Continuing children's education in Nepal during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the Government to close all schools across the country at the end of the 2019-2020 academic year in March 2020. Having been closed for 8-9 months, local governments started to reopen schools at the end of 2020 as transmission rates of the virus continued to decline, only to have to re-close schools again as a result of the second COVID-19 wave emerging in the country in April 2021. This means severe disruptions in the education of children across the country, especially for those children who did not have the option to access alternative learning modalities and resources to continue their learning. In response to the impact of the pandemic on the school education sector, the Government activated the Nepal Education Cluster to support the response in the sector in terms of strengthening coordination, minimizing risk of becoming infected with COVID-19 for students, teachers and their parents while enabling them to continue their learning. Alongside this, the Government put in place guidelines and frameworks to facilitate alternative education modalities adapted to the context and access that students have to media, electricity and internet. Despite these efforts, a significant loss of learning among students in basic and secondary education is projected up to now, with no clarity as of yet when schools will be able to reopen. This learning loss is disproportional among those students that have no access to any type of online or media-based learning resources and those that were already at risk of dropping out at the onset of the pandemic.

UNICEF Nepal is a key partner of the Government in the education sector response, both in terms of supporting the Ministry of education, Science and Technology in the development and initiation of the new sector plan and the reflection of a recovery roadmap from COVID-19 within this in the years to come, and as co-lead of the Nepal Education Cluster. As part of this, UNICEF Nepal has been undertaking a large-scale phone-based survey called the "Child and Family Tracker" (CFT) since May 2020 on quarterly basis among over 6,000 families with children. The CFT covers a wide range of topics, with related to the overall well-being and safety of children during the pandemic, including questions related to their education.

This brief presents findings from our latest seventh round CFT survey conducted during the period of July 11th to 18th, 2021. This round of the survey gives an overview of children's learning status during the first months of academic year, which started on June 15th this year and after a month-long school enrolment campaign.

1. Caregivers perception on school reopening

Children's education is identified as one of the three main priorities by households. This highlights the importance parents and caregivers give to their children's education (Fig 1).

The majority of caregivers (89%) confirm that they are willing to send their children back to school as soon as these reopen (Fig.2).

Nationally, only a few (7%) respondents remain not confident in sending their children back to school, citing fear for their children or themselves becoming infected with COVID-19 as the main reason.
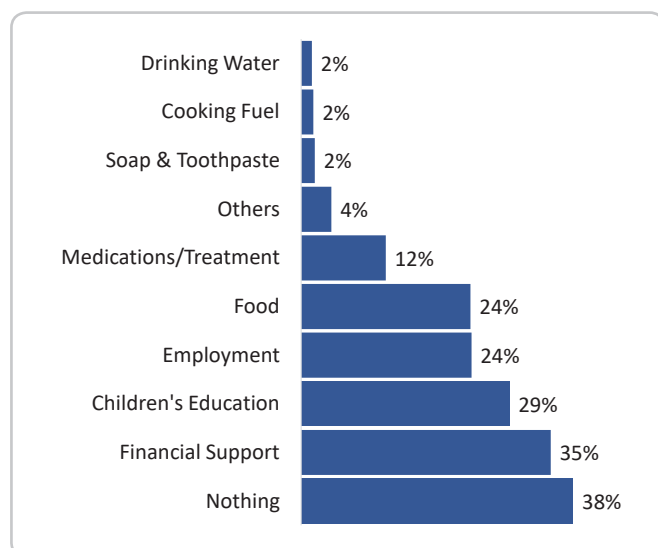
As per the **school reopening guidelines** issued by Ministry of Education, Science and Technology on November 2020, schools are required to enforce standard safety measures, such as social distancing, wearing of mask, measuring temperature upon entering and establishment of handwashing stations and sanitizers on the school premises. Additionally, schools will require to reduce class sizes by introducing a shift system, undertake periodic cleaning and establish medical/isolation rooms and counselling facilities.

Although the number of respondents willing to send their children back to school is high, only one-third (34%) of parents and caregivers were confident that their children's schools would undertake all the required precautions to ensure a safe learning environment in line with the guidance (Fig. 3) after reopening. Interestingly, the levels of confidence stated in this regard varied substantially across geographical areas, with a much higher percentage (68%) of respondents from province 2 stating they had confidence in schools undertaking the necessary measures, compared to a less than half of this percentage (24%) feeling that level of confidence in province 1. It should also be noted that parents and caregivers of children that are enrolled in institutional (private) schools were less confident (32%) on school reopening, compared to respondents whose children are enrolled in community schools (37%).
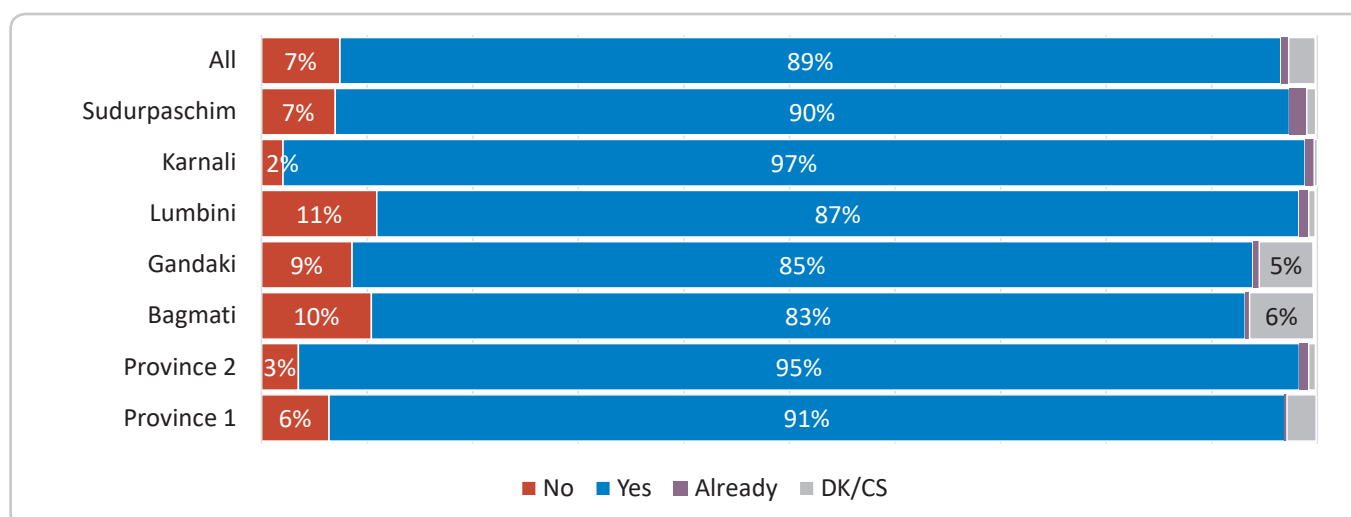

Category	Percentage
Drinking Water	2%
Cooking Fuel	2%
Soap & Toothpaste	2%
Others	4%
Medications/Treatment	12%
Food	24%
Employment	24%
Children's Education	29%
Financial Support	35%
Nothing	38%

Fig 1: Top 3 immediate needs reported by respondent

	No	Yes	DK/CS
All	7%	89%	
Sudurpaschim	7%	90%	
Karnali	2%	97%	
Lumbini	11%	87%	
Gandaki	9%	85%	5%
Bagmati	10%	83%	6%
Province 2	3%	95%	
Province 1	6%	91%	

■ No ■ Yes ■ Already ■ DK/CS

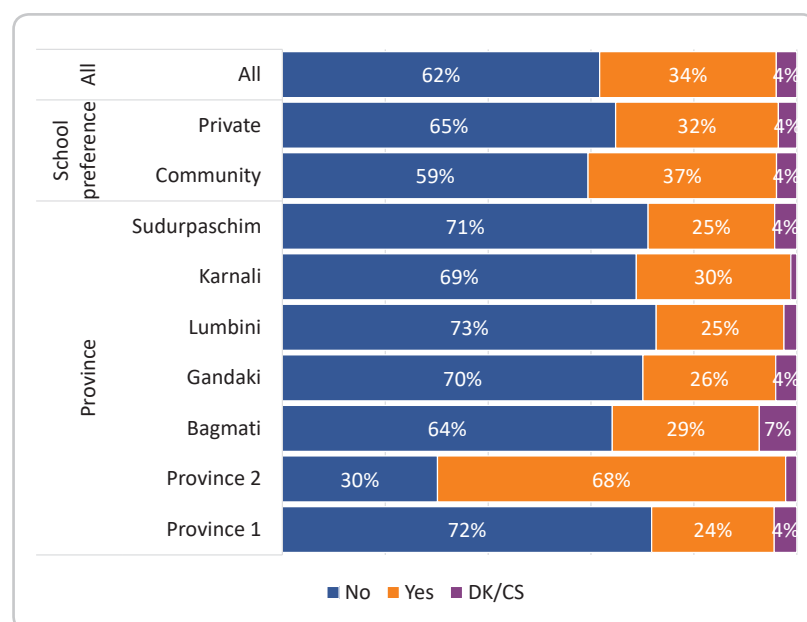**Fig.2:** Planning on sending children to school after reopening?

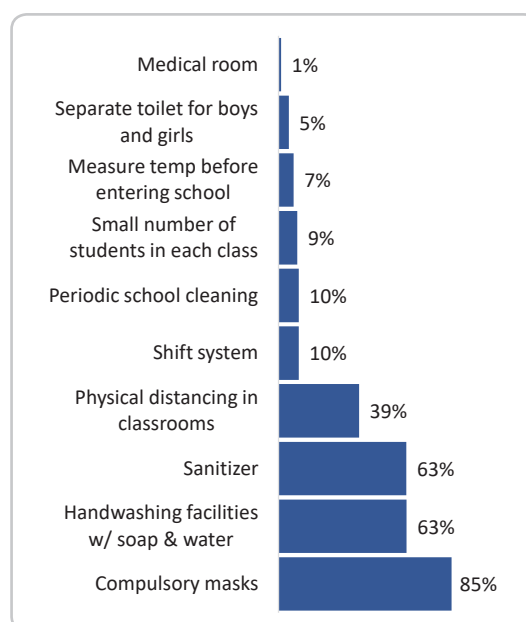**Fig.3:** Were respondents confident that schools would operate safely and regularly once it reopens?

Fig.4: Safety measures at schools reported by respondents when open

	All	Private	Community
Compulsory masks	84.8%	86.2%	84.0%
Hand washing facilities with soap and water	62.8%	64.3%	61.9%
Sanitizer	62.7%	71.6%	56.9%
Classrooms where children can follow physical distancing	39.5%	42.4%	38.1%
Periodic school cleaning	9.9%	12.5%	8.5%
Small number of students in each class	9.9%	10.5%	9.6%
Measure tempratures before entering schools	9.2%	10.9%	8.1%
Shift system	7.4%	10.8%	4.9%
Separate toilets for boys and girls	5.0%	6.1%	4.8%
Medical room	1.3%	1.2%	1.2%
Counselling facility	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%
Don't Know	5.7%	4.0%	5.7%

Table 1: Safety measures at schools reported by respondents when open (disaggregation by school type)

The reasons for parents and caregivers not having confidence in schools complying with the school reopening framework requirements seem to be based on schools being observed not to be adhering to these requirements or not adequately making parents/caregivers aware in cases where they did (Fig. 4). When schools had reopened in past, respondents reported the enforcement on wearing of masks (85%) and establishing of handwashing facilities and sanitizers (63%) as measures to be applied in a lot of cases, followed by enforcement of physical distancing (39%). However, the introduction of a shift system and periodic cleaning of schools (10%), measuring of temperature (7%) and establishment of a medical/isolation room (1%) were observed to have a very low compliance. In this regard, parents/ caregivers of children enrolled in institutional (private) schools were comparatively more aware of these measures utilized in schools than those whose children are enrolled in community schools (Table 1).

2. Learning Continuity of Children

As per the **Student Learning Facilitation Guideline** issued by the Centre for Education and Human Resource development in September 2020, children are classified in five categories as per access to alternative learning modalities:

1. Children without access to any alternative learning modalities;
2. Children with access to a radio/ FM
3. Children with access to a television;
4. Children with access to a computer but without online connectivity;
5. Children with access to a device that is connected to the internet.

Schools and parents/caregivers were guided to facilitate children's learning by offering appropriate alternative learning options that aligned with the level of access specified above, with teachers being identified as being responsible to ensure children were monitored and supported while continuing their learning and parents/caregivers were engaged and aware of their child's progress.

The survey shows that the self-study using textbooks has remained the dominant alternative (63%) for children to continue their education during school closures over the past 15 months.

Interestingly, the percentage of children that continue their education in this way is higher for children enrolled in public schools (70.5%), compared to that of children enrolled in private schools (61.5%). This a likely to correlate with the difference reported in terms of the access that children have to online classes (27%), with this being significantly higher for children enrolled in private schools (43.5%) compared to children going to community schools (18%), confirming that without substantial investments to increase households being connected to the internet, this alternative modality will continue to drive disparities in learning outcomes due to the existing digital divide.

Other alternative learning modalities have been reported to only cater to a small percentage of children, such as the provision of self-learning packs to children that have no access to any other type of alternative education (3%), children accessing education programs through television broadcasts (1.8%) and radio broadcasts (1.1%) and children being engaged in alternative in-person modalities such as mobile teachers and Tole Shiksya (0.6%), in which children are taught on small groups within their communities rather than in school. Finally, a number of students (10.4%) were not engaged in any of the previously mentioned modalities as they were waiting for SEE results or received external tuition among other things. An observation can be made here on the fact that the self-learning packs are
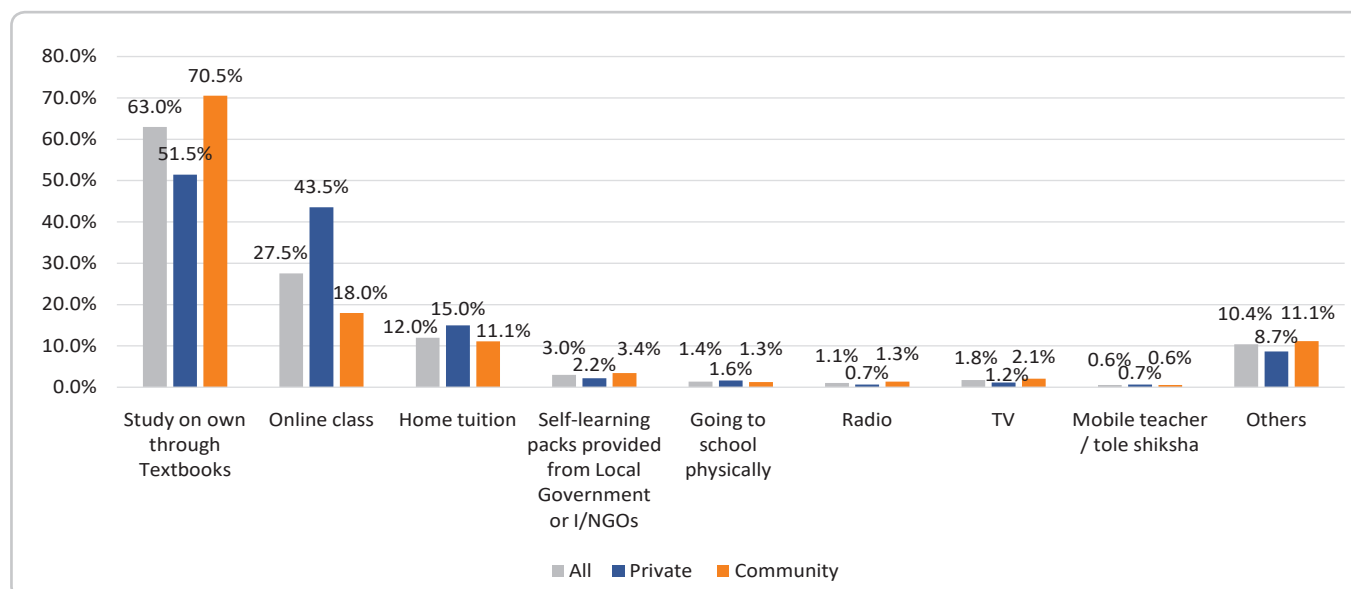

Fig.5: How are children studying currently?

designed to be targeted at those students that have no other options, yet a substantial share of the students receiving this are reported to be enrolled in private schools, raising the question to what extent these are the most at risk children to receive these. Finally, a small part of the children (1.4%) reported that they have started to resume going to school physically, with the difference in this among public school students (1.3%) and private school students (1.6%) being only moderate.

Contact between teachers and students is critical to facilitate children learning. However, approximately a half of students (50%) did not have teacher's contact at any point during the period their school was closed, with this percentage being much higher among public school students (59%) compared to private school students (36%).

Furthermore, of those children that were reported to have contact with their teachers, the frequency was reported to be low, with a 21% of students confirming they had contact with their teachers regularly (4 days or more per week).

In terms of the medium through which teachers connected with their students, there was an overall strong preference of using the mobile phone by teachers, with half of the teachers (50%) reporting to use their mobile phone for calling the children and a number of them in addition or instead using their mobile for audio-
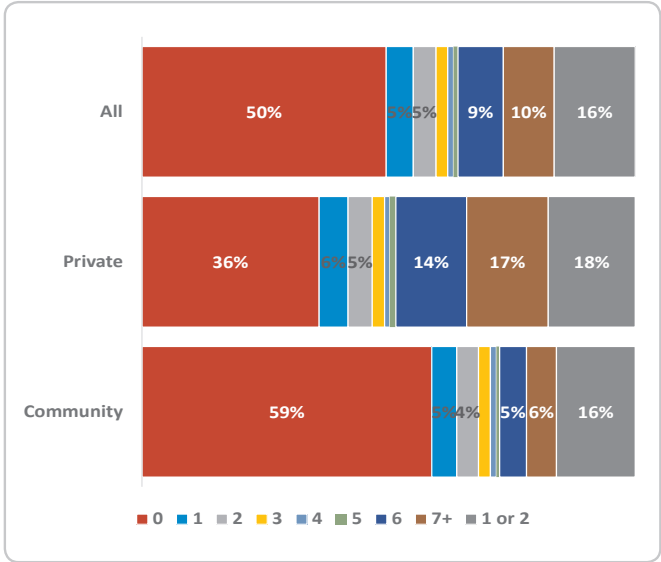

Fig.6: Weekly contact frequency by teachers during school closure

video calls (10%) and/ or to send messages using an app (8%). Besides this, the share of private school teachers (50%) that connected with their students through online/virtual classrooms was almost double to that of public school teachers (27%) doing this, which aligns with the earlier observed disparity in terms of public school students' access to online learning modalities. Teachers at community schools on the other hand are much more likely to visit their students in person, with 26% of public school teachers reporting this as the way to stay connected with their students compared to 11% of private school teachers. Most children with access to virtual classrooms live in sub-metropolitan areas (Fig. 8).
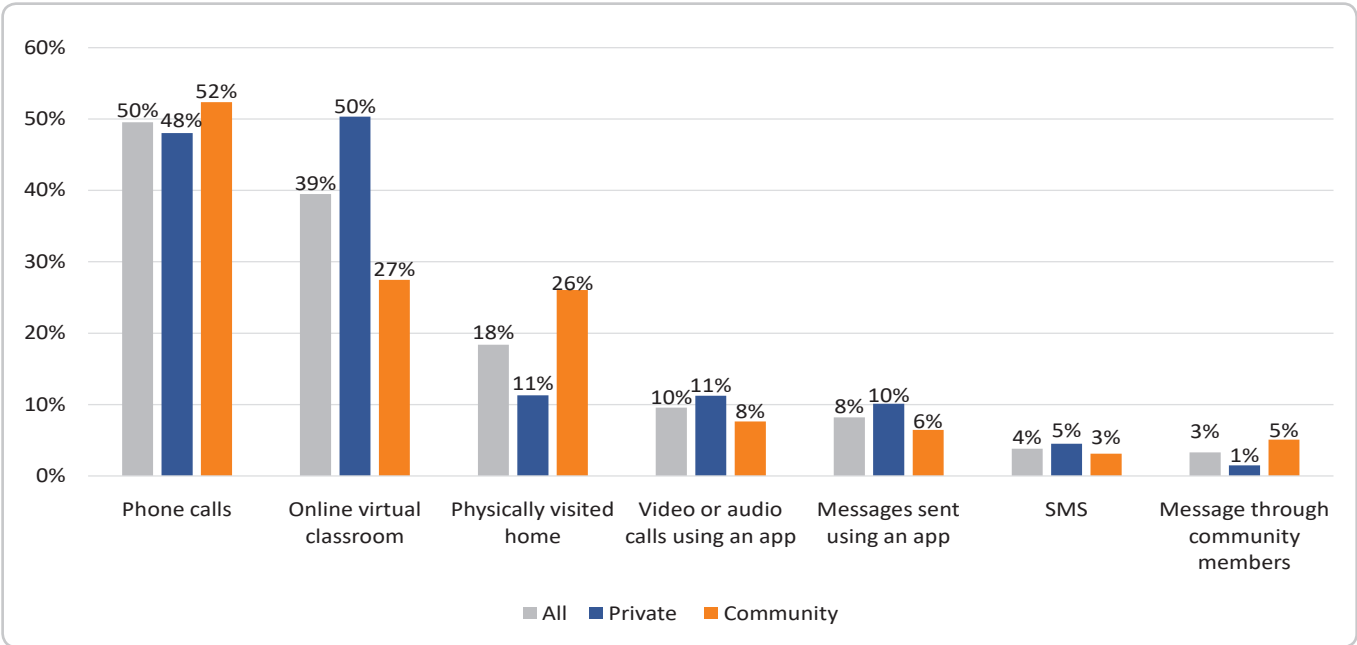

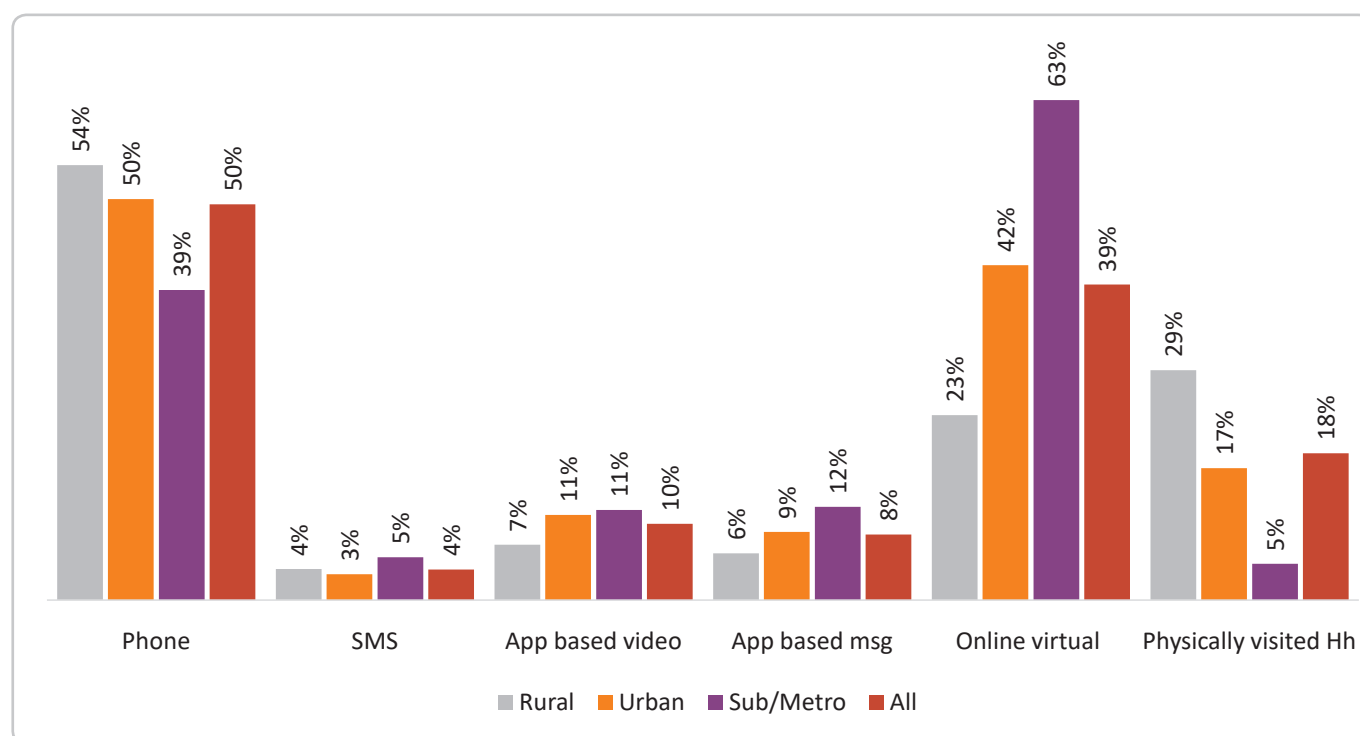**Fig.7:** Methods used by teachers to contact students

Fig.8: Methods used by teachers to contact students (disaggregation by geography)

3. Perception on learning status and examination

The loss of learning incurred by children during the school closures is a major concern in current context. With the severe disruptions over the previous and current academic year and limited and unequal access to alternative learning, nearly 90% of parents/caregivers confirmed to be concerned that their children are continuing to fall behind and are starting to forget things they had previously learned.

In terms of compensating these losses of learning, a large number (69%) of respondents reported that they perceived schools had not undertaken any efforts to address this through in terms of supporting children to catch up, with this percentage being higher among parents/caregivers in private schools (75%) compared to those having their children enrolled in public schools (59%), with the level of expectation towards the school that parents have to start with as a possible explanation for this. At the same time a number of parents/caregivers confirmed that they felt these efforts were made by the school through provision of extra
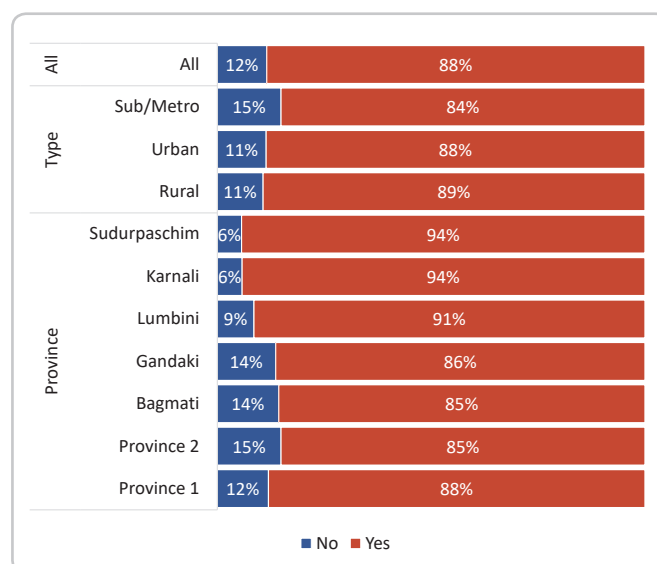

Fig 9.: Respondents perception about child forgetting learning or falling behind

classes (6%) and/or alternative education modalities (23%) offered to their children, with this almost being double in the case of children enrolled in private schools (33%) compared to public schools (17%). The provision of accelerated/remedial learning programs specifically focused on recovery of learning loss were only reported in an extremely low number (1%) of all cases.
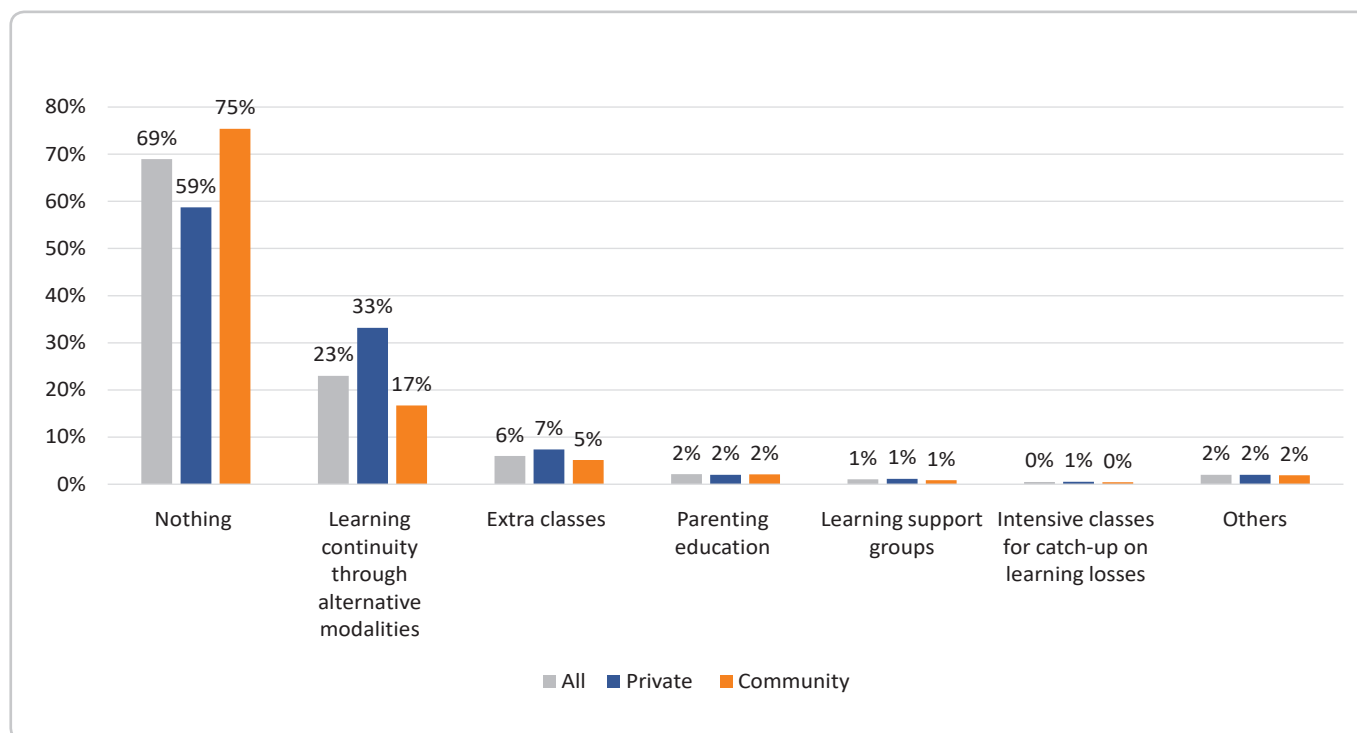
Fig. 10: Schools efforts to make children catchup

Examinations and passing: The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology had issued guidance to promote students based on internal evaluations. Hence, it is obvious that majority (61%) of respondents reported their children had not taken the exams at the end of the last academic year. More than half the respondents in sub/metro areas, where online exams are possible, reported their children had taken the exams as also respondents from Bagmati and Gandaki. However, on average 80% of respondents reported their children had passed to the next grade and 19% had not received any information from schools on whether their children are upgraded. This rate was higher for those who had taken the exams.
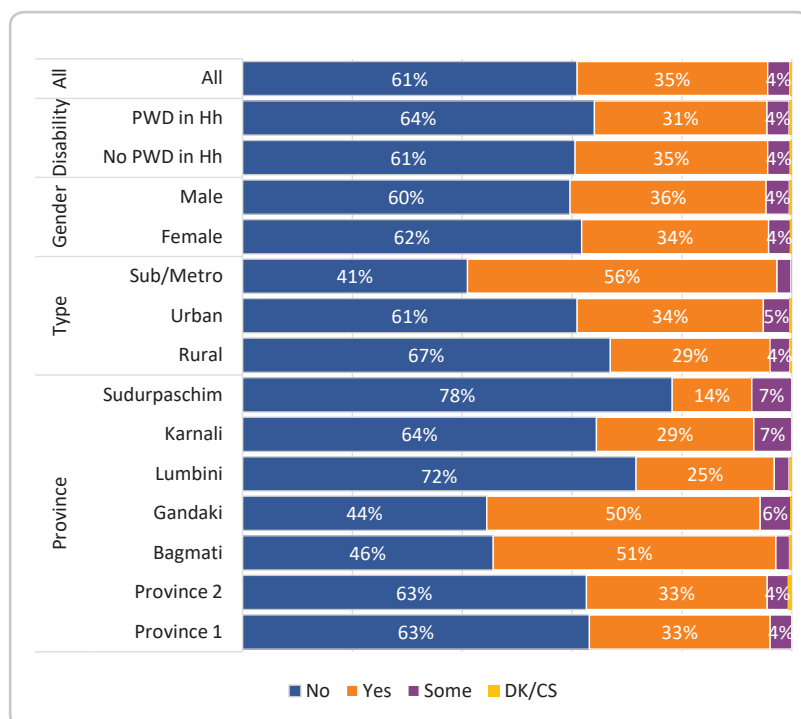

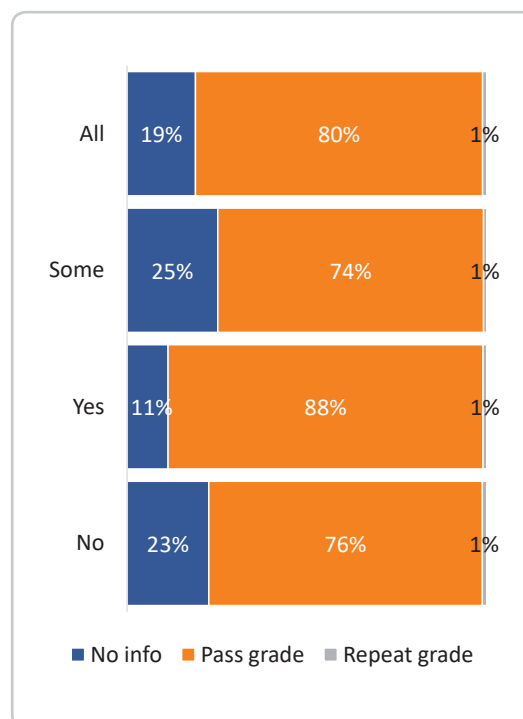**Fig.11:** Did children complete exams at the end of the academic year?

Fig.12: Any information no whether child would repeat grade or pass?

In conclusion, it should first and foremost be recognized that genuine efforts were undertaken by Government, schools and teachers in response to what has been and remains an emergency of unprecedented proportions for the Nepal education sector and in particular, the children depending on it for the continuation of their learning. The development of guidelines and frameworks, as well as the development of alternative learning modalities, including the printing of self-learning materials, development and broadcasting of radio/television education programs and the establishment of an online learning portal reflect the commitment towards the importance of continuity of learning. Having said this, *the trends observed across the different rounds of CFT show that a large number of children are not able to continue their learning at the appropriate levels and within that, a substantial part of children is expected to no longer be learning at all.* With schools being closed, observation on children's progress in classrooms and through daily interactions has seized, thus making it *even more important for*

parents/caregivers to be supported in ensuring their children continue to study and for teachers to continue to connect with their students through alternative modalities. Within all this, disparities that are rooted in pre-existing vulnerabilities a lack of access to books, media and internet continue to increase as the school closures are prolonged. Alongside this, there is a lack of dedicated follow up with children to identify their loss of learning and start to recover this through remedial and accelerated programs.

All this means that when schools eventually start to reopen again, the real challenges are only beginning with a large share of the school-aged population no longer being at an age-grade appropriate level and many of the students belonging to that group not being able to return to that level without intensive support, with them be likely to drop out over the years to come if not being offered this.

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Contacts: Tania Dhakwa
            Chief of Communications
            tdhakhwa@unicef.org

            Mark Waltham
            Chief of Education
            mwaltham@unicef.org