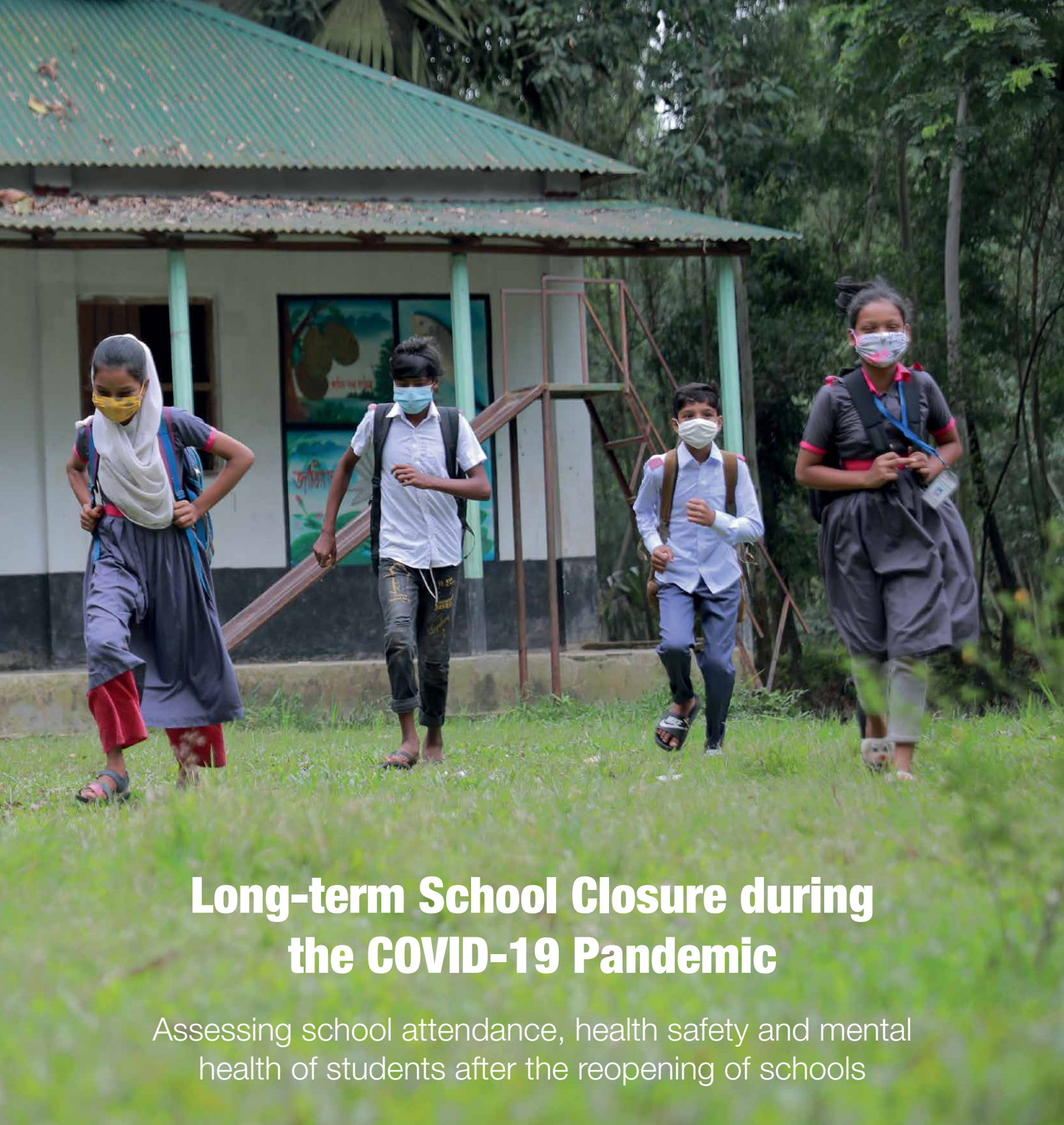




Long-term School Closure during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Assessing school attendance, health safety and mental health of students after the reopening of schools



Long-term School Closure during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Assessing school attendance, health safety, and mental health of students after the reopening of schools

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Executive Summary

Safe Back to School (SB2S) Campaign is a national-level network of 21 national and international NGOs working to help the government ensure safe school reopening and bringing the students back to the classrooms. As part of the campaign, SB2S conducted a study to look into the practice of schools' health safety regulations and protocols and the attendance rate of students in classes after the reopening of schools after a prolonged closure induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. The study also assessed the mental health situation of the students.

The objectives of the research were: (a) to assess school attendance after the reopening of primary and secondary schools in the post-Covid-19 pandemic context; (b) to find out if the COVID-19 health safety regulations and protocols were followed in the schools, and (c) to understand the mental health condition of primary and secondary level school students.

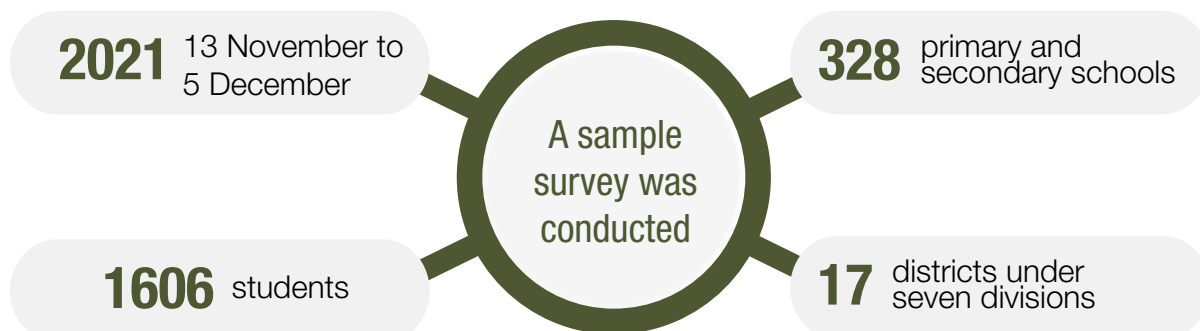
Multiple methods were used to capture school attendance, maintenance of health safety measures and mental well-being of the students. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected for this study. A sample survey was conducted from 13 November to 5 December 2021 from 328 primary and secondary schools and 1606 students from 17 districts under seven divisions.

Qualitative data were collected from seven districts using focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and key informant interviews with students, parents, teachers and education officers. Within the sample schools, the rural-urban school ratio was 76:24; primary and secondary school ratio was 55:45; Bangla medium and Madrasah ratio was 90:10 and government, non-government and NGO-run school ratio was 38:50:12. Among the students, the ratio of boys and girls was 40:60, and their primary-secondary school ratio was 48:52.

Major findings

School attendance

- An increasing trend in the average attendance rate was found at the primary school level from the first week to the third week. The attendance in three weeks after the school reopening shows that the lowest attendance was in class IV (65%) and the highest in class I (86%). In secondary schools, the lowest attendance was in class IX (57%), and the highest was in class VI (69%).
- The proportion of girls' attendance was higher than that of the boys.



Absenteeism was 16%-37% for boys and 14%-35% for girls at the primary school level and 34%-45% for boys, and 28%-41% for girls at the secondary school level. However, both girls' and boys' attendance declined in class IX.

- The attendance was higher for primary school students than for secondary school students in all three reference weeks. The attendance rate was 57%-69% for secondary and 65%-86% for primary schools.
- Interestingly, the rate of students attending schools in rural areas was lower than in urban areas, especially in secondary schools.
- The primary reasons for absenteeism as identified were: (a) involvement in economic activities, (b) child marriage, (c) migration of the family to other places, (d) shifting to other educational institutes, especially Qawmi madrasah and (e) loss of interest in the study, etc.
- Except for "loss of interest", the underlying cause of absenteeism was the financial crisis of the

students' families. Increased societal pressure also contributes to girls' marriage in the absence of perceived meaningful activities (like studying or going to school). The students lost their interest in learning during the long school closure and spent more time on their smartphones.

- Most respondents thought getting the students back to the classroom who stopped coming to school due to their involvement in economic activities is challenging. They also believe that it is almost impossible to get married ones back. However, discussing with the parents and in-laws might be a way out. Providing financial support, reducing or eliminating the fees, and providing educational and health safety materials might be helpful to get back the students whose families are facing a financial crisis.

Health safety

- Less than three-fourths of the students (74%) wore masks at school. 72% of the students, overall, maintained social distancing in class.



- The proportion of teachers wearing masks in the classroom (79%) was higher than that of the students. However, the rate of wearing masks in the teacher's room was found to be a bit lower (72%).
- Overall, 73% of the support staff wore masks properly. Whereas 81% of the staff did this in the rural areas, it was the case for only 54% of those in the urban areas.
- More than half of the parents (52%) followed social distancing regulations outside the schools.
- 91% of the schools had at least one handwashing point. However, a slightly lower percentage (87%) of the schools consisted of proper handwashing facilities, i.e., soap and water.
- More than half of the schools (52%) had a proper waste disposal system, and 67% of schools were found to check the temperature of the students at the entry point.
- Less than half of the schools (40%) had an isolation room for sick patients; not surprisingly, the percentage was higher among urban schools.

Mental health

- According to the modified Stirling Children's Well-being Scale, less than half of boys and girls (47%) got average scores (29-44), and more than half of students (52%) got high scores (45-60).
- A slightly higher score was evident among the boys than the girls, among the primary level students than the secondary level.
- According to the qualitative inquiry, the students felt irritated, lonely, isolated and under mental pressure during the lockdown. The reasons were demystified by the parents, teachers and education officers—which include financial crisis, uncertain future, risk of child marriage, the chance of stopping education, increased problems in the family, not attending online classes and difficulties in understanding lessons.
- After the reopening of schools, these problems were reduced, but some new issues came in, such as learning difficulties, difficulties in understanding lessons and challenges in mingling with others.



1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The closure of educational institutions in Bangladesh started on 17 March 2020 to contain the spread of Covid-19 and continued for more than one and half years. A ray of hope peeped at the beginning of 2021 when the rate of Covid-19 infection started flattening. However, from the end of March 2021, the situation worsened again as the second pandemic wave appeared. This resulted in a continuity of school closure. Finally, as the Covid-19 condition improved, the education minister of Bangladesh decided to reopen the educational institutions on 12 September 2021.

The long-term closure of schools has undoubtedly left some scratches on education despite the schools—both private and public—continuing the learning process through electronic means, such as broadcasting classes through television and radio and online mediums. Many children could remain in the learning process through different channels during the lockdown and school closure. However, this may not have been the case for children from more vulnerable families and communities.

Available data suggest less than half of Bangladeshi students (48%) have access to television, and one-fifth of the students (21%) have access to internet facilities for participation in television or online-based classes (World Bank, 2020).¹ For that restraint, the participation of all students in unconventional learning processes was

ineffective. A BRAC study (May 2020) revealed that 56% of Bangla-medium and madrasah students did not participate in classes aired through public broadcasting or other digital platforms.² Another study (CAMPE, 2021) revealed that

69.5% of students did not participate in the distant learning process, and 57.9% could not participate in classes owing to the constraints of necessary devices.³

Taking on alternative methods was even lesser among the students in low-income families. For example, a study conducted by Save the Children in Bangladesh in its poor beneficiary households (June 2020) uncovered that 80.5% of students met barriers to accessing education aired through television.⁴ Unconventional methods were also less supportive of teaching some subjects effectively, such as mathematics (Plan International Bangladesh, 2020). A primary school student in Dhaka said, “I am facing difficulty in math as I could not understand how the teachers were doing the math on Sangshad TV.”⁵

“ I am facing difficulty in math
as I could not understand
how the teachers were doing
the math on Sangshad TV. ”

-A primary school student in Dhaka

1 <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34138/TV-Based-Learning-in-Bangladesh-Is-it-Reaching-Students.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>

2 <http://www.brac.net/program/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Rapid-assessment-impact-of-COVID-19-education-in-Bangladesh.pdf>

3 CAMPE (2021) Education Watch Study 2020-2021 (Phase 1): Interim Report

4 Save the Children in Bangladesh (2020) State of Children and Households in Bangladesh: Impact and Needs during the COVID-19 pandemic; not a nationally representative study as this was conducted among their programme beneficiaries

5 Plan International Bangladesh (2020) Baseline study of the project – Gender Transformative Early Childhood Development (GeTECD)

The current state of the student's mental health condition is one of the critical concerns. A study (World Vision Bangladesh, 2021) unveiled that 55% of children expressed unhappiness with the state of staying home.⁶

Another research (Educo, 2020) suggested long-term closure of schools led students to a situation in which 41.95% of students expressed that their life was becoming more problematic.⁷ As another study revealed, more than half of the students (52.1%) were worried about the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic (Save the Children in Bangladesh, 2020). The same study further uncovered that 44% of children encountered physical punishment at home. Another prime anxiety that might signpost children's mental condition was unveiled through a study (World Vision Bangladesh, 2021)—34.7% of parents applied physical punishment to control their children's behaviour during the pandemic.

Child marriage was another concern during the pandemic. A study conducted by BRAC, New York University and UN Women suggested that 77 per cent of brides were under 18 at the time of marriage, and 61 per cent were under 16. The rate was even higher in rural areas (81 per cent under 18 and 64 per cent under 16). This information suggests a quick overview that many school and college-going girls had to marry during the

Covid-19 pandemic, which seems to be more than usual. Prolonged school closure was one of the main reasons behind the rise in child marriage. Many parents expressed concern over their daughters' safety, who stayed home all day. They were not in touch with in-person education at schools—getting no other alternatives, they chose the option of marriage. As a result, it was assumed that it would be almost impossible for these children to return to classrooms when the school reopened. It indicated that the dropout rate of girl students would increase. If that happened, it would seriously impact our attainments in increasing girls' school enrolment and reducing dropout rates.

Like the fear around the girls' dropout, some fears also cumulated in the case of boys—the Covid-19 pandemic compelled many boys from low-income families to become involved in various income-generating activities. With the loss of their parents' jobs or reduced income, the children took some work, that is, to help their family earn a living. Doubts remained as to whether this section of boys would return to school if the situation returned to normal.

Although a few studies shed light on the potential impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on education, it became necessary to measure the actual impacts as the schools reopened.

Safe Back to School Campaign (SB2S), a national-level network of 21 national and international NGOs working to help the



6 World Vision Bangladesh (2021) Rapid Assessment on the Impacts of COVID-19 Situation on Communities

7 Educo (2020) Global COVID 19 Survey Technical Report

government ensure safe school reopening and bringing the students to classrooms, conducted a comprehensive study to capture the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on education, particularly of the students studying at primary and secondary schools in different mediums of education and living in different locations.

There are 38.6 million students in Bangladesh, of which 3.6 million are in pre-primary, 18 million in primary, 13 million in secondary, and 4 million in tertiary education (BANBEIS, 2018). Therefore, it was crucial to understand the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the students studying in primary and secondary schools. The study's overall objective was to explore the practice of schools' health safety regulations and protocols and the attendance rate of students in classes after the reopening of schools after a prolonged closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.2 Objectives of the research

The specific objectives of the study were:

- Assessment of school attendance after reopening of primary and secondary schools in the Covid-19 pandemic context;
- Determining if the Covid-19 health safety regulations and protocols being followed in the schools; and
- Understanding the mental health condition of primary and secondary school students.



2

METHODOLOGY

It was a mixed-method study. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire survey using the KOBO interface, and qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs).

2.1 Study locations, methods and tools

Method	Division	Districts	Sampling unit & size	Data collection tool	Data collection duration
Quantitative • Survey	7	17	• Primary and secondary schools (328) • Students (1606)	• Survey Questionnaire	13 November-5 December 2021
Qualitative • FGD • IDI • KII	6	7	• FGD with Students (29) • FGD with Parents (13) • IDI with Parents (28) • KII with Teachers (42) • KII with Education Officers (5)	• Checklist	12-28 February 2022

2.2 Sampling and data collection

In the first stage, the data were collected from 17 districts across seven divisions. The survey questionnaire was pre-tested and modified according to the feedback. A pool of data collectors from member organisations fluent in the local language was trained, and they collected the data between 13 November and 5 December 2021. A total of 328 primary and secondary schools were selected for the data on school attendance and health safety. The head teachers or assistant headteachers mainly provided the data. Moreover, 1,606 students were interviewed from these schools to learn about their mental health situations. Researchers monitored the data collection process to ensure data quality.

In the second stage, the data were collected from seven districts across six divisions. Convenient sampling techniques were used to select the respondents. Two qualitative data collectors from each selected district were trained on the selected qualitative methods. They conducted FGDs and IDIs with parents and students (girl and boy groups), KIIs with teachers (primary, secondary, and madrasah), and Upazila Education Officer from each selected district.

2.3 Basic characteristics of the samples

A total of 328 respondents from 328 schools were interviewed for the survey. Within the sample, the rural-urban ratio was 75.6:24.4. Surveys were conducted within two types of schools—primary and secondary schools—at a 54.6:45.4 ratio. Almost half (49.7%) of the schools were non-government schools. The medium of education for 90.2% of the schools under consideration was Bangla medium, and the rest were madrasahs.

	No. of school	Per cent (%)
Division		
Barisal	82	25.0
Chittagong	77	23.5
Dhaka	25	7.6
Mymensingh	51	15.5
Rajshahi	15	4.6
Rangpur	58	17.7
Sylhet	20	6.1
Area		
Rural	248	75.6
Village	229	69.8
Hard-to-reach Area	19	5.8
Urban	80	24.4
Type of school		
Based on level of education		
Primary or equivalent	179	54.6
Secondary or equivalent	149	45.4
Based on ownership		
Government	124	37.8
Non-government	163	49.7
NGO-run	41	12.5
Based on the medium of education		
Bangla	296	90.2
Madrasah	32	9.8
Total	328	100.0

For the survey, any of the following five types of personnel were interviewed from each school—headmasters, assistant headmasters, assistant teachers, teachers, and staff belonging to the office administration. 65.9% of respondents were headteachers, 9.1% were assistant headteachers, 20.7% were teacher/assistant teachers, and the other 4.3% were someone from the administrative section.

An adapted version of the Stirling Children's Well-being Scale, a 5-point scale consisting of 15 questions, was used for mental health. The adapted scale for the Bangladeshi population was developed by Professor Dr Mahjabeen Haque and Mostak Ahamed Imran of the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology (DECP), University of Dhaka⁸. A total of 1,606 students from 328 schools participated in the survey. Among them, 40.2% were boys and 59.8% were girls; 75.6% resided in the rural area whereas other 24.4% in the urban area; 48.0% were studying at the primary level whereas other 52.0% at the secondary level; and 90.2% of them were studying in a Bengali medium school, and the remaining 9.8% were in madrasah.

2.4 Data analysis

The quantitative data were cleaned and analysed using STATA 14.2. The qualitative data were transcribed, extracted manually, and analysed thematically. Respondent triangulation methods were used to validate the qualitative data. Moreover, the researchers also conducted separate interviews with similar respondents from other areas to confirm the outcomes.

2.5 Ethical considerations

Informed consent was taken from each respondent verbally, and data confidentiality was ensured.

8 <https://www.banglajol.info/index.php/DUJBS/article/view/46338>

3

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

3.1 School attendance

Attendance of students in pre-determined three weeks, i.e., week 1 (12-16 September 2021), week 4 (3-7 October 2021), and week 8 (28 October – 3 November 2021) was collected from the attendance registers of each school.

3.1.1 Attendance at the primary level

An increasing trend in the average attendance rate is found at the primary school level from the first week to the eighth week. The attendance in the three selected weeks after the school reopening shows that the lowest attendance was in class IV (64.9%) in the first week, which increased up to 80.8% in the eighth week, and the highest was in class V (79.7%) which also gradually increased up to 82.0%.

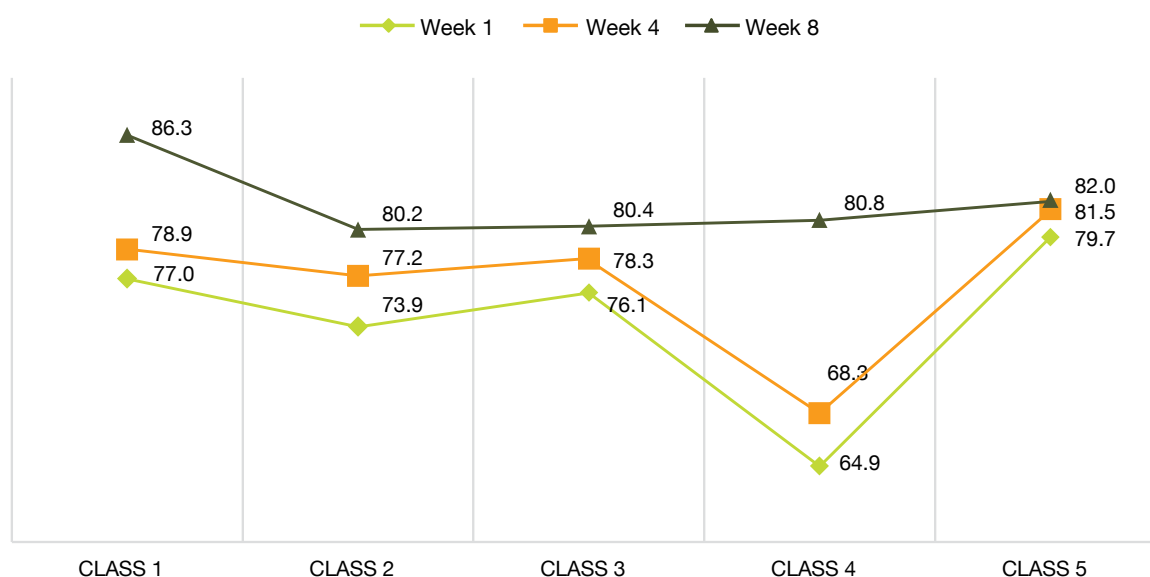


Figure 1: Attendance at primary schools (n=179)

In each class and each week, girls were found to be more regular than boys; the former group's attendance surpassed the average attendance. Among girls, in all weeks, students of class V had more than 80% attendance, and in the eighth week, girls of all classes reached 80%.

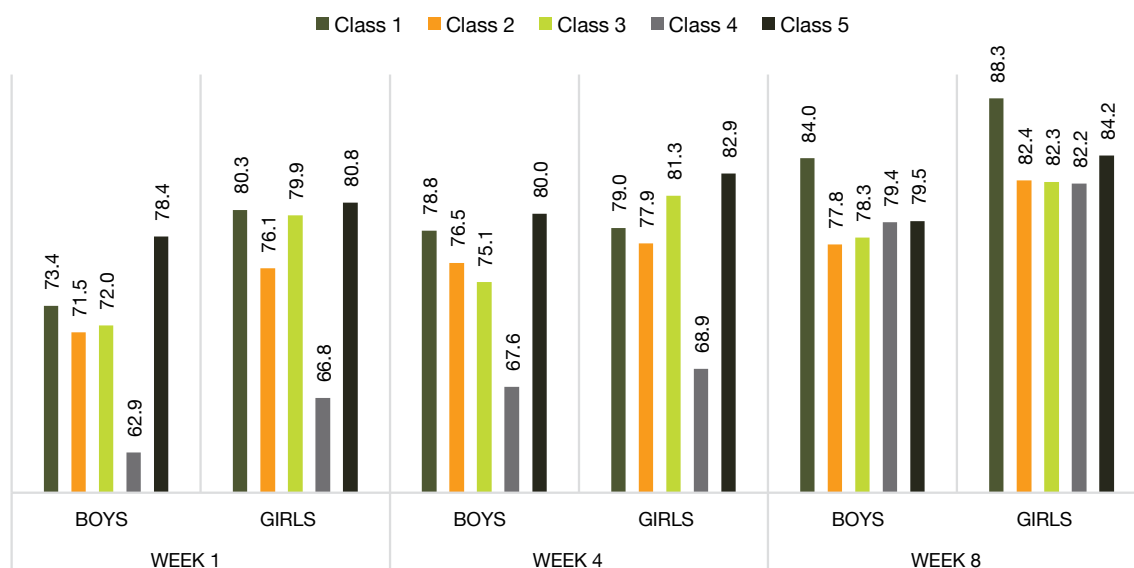


Figure 2: Attendance at primary schools by sex (n=179)

Interestingly, class V students of the rural area attended school the most, whereas, in the urban area, it was class I. In the rural area, attendance of class IV students was meagre in week 1 (59.9%) and week 4 (68.1%), which significantly increased in week 8 (83.7%). More than 80% of students were present in each class in rural areas at week 8. However, in the urban areas, attendance in class I reached above 80% at that time. Attendance declined from class I to class V in the urban area, whereas no such trend was seen in the rural area.

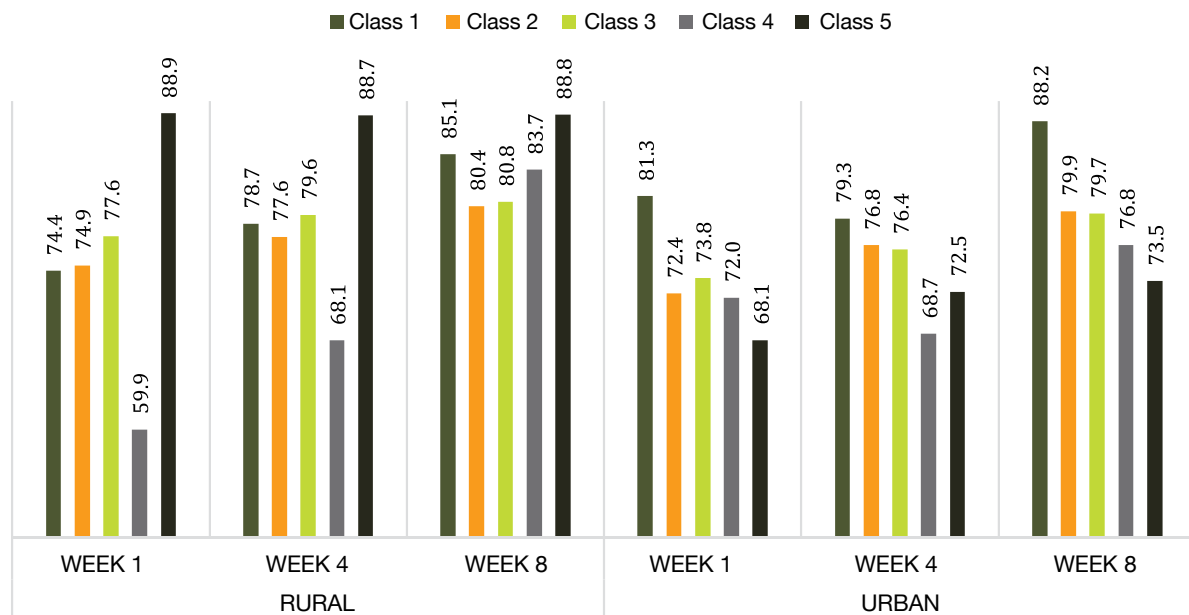


Figure 3: Attendance at primary schools by area (n=179)

3.1.2 Attendance at the secondary level

At the secondary level, the overall attendance was lower than that of the primary level for all weeks. Students of class nine had minor attendance among all students—however, it increased from 57.4% in week 1 to 65.7% in week 8.

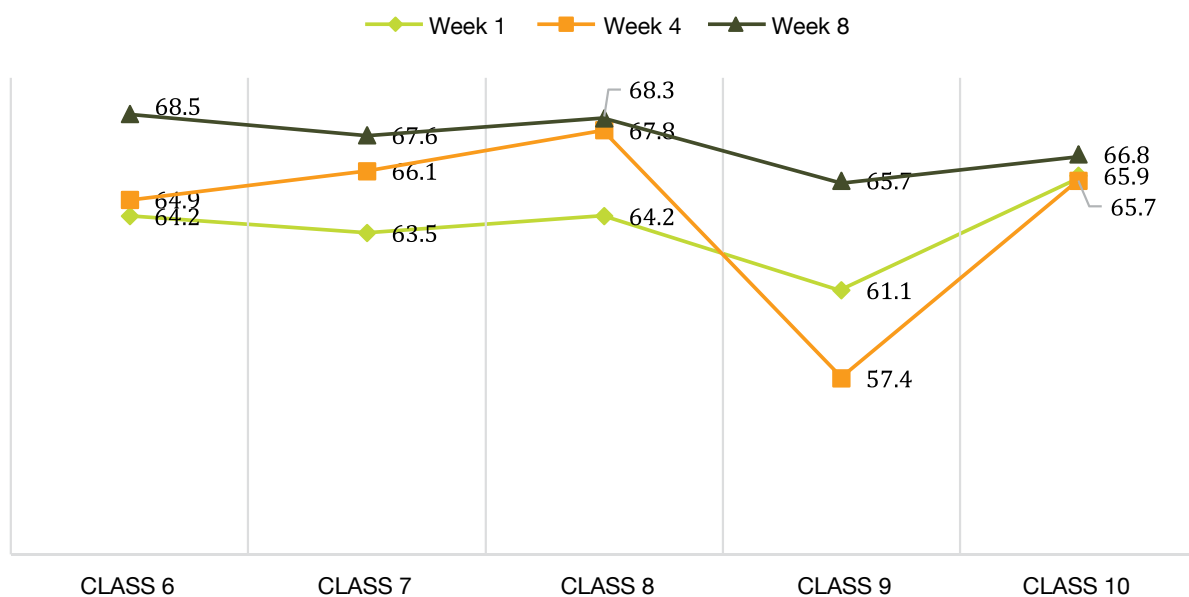


Figure 4: Attendance at secondary schools (n=149)

At this level, girls attended school more regularly than boys. Among the girls, in the first week, the highest attendance was in class X. However, in week 4 and week 8, the highest attendance was in class VIII (71.8% and 71.7%). Among the boys, the highest attendance was in class VII except in week 8.

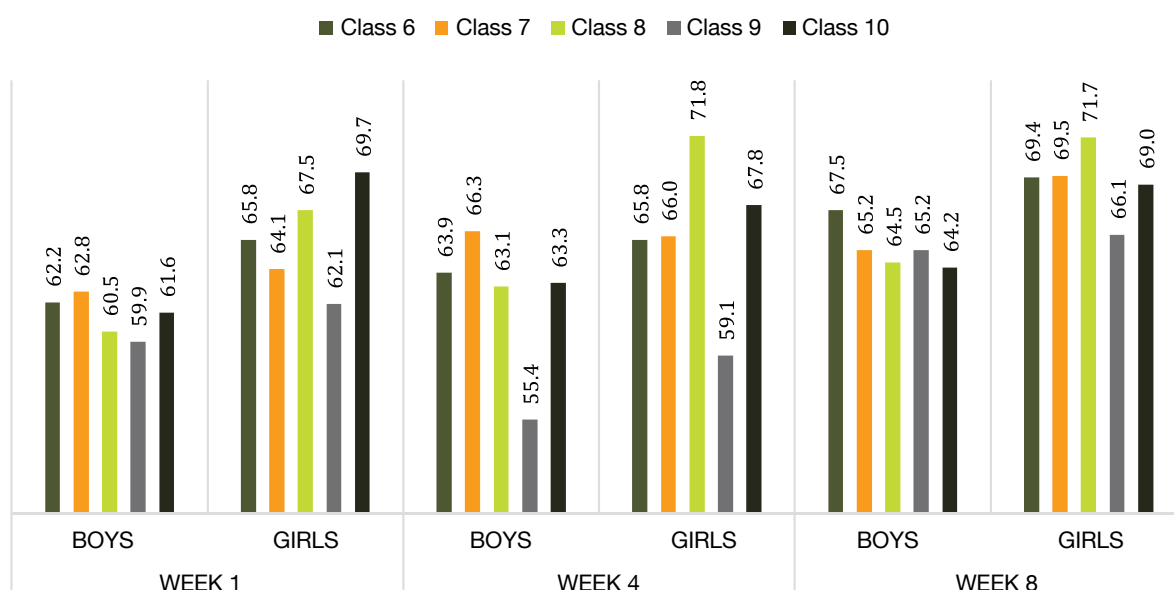


Figure 5: Attendance at secondary schools by sex (n=149)

No particular pattern was found in the rural or urban areas. However, unlike the primary level, in week 8, for all classes, attendance in urban areas was higher than in rural areas.

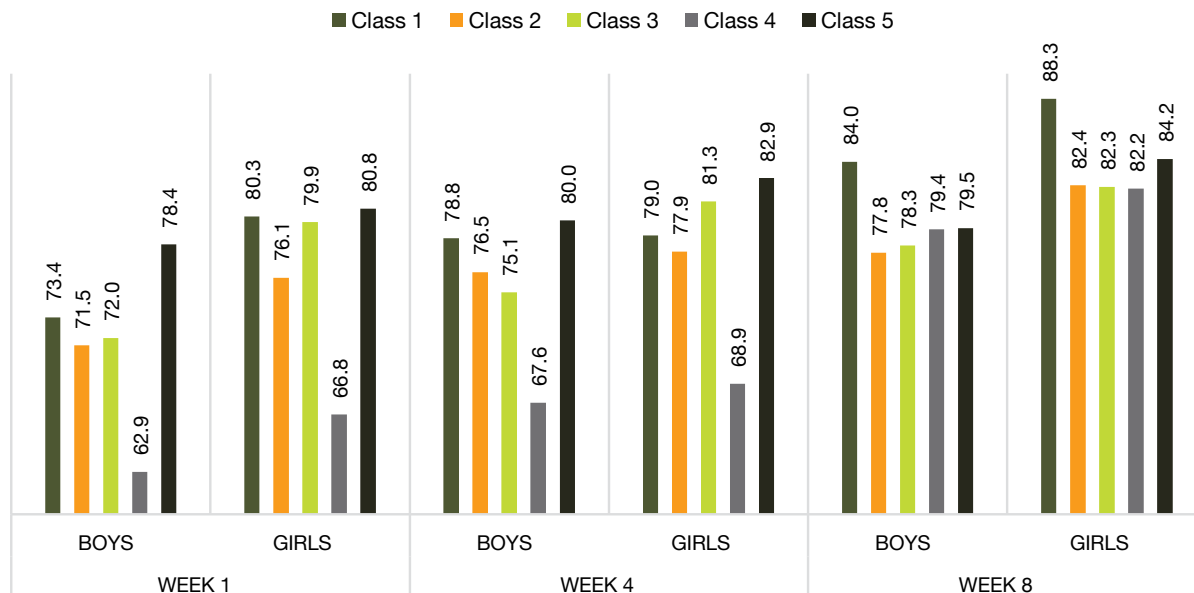


Figure 6: Attendance at secondary schools by area (n=149)

Existing literature reveals that the level of Covid-19 knowledge was higher among the urban population. In addition, an internal BRAC study conducted in 2021, assessing the learnings and resilience of the poor and vulnerable households in Bangladesh, found that the perception of threat prevailed among a higher proportion of respondents in the urban areas compared to the rural ones. This elevated feeling of risk has likely contributed to the lower attendance in urban primary schools. Nevertheless, it is not clear why urban secondary schools have comparatively higher attendance than rural secondary schools.

3.1.3 Reasons for absenteeism

Almost all participants in the FGDs, IDIs and KIs reported that someone they knew stopped attending school after reopening the schools. Both boys and girls stopped going to school, but more girls than boys have stopped going to school. However, the quantitative findings do not match the statements. The primary reasons for absenteeism identified were a) involvement in financial activities, b) marriage, c) migration of the family to other places, d) shifting to other educational institutes, especially Qawmi madrasah, and e) loss of interest in studying.

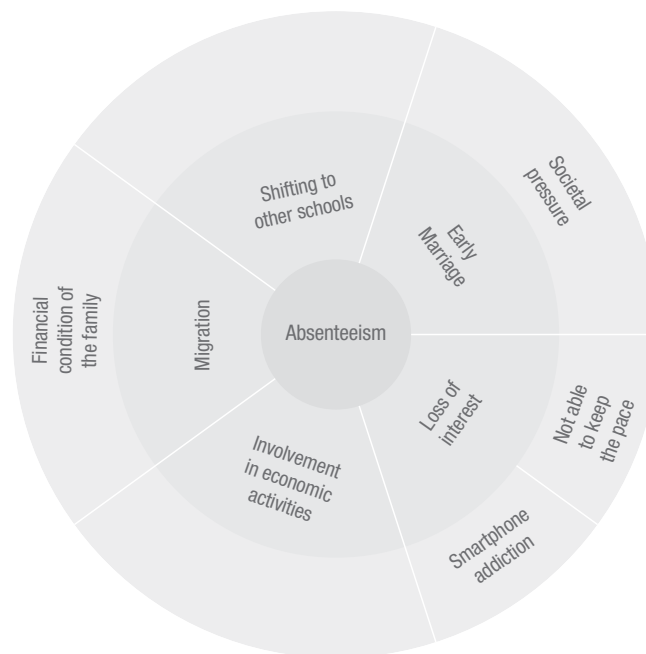


Figure 7: Reasons for absenteeism

One madrasah teacher from Gazipur said-

“Among those who didn’t come back, 30 were working, 50 went to the village, five got married, and others went to Qawmi madrasah”. [Gazipur_KII_Teacher_Madrasah_Urban]

Except for “loss of interest”, the underlying cause of absenteeism was the financial crisis of the students’ families. A mother from Sylhet expressed her concern about her children’s future education-

“My husband is a day labourer. He gets work one day but doesn't on the other three days. We are thinking about how to continue our children's education.”

A girl student from Rajbari also indicated the financial crisis issue-

“Many of our friends (girls) get married because of their family’s financial condition. Some joined in garments industry. Boys joined work.” [Rajbari_FGD_Girls_Rural]

Increased societal pressure was also a contributing factor to girls’ marriage in the absence of perceived meaningful activities (like studying or going to school). A mother said-

“ My relatives came with a marriage proposal...thought the girl might go in the wrong direction. So, we arranged her wedding. ”

-Rajbari_IDI_Parents_Mother_Rural

The students lost their interest in studying during this long break. Many lost their appeal due to excessive use of smart mobile phones. Some students could not keep pace with the online classes, so they also lost interest in their studies.

A study by Manusher Jonno Foundation revealed that at least 13,866 child marriages occurred in 21 districts during the lockdown period in 2020⁹.

In addition, the creation of new poor and the intensification of existing poverty amid the school closures have led households to engage their children in income-generating activities. In addition, a BRAC study conducted in May 2020 found that male students spend more time chattering, being on the phone, surfing the internet, and playing online games and sports than female students¹⁰. These might be the likely causes of the reduced attendance.



9 http://www.manusherjonno.org/latest_stories/13886-child-marriages-took-place-during-lockdown-last-year/

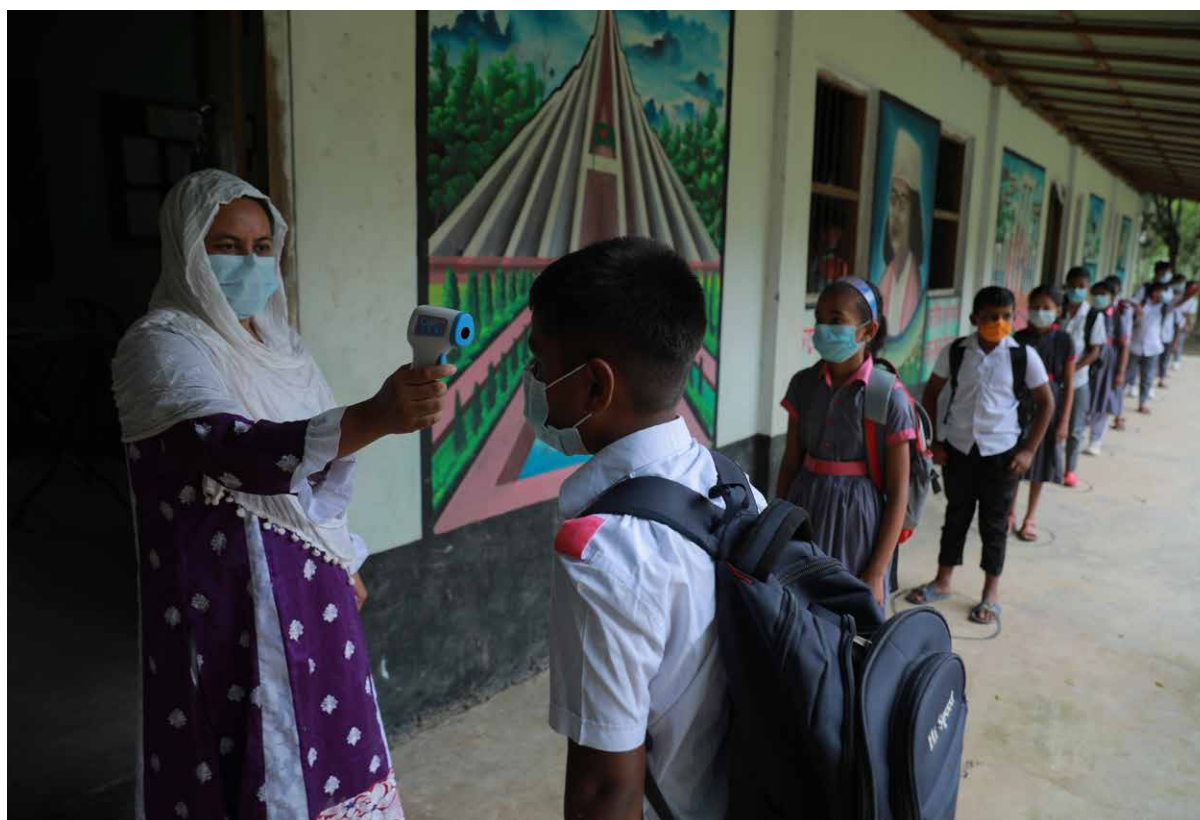
10 <http://www.brac.net/program/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Rapid-assessment-impact-of-COVID-19-education-in-Bangladesh.pdf>

Although the participants of the FGDs, IDIs, and KIs thought that it is very challenging for those involved in economic activities and almost impossible for married girls to return to school, they still suggested some measures to get the dropouts back to school. They suggested discussing with the parents and in-laws, providing financial support, reducing or eliminating school fees, and providing education and health safety materials. One of the students summarised it all-

“First, the school should be open; second, counsel the parents; third, motivate the students; and fourth, provide financial support.” [Sirajganj_FGD_Students_Boys_Urban]

One of the education officers acknowledged the duty-bearers’ responsibility as well-

“Talk with the parents of the girls already married and motivate them. Mass awareness is needed. The local administration has to take strong action to stop child marriage.” [Sylhet_KI_Education officer]



3.2 Health safety

To ensure the health and safety of the students, teachers, and staff, the government imposed several safety protocols to be followed upon the school's reopening. Wearing masks, maintaining a social distance of three feet, hand washing, and using hand sanitiser had been made mandatory. Given that it would be challenging to ensure social distancing due to the lack of space, classes were to be held alternatively among grades, with priority given to SSC candidates. Checking the temperature of the students upon arrival was advised. The study assessed the extent to which the following regulations were maintained:

- Wearing mask properly
- Social distancing
- Hand hygiene
- Covid symptom detection protocol



3.2.1 Practice of safety measures

The study found that less than three-fourths of the students (73.5%) wore masks at school. The practice was higher for the students in urban schools (81.1%) compared to those in rural ones (71%). On the other hand, the proportion of students wearing masks was almost similar at both primary (72.9%) and secondary (73.9%) schools. The proportion of teachers wearing masks in the classroom (79%) was higher than that of the students. Interestingly, the practice of wearing masks was higher among teachers in rural areas (79.4% of the teachers) than in urban areas (77.5% of the teachers).

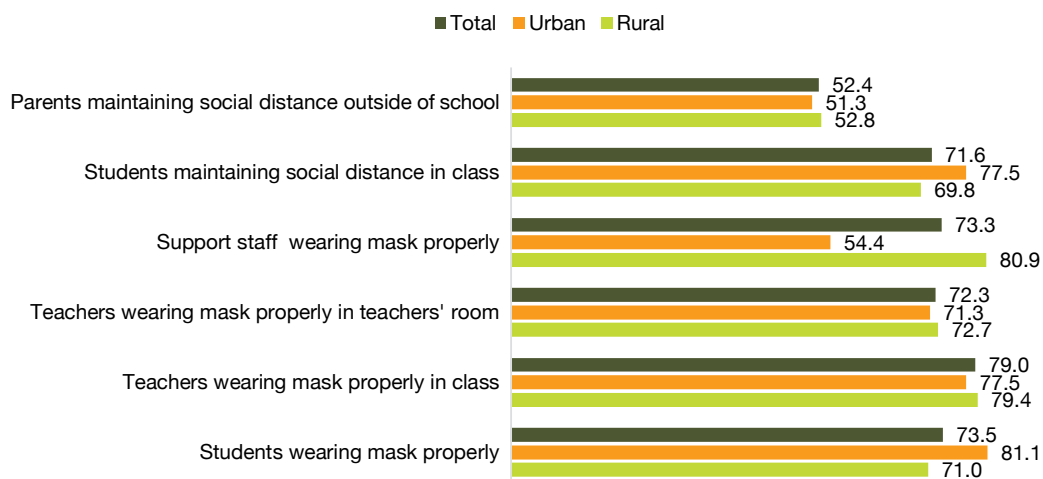


Figure 8: Practice of safety measures by area (n=328)

The practice was also higher among the primary school teachers (79.9% of the teachers) than the teachers in secondary schools (77.9% of the teachers). However, a lower proportion of teachers wore masks in the teacher's room (72.3%). Overall, 73.3% of the support staff wore masks properly. Whereas 80.9% of the staff did this in the rural areas, it was the case for only 54.4% of those in the urban areas. Most of the support staff in the primary schools (95.4%) wore masks properly, whereas it was the case for two-thirds (66.1%) of those in the secondary school level.

Overall, more than two-thirds of the students (71.6%) maintained social distancing in class. This was higher in the schools in the urban areas (77.5% of the students), compared to those in the rural ones (69.8%). A higher proportion of students (81.6%) at the primary level did this, compared to 59.7% of the students at the secondary level.

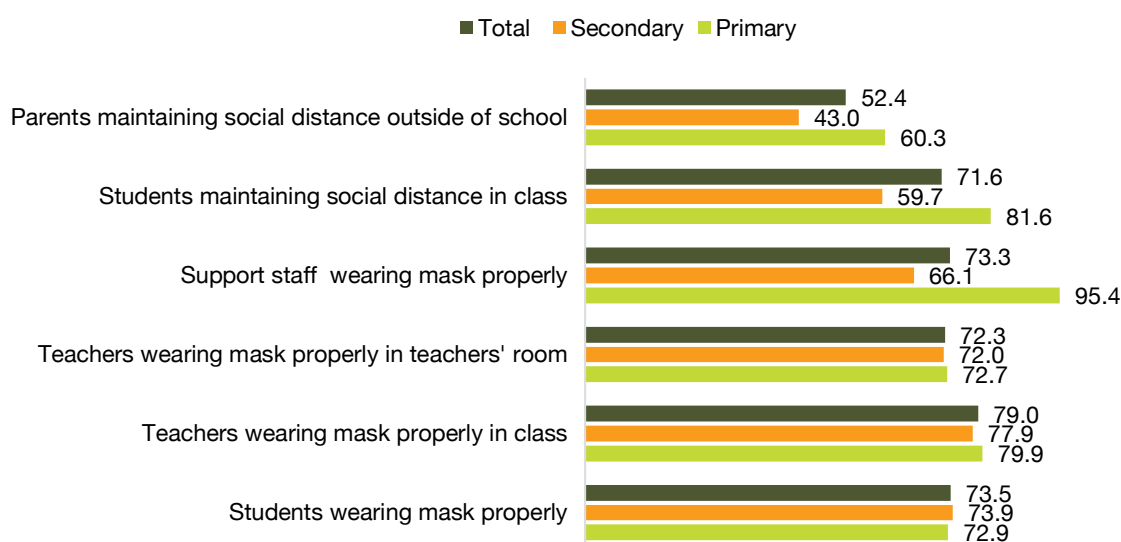


Figure 9: Practice of safety measures by school type (n=328)

However, maintaining social distancing only in class would be insufficient to ensure the safety of all stakeholders. Thus, it was necessary to assess whether the parents of the students did so outside of school as well—more than half of the parents (52.4%) abided by this regulation outside of their schools. Parents of primary school students maintained this more than the parents of secondary school students (60.3% vs 43%).

3.2.2 Following safety protocols

Schools need to have the necessary infrastructure in place to abide by the regulations imposed by the government. The study found that almost 91% of the schools had at least one handwashing point.

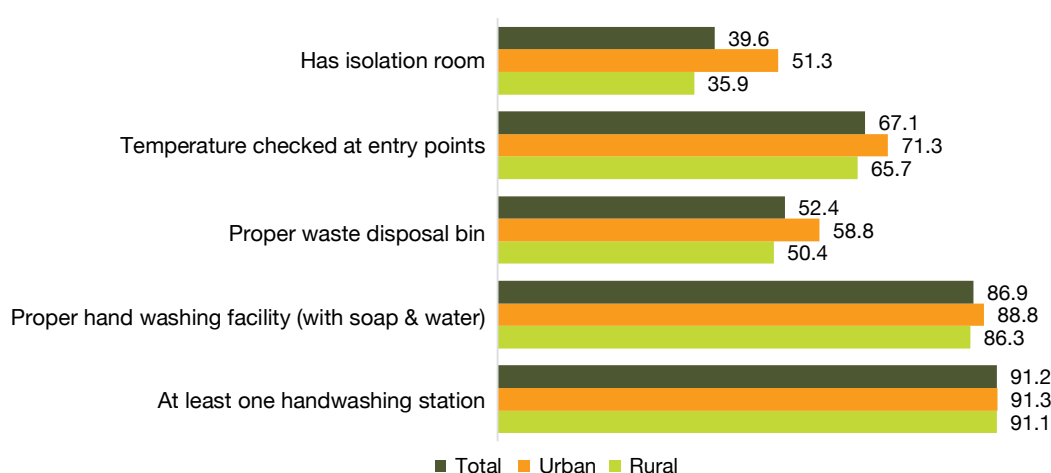


Figure 10: Following safety protocol by area (n=328)

The rate of having handwashing stations was lower for secondary schools (86.6% of the secondary schools) compared to the primary schools (95% of the primary schools). However, handwashing facilities such as running water and soap were available in 87% of the schools. The difference between the rural and urban areas in this respect was negligible. However, although

only 83.9% of the secondary schools had proper handwashing facilities with soap and water, it was the case for only 89.4% of those in the primary schools. Only half of the schools (52.4%) had a waste disposal bin. The secondary schools were in a more vulnerable position in this case as well, given that only 38.3% of the secondary schools had this, while it was the case for 64.2% of the primary schools. The temperature was checked at entry points by 67.1% of the schools.

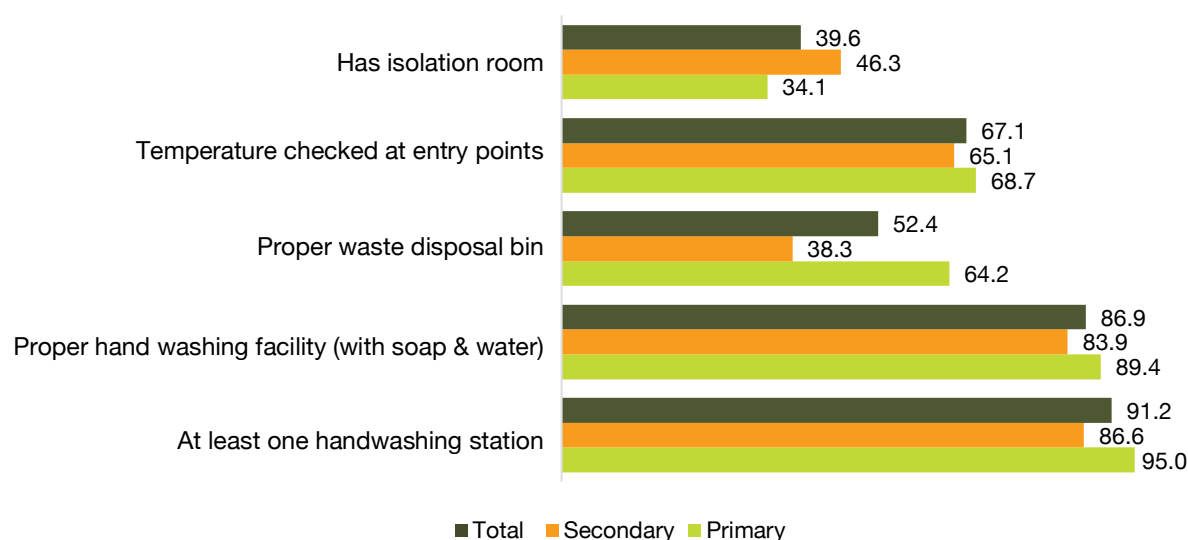


Figure 11: Following safety protocol by school type (n=328)

A higher proportion of schools in the urban areas (71.3%) did this compared to rural ones (65.7%). Only 39.6% of the schools have isolation rooms. This was the case for more than half of the schools in the urban area (51.2% of the schools). In this regard, secondary schools were in better condition. 46.3% of the secondary schools had isolation rooms, while only 34.1% of the primary schools did so. In the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, respondents acknowledged that there was rarely any isolation system in the schools. Teachers usually asked the students to stay home if they were sick.

3.3 Mental health

Attending school has various effects. Apart from knowledge gathering, schools are essential to a child's socialisation process. The Covid-19 restrictions forced students to stay home and sit in front of electronic devices rather than study and play with their peers. Hence, in addition to a learning vacuum, the six-month school closure might affect the students' mental health. According to a UNICEF report, before the pandemic, among the 1.2 billion adolescents aged 10-19 years in 2020, more than 13% had a mental disorder¹¹. Even though it is too early to understand the mental health impact of Covid-19 fully, similar restrictions (quarantine, isolation) during Ebola and HIV resulted in long-term consequences on mental health¹².

In Bangladesh, mental health issues have mostly gone undiagnosed. However, in the aftermath of Covid-19 and the subsequent school closures, it is necessary to understand the state of the future generation's mental state.

11 <https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-worlds-children-2021>

12 <https://unicef-irc.org/publications/1227-life-in-lockdown.html>

This study utilised Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (CWS), adapted for the Bangladeshi population, to gain insight into the children's mental health. This scale was primarily designed by the Stirling Council of Educational Psychology Service and is used to find the state of well-being in students aged 8-15. It utilises a 5-point Likert scale and 15 positive statements. Among the 15 statements, 12 are used to assess mental well-being, and the other three are used to assess social desirability.

The lowest possible score is 12, and the maximum is 60. Those with overall scores of 3 or 14/15 on three specific social desirability statements are treated with caution. Their responses are treated as unreliable due to their strive for social desirability¹³. The original scale has been adapted to the context of Bangladesh¹⁴. The study assessed the well-being of the students through 12 statements. The responses of all 12 statements have been added to represent a score. Based on their scores, students have been grouped into three categories: students scoring 12-28, 29-44, and 45-60.

3.3.1 Mental well-being of students

More than half of the students (52.1%) received scores ranging from 45-60. 47.1% of the students received moderate scores (29-44), indicating moderate well-being.

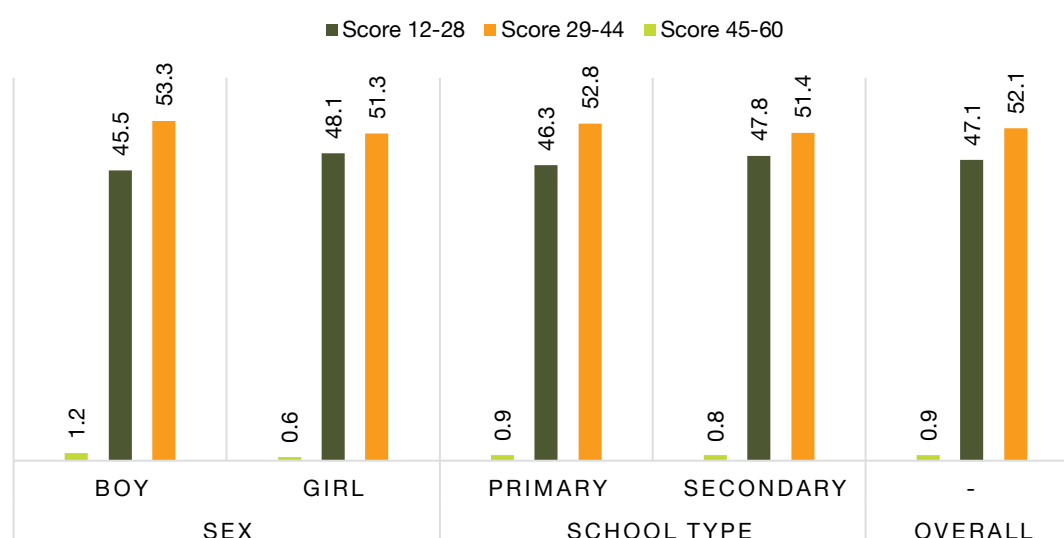


Figure 12: Mental well-being score (n=1606)

A negligible proportion of the students (0.9%) received low scores ranging from 12-28. This low score was acquired by a higher proportion of boys (1.2%) compared to girls (0.6%). A higher proportion of girls (48.1%) than boys (45.5%) received a moderate well-being score. On the other hand, a slightly higher proportion of boys (53.3%) acquired the increased well-being score compared to girls (51.3%). The distribution of the scores was found to be almost similar at the primary and secondary levels. More than half of the students at both primary (52.8%) and secondary (51.4%) levels received high well-being scores, while 46.3% of the students at the primary school and 47.8% in the secondary school received moderate scores.

¹³ <https://czone.eastsussex.gov.uk/media/4891/the-stirling-childrens-wellbeing-scale.pdf>

¹⁴ Haque, M., & Imran, M. (2016). Adaptation of Stirling Children's Well Being Scale (SCWBS) in Bangladesh context. Bangladesh Journal of Biological Science, 25, 161-167

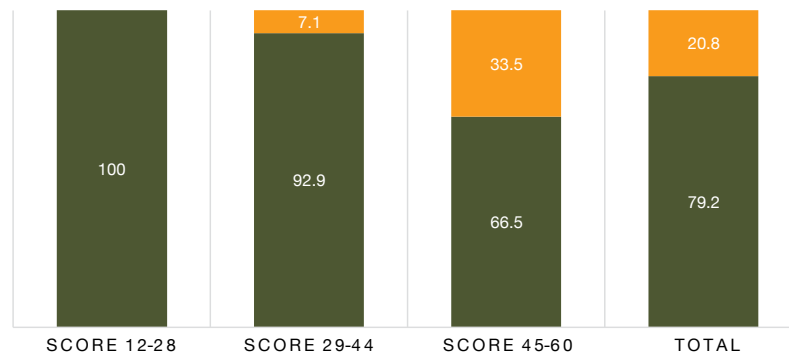


Figure 13: Social desirability score (n=1606)

Among the 1,606 students, mental well-being score of 334 (20.8%) should be treated with caution as their desirability score was high. Interestingly, 33.5% of those who scored 45-60 on the mental well-being scale need to treat with caution.

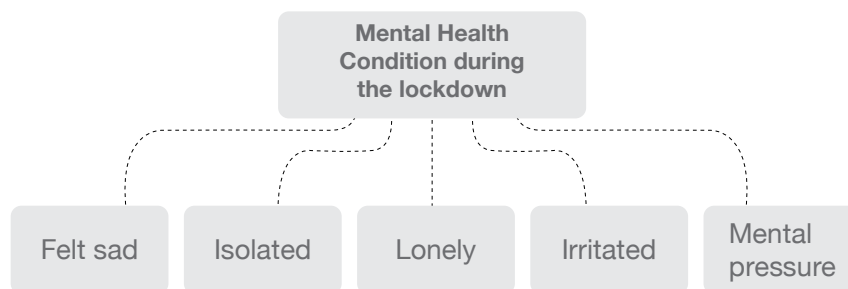


Figure 14: Mental health condition during the lockdown

The IDIs, FGDs, and KIs explored those students felt sad, isolated, lonely, irritated, and under lots of mental pressure. The reasons they mentioned for these feelings were:

- Financial crisis
- Uncertain future
- Risk of early marriage
- Risk of stopping education
- The increasing problem in the family
- Failure to attend online classes
- Failure to understand lessons

After reopening the schools, the students face new problems such as learning difficulties, understanding the lessons, and problem mingling with their peers. One student said-

“School opened after a long time; I had difficulty understanding the lessons. I couldn’t remember my roll number. I couldn’t recognise my friends. I was under so much mental pressure.” [Rajbari_FGD_Student_Boys_Rural]

There was almost no formal support from the school during the pandemic or even after reopening the school to cope with the mental pressure the students are going through.

4

RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Increase school attendance of students

- In-depth research should be done, and interventions should be taken based on the research. Stipends at a higher rate may help reduce their absenteeism and insist on coming back to school.
- Special attention to girls, especially in secondary education, should be started to prevent child marriage. The authority should take vital steps against child marriage. Moreover, steps should be taken so that the married students can return to school. Discussing with parents and in-laws can help in this process. Financial support or stipend at a higher rate may allow married girls to continue their education.
- Particular intervention for dropouts can be introduced, especially for the financially vulnerable groups/students. Financial support to the dropout students may help them get back to classes.

4.2 Ensure health safety in schools

- Strict monitoring in all schools to ensure 100% compliance with health safety protocols should be ensured.
- Ensure universal COVID-19 vaccination—at least all 6+ children should be taken under the vaccination process.
- Ensure the availability of health safety materials for all schools so that the students can get the materials from schools free of cost.

4.3 Ensure the mental well-being of the students

- Provide psychosocial support to students who are not psychologically well.
- Organise creative mental health-boosting workshops in communities for the students who are not psychologically well.
- Provide special training to the teachers on mental health to support the students and ensure a joyful learning environment to improve the mental well-being of the students.

4.4 Reduce the learning gap

- Arrange complementary remedial classes for the students to help them recover the learning gaps.
- A blended learning process should be introduced so that the students can keep pace with the new lessons—this approach should include the previous classes for those who missed those due to the extended school closure.
- Prepare the teachers for the complementary and blended teaching procedure through training. Non-government organisations might come forward to support the government.
- Government should prepare guidelines and give instructions to the schools on how to take complementary remedial classes or accelerate the learning process through a blended approach.