

Nutrition and Health in School Education



Purabi Pattanayak

Good health and nutrition lay the foundation for learning and are an essential investment in the development of a more sustainable and inclusive future for children. These can help to improve education outcomes, empower the learners to thrive, and promote inclusion and equity in education and health. Numerous studies have highlighted the significant connection between health and education. Good health and nutrition are essential for children's learning, as well as their broader well-being. These are also essential

to maximising educational potential. Children who are happy and healthy will learn better and are more likely to lead healthy lives.

Status of Health and Nutrition in Schools

Global research has demonstrated the serious effects of malnutrition, which is defined as stunting, underweight, or wasting, on a child's physical and brain development. This in turn has a detrimental effect on cognitive development, as well as on the overall productivity and economic development of a country.

Emphasising on health and nutrition of children in schools is about investing in learners' education, health, nutrition and well-being at the same time, with benefits extending to homes and communities. Interventions focusing to health and nutrition bring children into school and help them to stay and learn – especially those most at risk of missing out. Healthy and happy children learn better and are more likely to lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

Globally, 90% of countries have some form of school health and nutrition programme, which is one of the most widely implemented approaches to delivering health and social protection. According to research, early childhood, specifically the first 1,000 days of life, is a critical window for child development. However, for early gains to be sustained and children to achieve their full potential, it is essential to support their health, nutrition, and development during the next 7,000 days of life, throughout middle childhood and adolescence (Bundy, de Silva et al., 2018).

So, the Global School health and nutrition aims to protect and promote the physical and mental health, nutrition, well-being, and development of school-age children and adolescents and the wider school community through coordinated and comprehensive strategies, activities, and services that are integrated and sustained within the education system (UNESCO, GPE et al., 2020). The essential elements include:

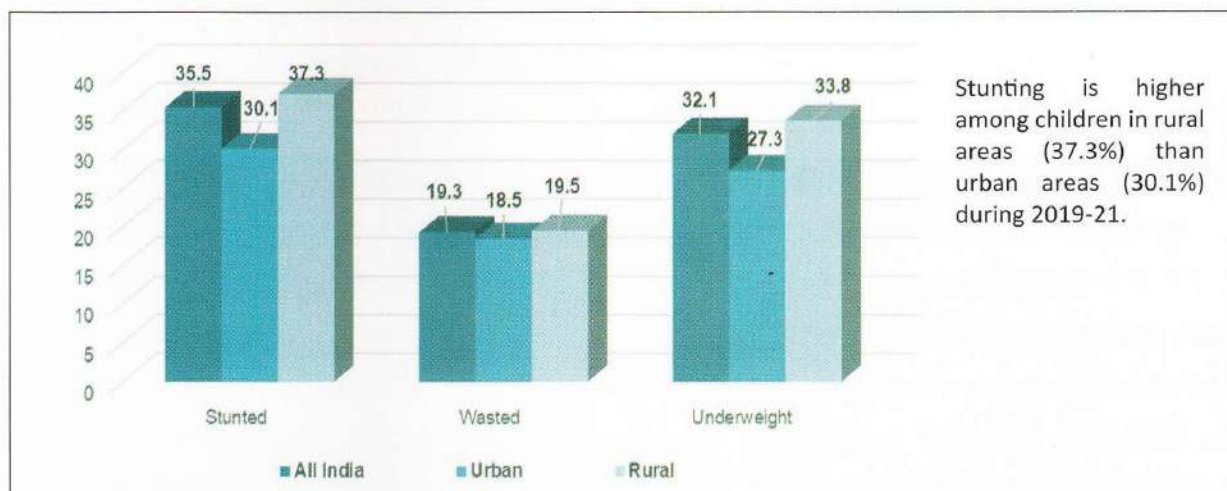
- Policies and laws that provide an enabling environment at national, subnational, and school levels.
- Education for health and well-being delivered through skills-based school curricula and extracurricular activities.
- A school physical and socio-emotional environment that is safe, inclusive, and conducive to health, well-being, and learning.
- School health and nutrition services and school feeding programmes that provide simple, safe and effective health interventions, and healthy school meals.

According to the recently released report 'Ready to learn and thrive', which highlights the significant impact and high returns of investments in school health and nutrition programmes, and urges governments to scale up their efforts to provide comprehensive and inclusive set of interventions. The major findings of the report are:

- 9 in 10 countries in the world currently implement School Health and Nutrition programmes.
- 3 in 5 countries include food and nutrition education
- More than 100 countries have school-based vaccination programmes
- 9 in 10 include physical education as a compulsory school curriculum subject
- 80% of countries now have a school feeding policy
- 388 million children in 161 countries – nearly half of all children enrolled in primary schools receive school meals.

Over the years, India has made progress on key nutritional indicators of children, whereas significant challenges still remain. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) provides data related to the health of India's children among various other key indicators; three indicators of malnutrition: stunting (low height for age), wasting (low weight for height), and underweight (low weight for age) have shown an overall improvement. These indicators reflect the issue of chronic under nutrition, which are usually associated with poverty, poor maternal health, and nutrition, and inappropriate feeding and care in early life. These prevent children

Table 1: Nutritional Status of Children (under 5 years of age)



Source: National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21), MoH&FW

from reaching their physical and cognitive potential. As per the recent report of NFHS-5 (2019-21), the nutrition indicators for children under 5 years have improved as compared with NFHS-4 (2015-16). Stunting has reduced from 38.4% to 35.5%, wasting has reduced from 21.0% to 19.3% and underweight prevalence has reduced from 35.8% to 32.1%. A comparative data for India and urban-rural is also given in Table 1. (See on page no. 20).

Policy Perspective on Health and Nutrition in Schools

Through school health and nutrition policies, almost every country makes investments in its children. Over a period of time, Governments have realised that these initiatives are wise investments since they improve students' health, nutrition, and learning outcomes while also significantly advancing their communities and countries (UNESCO, 2023). Emphasising health and nutrition in schools is about investing both in learners' education and their health, with benefits extending to homes and communities. Ensuring the health and well-

opportunities for all. The National Health Policy (NHP) 2017 also envisages the attainment of the highest possible level of health and well-being for all ages, through preventive and promotive health care. The policy places greater emphasis on investment in school health by incorporating health education as part of the curriculum, promoting hygiene and healthy practices within the school environment.

Towards Building Healthy Learning Environment:

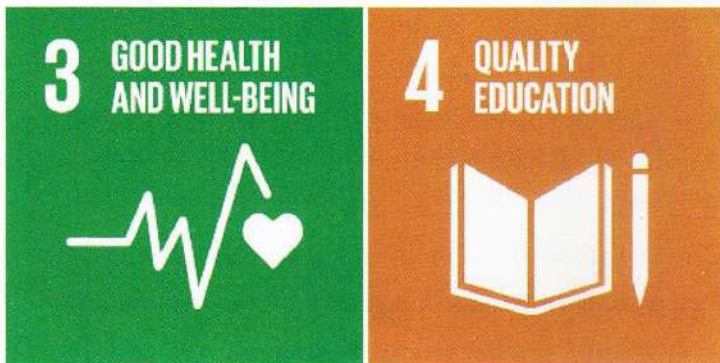
The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 takes a step towards integrating education and health to enable children to learn and grow as healthy individuals. The policy makes it mandatory for all students to acquire skills in the areas of health and nutrition, physical education, wellness, fitness, and sports. This calls for a paradigm shift in Indian education. As a result, it acknowledges the necessity of nutrition and regular exercise for effective learning. This includes regular health check-ups in schools, especially for 100% immunisation, and health monitoring through health cards.

NEP has recommended the provision of early childhood care and education to children below 5 years of age in preparatory classes in primary schools, and extends the mid-day meal programme to these students. Further, NEP recommended the provision of breakfast for school children in addition to mid-day meals, so that children can benefit from a healthy breakfast. Where serving cooked meals is not feasible, breakfast may include simple yet nutritious foods like groundnuts/chana with jaggery and/or fruits.

Recognising the importance of health education in schools, NEP 2020 includes health and nutrition, physical education, fitness, mental health and wellbeing, sports, sanitation, and hygiene as key subjects for students in order to promote their holistic development. The policy has clearly taken a step towards integrating education and health to enable children to learn and grow as healthy individuals.

Initiatives Undertaken in India

Keeping in view the varied challenging aspects, a lot of initiatives have been undertaken to ensure the health and nutrition of children in schools so that the programmes in place are comprehensive, meet the needs of all learners, and can be sustained. However, more attention needs to be paid to the quality of such programmes through regular monitoring and



being of learners is one of the most transformative ways to improve education outcomes, promote inclusion and equity, and to rebuild the education system, especially following the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has highlighted these linkages and the critical role that schools play in the physical and mental health, nutrition, and well-being of children and adolescents.

Addressing health and education together underlines all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 3 of the SDG underlines ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages, while Goal 4 of the SDG focuses on inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning

evaluation of their impact. Some of the major initiatives undertaken by the Government of India are:

(i) Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN): India's PM POSHAN (earlier mid-day meal programme) exemplifies the convergence of education with a food and nutrition programme and has been aligned with the recommendations of the NEP 2020. The scheme is one of the foremost rights based Centrally Sponsored Schemes under the National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA). Around 12 crore children studying in 10.84 lakh schools in all Government and Government-aided schools have been covered under the scheme across the country. As per the guidelines, the objectives of the scheme are to address two of the pressing problems for the majority of children in India, viz., hunger and education by:

- i. Improving the nutritional status of children studying in Bal Vatika and classes I – VIII in Government and Government-aided schools and Special Training Centres (STCs).
- ii. Encouraging poor children, belonging to disadvantaged sections, to attend school more regularly and help them concentrate on classroom activities.
- iii. Providing nutritional support to children of elementary stage in drought affected areas during summer vacation and during disaster times.

Under School Health Component, in convergence with M/o Health & Family Welfare, regular health checkup of children under Rashtriya Bal Swastha Karyakram has been conducted. Deworming medicine and Iron & Folic Acid (IFA) tablets are also provided to children (Ministry of Education, 2022). There are evidences to suggest that apart from enhancing school attendance and child nutrition, this scheme plays a very important role in fostering social values and equality.

(ii) School Health and Wellness Programme: The School Health Programme under AYUSHMAN BHARAT is a joint collaborative programme between the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Ministry of Education. This initiative is envisaged to facilitate an integrated approach to health programming and more effective learning at the school level.

Major features of the scheme to improve the efficiency and effectiveness are as follows:

- i. TithiBhojan: A community participation programme in which people provide special food to children on special occasions/festivals.
- ii. School Nutrition Gardens: Development of schools to give children first hand experience with nature and gardening. More than 4 lakh schools in India are now equipped with Nutrition Gardens.
- iii. Social Audit of the scheme is made mandatory in all the districts.
- iv. Special provision is made for providing supplementary nutrition items to children in aspirational districts and districts with high prevalence of Anemia.
- v. Cooking competitions been encouraged at all levels right from village level to national level to promote ethnic cuisine and innovative menus based on locally available ingredients and vegetables.
- vi. Vocal for Local for Atmanirbhar Bharat: Involvement of Farmers Producer Organisations (FPO) and Women Self-Help Groups in scheme implementation. Use of locally grown traditional food items for a fillip to local economic growth will be encouraged.

Source: PM Poshan Guidelines, Ministry of Education, 2022

In every public school, two teachers-preferably one male and one female are declared Health and Wellness Ambassadors (HWA) and trained to promote healthy lifestyles and disease prevention information through engaging weekly activities in the classroom. To prevent anaemia among children, the programme also provides mid-day meals and weekly iron-folic acid supplementation including nutrition counselling, tobacco prevention, and life skills education.

(iii) Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 : The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWCD) implementing an integrated nutrition support scheme called Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0. The programme aims to address

the issues of malnutrition in children, adolescent girls, and pregnant women. The schemes of Anganwadi Services, Scheme for Adolescent Girls, and Poshan Abhiyan have been realigned under the scheme to maximise nutritional outcomes. It has been organised to address three primary verticals: (i) nutritional support for women, children, and adolescent girls, (ii) early childhood care and education (3-6 years), and (iii) Anganwadi infrastructure including modernisation.

Poshan 2.0 addresses malnutrition challenges, promote nutrition awareness, and good eating habits for sustainable health & well-being, and address nutrition related deficiencies through key strategies. As per the data and information of MoWCD, the scheme operates through a network of 7074 fully operational Projects, and 13.91 lakh AWCs as on June, 2022. The services are currently being provided through 12.72 lakh Anganwadi Workers and 11.69 lakh Anganwadi Helpers to 951.35 lakh beneficiaries, of which 770.98 lakh are children under six and 180.37 lakh are pregnant women & lactating mothers. Till June 2022, a total number of 303.17 lakh children of 3-6 years were covered under pre-school education of which 154.67 lakhs were boys and 148.50 lakhs were girls.

Further, in order to capture near real-time data on the implementation and monitoring of Anganwadi Services across the country, a robust ICT-enabled platform named Poshan tracker has been designed. This tracker management application monitors different activities at the Anganwadi Centre (AWC), service deliveries by Anganwadi Workers (AWWs), and facilitates complete beneficiary management.

(iv) POSHAN Abhiyaan: An overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment named 'POSHAN Abhiyan' (Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nutrition) was launched by the Hon'ble Prime Minister in 2018 to attain the goal of 'Suposhit Bharat' in mission mode. The Abhiyaan aims to reduce malnutrition in the country with an aim to achieve improvement in nutritional status of Children aged 0-6 years, adolescent Girls, pregnant women and lactating mothers in a time bound manner.

(v) Poshan Bhi, Padhai Bhi: Under the Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0, Centre's

flagship programme 'Poshan Bhi, Padhai Bhi', has been launched by MoWCD on 10 May 2023, which will focus on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) covering 13 lakh Anganwadis across the country. The aim is to make Anganwadi centres both nutrition hubs as well as education-imparting centres. The objective of this programme is to ensure holistic development of children under the age of 6 years, with focus on building skills in key development domains identified under NEP.

Paving the Way Ahead

A nation's future depends on its children, because healthy children are the cornerstone of a healthy society. It has been acknowledged around the world that schools are an important setting where children develop behaviour skills for physical, emotional, and social well-being. School health and nutrition interventions contribute positively to the socio-economic benefits of the most vulnerable children and reinforce the human capital base of communities.

Healthy and well-nourished school children will learn better. Ensuring that children remain in school and are able and ready to learn allows individuals to more fully achieve their potential in life. Investing in health and nutrition interventions in schools serves to promote a well-nourished, healthy, and educated population, which can stimulate long-term growth and economic development. To ensure that children in India receive proper nutrition and health care, we must collaborate in more streamlined and integrated ways. By focusing on and contributing substantially to the health and nutrition of children in schools, we will offer a unique opportunity to transform education. □

References

1. <https://dsei.education.gov.in/scheme/pm-poshan-scheme>
2. In Financial Year (FY) 2021-22, Government of India (GoI) restructured the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), POSHAN (Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment) Abhiyaan, and the Scheme for Adolescent Girls (SAG) into Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0, also known as Poshan 2.0.
3. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1897355>