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# Why do Children Stay absent From School?

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*A study of causes in  
Bargarh cluster,  
Chitrakoot district,  
Uttar Pradesh  
April, 2016*

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*A study of causes in Bargarh cluster, Chitrakoot  
district, Uttar Pradesh*

*April, 2016*

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## Introduction

Even in India, where quality of school-education, particularly in rural primary schools, is low, school-education is expected to make a substantial contribution to the development of a child's potential. At the least, school-education can give a child socialization experiences she/ he is not likely to get otherwise: she/ he can learn to deal with the world outside the home, she/ he can learn to interact with children and adults other than family-members, she/ he can learn social skills, and develop self-confidence. If minimal learning levels are attained, the child will be able to write, speak, read and do simple arithmetical calculations. This will give her grounding for attaining higher levels of learning. The minimal capabilities will also expand the world of economic opportunities that will be available to her when she/ he become an adult: she/ he can think of opportunities other than doing unskilled manual labour.

For these reasons, children's levels of participation in school can be considered key determinants of the development of their personalities, and the quality of life they will enjoy as life. In turn, these determine the quality of life and economic growth achieved by society at large.

Hence, understanding of children's level of participation in school is important for all those who are concerned about children, school education, and the future of the country. From this understanding, we can tackle issues that reduce participation, and support factors that increase participation. An understanding of factors affecting participation in school will be useful at the ground level, in schools, and at higher levels like supervisory officials and policy-makers. The understanding will also be useful to non-government agencies working to enhance the potential of children and schools.

Broadly speaking, children's level of participation in school can be understood in quantitative and qualitative ways. Under the quantitative approach, we look at the number of days and hours children are in school, compared to the number of days/hours they are expected to be in school. In other words, we look at attendance record. By itself, this is not a sufficient indicator of learning. However, by considering other quantitative data such as test scores for subjects like language and maths, we can make broad co-relations between attendance and learning levels. In any case, regular attendance is generally considered a pre-requisite for attaining desired learning levels. Further, chronic absenteeism is likely to lead to the child dropping out of school. Hence, by identifying factors that lead to low attendance, we can address issues that lower the opportunity children have to get desired education.

Under the qualitative approach we look at the frequency, intensity and quality of children's participation in the teaching-and-learning process. This is a complex matter. As we cannot read what is going on in a child's mind when she/ he is in class, we have to rely on proxies like level of attention given to the teacher, responsiveness to oral questions posed by the teacher, and interest shown in solving written questions. In schools following activity-based pedagogy, we

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can look at participation in activities. But the proxy data will also have to be studied along with learning-level data if we are to arrive at some reasonable judgments about how the participation is or is not enabling learning.

The scope for meaningful use of the qualitative approach is severely restricted in schools that follow the traditional, teacher-centric pedagogy. In this situation, the teacher is expected to talk, or use the blackboard, and the student is expected to listen or write what the teacher has written. In this situation it is very difficult to assess quality of participation as a determinant of learning-level.

Under both the approaches, drawing clear links between level of participation in school and attainment of certain learning-levels is challenging, as we have to also consider other factors like:

- (i) Education levels of family-members who can support a child's learning
- (ii) Family attitudes to school, which can influence a child's view of the school
- (iii) Educational inputs received by the child through non-school sources like private tutors and tuition classes.

Despite these formidable limitations and challenges, a study of children's attendance in school for identification of key factors leading to absenteeism will be useful, particularly in areas where illiteracy among parents is high, and parents do not have the income or the opportunity to use non-school sources of educational inputs. In these circumstances, regularly attending a regularly functioning school is the child's only chance of getting some basic education.

With this understanding, a study of factors affecting school absenteeism was undertaken in the Bargarh cluster of Mau block of Chitrakoot district in Uttar Pradesh, which falls in a region known as UP Bundelkhand. The study was undertaken in February-March 2016 by Akhil Bhartiya Samaj Sewa Sansthan (ABSSS), a reputed NGO headquartered in Chitrakoot and working in the Bargarh cluster since 2015 under multi-dimensional projects focused on children and youth with support from ChildFund India (CFI). CFI is a child development organization "representing the voice of deprived, excluded and vulnerable children in India regardless of their race, creed and gender". It is a part of ChildFund International, a global child development and protection agency, headquartered in US, serving more than 17.8 million children and family members in 30 countries.

The next sections of this document describe:

- Findings of some relevant studies on school participation/attendance
- Profile of study area
- Objective, methodology and limitations of study

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- Profile of sample
- Key findings
- Actionable implications of findings

An appendix at the end gives an English translation of the questionnaire use for the study.

*Looking forward for your kind suggestions & feedback,*

***Bhagwat Prasad***

Director

## **Relevant studies on school participation/attendance**

Estimation of children's participation or attendance in school and factors affecting the same are the subject of several studies done across the world. In India, some broad-based studies such as Govinda & Bandyopadhyay (2008) and the annual Pratham-ASER reports discuss school participation/attendance. There are also some fairly recent studies focused on only this aspect. A summary of some of these studies is given below:

### **Sipahimalani (1998):**

The researcher investigated the determinants of school participation in rural India using household survey data collected by the National Council of Applied Economic Research in 1994. The study sample comprised 33,174 children aged 6-14 from all the major Indian states. Both 'initial enrolment' and 'grade attainment' were estimated.

The study found that parental education has a strong positive influence on school participation. The effect of mother's education on girls' school participation is particularly strong. Children from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are at a disadvantage, not only for initial enrolment but also for grade attainment. Low family income has a strong negative effect, especially for girls.

School characteristics that have a significant positive influence on initial enrolment and grade attainment include the proportion of female teachers, the proportion of trained teachers, the proximity of schools, school meals, and other pupil incentives.

### **Dreze & Kingdon (1999):**

The researchers analyzed determinants of school participation in rural north India, using data from a PROBE survey (conducted in 1996) of households in 122 randomly-selected villages of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, which covered school participation and school characteristics.

The researchers found that school participation, especially among girls, is determined by a wide range of variables, including parental education and motivation, social background, dependency ratios, work opportunities, village development, teacher postings, teacher regularity and mid-day meals. School quality matters, but it is not related in a simple way to specific inputs.

### **Educational Consultants India Ltd (undated):**

The study was conducted under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan in major states of the country to assess the students' attendance rate and teachers' absence rate by visiting schools on three different occasions in 2006-07 and actually counting the students and teachers who were present. The sample comprised 6745 rural and urban, primary and upper-primary schools in 286 districts of 20 states, including schools.

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It was found that overall average attendance rate of students was 68.5% and 75.7% at primary and upper primary levels respectively. For teachers, the average attendance rate was 81.7% and 80.5% in primary and upper primary schools respectively. The attendance rate of girls was slightly higher than that of boys. The overall average attendance was a slightly lower in rural schools than in urban schools (68.0% and 71.2% respectively at primary level), but in some states, the situation was reversed.

The main reasons for children being absent from schools given by head teachers, teachers and VEC members were

- a) Lack of adequate facilities in school
- b) Shortage of teachers and overcrowded classrooms
- c) Children being required for household work or sibling care at home
- d) Children required to help parents in income generating activities, and
- e) Parents' lack of interest in child's education.

Parents mostly felt that lack of facilities in school and the child's unwillingness to go to school were the main reasons for frequent absence from school.

### **Bandyopadhyay, Das & Zeitlyn (2011):**

The study, undertaken in 2008-2010, under CREATE, a DFID-funded research programme, analysed the causes and correlations of absenteeism, repetition and "silent exclusion" from schools in 36 villages of three clusters of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh: Rewa, Dindori and Rajnandgaon.

The study found that on the day of the field visit, 22%, 35% and 47% of children were absent from school in Rajnandgaon, Rewa and Dindori respectively. In all three clusters, most students were absent for 1 to 3 days per month.

Poor health was cited by parents as the major reason for absenteeism, followed by reasons like visits to relative's house. There was no clear relationship between caste affiliation and absenteeism. However, children whose parents were illiterate were found to be most likely absent from school.

The studies discussed above indicate that absenteeism is a complex phenomenon influenced by several factors. While there are some general predictors of absenteeism, specific causes would have to be investigated in particular contexts.

## Profile of study area

The study area falls in a corner of Chitrakoot district, in the UP Bundelkhand region, which is considered one of the most backward regions of the state and the country. Key data about the district recorded by Census 2011 is as follows:

- Among all districts of UP Chitrakoot ranks 70th in terms of population.
- Only 9.7% of the population of the district lives in urban areas.
- The district has population density of only 308 persons per sq.km against the state average of 829 persons.
- The sex ratio is 879 females per 1000 males, much lower than the state average (912).
- Persons belonging to SC groups form 26.9% of the population. Population of persons belonging to notified ST groups is negligible. However, the district has a sizable population of Kol adivasis, particularly in the study area, who are notified as an SC group in UP, though they are categorized as an ST group in MP.
- Average literary rate is 65%. In SC groups it is lower, at 54.8%.
- Literacy rate of females is much lower at 51%. Among SC group's female literacy is 43.3%.
- The average size of households in the district is 5.9 persons.
- The work participation rate in rural areas is 41% and among rural females it is 32.3%. Marginal workers form around 30% of all workers (47.5% among females).
- Cultivators and agriculture labourers form 83.4% of total workers.

Chitrakoot district has 4 blocks. The Bargarh cluster of schools covered by this study falls in Mau block, which has a population of 1.61 lakh persons (2011 Census) living entirely in villages.

The Bargarh cluster has 10 large villages, and around 45 smaller settlements with distinctive names. According to DISE 2015-16 data, there are a total of 55 schools in the cluster, of which 12 are within Bargarh village itself. Of the 55 schools, only 7 are run by private (unaided) managements. A total of 29 schools are up to primary level only. Only 3 schools have secondary section and only 2 have a higher secondary section. A total of 31 schools have pupil-teacher ratio of less than 40. All the schools have more than one classroom. According to the DISE data, almost all the schools have teachers with professional qualifications.

## Objective, Methodology & Limitations

The objective of the study was to estimate rate of school absenteeism and learning impediments due to common illnesses among children of 6-14 years age-group in Bargarh cluster, with focus on the target group of the ABSSS-CFI project, namely SC, Kol adivasi and other marginalized

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groups. The hypothesis was that common illnesses significantly affect school attendance and learning levels of target-group children.

There are several survey methods of estimating school-absenteeism across categories of students, across a number of schools, with advantages and disadvantages as explained below:

- We can count the number of children present in school on one or more randomly selected days and compare it to the number of children enrolled in school. This method has two pitfalls: (i) the number of children present on a particular day may be low due to reasons such as festivals, bad weather; etc (ii) Data on number of children enrolled may be false (inflated).
- We can count the number of school-going children in a particular area and compare it to number of children present in school on randomly selected days. While this method can take care of problem (ii) above, problem (i) may remain.
- We can count the number of school-going children in a particular area and compare it to number of children present in school every day over a period of several months, across seasons. This method would provide accurate data but requires considerable time and resources, especially if the study is to be conducted across a number of schools.

As the present study was focused on target-group children, none of the above methods were followed. Instead, we identified a sample of target-group children across 13 habitations covered by the Project and administered a questionnaire in Hindi to them, their parents and their teachers, to obtain data on the number of days children did not go to school in the previous two weeks, which had 12 school working days and did not fall in a festival season. While this method relied on recall, the data can be considered reliable as parents could specify the exact number of days a child did not go to school. In case of chronic absenteeism, recall of parents/child was cross-checked with recall of main teacher of the child.

Several other items of information were obtained from the questionnaire including:

- Social group and occupation of parents
- Distance from school
- Education level of parents
- Whether child frequently does not go to school through the year, i.e., is chronically absent
- Reasons for child not going to school in the given 12 days.

If illness was given as a reason for not going to school, the nature of the illness was noted down. If other reasons were given for not going to school, these were noted down under heads such as “family reasons” (eg, family function, visit of relative, visit to relative, etc), “does not like school” and “other”. In case of “other reasons”, the exact reason was noted down, such as “has to

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take care of younger siblings when parents go to work”, or “has to accompany parents when they go to work”.

To estimate learning impediments of children we relied on assessments made by parents, children and their teachers on following parameters related to language and arithmetic:

- Cannot speak well
- Cannot read well
- Cannot write well
- Does not know numbers
- Cannot do addition well
- Cannot do subtraction well
- Cannot do multiplication well
- Cannot do division well
- Cannot solve arithmetic word problems well.

Surveyors were instructed to ask questions related to the above from the lowest learning levels. In case a student or parent reported a high learning level in relation to the student’s age, the surveyors were asked to verify it by conducting a simple test on the spot. Further, in each case, teachers’ assessment of the child’s learning level was obtained. While direct assessment of learning levels was not done, the data obtained indirectly can be considered as useful as we are talking about gross learning impediments.

The study had the following limitations:

- Due to the framing of the objective and the hypothesis, reasons for not attending school other than illness could not be studied in detail.
- The survey was conducted in a drought year: data in years with normal monsoon may be different.
- The survey was conducted in the month of March (2016), when incidence of illness is most probably lower than during the monsoons. Absenteeism across the whole year was not tracked.
- The survey was limited to project’s target-group students: no comparison could be made with other students, or students of another area.
- Due to small sample size, conclusions drawn from data for children in age group of 6-10 years (25% of sample) may be questionable.

### **Profile of sample**

The sample comprised 125 selected school-going students of the target group in 13 project villages: Bargarh, Basniha, Bhauti, Dorhihapurwa, Hadaha, Khohar, Kolmajra, Kothi, Lasahi,

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Narharpurwa, Pateri, Satyanarayan Nagar and Singalpurwa. For making the selection of students, surveyors were given the following parameters:

- (i) The children should from the target-group and in the age group of 6-14 years
- (ii) At least half the children should be Project “sponsored” children
- (iii) At least half the children should be female
- (iv) As absenteeism is more critical in early schooling, around three-fourths of the children should be from the age group of 6-10 years.

Accordingly, all the surveyed students belong to the Project’s target group, 55% of them were “sponsored” by CFI, 75% of the students belonged to the age group of 6-10 years, and 56% were females. While 71% of students belong to SC groups (mainly Kol), 22% belong to OBC groups. For 12% of students school is at a distance of 2km or more from their homes.

The profile of parents/households (HHs) of surveyed children was as follows:

- Almost all the HHs have land, but for 68% HHs local wage-labour is main source of livelihood. Another 23% HHs have at least one member who migrates regularly for work.
- 91% HHs are ‘poor’ and 3% HHs ‘very poor’ according to surveyors’ assessment.
- 40% of fathers and 73% of mothers of surveyed students are illiterate. Only 35% fathers and 15% mothers have studied above primary level

### **Key findings**

The key findings can be discussed under the following broad heads:

#### **Chronic absenteeism:**

It was found that:

- 21% of surveyed children were chronically absent from school, as reported by their parents and teachers. Incidence of chronic absenteeism was higher among boys (27%). There was no significant difference in chronic absenteeism according to sponsorship-status of students, their social group, age or distance from school.
- Illness was reported as a cause in 19% cases of chronic absenteeism.
- The main cause (42% cases) was “other reasons”, such as accompanying parents to work and taking care of younger siblings at home when parents go to work.

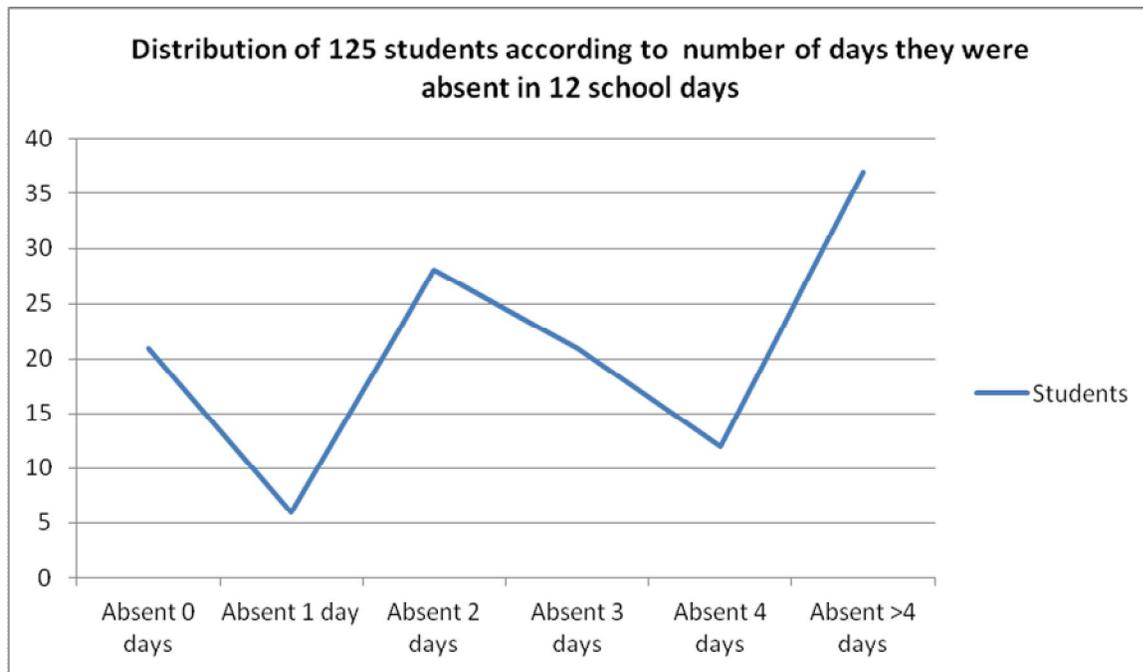
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- Another significant reason (31%) was that the child “does not like school”.

### Absenteeism in past 12 school working days:

In the given period of 12 schooldays in March 2016-

- 83% students were reportedly absent for 1 or more days. Absenteeism was higher among boys (87%). As the chart on the next page indicates, the number of children present on a school on any given day is highly variable. This would make it difficult for a teacher to provide educational inputs in a planned and systematic manner.
- In the 6-10 years age-group 33% students had not gone to school for over 4 days. In this age-group no significant difference was seen between boys and girls, SC-group students and others, and sponsored and non-sponsored students.



Among students above the age of 10 years, the percentage of students who had not gone to school for over 4 days was much higher (50%) and percentage of boys absent for over 4 days was as high as 71% (compared to 31% for girls).

### Reason for absenteeism in past 12 days:

In the given period of 12 schooldays illness was reported to be the cause for not going to school in only 13% cases. The common reported illness was “fever”. In 22% cases, the cause for not going to school was “family reasons”, such as family functions and visits to relatives’ homes. In 51% of cases, the cause was “other” reasons such accompanying parents to work and taking care of younger siblings at home when parents go to work.

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In 13% cases, the reason for being absent was that the child “does not like school”. We can reasonably surmise that these children are likely to join the ranks of chronically absent children.

### **Estimation of learning impediments**

Estimation of learning levels in Hindi and Maths, done by individual students; their parents and their teachers were strikingly similar: the three sources of information reported almost same learning impediments for each student.

On matching the reported learning impediments with students’ grades, it was found that:

- 20% of students above Std I do not know numbers.
- 47% of students above Std II cannot read well.
- 48% of students above Std II cannot add/subtract well.

Here, it must be noted that by the end of Std II a student is expected to be able to read the basic Hindi in her textbooks and correctly do operations like addition and subtraction. If a child above Std II cannot read well, she/ he is unlikely to be able to write well either. The survey data shows that 13% of students above Std IV cannot write well. If this is to be seen positively, it means that by Std IV, the majority of students learn to write. However, the learning lag for many students will remain large, and is likely to increase if remedial measures are not taken.

### **Actionable implications**

The study established that among Project target-group children illness is not the cause for being absent for school. That is, the hypothesis of the study was substantially disproved.

On the other hand, the main cause for children not going to school was accompanying parents to work or staying at home to take care of younger siblings when parents go to work. This finding is confirmed by the fact that incidence of absenteeism is higher among boys and older children. Here, it must be noted that incidence of target-group members going far to seek work was high in 2015-16 as it was a drought year. Attendance in school may well be better in normal-monsoon years. However, considering the high frequency of drought in Bundelkhand in the recent past, and the high dependence of target-group families on wage labour, there is a case for setting up community-run daycare centres for their young children, so that the older children can go to school. How the community will respond to this initiative and how it can be sustained are of course major issues.

The study shows high level of learning impediments, which could be attributed to low education levels of parents, high absenteeism, erratic attendance of children in school, which makes planned teaching difficult, and poor teacher capabilities to deal with these challenges. These

multiple challenges could be addressed by remedial classes run out-of-school and out of school-hours, so that children can at least reach minimum learning levels according to their grades. The remedial classes would also help children who go to work regularly with their parents. On the flip side, remedial classes run out of school could encourage parents to be less inclined to send children to school. Out-of-school efforts could also encourage school teachers to do their work with less interest and sense of accountability.

Hence, considering that it is primarily schools' responsibility to provide education, and the fact that around a fifth of students "do not like school", efforts will have to be taken to improve school ethos and teaching-learning methods.

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### Appendix: English version of questionnaire

**Date of survey:**

(dd/mm/yy)

**Name of surveyor:**

No	Item	Entry	Guidelines for entry
1	Name of village/habitation		Write full name
2	Name of student's father		Write full name
3	Family's social group		If SC write 1, if OBC write 2, if Gen write 3, if Muslim write 4
4	Family's main source of livelihood		If local labour write 1, if agriculture write 2, if local labour+ agriculture write 3, if migrant labour write 4, if employed/ salaried write 5
5	Family's economic level		If very poor write 1, if poor write 2, if not poor write 3
6	Father's education level		If not gone to school write 0, if studied only up to primary write 1, if studied only up to middle school write 2, if studied only up to secondary write 3, if studied above secondary write 4
7	Mother's education level		As above
8	Is student sponsored?		If yes write 1, if no write 0
9	Name of student		Write only first name
10	Gender		If male, write 1, if female write 2
11	Age		Write age in years (numbers ) only (6, 7, 8 etc)
12	Class/Std		Write class/std in numbers only (1, 2, 3 etc)
13	Distance from home to student's school		If less than 1 km write 0, if 1-2 km write 1, if more than 2 km write 2
14	Does student have elder brother or sister studying in school		If yes write 1, if no write 0
15	Student's academic record according to student		If cannot say write 0, if poor write 1, if fair (average) write 2, if good write 3
16	Student's academic record according to parents		As above
17	Does student frequently NOT go to school?		If does not frequently go to school write 1, if goes to school regularly write 0
18	If student does not go frequently to school, why not?		If Not Applicable write 0, if due to illness write 1, if "does not like school" write 2, if due to family reasons write 3, if due to other reasons write 4 (write other reason behind this she/ heet)
19	In last 15 days how many days student has not gone to		Write number of days (eg 0, 2, 4, etc)

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	school?		
20	In last 15 days what is the main reason for student not going to school?		If Not Applicable write 0, if illness write 1, if “does not like school” write 2, if family reasons write 3, if other reasons write 4 (write other reason behind this she/ heet)
21	If student frequently falls ill, what is the MOST common type of illness?		If not applicable write 0, if fever write 1, if stomach/digestion problems write 2, if breathing problems write 3.

22	According to student or parent what are the main difficulties faced by the student in language and maths?	<b>Language</b>	<b>Maths</b>	If no difficulties in language or maths write 0 in both columns Use following numbers to enter language or maths difficulties (WRITE ONLY ONE NUMBER in one column indicating main difficulty in each subject)		
		<b>Language</b>		<b>Maths</b>		
		Cannot speak well	1	Does not know numbers	1	
		Cannot read well	2	Cannot do addition well	2	
		Cannot write well	3	Cannot do subtraction well	3	
				Cannot do multiplication	4	
Cannot do division	5					
		Cannot solve word problems in Maths	6			

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<b>RESPONSES OF STUDENT'S MAIN TEACHER IN SCHOOL</b>						
<b>No</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Entry</b>	<b>Guidelines for entry</b>			
23	Student's academic record according to teacher		If cannot say write 0, if poor write 1, if fair (average) write 2, if good write 3			
24	Does student frequently NOT come to school?		If student does not frequently come to school write 1, if comes to school regularly write 0			
25	If student does not come frequently to school, why not?		If Not Applicable write 0, if illness write 1, if "does not like school" write 2, if family reasons write 3, if other reasons write 4 (write other reason behind this she/ heet)			
26	According to teacher what are the main difficulties faced by the student in language and maths?	Language	Maths	If no difficulties in language or maths write 0 in both columns Use following numbers to enter language or maths difficulties (WRITE ONLY ONE NUMBER in one column indicating main difficulty in each subject)		
			<b>Language</b>		<b>Maths</b>	
			Cannot speak well	1	Does not know numbers	1
			Cannot read well	2	Cannot do addition well	2
			Cannot write well	3	Cannot do subtraction well	3
					Cannot do multiplication	4
					Cannot do division	5
					Cannot solve word problems in Maths	6