, out of their own offices or in community rooms. Partner staff in this case are specialist teachers or qualified community members. They are supported by Community Based Rehabilitation Workers and Deaf Role Models to develop Teaching/Learning Materials and help with communication.

It is clear from the survey that Learning Centres were a key source of learning

support for the deaf learners. They were the most accessed and most preferred form of support by the group. Almost all of the deaf learners surveyed said they were able to understand lessons at Learning Centres.

## Visual material and practice exam papers were the most accessible methods of learning

Partners provided deaf learners with a range of different materials through WhatsApp when restrictions were in place. Deaf learners' most preferred learning materials were videos explaining sign language concepts and practice question papers.

## The importance of friends

Friends were important to deaf learners both at home and at school, if they had attended. For those who were happy to be back at school, the main reason they were happy was because their friends helped them with their studies. For those who liked studying at home, the main reason was also because it was there that their friends helped them with their studies.

Friends, both hearing and deaf, are clearly an important part of deaf learners' lives when it comes to their learning. This is significant because of what we know about the importance of deaf children having access to socialisation, which allows them to develop language and their understanding of new concepts. The case studies clearly demonstrate that friendships with other deaf young people at the Learning Centres were a source of enjoyment. One young woman stressed the importance of learning with other deaf young people, saying "The stronger the peer group for deaf children, the better they can learn."

## Female learners are at a disadvantage

We could see several ways that girls were at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. For example, teenage girls in our research mostly accessed family-owned and shared smartphones to do their studies, whereas a higher proportion of boys used their own smartphone. We also found that girls were less likely to receive support from their family and community when they asked for it. Of the small number of deaf learners who planned to stop their education, the majority of these were girls living in rural areas.

The research has gathered important information about the reality of deaf young learners' lives during the pandemic. It provides an opportunity to listen to deaf learners and to consider what needs to be done differently in making education more accessible for them.

It also provides evidence for policy-makers when planning for future waves of this pandemic or future pandemics, as well as those considering the benefits and drawbacks of home learning

or online learning. Based on the findings of this research, we propose the following recommendations.

### Recommendations to education policymakers and funders

- Ensure digital learning is accessible for all learners, including those with disabilities and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Invest in training teachers so that they are equipped with the right skills and knowledge to teach deaf children.
- Provide additional support to deaf students at school and in the community that recognises their specific needs.
- Conduct further research to understand other intersectionalities that lead to disadvantage.

# Background to this research

This research seeks to establish the experience of deaf learners during the COVID-19 pandemic to support efforts to 'build back better' post-pandemic. We wanted to understand the issues of access that deaf learners have had to learning resources and support as well their preferences. We also wanted to understand whether the pandemic has affected their motivation and plans to continue education. This research does not attempt to show how much more challenging it may have been for deaf learners compared to their hearing peers. Rather, its focus is on building a rich description of their experience.

Primary and secondary schools in West Bengal and the rest of India closed in March 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. Students of classes IX to XII (secondary and higher secondary class) returned to school from February 2021 in West Bengal but schools were closed again in April as cases rose resulting in the most recent and deadliest wave of the virus. Secondary and Higher Secondary Board exams were cancelled, after initially being postponed, and students in these classes were graded instead on their schoolwork. In place of regular schooling, the West Bengal Government provided some TV lessons and practice exam questions and made activities available to download on Government websites.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of 2020, three organisations in West Bengal supported by Deaf Child Worldwide – Child in Need Institute (CINI), Graham Bell Centre for the Deaf (GBCD) and Khagenhat Welfare Organisation (KWO) – started a new project titled Strengthening Inclusive Secondary Education for Deaf Children in West Bengal. Six years prior to this, these partners had been working on inclusive primary education projects, with funding from Deaf Child Worldwide. 154 of those who participated in this survey had also been supported by these inclusive primary education projects.

The new project which started in January 2020 was designed to take learnings

from previous projects and provide regular secondary school-level language, communication and curriculum support through Learning Centres (or at home if deaf learners were unable to travel to the centres). There they would receive out-of-school support by subject specialist teachers, based on their class level and ability. The specialist teachers were to be supported by Community Based Rehabilitation Workers (CBRWs) and Deaf Role Models (DRMs) to ensure they could adapt lessons and develop learning materials suitable for teaching deaf children. Further support was to be offered by Resource Parent Groups and Community Resource Groups comprising of parents or community members who are qualified enough to support deaf children with their higher studies. CBRWs and DRMs were also to visit secondary schools to facilitate sessions with peer groups and teachers, as well as to provide materials to support the learning of deaf students. A few months into the project, all interventions were disrupted by the pandemic and partners were forced to adapt to providing support over the phone – either through telephone calls or WhatsApp. Any work with secondary schools and specialist teachers has been unable to take place.

The majority of the more than 91 million people who live in West Bengal are located rurally, with only 32% located in urban areas.<sup>3</sup> Our three partner organisations work in different areas of West Bengal, and as such they have experienced the pandemic differently. CINI is based in Kolkata, the state capital of West Bengal, with an entirely urban population of 4.5 million people.<sup>4</sup> GBCD is based in Hooghly District with a population of 5 million people that is 33% urban.<sup>5</sup> KWO works in two districts: Jalpaiguri District, which has a population of 3.4 million that is 18% urban; and Alipurduar district, which has a population of 1.5 million.<sup>6</sup> The three organisations also represent different poverty levels, with Jalpaiguri considered to be the poorest, followed by Hooghly and then Kolkata.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Hindustan Times. West Bengal govt announces virtual classes for students of class 9 to 12. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/west-bengal-govt-announces-virtual-classes-for-students-of-class-9-to-12/story-Wlff4OZRWFHd2CA11Oo6yM.html> (accessed August 2021).

Before conducting this research, the three organisations delivered reports and updates that provided significant information about what it was like on the ground. CINI was forced to provide only online support to deaf learners until July 2020, when only 21 out of the 120 deaf learners in the project returned to Learning Centres. GBCD was able to resume in-person support through home visits and at Learning Centres to almost 100 deaf learners from June 2020. However, 19 deaf learners dropped out of the project either due to their families migrating or because they decided not to continue with education.

KWO was able to continue to visit a small number of homes from April 2020 and is now able to reach all 100 deaf learners in person, though continues to provide a hybrid approach of home visits and videos sent through WhatsApp.

The way the partners have had to adapt to pandemic restrictions gave us important insights. We noted early on that partners were returning to in-person support as soon as they could, suggesting that online support was not enough or not working.

Although Deaf Child Worldwide already had some understanding about the way different partners were adapting to the pandemic, this research was commissioned in order to establish some key facts. We wanted to know more about deaf learners' access to education support, and to understand what deaf learners thought about this support. Furthermore, the varied location of the partners also presented an opportunity to explore what differences there were in the experiences of deaf learners located rurally and those in urban areas.

<sup>3</sup>The 2011 Indian National Census. <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/west+bengal.html> (accessed March 2021).

<sup>4</sup>Indian Institute of Management Calcutta. Restructuring of School Education System in West Bengal: Interim Report. 2011. Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. No figures available on urban versus rural population for Alipurduar district.

<sup>6</sup>The Mint. Spatial poverty in West Bengal. <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/dXPv8bp492mKX9rirXX0hK/Spatial-poverty-in-West-Bengal.html> (accessed March 2021). No figures available for Alipurduar district.

<sup>7</sup>UNHR. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/crpd/pages/conventionrightspersonswith-disabilities.aspx> (accessed August 2021).



# What others are already saying

The research was designed based on the principle that people with disabilities have the right to have their voices heard and to participate in discussions about issues that affect them. Article 7 of the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities seeks to “ensure that children with disabilities have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them.” This research addresses the gap in evidence from people with disabilities themselves, in this case deaf learners.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to urgent cries for the world to ‘build back better’, so that we are able to move forward from this crisis with our lessons learned and recommendations in hand. The state of education for those most likely to be left behind has formed a major part of this self-assessment, as school systems across the globe have been disrupted since March 2020.

Even before the pandemic, the World Bank’s Inclusive Education Initiative pointed to the gaps between the prospects of disabled learners compared to their non-disabled peers, highlighting that high quality education for disabled learners was rare.<sup>9</sup> Our 18 years of experience of working in India has demonstrated to us that pre-pandemic education for most deaf learners lacked the specific adjustments needed to ensure that deaf children and young people were able to learn when in the classroom. Teachers often do not have the necessary knowledge about how deaf children acquire language and learn, or the necessary skills and capacity to provide the intensive support they need.<sup>10</sup>

That this research focuses on deaf young people from low income communities who are in secondary school makes it

distinctive. In 2018 the Global Partnership for Education estimated that 55% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not reach secondary school.<sup>11</sup> In India it is thought that very low numbers of children with disabilities reach secondary school, and it could be as low as 9% completing secondary education.<sup>12</sup> For Deaf Child Worldwide, the focus on secondary education is relatively new, with our first programme only starting in January 2020. The focus on secondary school is possible because we are only now in the position where a significant number of deaf children on the projects we work with have received many years of primary school support to enable them to attend high school.

With school closures, many teachers have relied on the use of technology to reach learners. However, it has become increasingly recognised that disadvantaged groups have limited access to technology, internet and the digital skills required to learn using technology.<sup>13</sup> A recent survey in 15 states in India, including West Bengal, highlights the disadvantage that learners from lower castes and those from rural areas are at when it comes to access to smartphones, stable internet, or even the inclination to study online.<sup>14</sup> In rural areas, 37% of those surveyed were not studying at all, and 55% of households of lower caste did not have access to a smartphone. On top of this, learners with disabilities face additional barriers to learning with technology, as well as sociocultural norms that may mean they are prevented from using technology.<sup>15</sup>

Lynch, Singal and Francia<sup>16</sup> highlight the potential of educational technology to support learners with disabilities. In their systematic review they bring to light the fact that most EdTech solutions available

<sup>8</sup>**The World Bank.** Inclusive Education Initiative: Transforming education for children with disabilities. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/socialsustainability/brief/inclusive-education-initiative-transforming-education-for-children-with-disabilities> (accessed August 2021).

<sup>9</sup>**Deaf Child Worldwide.** Unheard Children. <https://www.ndcs.org.uk/deaf-child-worldwide/unheard-children/> (accessed August 2021).

<sup>10</sup>**Global Partnership for Education.** GPE’s Work on Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/2018-07-31-gpe-children-with-disabilities-factsheet.pdf> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>11</sup>**UKFIET.** Examining Disability Inclusion in India’s New National Education Policy. <https://www.ukfiет.org/2020/examining-disability-inclusion-in-india-as-new-national-education-policy/> (accessed August 2021).

<sup>12</sup>**UNICEF.** How many children and young people have internet access at home? <https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-and-young-people-internet-access-at-home-during-covid19/> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>13</sup>**Times of India.** Over 90% parents from deprived sections clamour for school reopening. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/news/over-90-parents-from-deprived-sections-clamour-for-school-reopening/articleshow/85979450.cms> (accessed September 2021).

are located in India and focus on supporting learners with a hearing impairment. While there may be potential digital learning solutions for deaf learners in India, as Lynch et al demonstrate, the fact remains that only 8% of households in India with members aged 5 to 24 have both a computer and an internet connection.<sup>17</sup> As such, a significant proportion of learners, disabled or not, are unable to benefit from online or hybrid learning options.

More and more research is being published as the pandemic continues but existing literature that focuses on the Indian context seems sparse. Some does highlight the heightened challenges of children with disabilities to be included in the increased

online learning that has been made available, in particular by governments, though no primary data is made available. One author simply writes, “It is difficult to say whether we should teach them [children with disabilities] online or not and if yes, how.”<sup>18</sup>

Our research contributes the voices of deaf learners to the broader discussions taking place at country, regional and international levels. It contributes to questions around the effectiveness of online learning and home learning, and offers insights into what has worked and been preferred by deaf learners, so that they can be included in decisions about the future of education.

<sup>14</sup> **Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies.** INEE Technical Note on education during the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://inee.org/resources/inee-technical-note-education-during-covid-19-pandemic> (accessed August 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Lynch, P., Singal, N., and Francia, G. **EdTech for Learners with Disabilities in Primary School Settings in LMICs: A Systematic Literature Review.** 2021. The World Bank. <https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/XJ42VUQG> (Accessed July 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Mahapatra, A. and Sharma, P. **Education in times of COVID-19 pandemic: Academic stress and its psychosocial impact on children and adolescents in India.** International <sup>17</sup>Journal of Social Psychiatry. 2021. 67(4):397-399.

<sup>17</sup> Narvekar, H. N. **Educational concerns of children with disabilities during COVID-19 pandemic.** Letters to editor. Indian Journal of Psychiatry. 2020. 62(5):603-604.

# Methodology

The primary question this research seeks to answer is:

## **What has been the experience of deaf learners in accessing educational support during the COVID-19 pandemic in West Bengal, India?**

Under this primary question are six objectives:

1. Understand the extent to which deaf learners have been able to access government, school and partner learning materials, and how they have been supported at home.
2. Document clear experiential descriptions of what it has been like for deaf learners during the pandemic.
3. Understand what support has been preferred by deaf learners.
4. Understand the extent to which this experience has impacted their motivation or ability to continue learning or training.
5. Identify whether there are differences between the experience of deaf learners according to geographical location, gender or age.
6. Develop recommendations that will raise awareness about the needs of deaf learners

and inform strategy and planning to support them post-pandemic.

This research was designed in two parts, using a mixed methods approach. The first part involved conducting a survey of deaf secondary and higher secondary school students from three of our partner organisations' projects. The second part, involved collecting eleven case studies from deaf learners, using insights from the survey.

In total, the three partners work with 344 deaf learners between class V to XII. 52% are female and 48% are male.

To limit its scope, our research focused on secondary and higher secondary school students, bringing the total population to 178. Of this population, 171 participated in the survey. The characteristics of the population are shown in Figures 1 to 5. There was a relatively even split by partner, with slightly more representation from Khagenhat Welfare Organisation (KWO). The gender split represents that of the overall project, where females are slightly more than males. The proportion of deaf learners in this group in urban and rural areas matches that of the overall state of West Bengal (referenced in Background section). 89% of the group were either profoundly or severely deaf.

Figure 1: Survey sample by geography



Figure 2: Survey sample by partner

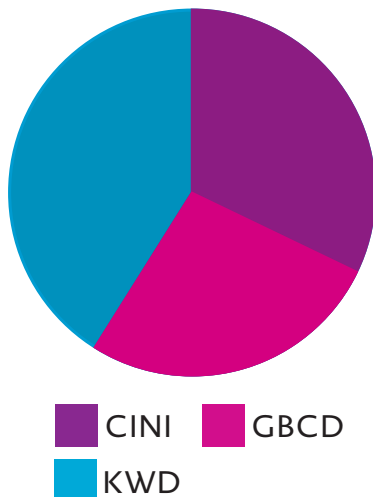
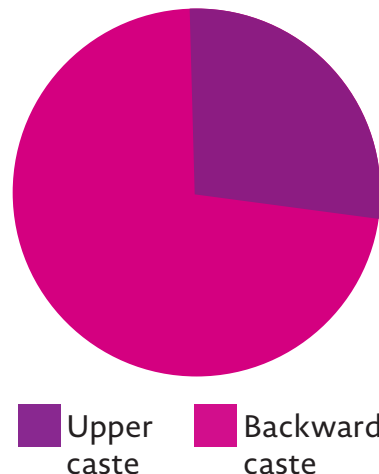


Figure 3: Survey sample by caste



‘The term “backward caste” is an official classification of ethnicity’.

Figure 4: Survey sample by gender

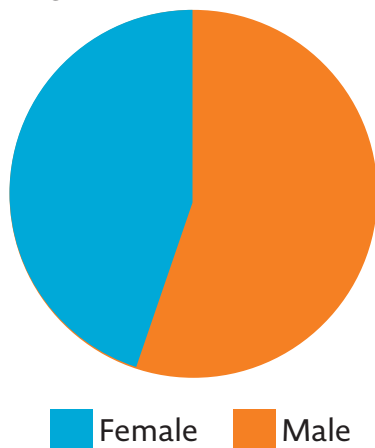
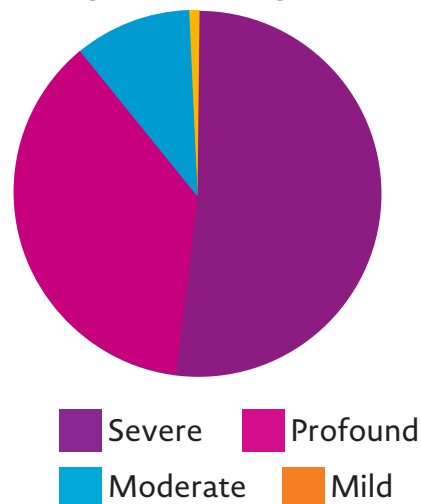


Figure 5: Survey sample by degree of hearing loss



The survey included six sections and a total of 37 questions. All questions were closed, with either single or multiple-choice options. We decided not to include any open qualitative questions. By keeping the questions simple and unambiguous, we aimed to enable the deaf learners to answer the questions independently. This was important due to the varied communication skills of the group. Including open questions would potentially cause confusion and may require the participants to ask for help to answer them. This would have increased the possibility for influence in the way they answered the questions.

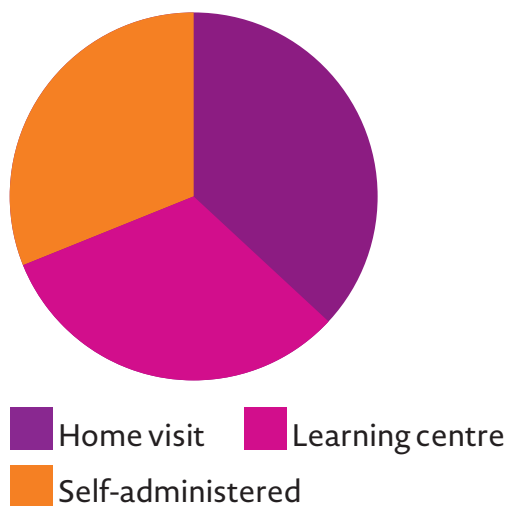
As the survey was being designed, it was not yet clear whether the participants would have to take the survey alone in their homes due to COVID-19 restrictions, without any support to understand the questions.

When the survey was being designed, schools had reopened, but it was not certain that they would remain open for the duration of the survey. This brought up concerns about recall bias affecting the validity of the questions. To avoid asking participants about a specific period of time that they might misremember, they were asked to think about the time since they started studying at home.

The six sections of the survey covered the following topics:

1. Experiences during the pandemic: asking questions about how they felt during the pandemic.
2. Access to technology: access to devices and internet connection quality.
3. Learning arrangements during the pandemic: asking questions about different modes of support, how often they received it, whether they were able to understand, ask questions and connect with peers.
4. Learning materials support: asking questions about the different types of materials they received, who from, and what they found most helpful.
5. Family and community support: if anyone in their family or community help them with studies, and if they got the support they asked for.

Figure 6: Survey sample by place survey was taken



6. School and future aspirations: if they had returned to school, how they felt about it and why, and what they plan to do next and why.

All 37 questions were designed first in English, then translated in Bengali and then into Indian Sign Language. Both the English and Bengali written questions along with the signed video were made available on the online platform Google Forms. This was chosen due to its versatility when it came to using multiple languages.

There was a relatively even split between those who took the survey themselves using a mobile phone at home, during a home visit from a partner staff member, and at a partner Learning Centre. All respondents took the survey on a digital device.

The need to limit the risk of bias from partner staff administering the survey was considered carefully while designing the methodology. The control measures included the following:

1. Participants were not replaced if they decided not to participate.
2. Survey information was corroborated with project information available on the sampled deaf learners.
3. Survey information was stored in Google Form in real time and was not edited.
4. Survey questions did not directly ask about the effectiveness of partner specific materials or about their effectiveness in comparison to other materials.
5. Question responses were checked for logic of answers.

The results were analysed by looking at whether different variables, including age, gender, caste, geography, communication style and hearing impairment revealed differences in experience.

## Case study collection

The survey revealed many gaps in our knowledge. To understand more, our partners collected eleven case studies to develop a more in-depth understanding of the themes raised by the survey and the experience of the pandemic according to deaf learners themselves. These case studies were collected by Deaf Role Models and partner staff, with the guidance of an experienced Case Study Researcher.

Each case study was collected during a maximum of three visits using an interview schedule with five parts. The case study team conducted a first interview in Indian Sign Language with each participant, which took a minimum of two hours to complete. This varied and sometimes took longer according to the varying levels of sign language and the ability of the deaf learner to express themselves. The Case Study Researcher then reviewed the information collected and then the case study team asked the participant some further questions based on the review. The team then communicated with the participant a final time to collect any final pieces of information and to also share the case study with the deaf young person for their validation and approval. During this final phase, some small changes were made by the deaf young people, but overall they were happy with their stories and appreciated being able to see them in their full form. These case studies have been translated from Bengali into English.

Based on the results of the survey, the key themes that the case studies sought to understand are as follows:

- The differences in having or not have a smartphone.
- What it was like to attend a Learning Centre.
- The different learning materials they preferred and why.
- Who their friends were and how they helped them.
- What going back to school was like for those who attended.

- Why they will or will not continue their education.

An interview schedule was drafted to cover questions about the key themes, as well as the background.

The participants in the case study collection were selected based on the way they responded to the survey. The sampling method was both purposive and convenient. Between 17 and 21 participants per location were selected anonymously based on their answers to the survey as well as their gender. From these, participants were then shortlisted to eight participants from each partner, along with a backup list. For those who could not participate or be reached, another was selected from the list. Sampling criteria included:

- Gender
- Adolescent, young adult
- Access to smartphone – minimal/ did not have
- Learning Centre – attended/did not attend
- Preferred materials, especially signed videos, question papers
- Joined school – regular/irregular
- Did not receive support at home
- Education – continue/discontinue
- Answers that were anomalous.

The process of collecting the case studies was as follows:

1. Training of case study team
2. Pilot case study
3. Follow up call/meeting
4. Complete pilot with participant approval of story
5. Complete other case studies as per agreed timeline.

**Daily activity chart:** Symbols/pictures used to show the daily routine.

**Gendered resource mapping:** A girl and boy are drawn on two halves of a chart paper. Pictures of resources/services – for example books to symbolise education – are kept at the ready. The exercise helps the participant to depict which resources can be easily accessed by boys and girls.

**Generating conversation using smileys/emoticons:** Smileys/emoticons (happy face, sad face, angry face) are used to explore emotions related to the pandemic. Following this a discussion can be had about what made the child sad and what made the child angry.

**Relationship mapping:** A child is drawn in the centre and other people and the relationships are written around this. The relationship can be shown by different kinds of lines or in terms of having clusters of circles where the size of the circles can indicate extent of engagement and support.

**Ranking/measuring effectiveness of support:** This can be done in various forms. Smileys/emoticons can be used to express satisfaction (happy face), medium effectiveness (neutral face) and dissatisfaction (sad face). Pie charts can be used, where bigger segments represent those that are more effective. The support can also be placed along a ranking line (for example, 0 to 5) which can be colour-coded – red (for not useful, 0 to 1), yellow (barely useful, 2 to 3) and green (useful, 4 to 5).

The questions on daily activities and gendered resource mapping were more challenging to explore than expected. More time and in-depth engagement was required. Some of the deaf learners found it challenging to conceive of the routine of the opposite sex. One boy was suspicious of the questions and responded, “I am not in a relationship with a girl. I cannot tell (you about the routine of a girl).” Furthermore, none of the participants shared what they did not like about the Learning Centres or other aspects of their engagement with partners. Instead, responses related to challenges with distance and a lack of transport were cited. This could be because their experience with partners was overwhelmingly positive, or could signify a lack of critical reflection on the support they received. It is also possible that the Case

Study Teams did not explore these areas sufficiently or that the deaf learners were wary of providing negative feedback directly to the Deaf Role Model and partner staff. It was also noted that the deaf learners found it difficult to provide recommendations directed towards a ‘government education department’ as this was a concept they did not fully understand. They were much more comfortable providing recommendations for their schools and teachers.

Partner staff shared that they had learned a lot from being part of the case study process. They were exposed to an in-depth process that valued the information given directly by deaf learners. One Deaf Role Model explained:

**“We used to get a lot of the information from the people around them (from parents of deaf children and young people and others). But this time, we got 99% information from them (case study participants) and only 1% information from others.**

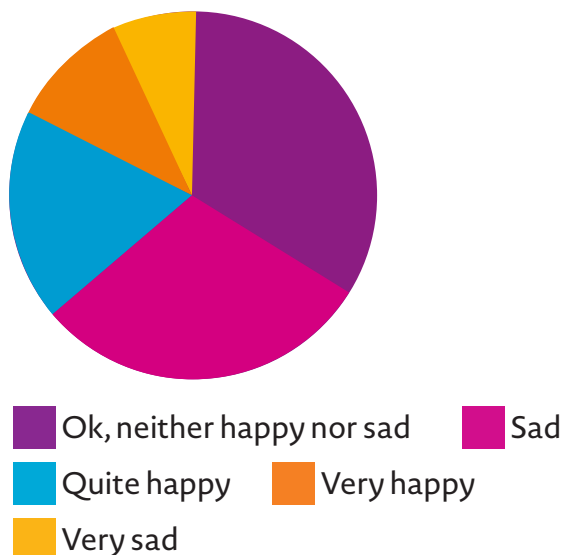
**We had never gone back and shared the stories (with participants) before. They have really enjoyed it. The girls said they want to be independent; they want to earn in some way. Sanchari now wants to be a Deaf Role Model like me. This is what I liked best.”**

This experience has built the knowledge and skills of partner staff so that the views and stories of deaf learners can be better captured in future.

# The results

## The experience of staying at home

Figure 7: How deaf learners felt staying at home during the pandemic



The highest proportion of deaf learners reported to be ‘OK, neither happy nor sad’ while staying at home during the pandemic. A similar proportion said they were ‘Sad’. When looking at the way the two genders responded, a higher proportion of females (35%) than males (23%) responded that they were ‘Sad’.

Those that responded that they felt ‘OK’ gave a mixture of both positive and negative reasons for why they felt that way. They gave more negative reasons than positive reasons, as shown in Table 1.

Positive reasons	Negative reasons
They were able to spend more time with their families (21%)	They were unable to meet their friends and relatives (28%)
They got more time to study (16%)	Felt excluded from accessing education (13%)
More leisure time (10%)	More household work (6%)
	Felt lonely (5%)

Similarly, the main reason those reported they were ‘Sad’ was because they were unable to meet their friends and relatives and that they felt excluded from accessing education. This shows that overall the experience for these deaf learners was not positive, due to the fact that they could not see their friends and relatives.

Friends were also frequently mentioned in the case studies when remembering life before the pandemic. Koyel (16) is based in a rural area and her father was a primary school teacher. She used to enjoy attending the local government high school.

Koyel had about 20 friends in her section of 60 classmates. Her face lit up as she recalled,

**“I could meet all my friends earlier. I studied regularly in the school.” She added, “I don’t like being at home because of the pandemic.”**

The case studies give more information about the ways deaf learners lives had been negatively affected by the pandemic, showing a stark difference to pre-pandemic life.

Ashrafal (19), a teenage boy from Hooghly district, was close to his father before he passed away from a sudden heart attack. His story shows the way the pandemic not only affected his ability to study, but the emotional impact the loss of his father has had.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Ashrafal would attend his school and the Learning Centre managed by Graham Bell Centre for Deaf (GBCD) regularly. His parents could barely sign their names and had, therefore, been unable to support him with his education directly. “Truly... it was a different time. I used to go to school. I used to chat with my school friends. In the evening, I would play football with my friends and then I used to study a little more,” he shares through sign language. Ashrafal’s eyes brim with unshed



tears as he recalls, “Every evening, my father used to come back from work and sit next to me. He would ask me how my studies were going. I used to really like that.”

Adil (20) from Kolkata, shared that even though his family had less income during the

pandemic and they sometimes had to ration food, he liked that he could spend more time with his family. He also used to complete his school and would help his mother with the household work.

## Average hours spent in following activities per day

Study	Household work	Leisure time with family/friends	Leisure time alone
3.5	3.1	2.8	2.6

Table 2

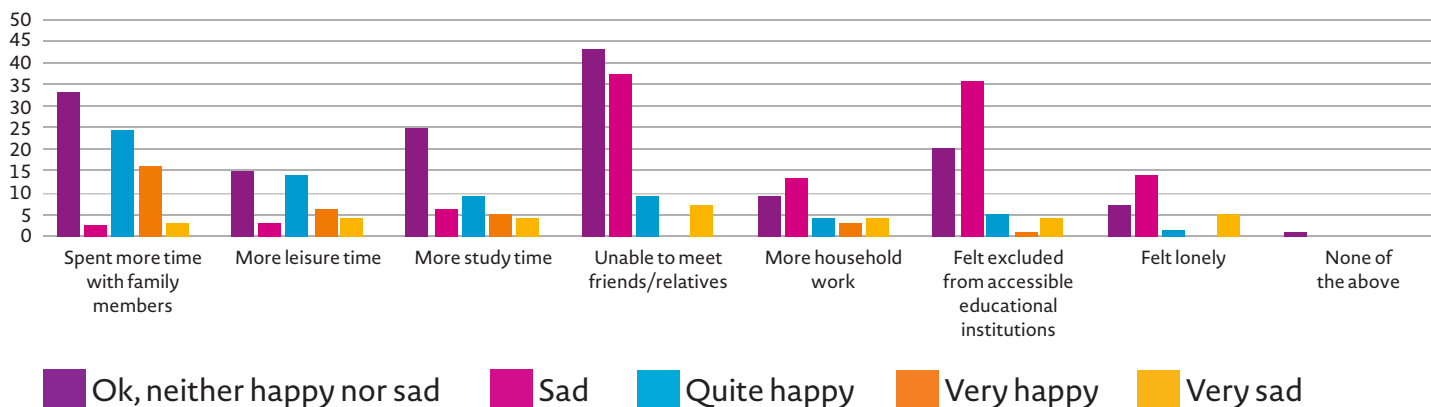
When asked in the survey about how deaf learners spent their time, on average most time was spent on studying, followed by household work (Table 2). Males spent more time on household work than the average, and those in urban areas spent more time on their studies than the average. It is important to note that the term ‘household work’ was not defined, so from the survey it is not clear if this includes agricultural work or work for the family business or it is clear that deaf learners spent more of their time either studying or doing household work than on leisure time. Males spent more time with family and friends than females.

We asked this question to see if these deaf learners had greatly reduced the time they spent on studying, in favour of other activities. It is encouraging that on average they spent most of their time studying, however without anything to compare it to it is hard to know if this is greatly reduced or the same compared to before the pandemic.

In summary, the section of the survey about staying at home during the pandemic highlights some differences between the female and male experience, suggesting that females in this group are at more of a disadvantage to their male peers.

## Reasons deaf learners reported for how they felt

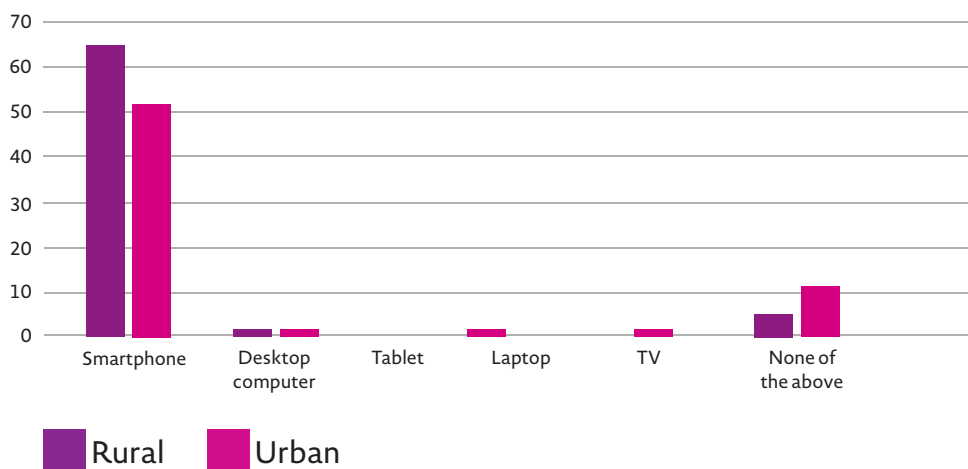
Figure 8: Reasons deaf learners reported for how they felt



This graph (Figure 8) shows a breakdown of the reasons deaf learners reported for how they felt during the pandemic. This shows that a prominent reason given was that they were unable to meet friends or relatives.

## Access to technology

Figure 9: Devices used for their studies according to location



In terms of their access to devices used for their studies, deaf learners most commonly had access to a smartphone (Figure 9). Only 9% told us that they had access to a TV for their learning and only one or two had access to computer, laptop or tablet. The majority of those who had access to a TV or another device resided in urban areas. Adil shared that he could never understand the live classes shown on TV because they did not use sign language, so even those who had a TV were unlikely to be able to engage with anything being shown.

28% had no access to any devices at all, and almost all of this group resided in rural areas

and were from GBCD's project. This means that for almost a third of this group of deaf learners, online or hybrid learning is not an option. Priyanka (15) lives in a remote mountain area 9km from her school and Learning Centre. She became disconnected from both as neither she nor anyone else in her family had a smartphone.

Figure 10 shows that the majority who had access to a smartphone were males, most of whom owned their own devices. Fewer females had access to a smartphone and fewer females actually owned their phones, most used a family phone and shared with others.

Figure 10: Means of accessing a smartphone by gender

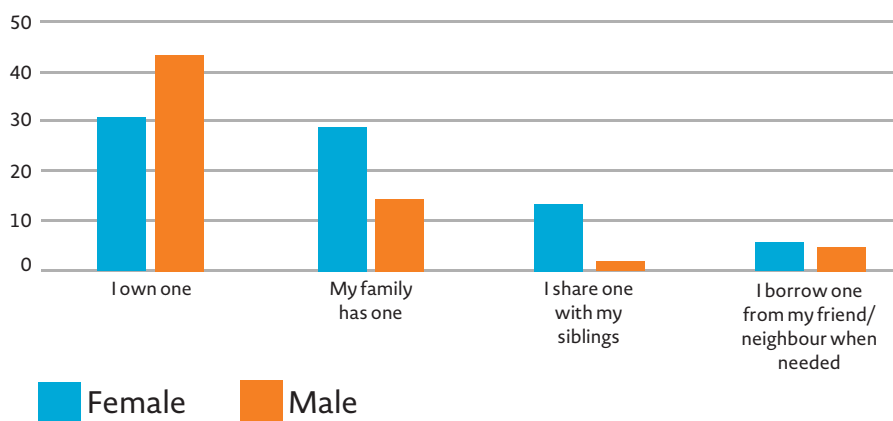


Figure 11: Experience of using internet network

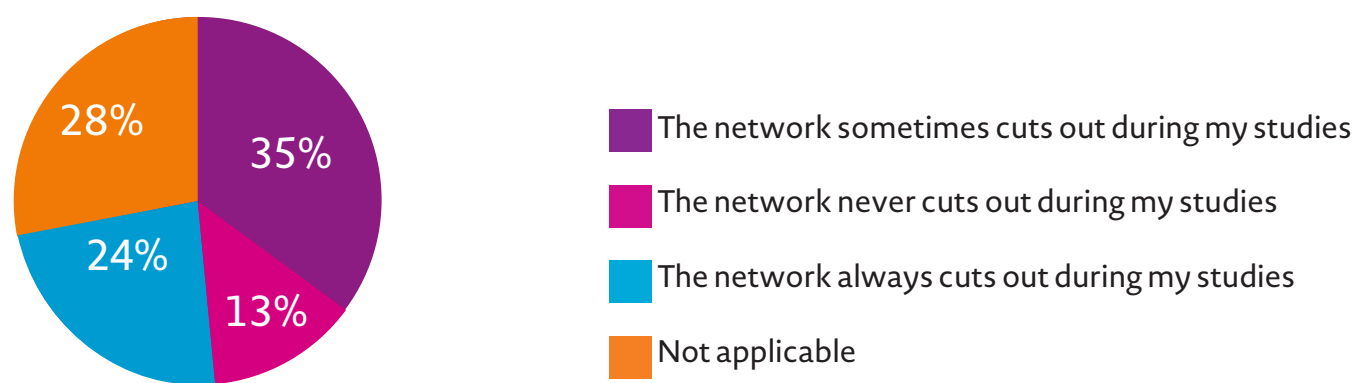


Figure 11 shows that for those who had access to the internet, only 13% reported that their network never cut out during their studies. Over 60% said that their network either ‘Always’ or ‘Sometimes’ cut out. This suggests that learning online was often disrupted due to the internet connection, which likely hampered understanding and engagement.

Trijit (19) from Kolkata discussed the challenges of online learning. Trijit prefers to study offline. He shares that online education is expensive because of the mobile-related costs. Also, there are network problems and so he often gets disconnected. This makes it difficult to understand what is being taught. He found mathematics most difficult to follow.

Adil adds to this picture of struggling to follow what was being taught online by partner staff. “It is difficult to understand. The connection is not there always. I have to keep asking again and again to repeat.” He only liked the classes on communication (sign language) online. Some signed videos were helpful. But overall, Adil became quite fed up with online education.

## Learning arrangement during the pandemic

Deaf learners mostly accessed learning arrangements provided by partners. Only 33 deaf learners (19%) received either online lessons or home visits from schoolteachers. The majority of this group were based in Kolkata.

Baidyanath (19) explained that one of his schoolteachers tried to help. “The English teacher in school started a WhatsApp group. That was helpful. Even though she could not explain with sign language, she used to help a lot with the writing.” However, most of the deaf learners involved in the case studies explained that they had had no contact from their school or teachers.

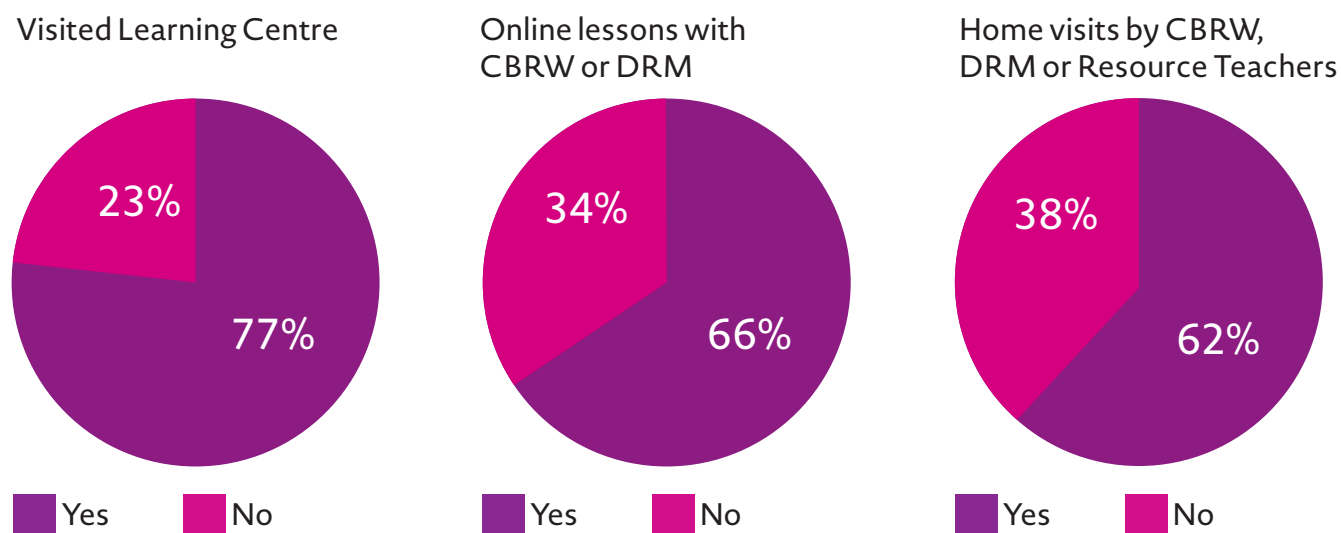
The case studies also provided insights into ways that school was not deaf friendly prior to the pandemic. Sanchari shared how she used to struggle with lessons because the teaching was delivered verbally. These stories shared more

about how friends helped than teachers.

In comparison to support from school teachers, figure 12 shows that 77% accessed Learning Centres, 66% accessed online lessons with Community Based

Rehabilitation Workers (CBRWs) or Deaf Role Models (DRMs) and 62% accessed home visits by CBRW or DRMs. These three most common arrangements were provided by our three partner organisations.

Figure 12



When considering access to these learning arrangements by location, most deaf learners based in urban areas received online lessons with CBRWs or DRMs and most deaf learners based in rural areas received home visits by CBRWs or DRMs. This correlates with the fact that urban areas experienced longer and stricter lockdowns, which prevented movement and the ability to meet in person. It can be assumed that the majority of this group faced regular disruption to their learning due to poor internet connection.

We found that a higher proportion of those who had access to a smartphone were able to access a bigger variety of learning arrangements, compared to those who had no access to any devices. Table 3 shows

the proportion of those who own their own smartphone, used a family-owned smartphone, shared a smartphone with siblings and didn't have any form of device. It then shows the different modes of support that they said they received. This shows that a higher proportion of those who had their own smartphone accessed in-person support at Learning Centres and from home visits from our partner organisations. This slightly reduces for those who used their family-owned smartphone and even more so for those who shared their smartphone with siblings. It is also noticeable that a smaller proportion of those who did not have access to devices accessed to Learning Centres and home visits.

	Online class with CBRW or DRM	Classes at Learning Centre	Home visit by CBRW or DRM	Online class with schoolteacher
Has own smartphone	91%	83%	68%	20%
Uses family-owned smartphone	95%	79%	64%	33%
Shares smartphone with siblings	92%	62%	38%	31%
Doesn't have access to devices	0%	79%	65%	0%

Table 3

In addition, 38% of those who did not use a device also said they did not have home visits from a CBRW or DRM, and 22% said they had not accessed classes at a Learning Centre and accessed any other form of support. This shows that those who had access to a smartphone were more able to access educational support of all kinds compared with those who did not

have access to a smartphone or any other device. This may have been because those without smartphones were more likely to live rurally and therefore also have geographic challenges in attending lessons, as well as geographic challenges for CBRWs and DRMs in visiting the deaf learner.

Did not have access to a devices for learning	
Did not have home visit from CBRW or DRM	38% 18
Did not attend classes at Learning Centre	22% 11
Schoolteacher visited you	0% 2

Table 4

Sachin (15) provides some insight into this point. His family does not own a smartphone so he could not access online education. He was fearful of returning to the Learning Centre even when it reopened later in 2020, and only attended in early 2021. The centre closed again in the second wave and so in the end the Deaf Role Model and Community Based Rehabilitation Worker visited him at home two to three times a month.

Overall, deaf learners told us that Learning Centres were their most preferred learning arrangement (Table 5). Koyel who is based in a rural area explained,

**“I went to the Learning Centre once every week. All the sirs [teachers] use sign language when explaining. They would repeat the answers several times and I could understand well... Earlier also, I have been able to get good marks in school because of the learnings.”**

This changed when looking at those from urban areas, where most preferred online lessons from CBRWs or DRMs, followed by Learning Centres (Table 6). This correlates with the fact that those in urban areas had more access to online lessons from CBRWs or DRMs, as they had less access to in-person support due to ongoing lockdowns.

Nahida (19) from Kolkata is committed to her studies and would never miss the online classes. However, online education was not easy for her. She shared that there were multiple problems. The time was very limited and covering the content in sign language was

not easy. Understanding arithmetic and geometry was particularly difficult. She prefers classes held in person in school and the Learning Centre since she can understand better and there is a lot of time.

Baidyanath, who is based in a rural area, felt too afraid to attend the Learning Centre and so with the help of a smartphone, he started attending the online classes held by the Deaf Role Model and partner support staff. Since then, the online classes have become an integral part of his life.

## Overall preference for learning arrangements

Learning arrangements	Number of deaf learners	% total deaf learners
Attending lessons at a Learning Centre	65	38%
Online lessons with CBRW or DRM using smartphone or computer	52	30%
CBRW, DRM or resource/special teacher visiting your home to teach you	45	26%
Online lessons with schoolteacher using smartphone or computer	8	5%
Schoolteacher visiting your home to teach you	1	1%

Table 5

## Urban area preference for learning arrangements

Learning arrangements	Number of deaf learners	% total deaf learners
Online lessons with CBRW or DRM using smartphone or computer	26	15
Attending lessons at a Learning Centre	19	11
CBRW, DRM or resource/special teacher visiting your home to teach you	5	3
Online lessons with schoolteacher using smartphone or computer	5	3

Table 6

Despite geographical differences, Learning Centres were clearly an important form of support for deaf learners during the pandemic. For Ashraful, who had found it hard to be engaged with his studies during the pandemic, he liked studying at the Learning Centre and could understand what was being taught. He felt the Learning Centre was the biggest support for his education during the pandemic. His friends from the centre would also come to his house and share their notes with him.

Ayesha (15), shared that she likes coming to the Learning Centre because of the use of sign language. She also learned about things that had never been discussed in her school, like using mobile phones safely, and the rights and needs of children, and hygiene. Although, the Learning Centre’s benefit is not because of the opportunity to learn. She says,

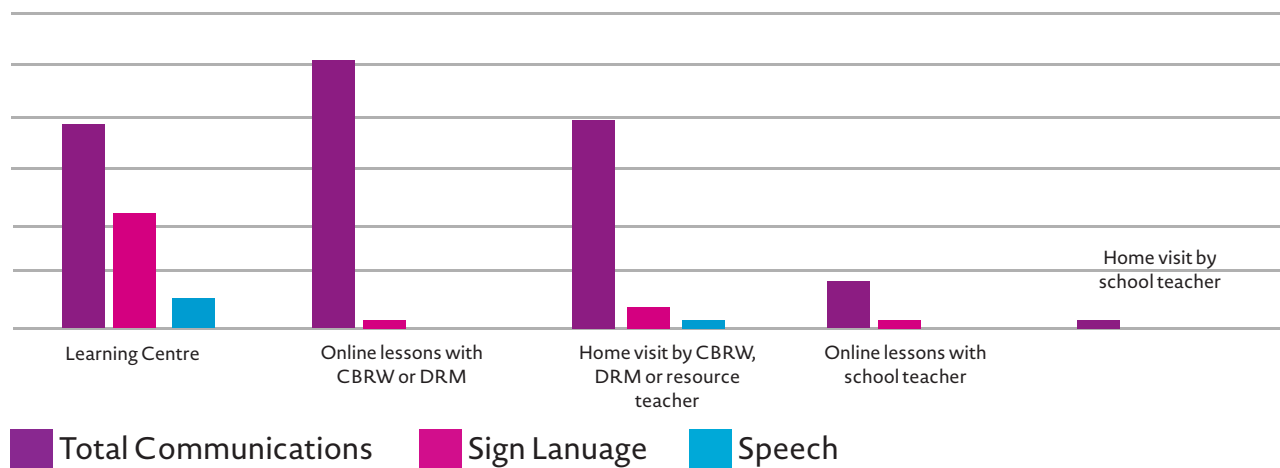
**“I like coming to the centre. But it is not for studies.”**

It is also clear that deaf learners preferred support provided by our partners over other sources of support. Even though 19% of

the group had received some support from schoolteachers, a very small number of them preferred the support given by schoolteachers.

Figure 13 shows that communication preference had an impact on the preference of learning arrangements. 83% of the total group are Total Communication users. This means that they use any form of communication depending on their particular needs and abilities, including sign, gesture, lip-reading, writing, aural and speech. 15% are sign language users and 4% use speech. We found that 37% of Total Communication users preferred online lessons with a CBRW or DRM, but 29% preferred home visits by a CBRW or DRM and 28% preferred Learning Centres. Compared to this, sign language and speech users almost unanimously preferred Learning Centres. This suggests that Total Communication users are able to benefit from a wider range of learning arrangements compared to sign language and speech users. It also shows that Learning Centres are relatively popular for all communication styles.

Figure 13: Preference for learning arrangements by communication style



Deaf learners were asked whether they understood what was being explained to them during the different learning arrangements they accessed. Table 8 shows that Learning Centres scored the highest,

with 59% of deaf learners ‘Always’ able to understand what was being taught.

		Online class with CBRW or DRM	Classes at Learning Centre	Home visit by CBRW or DRM	Online class with schoolteacher
Able to understand lessons	Always	49%	59%	43%	33%
	Sometimes	50%	40%	55%	60%
	Never	1%	1%	2%	7%

Table 7

When we looked at whether deaf learners could understand different learning arrangements by their degree of hearing loss, the highest proportion of those with severe and moderate hearing loss could ‘Always’ understand lessons at the Learning Centres. A similar proportion of those with profound hearing loss could ‘Always’ understand lessons at Learning Centres and during online classes with CBRWs or DRMs. This further highlights the usefulness of the Learning Centres.

## Learning materials support

In the survey, most deaf learners reported that the videos explaining sign language concepts were the most helpful learning material. These videos were used to help explain concepts in textbooks and as part of schoolwork. This changed for deaf learners in urban areas, where they found solved question papers most helpful (Figure 14). Most deaf learners received these materials from CBRWs or DRMs, and only 22% received materials from teachers (Figure 15). Only 2% received solved question papers/assignments from schoolteachers, compared with 58% who received them from CBRWs or DRMs (Figure 17). This is significant as these solved question papers/assignments were made available online by the West Bengal government schools as one of their contributions to learning during the pandemic. Through the case studies we learned that the students collected these solved question papers/assignment from the schools when they visited for free meals that

were being distributed by schools, or they were downloaded by partners. Either way the partners would share them with the wider group through WhatsApp and the Learning Centres.

The deaf learners in the case studies showed a strong preference for visual aids and materials, as well as the helpfulness of the practice question papers. Sharmistha (19), who has now been admitted to college, explained that the use of pictures made it easier to understand, which was the main positive of the Learning Centre. Three of the case studies mentioned that they found sign language videos helpful.

Six out of 11 of the case studies preferred practice question papers and assignments. Koyel preferred these because “Using question and answers would help in the examination later... in getting good marks.” Nahida felt similarly to Koyel. She preferred the practice question papers and assignments, which she would receive from the Learning Centre staff though WhatsApp. Nahida was able to consult the answer sheets and practice the questions herself.

Interestingly, we found that sign language users preferred solved question papers and hand-written notes, compared with Total Communication users, who liked videos explaining sign language concepts the most (Figure 18).



Figure 14: Preference for learning materials by location

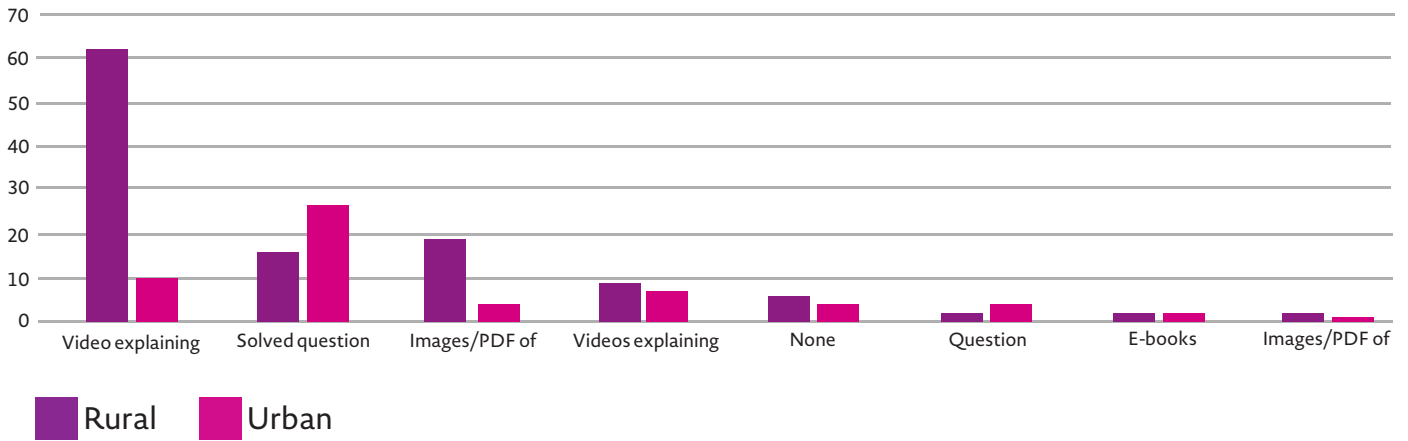


Figure 15: People who supplied the most helpful learning materials

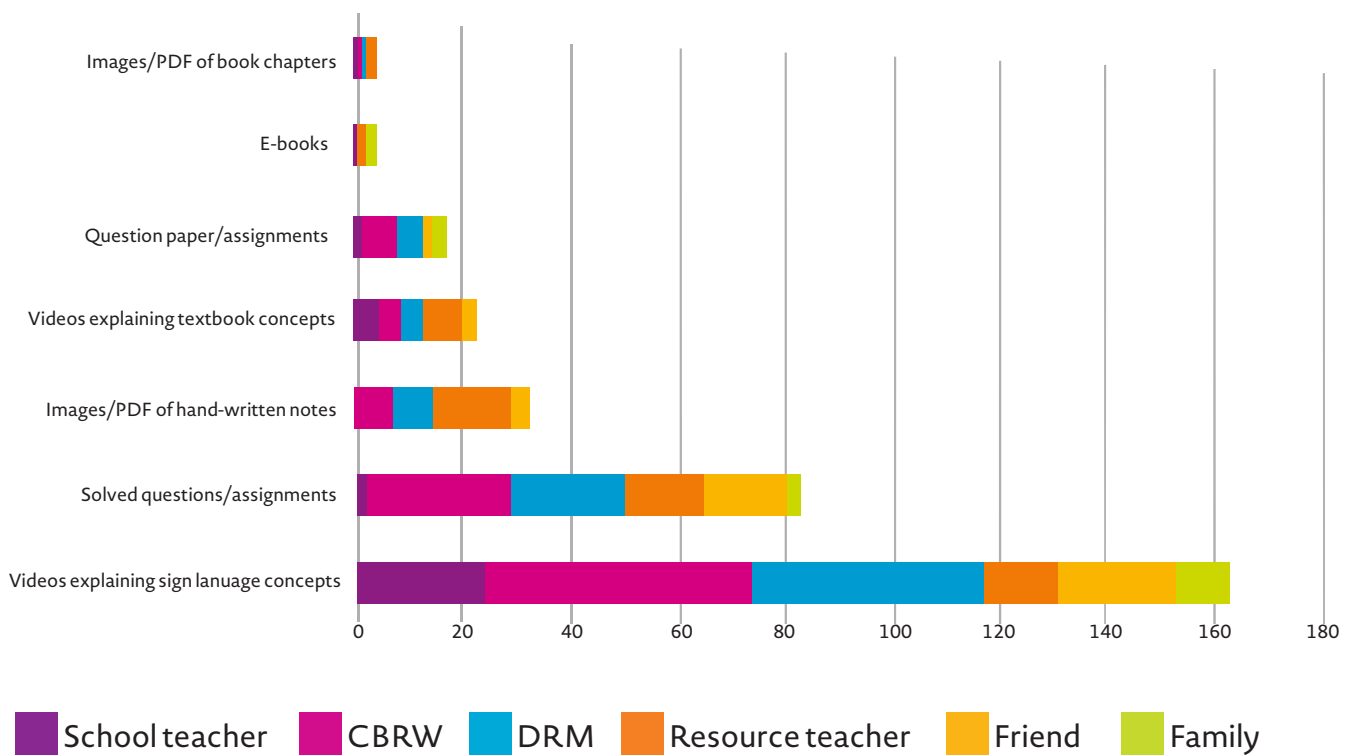


Figure 16: People who supplied videos explaining sign language concepts

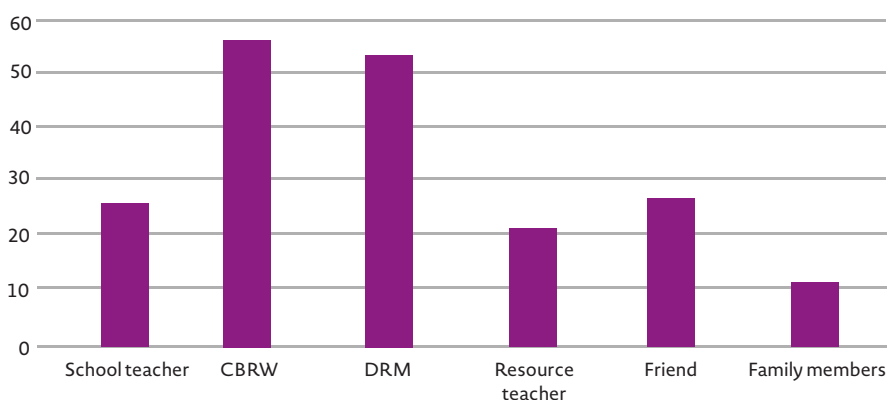


Figure 17: People who supplied solved question papers/assignment

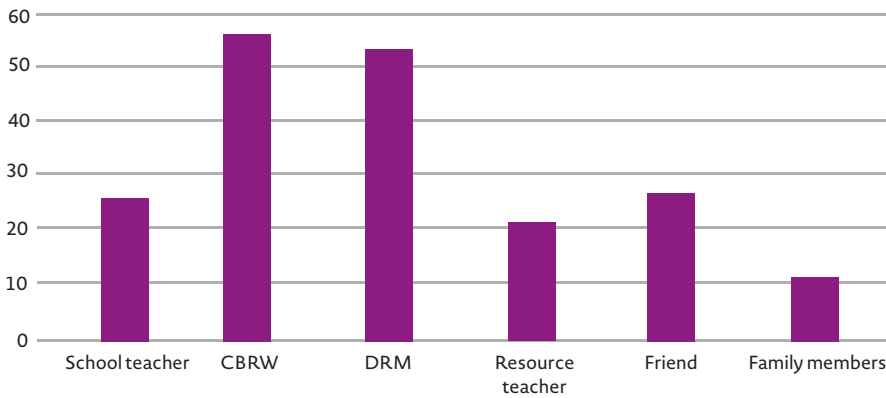
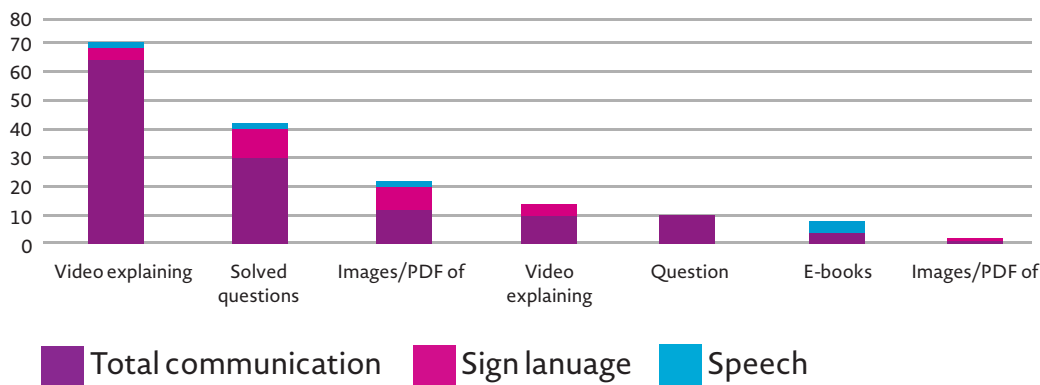


Figure 18: Preferred learning materials by communication style



## Family and community support

Figure 19: Whether family or community helped deaf learners with their studies

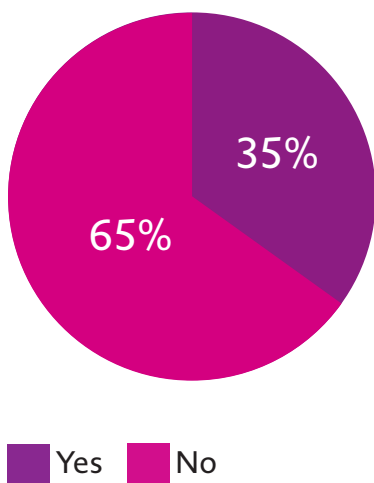
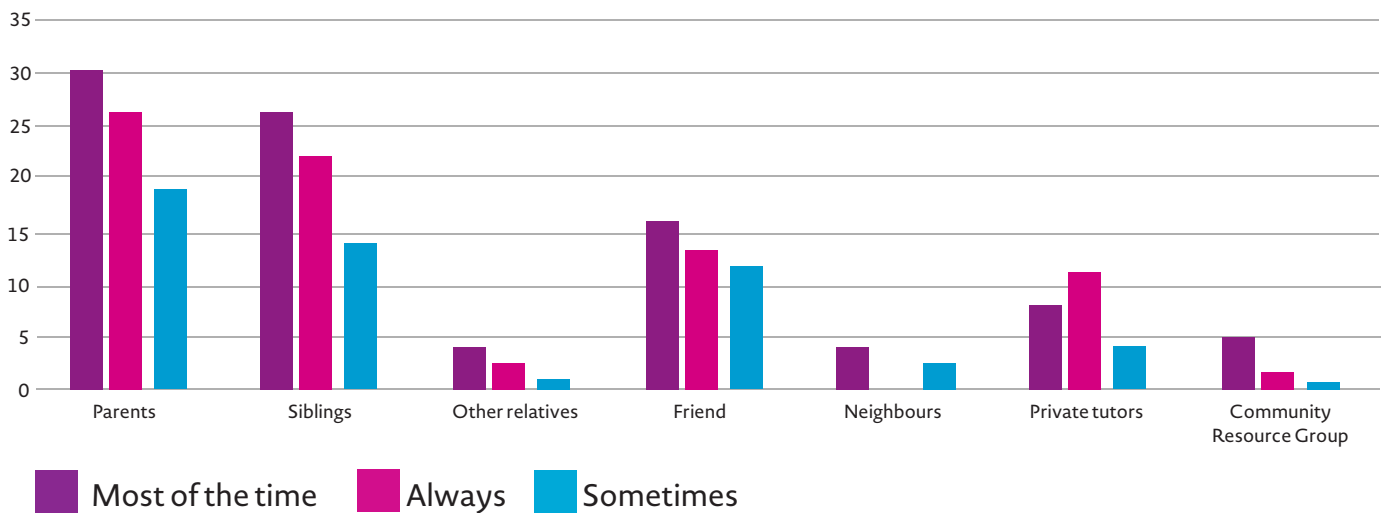


Figure 19 shows that though the majority of deaf learners received support with their studies from their family and community, over a third did not. We also found that 73% of males received support from family or community, compared with 60% of females. Most support was received from parents, followed by siblings, followed by friends.

Priyanka's (16) brother and sister used to help her with her studies. Her sister had studied until class XII and her brother until class XI. However, they had both moved away and so were no longer able to help. Without them around, she does not like being at home that much.

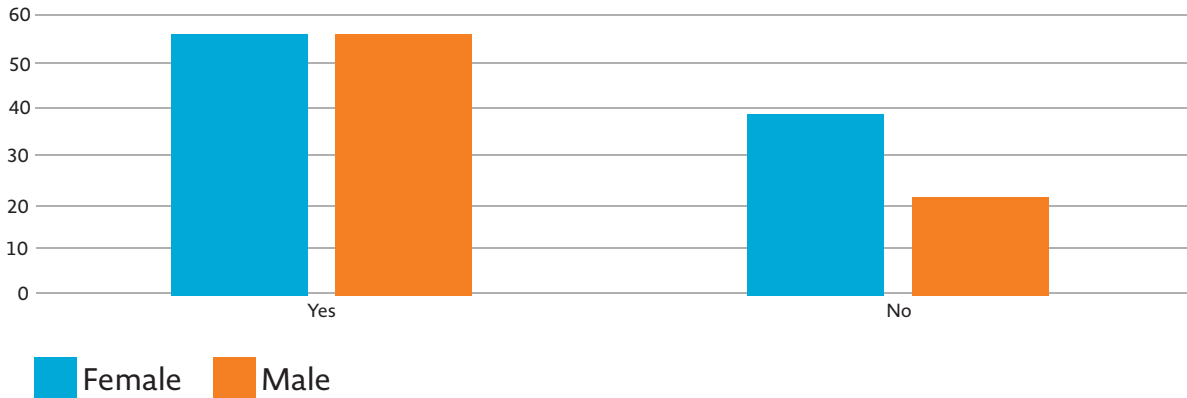
Figure 20: Whether deaf learners received support when they asked for it, by person



This chart (Figure 20) shows that most deaf learners received support when they asked for it 'Most of the time'. This is higher for males than for females, suggesting that males

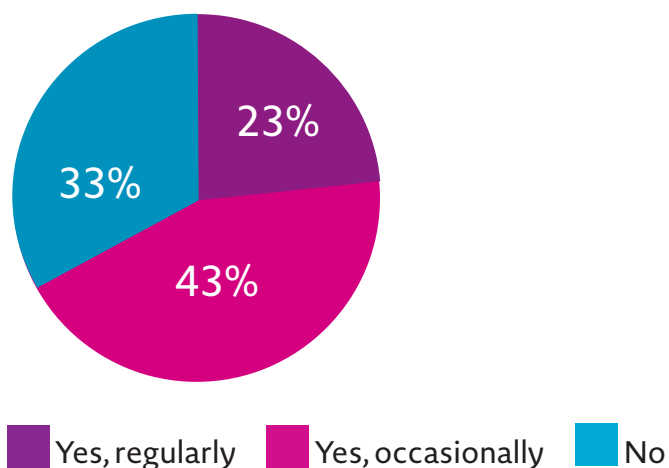
are more likely to get the support they need when they ask for it. Figure 21 also shows that more females than males said they received support from family or community.

Figure 21: Whether deaf learners received help from their family or community when they asked for it, by gender



## School and future aspirations

Figure 22: Whether deaf learners returned to school when they reopened



The majority of deaf learners returned to school occasionally or regularly when schools reopened in February 2021, and a third did not return at all (Figure 22). When asked how it felt to be back at school, most said that it felt good to be back at school (Figure 23), with the main reason being because they received help from friends (Figure 24). 45% of those who were back at school also said that they liked studying from both school and home. Figures 24, 25 and 26 show that one of the main reasons they liked studying at both school and home was because they

got help from friends. Getting help from friends was a main reason why they were happy studying at either home or at school. This relates to an initial finding of this survey about not being able to see friends being a main reason why deaf learners felt 'Sad' or 'OK' during the pandemic. The importance of friends, both deaf and hearing, has been highlighted in previous evaluations in India, and socialisation is known to be important for deaf learners to develop language and concepts.

Figure 23: How it felt to be back at school

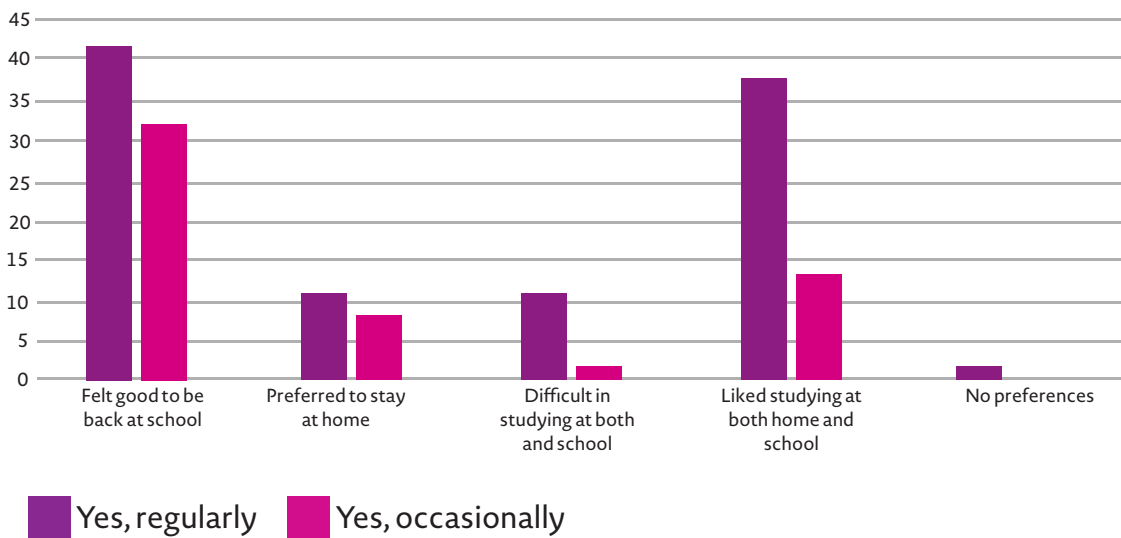


Figure 24: Reasons it felt good to be back at school

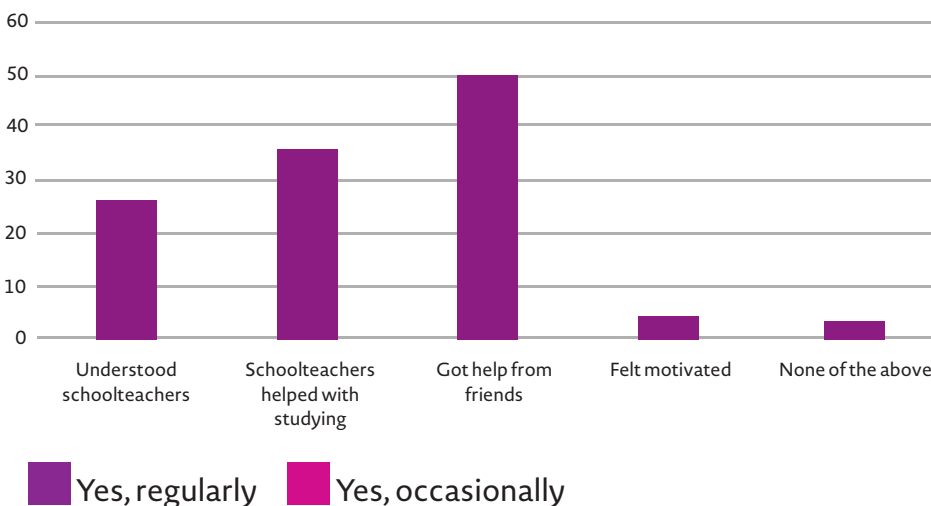


Figure 25: Reasons for preferring studying at home

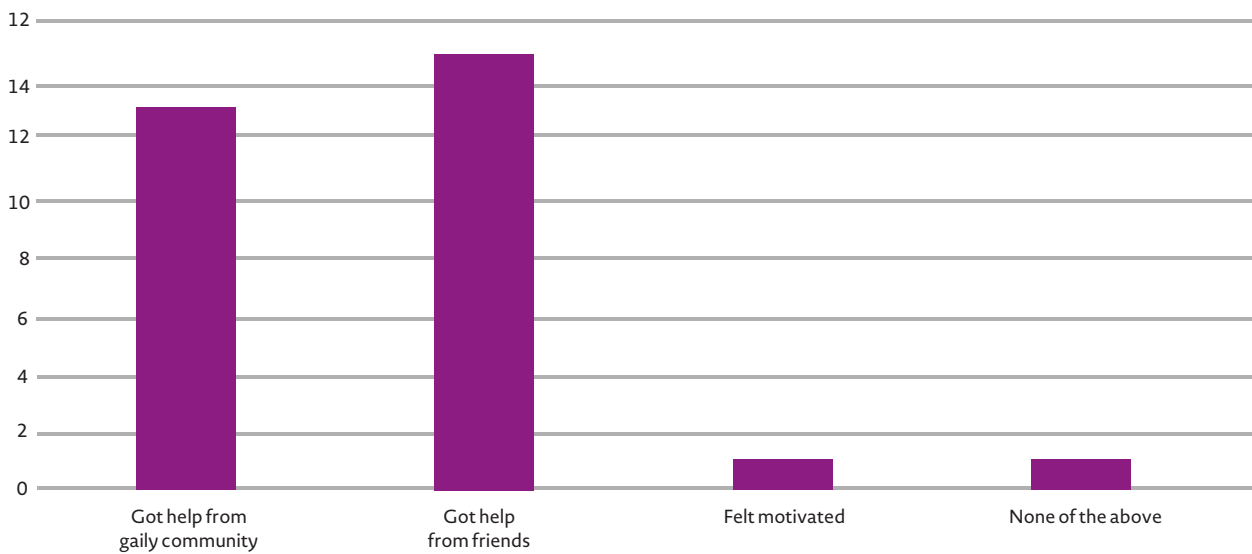
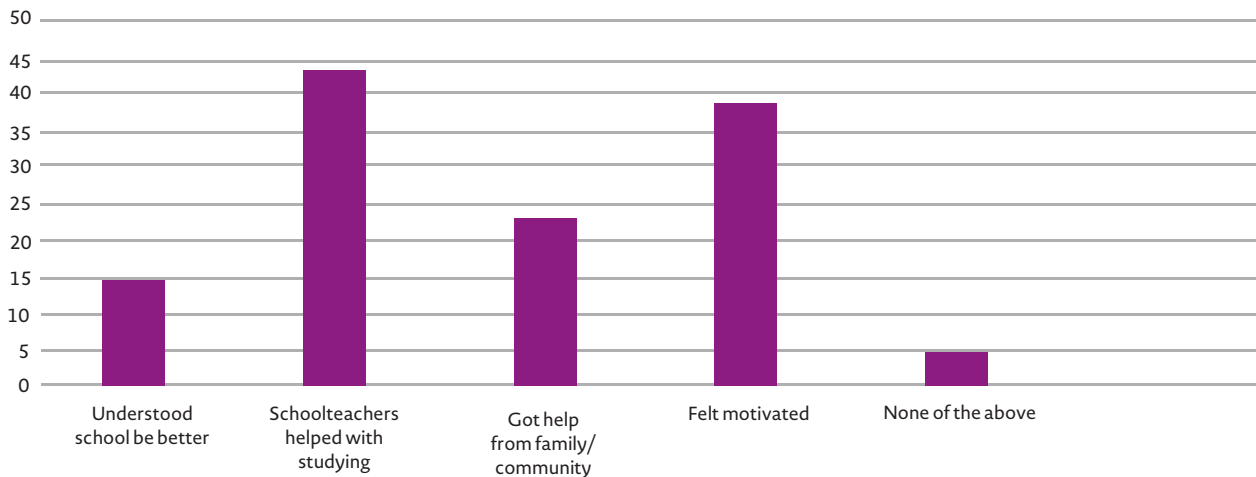


Figure 26: Reasons for liking studying at both home and school



Koyel explained that her father, who is a primary school teacher, helped her with her studies, particularly in the first three months when the schools were closed. When the school provided practice exam papers, her friends also helped.

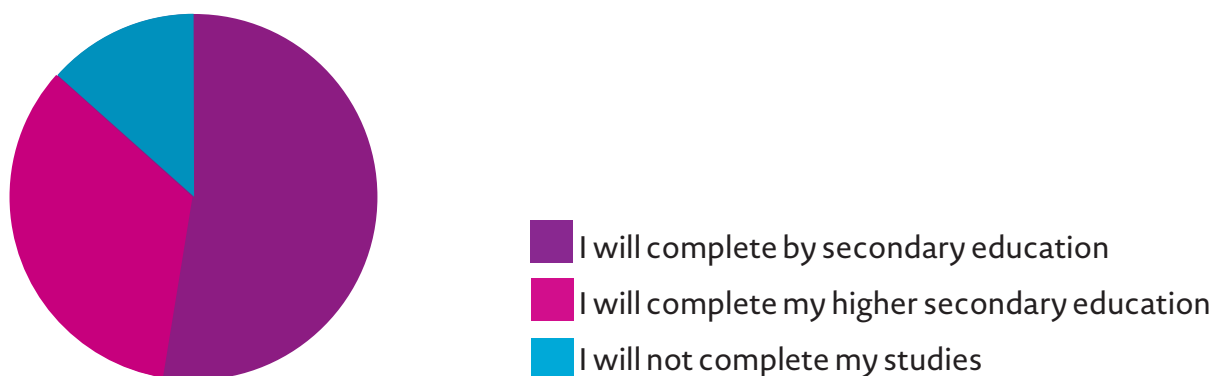
**“They would explain the questions in the [practice paper]. While school was on, they used to show me what was being taught in my book. They would underline in my book. They used to write in my notebooks also when I needed help.”**

8% said that they had difficulty studying at both home and school. We looked closer at this group to see if we could find out any more about why they felt this way. Almost all of this group had received support from parents, CBRWs and DRMs, similarly to those who said they liked studying at both home and school. However, we found that of those who said they had challenges, fewer of them had received support from siblings, friends, schoolteachers and Resource Teachers. As shown in Table 8, fewer of them received support when they asked for it, compared to those who liked studying at both home and school. This suggests that family and community support has an impact on the ability of deaf learners to study at both home and school.

Whether they received support when they asked for it	Number of deaf learners	% total deaf learners
Always	41%	20%
Most of the time	46%	33%
Sometimes	16%	46%

Table 8

Figure 27: Deaf learners who plan to continue or discontinue studying



It is encouraging to see in figure 27 that the majority of the group intend to continue to complete their secondary or higher secondary school education. Of those who plan to complete their study, 21% also plan to study at undergraduate level (Table 9). This was a surprise to the DCW research team, who had thought a higher number of deaf learners would plan to stop their studies or would have to join their family business or help parents at work due to increased financial pressures brought about by the pandemic. The case studies also reflected a preference for continuing education. Only one deaf learner had decided to drop out of school. Many looked forward to attending school more regularly so that they could be with their friends. As Sachin explains,

**“When the school will reopen, I will be able to study and also play with my friends again.”**

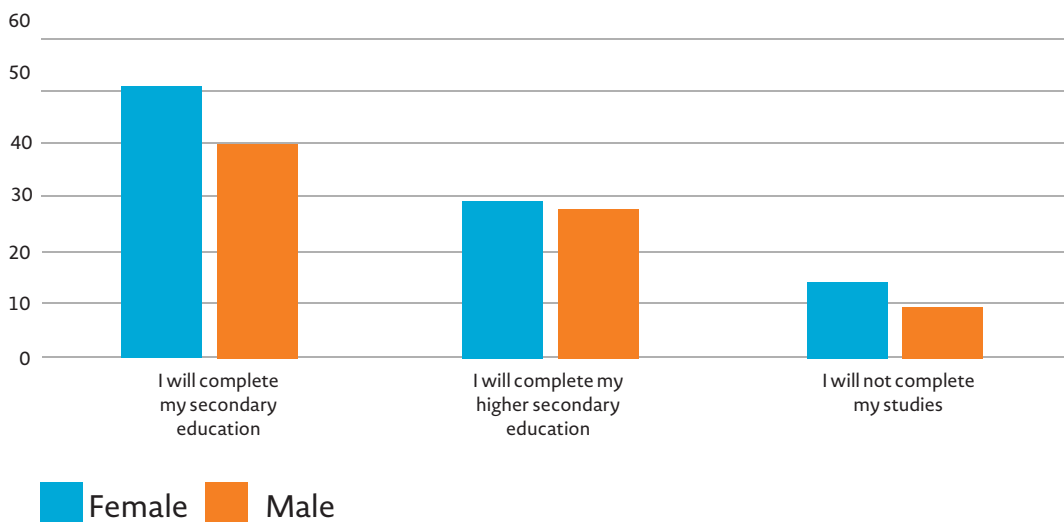
Despite this, the deaf learners in the case studies also shared their thoughts about the way schools need to change to be more accommodating of deaf learners. Sharmista wanted the Education Department to know that “The schools should think more about the deaf students. For example, they should be able to sit in the first row, the teacher should explain slowly and clearly and this would help in lip-reading too.” Most of them also shared that they felt sign language should be used more commonly in schools. This is significant as we know that currently mainstream schools do not use sign language.

Plans after board exams	Number of deaf learners	% deaf learners plan to complete study
I will complete my higher secondary education	67	45%
I will take admission at undergraduate level (college)	31	21%
I will look for paid work	16	11%
I will do a vocational course	15	10%
I will join my family business/enterprise/help parents at work	6	4%

I will stay at home for household work	5	3%
None of the above	5	3%
No response	2	1%
I will get married	1	1%

Table 9

Figure 28: Deaf learners who plan to continue or discontinue studying by gender



Only 14% said that they do not plan to complete their studies. More than half of this group are females (Figure 28). We could not find out much about this group and the reasons why they had decided to stop studying (Table 10). Anecdotally, it was reported that some deaf learners struggled to complete the final questions due to their internet connection, so it is possible that this interfered with their answers. We also looked into whether the group who had decided to drop out had received support from family and community or whether they had devices, and we found that most of them had access to both. This suggests there may be other factors as to why they decided to drop out. The case studies did not mirror the survey in its insights into the differences between the male and female experience regarding the reasons why they had discontinued their studies.

Ayesha's case perhaps gives us some insight into the reasons why discontinuing education is a preferred option. For Ayesha, she has been disconnected from her school for two years and her interest in studying,

whilst not strong to begin with, has waned. Assessments done by partner staff at the Learning Centre found that her educational competencies were lower than what was expected for her class. She has struggled with online classes provided by the partner and finds it hard to concentrate. She is impatient with watching videos and looking at the shared pdfs of hand-written notes or books/book chapters that include a lot of text. She also prefers to study with her peers than on her own.

Sanchari (24) did not want to go back to school when it opened briefly. She just wanted to focus on the work required so that she could finish her exams. She had started going to the Learning Centre several years ago when she was in Class X as she had failed the year. Thankfully she was able to pass her Class XII exams this year. The school used class XI results and performance in project work to provide marks. Though she is not interested in further studies and would rather learn tailoring and make a living from it. For deaf learners like Sanchari, where studying has been a challenge,

the practicalities of earning an income is more important than an education.

In contrast to the survey, the case studies showed signs of resistance to gender norms from several of the female deaf learners involved. Nahida spoke about family pressure for marriage, which is more common for girls due to societal norms around the age a community believes a woman should get married. However, Nahida was resisting this pressure. She also shared her view on boys her age spending more time on mobiles and non-productive activities during the pandemic.

Priyanka's story also demonstrated a commitment to education, despite the

arduous journey over mountain rivers and the inevitable challenges her Adivasi background would give her. (Adivasi is a tribal/indigenous ethnicity in which people are more likely to be economically disadvantaged and receive less education.) Meanwhile, ensuring the marriage of his younger sister with due ceremonies was part of the reason why Ashraf had to drop out and start working. Here, we can see the inevitable pulls and pressures of circumstances as well as societal expectations on the male participants (as provider) at play.

However, the case study process did not deeply investigate gender differences in experience during the pandemic, and further study of this would be beneficial.

Plans after board exams	Number of deaf learners	% deaf learners plan to complete study
None of the above	20	87%
I have decided to quit my studies as my family cannot afford my studies	1	4%
My family asked me to quit my studies so that I can earn/help them in work	1	4%
The uncertainty after the pandemic made me decide to quit my studies	1	4%

Table 10

## Case studies: the stories behind the statistics

Many of the survey results were echoed in the case studies. However, some themes emerged from the case studies that were not revealed through the survey. The case studies showed in detail the fear deaf learners have faced through this pandemic. Several expressed fear of being beaten by the police if they left their home for school or to see friends. Many were frightened of contracting the virus. Some were extremely worried about how they and their families would eat without the ability to work.

The loneliness and isolation deaf learners felt came through strongly in the case studies. Many spoke of spending all their time at home, doing chores or playing games.

This was in vivid contrast to the lives they described before the pandemic, where they described spending time with friends – both hearing and deaf – playing sports and studying together. Boredom was frequently referenced. Painfully, many experienced schools and Learning Centres reopening for a few months before the Delta variant meant everything closed again.

Their stories show how the pandemic changed their life trajectories in some instances. For Ashraf, his father's death coincided with the pandemic and Ashraf chose to work instead of wait for his education to return when restrictions allowed. Baidyanath's family financial uncertainty due to restrictions pushed him to join a vocational training course, where in other circumstances he may have completed class XII.



# Key findings

## Access to digital devices was uneven

Our research has demonstrated that access to digital devices varied according to location. The majority of deaf learners were able to access a smartphone for their learning, and by contrast very few had access to a TV. Almost a third had no access to any devices – these deaf learners were from one of the rural locations. The other rural location had much higher levels of access to digital devices, mostly smartphones. This highlights that not all rural locations can be considered as homogenous, and reminds us that there may be differences, in attitude or practice, towards digital devices between different rural locations. Factors such as poverty and literacy of the community could be having an impact.

Online lessons were only available to those who had access to a smartphone, or for the very few who had a laptop or computer. Deaf learners who could access online lessons told us they liked them. Being able to access a smartphone for learning also put deaf learners at an advantage in terms of the variety of modes of support they were able to access.

However, online and hybrid learning was not an option for a third of these deaf learners. This must be strongly considered when thinking about how to support deaf learners in future, especially if schools remain closed.

## Non-governmental organisations have been filling the gap in educational support

It is clear that these deaf learners received most of their support from the three partner NGOs, and not from their schoolteachers. These deaf learners are privileged in the sense that they had access to NGO support. However, by looking at those few who said

they had access to a schoolteacher, they still told us that they preferred support from the partners and found it easier to understand.

The West Bengal Government provided TV lessons in collaboration with a private TV channel, but these did not include sign language interpretation or subtitles. The Government also made practice exam question papers available online to download.

However, our survey has shown that TV lessons were not an option for almost all of the deaf learners, and most got practice exam questions from partner staff.

The survey has shown that support has overwhelmingly been provided by partners. Without them, deaf learners would have had little to no educational support during the pandemic.

It is also clear that deaf learners preferred and appreciated the support provided by partners, in particular Learning Centres.

## Learning Centres were a key source of support

Learning Centres are run by Deaf Child Worldwide partner organisations, out of their own offices or in community rooms. They are a core part of the current project being run by the partners. Deaf Child Worldwide and its partners felt that that centre-based support would be better suited for secondary school students rather than one-to-one support at home. These centres are staffed by Resource Teacher Groups, who are specialist teachers or qualified community members. They are supported by Community Based Rehabilitation Workers and Deaf Role Models, who are partner staff, to develop Teaching Learning Materials and to help with communication.

It is clear from our research that Learning Centres were a key source of learning support for the deaf learners. They were

the most accessed and most preferred form of support of the group. Deaf learners said they were able to understand lessons the most at Learning Centres. The case studies also showed that the Learning Centres were valued by deaf learners as they provided specialist support, using sign language and Teaching Learning Materials.

They were also a space where deaf friends could meet, rare in a pandemic where deaf learners were at home with their hearing families and neighbours. Learning Centres offered an alternative to schools during the pandemic. The way the Learning Centres operated fluctuated with restrictions, though they would open whenever it was possible. This was helped by the fact that Non-governmental organisations were allowed to remain open in order to support efforts to provide food and supplies to local populations as a result of the pandemic.

## **Visual material and practice exam papers were the most accessible methods of learning**

This research has given us a greater insight into what materials deaf learners find helpful. In the case studies, many deaf learners highlighted how much they learnt from visual materials such as videos and images. The survey highlighted the use of videos explaining sign language concepts as the most helpful. Practice question papers came through clearly, in both the survey and the case studies, as a practical way for deaf learners to prepare for exams.

## **The importance of friends**

Friends were important to deaf learners at home and at school, if they had attended. For those who were happy to be back at school, the reason they were happy was because their friends helped them with their studies. For those who liked studying at home, the main reason was because their friends helped them with their studies.

Friends are clearly an important part of deaf learners' lives when it comes to their learning. This is significant because of what we know about the importance of deaf children having access to socialisation, which allows them to develop language and their understanding of new concepts and ideas. Deaf children are often at a disadvantage because they have less access to incidental learning.

The significance of friends shown in this research supports findings from previous evaluations by Deaf Child Worldwide, where the importance of peers has emerged as a strong theme.

While most of the case studies did not distinguish between deaf and hearing friends, some particularly pointed to learning with other deaf young people being beneficial.

## **Female learners are at a disadvantage**

We saw several ways that female deaf learners were at a disadvantage to their male counterparts. For example, teenage girls in our research mostly accessed family-owned and shared smartphones to do their studies, where boys mostly owned their own smartphone. We also found that girls were less likely to receive support from their family and community when they asked for it. Of the small number of deaf learners who planned to stop their education, the majority of these were girls living in rural areas.

This is not a surprising finding, but it underlines the need to consider the intersectional ways that people can face disadvantage. The experiences of deaf young people in this research are not all the same, but vary depending on their gender and location.

## **The Covid-19 Pandemic triggered enormous anxiety in deaf learners**

The case studies have shown the anxiety deaf learners have felt through the pandemic. Rumours of police brutality against those

out after curfew were cited by several of the deaf learners. The restrictions imposed by government meant several deaf learners worried how their family would eat. And many said even when restrictions lifted, they did not always immediately return to the Learning Centres out of fear of contracting COVID-19.

It was not clear from the case studies if their fears were unfounded – for example, if they understood that as young people without

co-morbidities that they were at a low risk for serious ill health, or if their fears related to infecting older or sick member of their families.

Regardless we believe it is important to ensure that key public health information is accessible to deaf children and people, especially in the case of a pandemic or national emergency.

# Recommendations to education policymakers and funders

## What this research reveals about learning during a pandemic and how to 'build back better' in an education system which is accessible for deaf young people from low income communities

**Recommendation one: Ensure digital learning is accessible for all learners, including those with disabilities and from economically disadvantaged backgrounds**

Our research has revealed that moving lessons online when schools closed has been a disaster for the education of deaf young people from low income communities.

Our survey found a third of deaf learners did not have access to any kind of digital device. The case studies also showed that those with access to devices worried about affording data for their phones or struggled to keep up with video lessons due to issues with buffering.

Lessons on the TV and radio exclude deaf learners. Deaf young people cannot hear the radio and will not understand television programs if they are not subtitled or showing sign language interpreters.

**Recommendation two: Invest in training teachers so that they are equipped with the right skills and knowledge to teach deaf children.**

This group of deaf learners received the majority of their support from staff at Learning Centres, which provide the specialist and intensive support they need. Our survey showed that most deaf learners said they could 'always' understand at Learning Centres, whereas only a third said they could 'always' understand their

schoolteacher at their mainstream school, where they are likely the only deaf student or else one of very few deaf pupils. We recommend teachers in mainstream schools be trained in understanding how deaf children learn and how they communicate. Without this knowledge, teachers will not be able to make their lessons accessible to deaf learners in their classroom, which means deaf children will continue to fall behind.

**Recommendation three: Provide additional support to deaf students at school and in the community that recognises their specific needs.**

Our research shows that before and during the pandemic deaf learners thrived by attending Learning Centres or receiving visits from partner staff from the Learning Centres. These educators develop specific materials that will help deaf young people understand and engage with curriculum. For example, our case studies showed how much deaf learners valued the visual learning materials, such as the pictures, videos and drawings created for them. This extra support recognises the gap that deaf learners face due to late diagnosis and late access to language, and also makes the curriculum accessible to them. Support like this is crucial for deaf learners and must be built on and extended, both now and as the pandemic recedes.

**Recommendation four: More research is needed to understand other factors that lead to disadvantage**

Our research shows that deafness should not be considered as a homogenous experience. There were other intersectional disadvantages to accessing education that some deaf learners faced, for example being female (gender) and location (living rurally). More research is needed to find out more about how these intersectionalities, as well as others such as ethnicity, income stability, class and caste are experienced alongside deafness.

## Appendix – Case studies

These case studies were collected by Deaf Role Models and written by supporting staff, with the help from Case Study Researcher Ronita Chattopadhyay. All case studies have been shared with the deaf learner, who has validated and approved their use. They have been translated from Bengali into English.

### Driven by determination: Priyanka Nanwar's story

Sixteen-year-old Priyanka Nanwar is a spirited and brave girl. She has always been regular at the learning centre run by Khagenhat Welfare Organisation (KWO) at Falakata block in Alipurduar, West Bengal, India. "I like studying," she shares with a broad smile. She lives with her parents within the Dolmoni tea garden estate. Both her parents work in the tea garden as labourers. She has an older brother who works as a rajmistry in Kerala. She also has an older sister who is married. Priyanka's home is a colourless, single room in a predominantly Adivasi<sup>21</sup> area of the tea garden.

Priyanka's school and the Learning Centre are both located 9km away from her home. She cycles through stretches of land often crossed by elephants (sometimes even on rampage!), parts that are deserted and those where men load trucks with materials. This particular section is considered risky for girls and women. Her parents, and her brother when he is at home, sometimes accompany her for this stretch. She also crosses a seasonal mountain river. When the river is flooded, Priyanka is disconnected from her school and the Learning Centre as well. There is another route – but that is 20km! Priyanka has gotten used to these hardships. But then her life and routine were thrown out of gear with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Priyanka's mother had first felt that something was wrong when her daughter passed one year of age and did not speak.

She did not cry or scream. As Priyanka's age increased, so did her mother's worries. She was admitted in a local government primary school in class II at seven years of age. She was taken to a doctor and tested the following year. She had 80% deafness in one ear and 75% in the other.<sup>22</sup> While they were disheartened, her parents never ill-treated Priyanka because of her deafness. Priyanka moved through primary and upper primary levels and changed schools as needed. She got admission in a higher secondary, co-educational government school. She has four deaf friends in the school. She also counts some of her classmates as friends. Some of them live along the route she takes to school and accompany her for part of the journey.

Before the pandemic, she used to go to school regularly (except during the monsoons). She particularly enjoyed the geography class. She would struggle with Bangla and English though. She could spend time with her friends. She would also come to the Learning Centre. At home, Priyanka's sister had been her playmate till she married and moved away. Her brother also migrated for work. Both her siblings used to help her with her studies. Her sister had studied till class XII and her brother till class XI. Priyanka shares that, without them around, she does not like being at home that much.

Then in March 2020, her parents came back from work one day and told her that the tea garden was shut indefinitely. Many questions sprang up in her mind. She learnt about the COVID pandemic from her mother. She was shocked. The tea garden was closed for 12 days during the first lockdown. Then, the workers were gradually allowed to resume work. The school and Learning Centre were closed. The Deaf Role Model (DRM) or the Community Based Rehabilitation Worker (CBRW)/supervisor began weekly home visits in May 2020. This became her sole link with her studies. The family does not have

a smartphone. Thus, online education was not an option. Moreover, her school did not hold online classes during 2020 to 2021.

In August 2020, the Learning Centre reopened following COVID protocols including social distancing. Earlier, Priyanka and her mother had visited the learning centre to collect rice provided by KWO. When the centre became functional, Priyanka could again meet her friends there, study and play with them. Among the learning materials used, she liked signed videos and PDFs. She could also meet some of her other school friends on the way to the centre. They would help her with her studies. Typically, they would write and explain as needed. They also helped with the model tasks provided by the school.

The school, situated within 100m of the centre, reopened only for a week in January 2021. However, the infection rate again shot up and the school was closed. Things became uncertain again. In May 2021, the Learning Centre also closed again. The DRM and CBRW again visited her at home. The

Learning Centre reopened in the first week of August 2021. Priyanka counts the DRM and CBRW among her biggest supports for education. They used Total Communication to work with her. Her friends from school and others at the Learning Centre have helped as well.

Both her parents are illiterate and thus unable to help directly with her education. But they have always encouraged her to study.

Priyanka, who prefers in-person/face-to-face education, is eagerly waiting for the school to reopen. She will be able to study again and spend time with her school friends. She is currently in class IX. She will take her class X examination next. "If teachers can use sign language, then that would help many deaf students," she states.

She does not consider deafness as a significant barrier in her life. But she also feels that she might face problems later. Priyanka wants to become a teacher who can support and inspire deaf children.

<sup>20</sup>Mason skilled in construction work.

<sup>21</sup>Adivasi is an umbrella term for tribal groups in India. Adi means from the earliest times and vasi translates to inhabitants. Thus, these are age old/original inhabitants of the land who pre-date the arrival of the Aryans in the Indian sub-continent. The tea garden estates in West Bengal have sizeable tribal population including those that moved from their original homes in central India for work. This move was encouraged and controlled during the colonial era.

<sup>22</sup>Priyanka and her family came in contact with KWO then (when she diagnosed at 8 years of age). Priyanka was supported with educational inputs through her educational journey since then.

## Valuing independence: Mohammed Adil's story

The COVID-19 pandemic brought mixed experiences for 20-year-old Mohammed Adil. On one hand, his family had to deal with increased financial hardships. He struggled to continue his ties with education. But then, he also got to spend more time with his family members (particularly his father) at home. Thus, both pain and joy mingle as he shares about his experiences of the past two years.

Adil lives with his parents and two siblings in Kolkata, West Bengal, India. His father is a stenographer employed at the Kolkata High Court. Adil's deafness was diagnosed when he was three years old. He did not respond to any sounds and his parents began to grow concerned. He was taken to a doctor. Subsequently, tests revealed that he had 85% deafness in both ears. His parents, though disheartened, did not give up. At the age of five, Adil was admitted in the pre-primary section of a government school.

Adil progressed to class IX at the Hindi medium, government school. He likes going to school primarily because of the friends he has made. These friends, all of whom are hearing, help him with his studies including homework and preparing for examinations. They also play cricket together. His school has another deaf student besides him. Significantly, special educators have rarely visited his school (prior to the pandemic). It seems that access to special educators remains more problematic for Hindi medium schools than Bangla ones.

The year 2020 changed their lives in many ways. Adil's father's work stopped. His older brother had to discontinue his college education and start working at

a mobile repairing shop. However, he wanted his sister (then in class X) and Adil to remain in school. Adil's mother who handles household responsibilities, continued to hold the family together.

Adil shares that he feels afraid whenever he thinks about the initial days of the pandemic. "So many people were dying," he shares. With the loss of his father's income during the initial lockdowns, the family had to reduce its expenditure. They were even forced to reduce their food intake. His school closed. He could no longer go out to play. However, he liked spending time with his family. He would get provisions from the market as needed. He also helped his mother with household chores. He used to fetch drinking water and do other household tasks before the pandemic as well. In fact, he had always helped his mother more than his sister (who was traditionally expected to do so).

Adil's school did not hold online classes during 2020 and 2021. He attended online classes initiated by the Child in Need Institute (CINI)<sup>23</sup>. He shares, "It is difficult to understand. The connection is not there always. I have to keep asking again and again to repeat." He would often grow impatient because of network-related issues. He liked the sign language classes online. In other subjects, the explanations would invariably get interrupted due to network issues. Some signed videos were helpful. But, overall, Adil became quite fed up with online education!

He tried watching the education-related programmes on television. He could not understand what was being taught since sign language was not used. In the absence of regular physical classes in school, he has found studying difficult. He visited

the Learning Centre when it reopened in August 2020.<sup>24</sup> Classes were held twice a week and Adil was a regular participant. He continued to receive inputs particularly on English and Mathematics.<sup>25</sup>

He shares that the online inputs and the physical learning at the Learning Centre did help to some extent in staying connected with his studies. His mother, who studied till class V, has been his biggest supporter. Even though she is often unable to help him directly with his studies, she has always been encouraging. “As long as she [his mother] is with me, I can overcome any barrier,” he affirms. He also mentions his father, sister and the CINI staff as other key supports who helped him with his education during the pandemic.

Adil is eagerly waiting for his school to reopen. He is in a crucial period in his educational journey – class X. He urges the state education department to reopen

schools at the earliest to ensure that the future of students at the higher secondary education level is not adversely impacted. Looking ahead, he wants to join the Industrial Training Institute in Kolkata and find employment. He has heard about the vocational training institute from his friends. He is keen to join mainly because he has heard that it uses deaf-friendly teaching methodologies. He is not yet aware of the specifics including the courses offered and related requirements. He is also open to pursuing higher education, i.e. attend college.

Adil does not think of his deafness as a significant barrier. But he is concerned about the lack of jobs for deaf people in Kolkata. Adil knows that his mother worries about him. He wants to secure his future so that he can reduce her fears and make an independent living himself.

<sup>23</sup> Adil was identified during a survey conducted by the Learning Centre teachers. He was then in class VIII. Subsequently, his parents connected with CINI and he began to come to the Learning Centre.

<sup>24</sup> The Learning Centre was shut during March to July 2020. It was closed from May to June 2021 as well.

<sup>25</sup> The Learning Centre has focused on supporting him in English and mathematics as its staff are also more equipped to do so (among all the subjects taught as per the curriculum of the Hindi medium school).



## Pandemic barriers: Nahida Khatoon's story

Nineteen-year-old Nahida Khatoon<sup>26</sup> studies in class X at the government-aided school for hearing impaired children in Kolkata, West Bengal, India. She lives with her parents and brother in a small, one room flat in a multi-storied building in the city. Her father used to work as a daily wage labourer in a sofa making factory. His meagre income would be exhausted in managing the family's finances. The factory was shut during the COVID-19 pandemic and this income stopped. Her brother had to drop out of college. Fortunately, he got work in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation developing/typing soft copies of identification documents. In these difficult times, Nahida's mother began to insist on getting her married. This stemmed largely from worries about finding a suitable groom for her as she grows older. But Nahida remained steadfast. She wanted to first work and become financially independent.

When Nahida was one year and six months old, she had high fever. She was unwell for many days. Two months later, her parents began to sense that Nahida could not hear and respond properly to them. They took her to a doctor. She was subsequently tested at a reputed government medical college and hospital in Kolkata. The test confirmed her deafness. Nahida could not hear at all (100% deafness in both ears). Her parents got her admitted in a school for the hearing impaired when she was three and a half years old. However, for the past two years, the COVID pandemic has disconnected Nahida from her school completely. Her eyes light up as she recalls travelling to school together with her close friend. She had first met her at the Learning Centre run by the Child in Need Institute (CINI)<sup>27</sup>. The commute became enjoyable largely because of her company<sup>28</sup>. Clearly, she longs for those earlier days to return.

Nahida's life became restricted to her house. She also became fearful of stepping out, particularly during the initial lockdowns. She had seen news (on the television) regarding police beating people for flouting covid-related norms. She would chat with few girls of her

age who lived within the same building in the evenings. She would also help her mother with the household work. Nahida believes that boys her age would have spent their time during the pandemic on their mobiles (including playing games) and other aimless pursuits.

Nahida became a regular participant and would never miss the online classes held by CINI. There had been no contact and support from her school and so she was eager to remain connected with her studies. However, online education was not easy for her. She shares, "The time is very limited. Covering everything [the content in sign language] is not easy."

Understanding arithmetic and geometry has been particularly difficult for her.

In terms of learning materials, she does not like signed videos primarily because of network issues. This would lead to constant buffering/breaks which hindered the flow. Downloading heavy PDF files has been another concern. Comparatively, she prefers question and answer sheets/assignments. The teachers from the Learning Centre would share question papers for all the subjects in a WhatsApp group. Where needed, the answer sheets would also be shared in the group. Thus, Nahida could consult the answer sheets also and practice herself.

Overall, Nahida prefers classes held in person in school and the Learning Centre since there is a lot of time and one does not feel rushed. She can understand better. Nahida attended the Learning Centre regularly whenever it was declared functional and public transport was allowed in keeping with the covid norms during 2020 to 2021. She had attended school regularly when it had opened briefly in March to April 2021.

Nahida wants to go back to school again like earlier times. She wants to be able to step out on the roads without wearing a mask. She requests the government education department to incorporate vocational training along with the education in the schools. She wants to learn tailoring and become independent. "I want to establish myself first. Then marriage can happen," she affirms.

<sup>26</sup>Name changed as requested by participant.

<sup>27</sup>The Learning Centre teacher had visited the school for the hearing impaired (known as Calcutta Deaf and Dumb School) to interact with the teachers in 2016. She met Nahida there and encouraged her to visit CINI's Learning Centre. She was in class V then. At the centre, she has been receiving inputs on academics as well as changes during adolescence, child protection and life skills.

<sup>28</sup>Nahida's friend studied in the same school. Nahida's family had recently shifted homes. Her school was now two hours away. The two travelled part of this journey together by bus.

## Living with uncertainty and hope: Baidyanath Roy

Nineteen-year-old Baidyanath Roy liked attending school. He also enjoyed coming to the Learning Centre on the Pauro Sabha premises in Dhupguri block of Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, India. Run by Khagenhat Welfare Organisation (KWO), the centre helps deaf children and young people with educational inputs and other supports. Baidyanath would meet his friends here and study with them. But the COVID-19 pandemic with its associated fears and risks disrupted his life and these vital connections for him. For a while, the smartphone owned by his father became his only link with education.

Baidyanath was born into a family of hardworking labourers. His father, who had studied till higher secondary level, worked as a rajmistry. He also became a tuition teacher for children in the neighbourhood. He took classes for these children in the evenings. His mother, who could study till class X, worked on the small plot of land that they owned. Despite these significant engagements, she also grew to become a leader in the parents of deaf children group she is part of. Baidyanath's world revolved around his parents them and his brother who was older to him by three and a half years. The family lived in a two-room home with concrete flooring and walls and tin sheets as roof.

Baidyanath's mother grew suspicious when he did not respond to sounds even at five years of age. He was formally tested and diagnosed with deafness when he was seven or eight years old. He had 75% deafness in both ears. Nonetheless, they admitted him in class I at a nearby government primary school. He later shifted to a secondary school located next to the primary school within the same field. This continuity aided Baidyanath. His likeable and easy-going nature made him a favourite with teachers from both the primary and secondary schools. In 2019, he cleared class X with good marks. He got a one-time scholarship of Rs 16,400 for

disabled students from the Mass Education Department (Government of West Bengal). Baidyanath then set his sights on clearing the class XII examination. "My roll number is 59. Our school is a regular school with boys and girls," he shared using sign language. His face broke into a smile while talking about his school. But this smile disappeared as the conversation turned to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on his family.

With a sad heart, Baidyanath revealed, "When my father's work stopped during the pandemic, we all felt very lost, clueless. My mother used to somehow manage with the ration (rice and pulses) provided by the government." He would see the pandemic-related news on the mobile. (The family did not have television.) He came to know about the markets being shut, people forced to stay in their homes during the lockdown periods and the mounting deaths. He was most affected by the news of people being beaten by police for stepping out, particularly during the first lockdown in March to April 2020. Such incidents had also happened on the highway located close to his home.

Meanwhile, his mother was also unable to step out for work. His school had closed in late March 2020. He could no longer go out freely. He began to miss meeting with friends and being able to take short trips with them within Jalpaiguri. Durga Puja in 2020 had also been a quiet affair. He could not visit pandals with his friends. KWO could arrange only one day-long, educational tour in March 2021 when the infection rate had reduced. However, the country soon reeled under the effects of the second wave of Covid. Further trips and events were not possible. Baidyanath missed practicing mime and performing with his friends at these events.

The Learning Centre, located 5.5km away, reopened in August 2020<sup>38</sup>. But Baidyanath did not return. He was scared – what if the police caught him and hit him? It took him some time to overcome this fear. He began tentative visits to the Learning Centre in December 2020. Gradually, he became more regular. But then the second wave struck in 2021 and the centre was closed again.

The school also followed a similar pattern. It reopened briefly in January 2021 and then closed again. The school asked students to collect and submit model task papers for all subjects periodically. Initially, Baidyanath's school friends collected the papers for him also. They explained and helped him fill the sheets as well. Gradually, Baidyanath began to make these trips himself. The school initiated online classes in August 2021 only in one language. "The English teacher in school started a WhatsApp group. That was helpful. Even though she could not explain with sign language, she used to help a lot with the writing," he recalled.

Meanwhile, the online classes held by the Community Based Rehabilitation Worker (CBRW) and Deaf Role Model (DRM) became Baidyanath's strongest and continuing link to education. These online classes were initiated by KWO in May 2020. Often, three classes were held a week. Zoom meetings were also used for focused inputs on various subjects once a week. These were usually slotted from 11am to 2pm with 20-minute breaks.

Baidyanath like signed videos in particular. He felt that these were easy to understand. Also, he preferred in-person teaching to online classes where he often experienced network/connectivity issues. He shared that he preferred studying in school even though the teachers did not use sign language. He also shared that books and other learning aids that contained chunks of text were difficult for him. He found documents that combined pictures and words more accessible.

Baidyanath indicated his parents, school friends, DRM and support staff as the biggest supports for his education. He also had a tuition teacher who came to his home and taught free of cost. However, the tuition teacher had not been able to come regularly during the lockdown periods. Baidyanath remained eager to return to his school. "I will definitely go back to school when it reopens," he shared. "I really like geography and mathematics," he added. He also looked

forward to spending time with his classmates.

But before schools could reopen,<sup>39</sup> his life took a significant turn. Baidyanath had applied for admission in the Industrial Training Institute (ITI) for Physically Challenged Boys and Girls in Kolkata, West Bengal. The family had been grappling with lack of work (and finances) and the possibility of Baidyanath securing a course and subsequent employment had seemed more urgent. He received news that he had been selected for a course in dressmaking. Baidyanath and his family were now torn between elation and concern. Should he discontinue his studies and join the ITI or complete class XII and apply again? How would they cover the costs of living in Kolkata?

The course would begin on 1 November 2021. With this deadline looming over their heads, Baidyanath's parents decided to opt for the course. He travelled to Kolkata with his mother. They arrived on campus and learnt that he had been given hostel facility. This was a big relief. He would still have to make arrangements for his food. Another deaf youth supported by KWO had also joined ITI. Baidyanath now looked forward to exploring his new surroundings and beginning the next phase of his life with a familiar face by his side.

<sup>29</sup>The WhatsApp groups were formed by the teachers of the four Learning Centres run by CINI in September 2020. Other project staff were also involved. Each group covered students at a particular centre.

<sup>30</sup>The Learning Centre was closed during 16 March to 30 June 2020. The centre was opened in July. However, students began to return in October since government norms did not allow people to assemble in groups earlier. The online support was thus continued even as the centres were gradually initiated. In 2021, the centre was closed again during May to June 2021. Here too, students were encouraged to attend as the infection rates dipped and public transport normalised in August 2021.

<sup>31</sup>Baidyanath first came in contact with KWO in 2015. He received educational support primarily through home visits.

<sup>32</sup>Completed class XII.

<sup>33</sup>Mason with considerable skill in construction work.

<sup>34</sup>This is a group of parents of deaf children who support other families with deaf children with advice (including information regarding various services/ referrals) and educational inputs. They are mentored for this role by KWO.

<sup>35</sup>Regular or mainstream school in contrast to special school for disabled children.

<sup>36</sup>A key Hindu festival in West Bengal wherein pandals (temporary structures) with figures of the deities are worshipped within Hindu homes and community spaces; considered a period of festivities across communities.

<sup>37</sup>Twenty deaf children and young people, including Baidyanath visited Science City in the neighbouring district of Siliguri on 25 March 2021. This educational trip was organised by KWO in line with covid protocols.

<sup>38</sup>The centre was closed during end March to July in 2020 and from May to July in 2021.

<sup>39</sup>The West Bengal government decided to reopen schools (for classes IX to XII) and colleges from 16 November 2021.

## The battles of life: Sheikh Ashraful's story

The last two years have been particularly stormy for 19-year-old Sheikh Ashraful, a resident of Polba Dadpur block in Hooghly, West Bengal, India. He watched his father, who used to drive a toto (rickshaw),<sup>40</sup> lose his livelihood. His mother, a housewife, became increasingly ill as her diabetes worsened. Then the family faced an even bigger crisis with his father's sudden death due to a heart attack. Ashraful had to take on the responsibilities of his mother and 17-year-old younger sister. He began working 12 hours a day at the Hooghly Plastic Private Limited factory. From a youth who always enjoyed a game of football, Ashraful now spends his time in the packing and sealing line for multiple items at the factory. His life has moved, possibly irrevocably, from a classroom to a factory floor.

Ashraful's father had first noticed that Ashraful experienced difficulties in hearing and speech. Ashraful was tested when he was one year and seven months old. The diagnosis – severe deafness (90% in both ears).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Ashraful would attend his school and the Learning Centre managed by Graham Bell Centre for Deaf (GBCD)<sup>41</sup> regularly. His parents could barely sign their names and had, therefore, been unable to support him with his education directly. "Truly... it was a different time.

I used to go to school. I used to chat with my school friends. In the evening, I would play football with my friends and then I used to study a little more," he shares through sign language. Ashraful's eyes brim with unshed tears as he recalls,

**“Every evening, my father used to come back from work and sit next to me. He would ask me how my studies were going. I used to really like that.”**

He shares that he heard about the coronavirus from his father. He adds, "He [his father] had been worried and said what will we eat if the lockdown continues like this. If we cannot use the toto [to carry passengers and earn], then how will the family survive?" The family did struggle with securing three meals. After the first lockdown was announced in March 2021, the family received food from GBCD. Recognising their dire condition, the organisation provided rations multiple times over several months. But the pandemic had already begun to cast a very heavy shadow on their lives.

Ashraful's school closed in March 2021. He began working in the fields to support the family. The Learning Centre was also closed during March to June 2020. His family did not have a smartphone. Though his school initiated online classes during the pandemic, it was never an option for him. "It is not possible because of the mobile costs. Face-to-face education is better where pictures are shown and explained," he shares. He tried to study on his own at home. His younger sister who had dropped out of school would help him. But it was difficult and he began to lose interest in studying.

The teachers at the Learning Centre<sup>42</sup> and the project staff during home visits would encourage him to continue with his studies. Ashraful had always liked studying at the Learning Centre. He could understand what was taught. In fact, the Learning Centre became a key support for his education during the pandemic. His friends

from the centre would come to his house and share their notes with him. But he became uncertain about his education and that affected his regularity. His neighbours did not play any role or support him in his education. He feels that this could be because they are not particularly educated themselves. They are also not aware about the importance of education for deaf children and youth.

In February 2021, the school reopened. He cycled to school and attended classes for a few days. He had never particularly enjoyed going to school. "I only have two friends in school. So, I never liked going to school," he shares. Ashraful did not apply for the admit card required to appear for the class X examination. He missed the related deadlines.

His attendance at the Learning Centre became increasingly irregular as he began to take on whatever work he could find. This became an urgent need after his father's sudden death in September 2020. He would make frequent requests to GBCD to find him employment. The organisation assessed his needs and capacities. Ashraful also underwent sessions on understanding appropriate workplace behaviours (how to engage with supervisors and co-workers, dos and don'ts etc).<sup>43</sup> In March 2021, he was placed at the Hooghly Plastic Private Limited factory with a monthly salary of Rs 10,000. Ashraful also reconnected with three deaf youth placed at the factory through GBCD. These old ties began to help him in the new location. He also became friendly with

other workers. He did his work sincerely. His supervisor was satisfied and provided positive feedback to GBCD.

Besides helping with packing and sealing items, Ashraful has recently been entrusted with responsibilities related to storing the manufactured items. His supervisor has made arrangements for boarding facilities for him close to the factory. Ashraful now wishes to emulate the life path of one of the older deaf youth at the factory, including buying a motorcycle for himself. He wants to ensure that his 18-year-old sister gets married with due ceremonies. Ashraful wants to take care of his mother, marry and have a stable life.

These new aspirations have meant that education has taken a backseat. Ashraful did briefly reconsider continuing his education when he learnt that the state government would pass students in class X without holding the examination. But the school authorities informed that it was too late by then. He is aware of the option of joining open/correspondence courses for further education. For now, Ashraful wants to find his feet and then see what the future holds.

<sup>40</sup>An electric rickshaw (battery run) used to carry passengers.

<sup>41</sup>GBCD had first met 12-year-old Ashraful during a door-to-door survey. He was in class IV then. GBCD initiated engagement with his parents and the local community members. Ashraful began attending the Learning Centre when he was in class IX. He received educational support and computer training.

<sup>42</sup>The Learning Centre was functional from June to July 2020. It had to be closed again during May to June 2021.

<sup>43</sup>The pre-placement counselling was done through interactions over a period of two months. This included inputs and discussion during home visits as well as Ashraful's participation in specific sessions on workplace behaviour.

## Moving forward: Sharmistha Ghosh's story

Nineteen-year-old Sharmistha Ghosh shares a passion for drawing with her younger sister. The sisters live with their mother in Balagarh block in Hooghly, West Bengal, India. Their father passed away from cancer three years ago. The small family of three manages a comfortable living from the produce of their own field. Sharmistha's grandfather, a retired army man, also supports them. Thus, the family was spared the financial troubles that befell many during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even then, the past two years have not been easy for Sharmistha.

Sharmistha was diagnosed with severe deafness when she was two years old. Her parents had become concerned when they realised that she did not respond when someone called her from behind. Sharmistha's mother believes that her deafness is linked to a bout of whooping cough that she had after birth. Her parents were disheartened on learning about her deafness. Nonetheless, they admitted her in a government school when she was six years old.

Sharmistha would go to school regularly. But she began to make more headway in her education after she connected with Graham Bell Centre for the Deaf (GBCD). She was in class VI then. She moved from upper primary to secondary and higher secondary levels of education. By 2020, she had reached class XI. She would go to school and also study at home on her own twice a day. She also started visiting the Learning Centre located 13km away from her home.

She heard about coronavirus from her mother. She had felt quite scared. She began to follow all the related precautions and hygiene measures. Then in March 2021, her school was shut. She missed cycling to school with her friend who lived nearby. The two friends could no longer step out in

the evenings as well. Her life became largely limited to her home. She would help out with household tasks like cleaning and washing utensils. As lockdown norms eased, she would buy provisions from the market as needed. She still tried to continue to study as much as she could. Her life became very monotonous and boring. Sleep offered some respite.

The Learning Centre was also closed during late March to June in the initial lockdown in 2020. She did not have a smartphone and so could not access online education.<sup>45</sup> She was visited twice a month by the project staff, particularly the CBRW, at home. Since she was in class XII, the emphasis was on familiarising her with answering question papers. This would help her score well in the examination. She shares, "Besides the question and answers, the staff [she calls him dada or older brother] would explain the chapters in the books using pictures." The visual element helped her understand better.

She was happy to return to the Learning Centre when it reopened and transport facilities became functional. She highlights the use of pictures in the teaching processes and greater ease in communicating with all as the main positives at the centre. She had attended school for a few days when it briefly reopened in February to March 2021. She completed the model tasks (worksheets) provided by the school periodically. That was her only contact with the school. Overall, she prefers in-person/face-to-face learning rather than online options.

At home, her mother and younger sister encouraged her to study. Her sister, who is in class VI, would help her with the project work given from the school. She also studied with a tuition teacher who would come to her home thrice a week. He would teach Bengali, English, history, education and physical education. He charged Rs 500 monthly. He continued his visits regularly (except for the first three months of the first lockdown).

<sup>44</sup>Sharmistha was identified by GBCD during a survey conducted in 2014. She was then in class VI. The engagement made a significant difference. GBCD worked with her and the family as well as the school to promote deaf friendly teaching learning methodologies. Classroom demonstrations were held for her teachers. Students in her class were also encouraged to form a supportive peer group for her.

<sup>45</sup>Her school had held online classes. But she could not access these due to lack of smartphone.

Since class XII examinations could not be held, the school used the model tasks and project work for evaluation. She cleared class XII in this manner. In September 2021, she enrolled in further education. Sharmistha is eagerly waiting for the college to reopen. “I will travel by local train with my friend to college. We will enjoy together,” she shares. She is still slightly worried about the pandemic. She wants to tell the state education department,

**“The schools should think more about the deaf students. For example, they should be allowed to sit in the first row. The teacher should explain slowly and clearly and this would help in lip-reading also.”**

After completing her graduation, Sharmistha wants to work in a shopping mall in Kolkata. She feels that she can work in sorting and packing related roles. She is also excited by the prospect of leading a life in the city.

## **Holding on to his dreams: Trijit Das’s story**

“I love to sleep and dream,” shares 19-year-old Trijit Das with great enthusiasm using sign language. A student of class IX at a co-educational government school, Trijit lives with his mother and sister in the railway quarters in Nonadanga in Kolkata, West Bengal, India. His house is a rented, one room flat. His mother is the only earning member in the family. She works as a data collector with Child in Need Institute (CINI)<sup>46</sup>. She also takes on tailoring work to help meet the family’s needs. Trijit’s mother reveals that the area where they stay is not

safe, particularly in the evening and night. But it is still a step up from where they stayed earlier. Also, this is the best that the family can currently afford. Trijit’s sister is in college pursuing graduation. His mother and sister share a common passion for dance. Trijit has artistic interests as well. He paints. Even while living in the clutches of the COVID-19 pandemic, Trijit dreams of completing his education and growing as a painter.

Trijit was not born with deafness. Trijit’s mother informs that he had a severe bout of chicken pox when he was two and a half years old. This caused his deafness.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, she was eager to put her son in school. Trijit was admitted in a local government school when he was five years old. Currently, Trijit has 80% deafness in his right ear and 100% deafness in his left ear. Trijit’s deafness has remained at the same level in the past six years.

Trijit came to know about the COVID-19 pandemic from television and Facebook. He signs, “I was afraid... if I also fall sick with covid.” Before the pandemic, he used to go to school regularly and also attend CINI’s Learning Centre. He met his friends and played cricket and football with them.

The announcement of the first lockdown in March 2020 meant that his school closed. His studies suffered and he began to spend less time on it than before. He could not go out to play with his friends due to fears of contracting covid. Watching television and playing free fire (a game) on the mobile phone became more frequent. Trijit looks decidedly irritated as he shares that he finds staying at home boring.

His school began online classes in February 2021 on mathematics. He attended about five classes and did not continue beyond April 2021. Comparatively, he has been more regular with the online classes held by CINI. This was initiated in April 2020. WhatsApp

video calls were primarily used. Study aids were shared. The signed videos have been useful for him. “All the topics were explained clearly and I could understand easily,” he shares. His private art teacher also took online classes with him through WhatsApp.

Nonetheless, Trijit prefers to study offline. He shares that online education is expensive because of the mobile-related costs. Also, there are network problems and he often gets disconnected. This makes it difficult to understand what is being taught. He found it most difficult to follow mathematics in this manner. He also tried to watch the education-related programming on television.<sup>48</sup> But he soon gave up. “I did not understand at all. It was not useful,” he reveals. The programmes did not use sign language.

Trijit prefers studying at the Learning Centre. “Didi (CINI staff at the centre) draws pictures for the new words in Bangla and other subjects,” he elaborates. Training Learning Materials are also used. The staff at the Learning Centre have helped address the difficulties he experienced in online learning as well as in completing the model tasks (worksheets) shared by his school. Trijit is appreciative of the inputs received on sign language at the centre since this allows him to communicate. He also likes coming to the Learning Centre since he can spend time with his deaf friends who he can converse with easily.

Trijit misses his school a lot. He shares that he enjoyed mathematics classes in school the most. He found other subjects difficult, particularly if these involved memorising. Post March 2020, he has gone to school only for a few days during the unlock periods.

Fears of covid also affected this. Then, the school closed again. It did give model tasks for all the subjects from March 2021 onwards. He used to go to school to collect these and to submit them as well.

However, the pandemic has not completely disheartened Trijit. The difficult times have also revealed the biggest supporters of his educational journey – his mother, art teacher, sister, the staff at the Learning Centre and his neighbourhood friends with whom he plays cricket. “I will attend school when it reopens,” he affirms. He wants to return to school to also meet and play with his friends and eat tiffin with them. He has forgotten how many school friends he has and wants to resume contact with them as soon as possible.

Trijit urges the state government to reopen schools as soon as possible in line with the covid health and safety guidelines. He also feels that having a teacher in the school who can use sign language will help greatly.<sup>49</sup> He would also like to see more space given to art in the school routine. He has another important request for the state government – to ensure deaf friendly colleges so that deaf youth can access higher education.

Trijit does not feel that his disability will limit his future. But he does get affected when sharing about it. He remains driven by his dreams. He wants his artistic aspirations to also provide the means for him to stand beside his mother in her life struggles.

<sup>46</sup>Trijit first came in contact with CINI in 2014 when the organisation began working in the domain of inclusive education with support from Deaf Child Worldwide. He received inputs to support his education (primary level) and on communication (including use of sign language). He has also participated in trainings on child rights including child protection and life skills. Trijit’s mother has been working with CINI since 2018.

<sup>47</sup>She shares that the doctor had told her so. Trijit’s deafness became apparent within a year of the bout of chicken pox (when he was three and half years old).

<sup>48</sup>Programmes with educational content were initiated on the ABP Ananda and Zee Bangla (private television channels) from April 2020 on various subjects for classes IX to XII.



## Navigating challenges: Sachin Munda's story

Fifteen-year-old Sachin Munda lives with his parents and three siblings in Falakata block in Alipurduar, West Bengal, India. Sachin's 65-year-old father has been bedridden for many years. About five years ago, he suffered from tuberculosis. He did not follow the medication regime properly and so, continues to be ill. Age related ailments have also begun to take a toll on him. Sachin's mother suffers from arthritis. She is unable to work as a labourer in the fields like before. She finds it difficult to do household chores as well. Sachin's brothers, aged 32 and 29 years, could not study beyond class VI. They had to join work. The eldest brother moved out of Alipurduar for work. He currently works in Assam. His 21-year-old sister managed to reach class X, but had to drop out then. She took on the responsibilities of her mother including cooking for the family. She and another brother work on the land that they own.

Sachin was admitted in class I in the local government school when he was five years old. Even though his family members noticed that he did not respond to sounds, he was formally tested only when he was eight years old. He was diagnosed with deafness (80%). Despite all her responsibilities, Sachin's sister ensured that he went to school and the Learning Centre.<sup>50</sup>

Sachin currently studies in class X in a government high school located 2km away. He usually walks to school. He shares through sign language, "There are 72 students in my class. There are boys and girls." His favourite subject is mathematics. His classmates would help him when needed. "They would explain using their own signs and gestures," he adds.

He had first heard about COVID-19 from his sister. The announcement of the first lockdown in March 2020 had left the family worried. "My brother used to work outside [i.e. outside Alipurduar] as a labourer. We had felt scared and helpless. We could somehow manage with what we grew in the field," he shares. People had to stay indoors. The markets were shut. Sachin could no longer go swimming with

his friends in a nearby river. He had to remain indoors.

His school also shut. It reopened only for a week in January 2021. The school did give model tasks (question papers) to the students for all the subjects. A friend who lives close by – a girl of the same age – used to collect the model tasks for him. She used to help him fill the sheets as well. The Learning Centre, located about 8km from his home in Poteswar (Falakata) was also closed from March to July 2020. The family did not own a smartphone then.<sup>51</sup> Thus, Sachin could not access online education.<sup>52</sup>

When the centre reopened, Sachin did not return immediately for fear of contracting covid. He used to take a bus to the centre. He began to visit the Learning Centre only in early 2021. But then the second wave of covid struck and the centre had to be closed again. While the school and Learning Centre were closed, the Deaf Role Model (DRM) and Community Based Rehabilitation Worker (CBRW) used to visit him at home two to three times a month. They would check on his wellbeing and also provide inputs for his education. They would show him signed videos. But Sachin prefers question and answer sheets the most. "It is easier when the answers are given," he shares. In terms of learning arrangements, he prefers lessons at the Learning Centre. "I like to meet everyone, talk with my deaf friends and we all study together. I can understand what is taught at the centre," he shares. He finds it particularly easy to understand when the DRM explains. Meanwhile, his brother, sister and friend [from the neighbourhood] help him with his studies as well.

Sachin is eager to return to school. He does not have any apprehensions or fears about returning to the classroom. "When the school will reopen, I will be able to study and also play with my friends again," he shares. He also has five deaf friends in his school. "No teacher in the school uses sign language. If we had a teacher who could explain using sign language, that would help," he adds. He also hopes that the KWO staff will continue to support him. Sachin wants to complete class XII and then become either an electrician or work on repairing mobiles.

<sup>49</sup>His school does not have a dedicated special educator. Special educators from Sarva Shiksha Mission (now reframed as Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan) used to visit his school periodically before the lockdown to provide support.

<sup>50</sup>Khagenhat Welfare Organisation (KWO) first came in contact with Sachin during a survey. He was seven years old then. Local community members had spoken about Sachin and his family. Sachin was formally diagnosed the following year.

## Supported by friends: Koyel Mandal's story

Sixteen-year-old Koyel Mandal has always enjoyed drawing. She belongs to a small, close-knit family of four living in Balagarh block in Hooghly, West Bengal, India. Her father (a primary school teacher) and her seven-year-old brother share a passion for football. Koyel's mother (a homemaker) enjoys music. Neither of her parents could progress beyond the higher secondary level. But they remain strong supporters of children's education, particularly for their daughter.

Koyel was born with deafness. Her parents soon realised she did not respond to sounds. They became worried. Her deafness was diagnosed as 'profound' when she was one year and six months old.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, her parents got her admitted in a nearby English medium school when she was four years old. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted their world when she was in class IX. Koyel missed her school friends the most even though they found ways to stay in touch and help each other with their education.

Before the pandemic, Koyel enjoyed going to the local government high school. Her section had 60 students. She got along well with all of them. Twenty of them had grown to be her friends. Her face lit up as she recalls, "I could meet all my friends earlier. I studied regularly in the school." She adds, "I don't like being at home because of the pandemic." Koyel has a vibrant group of friends – girls and boys, from the school and the Learning Centre. They include both hearing and deaf adolescents.

Koyel learnt about COVID-19 from her father. She understood its significance fully only when the first nationwide lockdown was announced on 24 March 2020. She felt afraid. Her school closed. As the months progressed, Koyel's routine centred around her house. She still tried to put in a couple of hours of study in the morning and evening.

Fortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic did not take a heavy toll on the family. Her father's income was not disrupted. Her father would help her with studies, particularly in the first three months when the school closed. The students would collect model tasks<sup>55</sup> for all the subjects from the school. Friends from her class would help her. "They would explain the questions in the model task. While school was on, they used to show me what was being taught in my book. They would underline in my book. They used to write in my notebooks also when I needed help," she shares. "The school does not really use sign language," she adds, the disappointment palpable in her expression.

There has been no connection with the school beyond the sharing of the model tasks. Though her school holds online classes periodically, she has not been able to participate. Her father has a mobile but Koyel has never used it much, not even for communicating with friends. Her father and friends have been the biggest supporters of her education through the pandemic. The project staff and the deaf role model (DRM) also stand out as important supports for her. Attending the Learning Centre and ensuring few hours for self-study have also helped her remain connected with her education to a large extent.

"I went to the Learning Centre once every week.<sup>56</sup> All the sirs [teachers] use sign language when explaining. They would repeat the answers several time and I could understand well," Koyel shares. Her father would take her to the Learning Centre on his motorcycle. She highlights specific aspects that have been useful. "The chapter on rivers from my geography book was explained with the help of a model made of shola.<sup>57</sup> The story 'Father's Help' from English was explained with a video. And Sir<sup>58</sup> had explained the factorisation method of mathematics very well," she shares. "Earlier also, I have been able to get good marks in school because of the Learning Centre," she adds.

She informs that the staff would also come to her home once a month for follow up.

She likes interacting with the Deaf Role Model who supports her. This engagement has been particularly motivating. The local resource group member would also come to her home and help her.

Overall, Koyel prefers face-to-face/physical learning to online methods. She feels it provides more scope to ask questions if she doesn't understand. In terms of learning materials, she prefers question papers and assignments. She explains, "Using question and answers would help in the examination later... in getting good marks."

When schools opened briefly in February to March 2021, her father had taken her for the classes. She had also cycled to school with her friends. Koyel is eagerly waiting for her school to reopen. She is excited to meet all her friends and teachers again. She is looking forward to cycling to school with her friends. "No, I am not afraid about going back to school. Corona's effects have also reduced now," she signs emphatically. In fact, this is her main recommendation to the government education department functionaries – that the schools should reopen as soon as possible. She has another request – "The school should use sign language more."

Koyel has mixed emotions as she stands on the threshold of adulthood. "It would have been better if I could have been able to talk. Maybe, I will not be able to marry [because of deafness]," she shares. But she is also hopeful and has aspirations. "I want to complete my education and then do a course and start a beauty parlour in my house. I want to be financially independent," she affirms.

<sup>51</sup>The family bought a smart phone recently in September 2021.

<sup>52</sup>His school did not hold online classes. He could not access online/WhatsApp based support from KWO because he did not have a smartphone.

<sup>53</sup>Affecting both ears.

<sup>54</sup>Koyel was identified in 2014 by GBCD. She was eight years old and studied in class II. She received supportive inputs for her primary education. This support continued as she progressed to the secondary level.

<sup>55</sup>These were essentially worksheets in question paper format and shared for all the subjects. These were provided as home tasks. The schools aimed to use the responses to evaluate the students.

<sup>56</sup>The Learning Centre was closed during April to May 2020. It reopened subsequently. It was again shut during May to June 2021.

<sup>57</sup>Shola is a dried, milky white plant matter that can be shaped. It is also referred to as Indian cork.

<sup>58</sup>A retired schoolteacher who teaches mathematics and science particularly for students in classes IX and X at the Balagarh Learning Centre. He visits once a week. He continued during the pandemic as well (whenever the centre was functional). He has also become a part of the Community Resource Group (a group of parents of deaf children and other likeminded people who help deaf children and their families with advice, referrals and other support).

## Living with uncertainties: Sanchari Ghosh's story

Twenty-four-year-old Sanchari Ghosh loves to draw. She lives with her parents in Dhaniakhali block in Hooghly, West Bengal, India. They belong to a neighbourhood (Ghoshpara) where all the families are involved in raising cows and making a livelihood from milk and milk products. Her father does the same. Her mother handles household responsibilities and also takes care of their cows.

Sanchari was born with deafness. Her parents gradually realised that their daughter did not respond to sounds. She was taken to a doctor when she was two years old. She underwent tests at a reputed government hospital and medical college in Kolkata. The result – she had 'severe' level of deafness affecting both ears. Sanchari's parents got her admitted in a special, residential school.<sup>59</sup> She was seven years old then. But they brought her back within a year as the private institution was rocked by alarming instances of physical and sexual abuse of children.<sup>60</sup> She was then admitted in a government primary school nearby.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Sanchari used to like going to school. She would cycle to school with her friends. Her main interest in going to school was meeting her friends! "I could understand Bangla, history and geography because the teachers would write on the blackboard," she shares. "I could not understand English and mathematics at all," she adds. In fact, Sanchari struggled since most of the teaching would be verbal. Her father, though a graduate, would be preoccupied with making a living and keeping the family afloat. Therefore, he could not give her enough time.

Sanchari started visiting the Learning Centre run by Graham Bell Centre for the Deaf (GBCD) when she was in class X. She would take a bus to the centre located 7km away. She had failed and was repeating the year. GBCD motivated her to continue her education. The staff began to work with her schoolteacher and classmates as

well.<sup>61</sup> Sanchari's visits to her school and the Learning Centre stopped with the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020.

She had learnt about coronavirus from her mother. "I had asked my mother – why is everyone covering their face with a cloth [mask]," she recalls. "I had felt quite scared," she adds. At home, she would help her mother in the household chores – cooking, washing utensils and clothes etc. She would also try to study in the evening. She was forced to stop meeting her friends in the evenings. She had no contact with them. She did not like staying at home and would feel bad about it. "I could not visit any of my relative's houses. I could not visit my dida [maternal grandmother]," she shares. Fortunately, her father's livelihood was not disrupted.

Her school held online classes only for class XII during September to December 2020. She could not access these since her family did not have a smartphone. GBCD also did not conduct any online classes for her. Sanchari would visit the Learning Centre regularly when it was functional during 2020 to 2021. She shares, "The chapter on landforms in geography was explained well. Dada-ra [older brothers – she is referring to the teachers] had shown pictures of mountains, deserts and plains and I could understand." In terms of learning materials, Sanchari prefers question and answer sheets/ assignments. She shares,

### **"I can memorise them and I like that."**

The project staff (supervisor) would visit her at home periodically and provide educational inputs. Unfortunately, the Deaf Role Model designated for the area met with an accident and had to go on a long leave because of his injuries. Thus, Sanchari did lose out on a vital channel of support for few months. Her family and friends were not able to provide educational inputs to her. In fact, she lost contact with her three close friends. These friends – who are not deaf – live far from her home.

Sanchari did not attend school when it reopened briefly in 2021. She shares that she did not really feel the urge to attend. She wanted to do the project work given by school and clear her class XII examination. Fears of contracting covid were another consideration. Sanchari prefers face-to-face/in-person learning. She likes when teachers show pictures and use sign language to explain, especially the way it is done at the Learning Centre. She says that she does not like it when teachers keep talking because then she does not understand.

Amidst all the uncertainties, Sanchari could clear the class XII examination. The school used class XI results and performance in project work to provide marks. Sanchari does not want to join college. She is not interested in further studies. She wants to build on her interests in drawing and tailoring. She is keen to learn tailoring and make a living from it.

Sanchari is not very worried about her deafness.

**“My parents can communicate with me. GBCD is also there. So, I don’t have any major concerns,” she declares. She has one request for schools – to strengthen peer groups for deaf children. She states, “The stronger the peer groups<sup>62</sup> for deaf children, the better they can learn.”**

<sup>59</sup>Schools for children with disabilities are known as special schools in India (largely because the children were termed special children/children with special needs).

<sup>60</sup>Instances of physical and sexual abuse of children placed in the special, residential school came to light. There was a police investigation. The school was closed.

<sup>61</sup>She had been identified during a household survey in 2018.

## A small dream: Ayesha Ali's story

Eighteen-year-old, shy and introverted Ayesha Ali studies in class IX at the school for the hearing impaired in Kolkata, West Bengal, India. She lives with her parents and older sister in a rented, one room house in Bibibagan in Kolkata. Ayesha loves make up. She enjoys doing make overs for people, including her sister. Her older sister is currently pursuing her graduation degree in college. She is also doing a diploma course on information technology. Ayesha's father works as a labourer at a shop dealing with old/used iron and plastic items. But the income is meagre and often insufficient for the family. Her mother handles household responsibilities. Ayesha's grandmother also lives with them.

Ayesha's deafness was diagnosed when she was one year six months old. Her paternal aunt's husband had first noticed and voiced concern. She had then been taken to a medical hospital and college in Kolkata. She was tested and found to have 90% deafness in both ears.

At the age of three years, her parents admitted her in the school for the hearing impaired. Since then, Ayesha has continued in the same school. Her school is close to her home. This has helped her in attending school regularly. She enjoys the physical education class the most. Her reason – since it does not involve studying and they can play during the class! Ayesha shares that she is afraid of her teachers. She had seen a student being scolded badly after being caught cheating in an examination. She likes going to school mainly to meet and chat with her friends.

Ayesha got connected with the Learning Centre run by Child in Need Institute (CINI) in January 2021. Earlier, Ayesha used to study at home on her own. Sometimes, her sister used to help her. Ayesha's mother brought her to the centre. They learnt about the centre from one of Ayesha's friends who

was a regular participant. She likes coming to the learning centre and is appreciative of the inputs on sign language. She shares that she has also learned about mobile use and related risks, rights and needs of children and hygiene in the centre.<sup>63</sup> These aspects were never discussed in her school. "I like going to school to meet my friends. For learning, I like the Learning Centre. Sign language is taught with more care here," she shares. Ayesha is reticent when probed further about academic aspects. "I like coming to the centre. But it is not for studies," she finally declares.

The covid pandemic has cast a significant influence on her life. Initially, Ayesha used to feel very scared on seeing news related to the pandemic. She would be able to sleep only if her mother held her and the two slept in the same bed. She has also felt very lonely. Before the pandemic, she would go to markets and surrounding places with friends from school and the neighbourhood. Her friends include deaf and hearing adolescent girls. She also likes taking photographs with her friends on her mobile phone. But she has been unable to enjoy like this for a long time due to the pandemic. WhatsApp video calls with her friends from school and the Learning Centre have helped maintain some connection with them.

Ayesha has been disconnected from her school for two years. She had gone to school when it had reopened briefly for 15 days in February 2021. Her school did not hold online classes. Ayesha's interest in studying has also waned during this period. She shares that she finds it very difficult to understand. The preliminary assessments conducted at the Learning Centre also revealed that her educational competencies were lower than what was expected for her class. The teachers at the centre have tried their best to provide class-appropriate inputs as well as work on the existing deficits. But then the second wave of COVID-19 affected this and they had to switch to online teaching. Interpreters would use sign language during the online classes initiated by CINI. Even then, Ayesha shares that she found it

<sup>62</sup>Schools for children with disabilities are known as special schools in India (largely because the children were termed special children/children with special needs).

<sup>63</sup>Instances of physical and sexual abuse of children placed in the special, residential school came to light. There was a police investigation. The school was closed.

<sup>64</sup>She had been identified during a household survey in 2018.

difficult to concentrate. She likes question and answer sheets. She shares that she sometimes grows impatient with videos and pdfs. Also, she prefers studying with her peers than on her own. Overall, she prefers physical/face-to-face teaching to the online option. She elaborates that it is easier to gauge the facial expressions of the other person, respond accordingly and maintain communication. Nonetheless, the physical classes at the Learning Centre (when it was functional) and the online inputs have been her main connection with education in the past two years.

At home, she is closest to her father. She feels that he can understand whatever she wants to say by just looking at her. She then lists her mother, sister, a few friends

and teachers at the Learning Centre as the other people who support her and whose company she enjoys. Ayesha shares that her family members always support her, and they do not discriminate between the two sisters in any way.

Ayesha wants to complete class X. She is unsure about studying further and taking the class XII examination. She wants to become a beautician and earn for herself. She requests the government education department and CINI to facilitate her access to a related course. She affirms that she will study and do all that is needed to succeed in the course. She is impatient to achieve this dream and also bring smiles to her parents' faces with this accomplishment.

# References

**Deaf Child Worldwide.** 2018. **Achieving academic excellence for deaf learners: the influence of early exposure to rich language.** [www.deafchildworldwide.info/publications\\_and\\_resources/index.html](http://www.deafchildworldwide.info/publications_and_resources/index.html). 2018.

**Deaf Child Worldwide.** 2020. **Unheard Children.** <https://www.ndcs.org.uk/deaf-child-worldwide/unheard-children/> Accessed August 2021.

**Global Partnership for Education (GPE).** 2018. **GPE's Work on Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities.** [www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/2018-07-31-gpe-children-with-disabilities-factsheet.pdf](http://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/2018-07-31-gpe-children-with-disabilities-factsheet.pdf) (March 2019).

**Global Partnership for Education (GPE).** **GPE's Work on Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities.** [www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/2018-07-31-gpe-children-with-disabilities-factsheet.pdf](http://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/2018-07-31-gpe-children-with-disabilities-factsheet.pdf). (March 2019).

**Gohain, M. P. Times of India.** 2021. **Over 90% parents from deprived sections clamour for school reopening.** <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/news/over-90-parents-from-deprived-sections-clamour-for-school-reopening/articleshow/85979450.cms> Accessed September 2021.

**Hindustan Times.** 2020. **West Bengal govt announces virtual classes for students of class 9 to 12.** <https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/west-bengal-govt-announces-virtual-classes-for-students-of-class-9-to-12/story-Wlff4OZRwfHd2CA11Oo6yM.html>. Accessed August 2021.

**Indian Institute of Management Calcutta.** **Restructuring of School Education System in West Bengal: Interim Report.** 2011.

**Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE).** 2020. **Technical Note: education during the COVID-19 pandemic.** New York. Page 10. [https://inee.org/resources/inee-technical-note-education-](https://inee.org/resources/inee-technical-note-education-during-covid-19-pandemic)

[during-covid-19-pandemic](https://inee.org/resources/inee-technical-note-education-during-covid-19-pandemic). Accessed August 2021.

**Mahapatra, A. and P. Sharma.** 2020. **Education in times of COVID-19 pandemic: Academic stress and its psychosocial impact on children and adolescents in India.** *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*. Page 1.

**Narvekar, H. N.** 2020. **Educational concerns of children with disabilities during COVID-19 pandemic.** *Letters to editor. Indian Journal of Psychiatry*. 62(5):603-604.

**Sarkar, T.** 2020. **UKFIET: Examining Disability Inclusion in India's New National Education Policy.** <https://www.ukfiet.org/2020/examining-disability-inclusion-in-indias-new-national-education-policy/> Accessed August 2021.

**The 2011 Indian National Census.** <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/west+bengal.html>. Accessed March 2021.

**The Mint.** **Spatial poverty in West Bengal.** 2015. <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/dXPv8bp492mKX9rirXX0hK/Spatial-poverty-in-West-Bengal.html>. Accessed March 2021.

**The World Bank.** 2019. **Inclusive Education Initiative: Transforming Education for Children with Disabilities.** <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/socialsustainability/brief/inclusive-education-initiative-transforming-education-for-children-with-disabilities>. August 2021.

**UNHR Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.** <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/crpd/pages/conventionrightspersonswithdisabilities.aspx> Accessed August 2021

**UNICEF.** 2020. **How many children and young people have internet access at home?** <https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-and-young-people-internet-access-at-home-during-covid19/>. Accessed October 2021.



**We are the UK's leading international charity  
for deaf children in developing countries.**

Deaf Child Worldwide is the international development  
arm of the National Deaf Children's Society.

**[info@deafchildworldwide.org](mailto:info@deafchildworldwide.org)  
[www.deafchildworldwide.org](http://www.deafchildworldwide.org)**

Published by the National Deaf Children's Society  
© National Deaf Children's Society  
37-45 Paul Street, London EC2A 4LS  
Tel: 020 7490 8656 (voice and text) Fax: 020 7251 5020

The National Deaf Children's Society is a registered charity in England  
and Wales no. 1016532 and in Scotland no. SC040779. C0161

