

A Peep into Healthy School Environment

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Abstract

“Students fell sick after having mid-day meal in school; some children had severe food poisoning in Uttar Pradesh” (March 16, 2018). We often come across news items such as these. It is quite a shameful situation for the citizens of the country. Is it not the responsibility of the government and schools to ensure that nutritious, hygienic and good quality mid-day meals are served to children in schools? This paper explores the condition of School Environment in a sixteen-week long interaction with schools (primary and middle) and its students. Schools’ contribution towards students’ health and hygiene was closely examined. Under the ‘Swachh Bharat Campaign’, the focus is on the cleanliness of our surroundings. It was observed that students of government schools have low attendance rates as compared to other private schools and their attendance rate and health rate is low in comparison to private schools. It further investigated the issues or challenges faced by students due to schools’ unhealthy environment and unhygienic conditions, which lead to unhealthy living conditions. Hygiene issue acquired importance and it was found that parents were unaware about these issues. A profiling of a class I student was done to find out students’ living conditions and examine the factors that are responsible for their health. This profiling helped in understanding the lives of children in a holistic perspective. Lastly, in this action research study, class 1 students were sensitised towards cleanliness and hygiene and their awareness while teaching. Therefore, it was found that government schools were also responsible for students’ health along with their family.

Keywords: *Healthy School Environment, Government Schools, Students' Health and Hygiene, Profile of Students*

Introduction

Children generally spend six hours per day in schools where they gain knowledge, make friends, develop their personality and also learn to socialise. Schools act as a mini society. Students’ learning is not only limited to the four walls of the classroom, the whole school environment, physical and psychological, plays an important role in learning values such as discipline, honesty and cleanliness. Dresslar divided healthy school environment into two essential parts: “the physical environment of the child during her/ his school life” and “the laws of mental hygiene as per needs of the children.” The physical environment of school includes

cleanliness of playground, classrooms, toilets, equipments they use; adequate water supply in toilets and for drinking; proper meal; proper light; and regular health checkups. In India, the government has taken steps like mid-day meal scheme, separate toilets for girls and boys, water supply, infrastructure in a school building like library, furniture etc., for ensuring a healthy school environment. Are these necessities available for children in schools? Does school health impact students’ physical and mental health? These are questions to ponder!

As part of the B.El.Ed. (Bachelor of Elementary Education) Internship programme, final year pre-service teachers are placed in schools for a

duration of sixteen weeks. During internships, it was observed that students did not come to school regularly. One of the main reasons was students being unwell. We wanted to investigate why students were frequently falling ill?; which were the diseases or infections?; what is the role of school and teachers? Is the school responsible for their health or their living conditions? Finally, what steps can be taken in schools for creating awareness among students about cleanliness, hygiene, sanitation and balanced diet. Further, a detailed case study of a child was conducted to find out how the lifestyle of a child affects his/her health.

In this paper, aspects like food, water, sanitation, school location and building, cleanliness, and playground were explored and examined to gain an insight into their effect on student's health and hygiene. It is important to understand the term 'hygiene'. Hygiene is a condition or practice under which one can prevent his/her self from diseases to maintain health. It does not only mean keeping oneself clean, but also refers to keeping one's surroundings clean, thus preventing illness.

Context of the Research

The research was conducted in two schools. One is a North Delhi Municipal Corporation Co-educational Primary School and the other is Govt. Girls Middle School of Directorate of Education. Both schools are located in the North-West part of Delhi. Children in the primary school come from a near-by slum area. Houses don't have washrooms or water supply. They take water from a tanker and use portable toilets. Most of the families work in construction sites.

A Brief of Researches in the Area

The area of school health and hygiene is researched from the perspective of bringing importance to cleanliness in school for its classrooms, playgrounds, toilets and sewages. Certain aspects which are necessary for students' health such as access to amenities, utilisation,

availability of resources and the culture around their utilisation and distribution were researched. Gupta and Baru (2010) described 'Health' in terms of the prevention and cure of diseases, and in the case of children's health, it is restricted to screening for nutritional deficiencies and diseases that lead to the prescription of selective interventions such as de-worming, micro-nutrient supplementation nutrition programmes. The World Health Organization (WHO) report (2008) "Closing the Gap in a Generation" by the Commission on Social Determinants of Health described that social justice affects people's lives, their consequent chances of illness, and their risk of premature death. Inequities in health arise because of the circumstances in which people grow, live, work, and age. According to the report, "the poor health of the poor, the social gradient in health are caused by the unequal distribution of power, income, goods and services, globally and nationally". There were many recommendations in the commission's report. One of the most important points is to raise public awareness about the social determinants of health and the need for everyone in the country to participate in this if they want to remove the health gap across generations. Deshpandey (2006) advocated that socio-economic status of the families of children plays an important role in their development. It determines access to basic needs, their residential location, and the type of school they go to. "Over the last few decades sections of the upper-middle and middle classes have exited from public provisioning and opted to educate their children in the private sector" (2009). According to her, the major challenge nowadays in government schools is attendance and learning outcomes. She further concluded that the issue of lower attendance can be solved if the students live a healthy life and that can be possible if schools provide a healthy environment to them.

Healthy School Environment: Observations in the Primary School

Building

The Primary School had three buildings with two floors each. The building is constructed in a U shape with the central space for playground. The school was well painted. By the design of the building, classrooms were airy with large windows which provided adequate lighting. The enrolment of students was about eight hundred and fifty. The number of rooms were adequate according to the strength of students. Classrooms wall were properly white-washed. There were no leakages from the walls. The condition of the furniture was appropriate, however the quantity of desks was less than the required number. Lights and fans were in working condition in the entire school.

A single staff was appointed for the cleaning of toilets, corridors, staircases and playground, but the classrooms were cleaned by students only. No dustbins were placed in common areas. All dustbins were placed at one single place. Students themselves carried the dustbins of their classrooms to throw the trash after cleaning it.

Under the Mid-day Meal Scheme Food was distributed to students. Like in other schools in Delhi, the food was cooked outside the school building by a vendor. It was cooked almost an hour before it was served and by the time it was served, it was cold. As per the requirements, a teacher and the head-mistress always tasted the food before it was given to students. However, students often said that the food did not taste good. The meal was served by five females with their hands, without wearing hand gloves. Some students also helped those ladies in serving. Students brought empty boxes from their homes for taking the meal with them. At times, their own boxes were not clean. But there was no practice of washing the boxes before taking food in it. The practice of serving foods with hands was so common that the teacher or head-mistress never objected to it. Teachers in the school made sure that if students asked for second servings, then they should get it.

There was another aspect to the mid-day meal. About 10 to 20% of students did not take food. This numbers varied as per the dish served. Halwa was found to be the most unpopular, while chholey-puri was the most popular dish among students. They said “*khaane mei kidee nikalte hai*”, “*school ka khaana acha nahi hota*”, “*they add some color to the halwa*”, “*Taste of halwa is totally different and it tastes changes every day - kabhi kuch daalte kabhi kuch, bekar hota hai ek dum*”.

In contrast, in the middle school, the person serving food always wore hand-gloves and a cap. They used serving spoons for the mixing and distribution of the food.

During the entire period of internship, it was observed that mid-day meal was served regularly. Students never washed hands before having food. But in these schools, it was just the serving of food that mattered, not its quality.

Water supply

Water was always available for drinking to students. There was no water purifier. It was the municipal corporation supply of water. However, sometimes, there was no supply of water in the toilets. It became a problem for the students and their complaints were hardly addressed. It was found that guard filled the water tanks of toilets in the morning by switching on the motor. A teacher discussed the scarcity of water- “*kbhi tanki puri ni bharti hogi to toilet mei paani ni aata*”. At times, water is also not available in the teachers’ toilet. It was also observed that sometimes students did not wash their hands because they didn’t feel the need to do so. At times, the taps of toilets were left open by students and there was water logging, making that area muddy and the students faced problems in entering to toilets.

Students Toilets were found to be very unhygienic and they were not cleaned daily. Even teachers’ toilets were not maintained properly. In one toilet, the main door was broken and other one’s lock was not working. The back

area of the school, near the toilets, had a lot of garbage and there was only one swing near this area.

Playground

There was a lot of space in the school to build a playground, but it was not maintained. Unkempt grass created problems for students. No one cleaned the playground until it had to be used for some function. There was always a lot of garbage lying on the ground. There was no safety in the ground while playing. The playground had greenery, but some unnecessary bushes were there that needed to be maintained on a regular basis. In the time-table, every class had a slot for the sports period, however they were not taken to the ground for any physical activity.

Health Checkups and its Effect on Students, Teachers and Parents

Doctors visit school for checkup once in a year. During the last visit, the most common disease/deficiency found in students was ANAEMIA. Iron tablets were distributed among students. About half of student strength in classes IV and V were diagnosed with anaemia. Few students were also suspected to have worms, thus de-worming medicines were prescribed. However, there were no follow up with students and their parents neither by doctors nor by teaches.

Challenges Faced by Students due to School Environment

Students threw the garbage of the class in the big dustbin, but they were never asked to wash their hands after throwing that. They even ate food with unwashed hands and some students were not even aware of the importance of washing their hands before having food. During lunch time, students were injured but they did not inform their teachers about accidents and injuries while playing in ground because they were afraid of them. For the entire strength of 850 students, there were only one toilet for girls and one for boys, due to which big queues were

observed. Children of class I even spoiled their pants. There was no training for personal hygiene. Students were instructed to pick up garbage found anywhere in the school and throw it in dustbins, however they were not instructed to wash their hands afterwards. Mosquitoes were there during rainy season.

Challenges Faced by Teachers due to School Environment

On being asked, the teachers shared that they felt that the students' parents do not fulfil their responsibilities of raising their children properly. They also understood the fact that the children come from families where having a meal every day is a more important concern than what the child learns at school. In most of the cases, the parents themselves were not educated enough to assist their children in learning. Students used unwashed boxing for taking meals. Students prefer having junk food like noodles and chocolate over fruits. There seems to be a lack of awareness about the significance of consuming a healthy diet among students and their families. Teachers complained that a few students were untidy as they did not bath everyday and wore the same uniform without washing for an entire week. Children had long and dirty nails. They came to school without bathing and at times without freshening up. For a few students, their school bags were extremely dirty, with their books and copies in a bad state with missing or stained pages. In such a situation, it is even more important for school and teachers to raise awareness about healthy environment. A healthy school environment would be a role model to follow for children.

Profile of a Class I Child:

A class I child, aged 7 years, lived in a nuclear family with his parents and a younger sister, age 3 years. The mother had completed schooling till class X and the father till class XII. His father was a rag picker and his mother worked as a part-time maid in different houses of a nearby posh colony. He lived in a rented house with a

monthly rent of 600/- There were no electronic gadgets at home except a cooler, and there was no provision of a fan in their house. The child went for tuition every day to finish his school homework, with a monthly tuition fee of Rs 400/-. Vegetables generally cooked in his home were potato, onion, and ladyfinger. The child did wash his hands before having his meals. There was no water supply at their home. Water is fetched in buckets from the tanker or hand-pump in the area. Their house is also not cleaned daily. There were only 2 toilets for the entire slum of about 50 houses. The child never gets the chance to use those toilets in the slum, as there is a long queue waiting. In morning, he used the school's washroom. He did not bathe daily, generally only once in a week. He brushed his teeth sometimes. The child did not take mid-day meal because of the perception that there were stones in the food. He brought junk food like chips, fun-flips or *kurkure* to school for breakfast. He came to school daily and studied well and is good at classroom learning activities. The economic condition of the child is weak. He did not have proper availability of food and water for drinking. Even the access to toilets was not available at the required time. He did not use soap or toothpaste. The physical environment of the child is completely unhygienic. In their social environment, they witness fights between their parents and neighbors on the issues of water, rent or the electricity bill. There seems to be a lack of awareness among the parents about health and hygiene. At the same time, the school environment also treated children as a worker or as labor, wherein they had to clean their classrooms using mops, washing wall tiles at times, collecting trash and carrying big garbage dustbins to class. Some information about how to prevent yourself from mosquitoes' bites, or some posters or slogans on saving water were displayed in school, but these were hardly discussed. Headmistress was observed instructing students to throw garbage in the dustbin and not to carry toilet mugs to their

home. The Sports teacher was the only teacher who checked the students' nails and continuously asked them to cut it and clean them. During the entire period of the internship, the teachers were never observed instructing students about hygiene and its importance for leading a healthy life.

Initiatives Taken by Pre-service Teacher for Developing Awareness Among Students and its Outcomes

With class I children, the pre-service teacher (intern) regularly discussed the importance of cleanliness, personal hygiene, sanitation. Some simple practices which could be followed every day such as washing hands after using toilets and before having meals, putting water in toilets after using them, bringing washed boxes daily for meals, cutting nails and eating healthy food like fruits and vegetables rather than junk food was continuously emphasised on during teaching. The Intern discussed five steps of washing their hands. In the same class, the intern carried disposal plates and spoons and gave them to children who either forgot to bring boxes for meals or brought dirty boxes. Students' nails were observed daily, so that they develop the habit of keeping them clean. After three weeks of continuous insistence, it was observed that the students started washing their hands before eating, and by the end of six weeks, almost all the students were washing their hands. Students also started washing their tiffin boxes before taking any kind of meal. Students came to school wearing proper uniform. Some students brought their spoons for eating food like rajma chawal or dal chawal. It was observed that only a small initiative of talking regularly to students helped them in developing an awareness about cleanliness and its linkage to their health.

Comparative Analysis of Primary and Middle School

The two schools of internship – one primary school of North Delhi Municipal Corporation and the other middle school run by directorate of

Education were compared on some common challenges between the two schools: The table indicates the difference

Issue	Challenges	NDMC Co-Ed Primary School	Govt. Girls Middle School
Cleanliness	Classrooms	Unclean and cleaned by students themselves	Cleaned and cleaned by sweepers
	Playground	Unmaintained with long bushes	Maintained always
	Staircase	Cleaned	Cleaned always
	School building	Cleaned	Cleaned always
	Sweepers	1	More than 3
Toilets	Teachers	Sometimes clean	Cleaned always
	Students	Mostly unclean	Cleaned always
Water supply	Drinking	Always available	Always available and fit for drinking
	Toilets	Sometimes available	Always available
Midday meal	Quality	Not healthy	Healthy
	Quantity	Not appropriate	Appropriate
	Arrival	Sometimes on time	Always on time
	Server	Not wear gloves and cap while serving	Always wear cap and gloves while serving
	Feedback of students	Negative	Positive
	Teachers taste on check food	No, rarely	Yes, sometimes
	Children servings	Yes, sometimes	Yes, sometimes
School Building	Condition	Good	Good
	Staircase safety	Safe	Safe
	Dustbin in common areas	No	No
Classrooms	Leakages	No	No
	Condition of furniture	Proper	Proper
	Dustbins	Yes	Yes
	Condition of fans and light	Working	Working
Other Facilities	Availability of water and electricity	Yes	Yes
	Physical access for beneficiaries	Yes	Yes
	Distance to nearest bus stop	Walking distance	Walking distance
Awareness	Teachers	Yes	Yes
	Students	No	Yes
	Practices in school for students' health and hygiene	No	Yes. Checking students nails daily; their dress; shoes etc.
Issues faced by students	Cleaning	Children themselves clean their classrooms	Sweeper clean their classroom
	Carrying dustbins	Yes	No
	Lunchbox	Unclean sometimes	Always clean
Parents involvement	No	Yes	

A careful reading of this table showed that the students in middle school were more aware about their health and hygiene. They were also placed in schools that had better infrastructure facilities.

Results and Discussion

Primary School:

It was found out that the teachers in the primary school were indifferent towards students' health and hygiene. Two broad findings emerged- the first being that aspects that schools consider under health and hygiene were not properly followed by them. For instance, water was not available in toilets all the time, no soaps were available to wash their hands before and after eating, no access to playing equipment, unclean area where they spend most of the time that was classroom and playground, throwing garbage of their classroom dustbin into the big dustbin themselves, students cleaning their classroom using mops themselves. The second aspect was related to their food and health issues- the quality and quantity of food given to students was not appropriate. As per the guidelines, "students will be provided with healthy and nutritious food", however the situation is contrary. There are number of feasibility studies done in the area of mid-day meal, but no changes have been made in the system to take appropriate action so that the students can get a quality meal. Moreover, teachers seemed to ignore the importance of emphasising on healthy and hygienic conditions of living. The parents' economic position and the ignorance of the school both contribute in making the environment unhealthy for students. This was probably the major reason for absenteeism of students from school.

Middle School

The situation in the middle school was still better. The school has better infrastructure and facilities as compared to the primary school under study. It was found that teachers' in this

school had a positive attitude towards students' health and hygiene. Sweepers were cleaning the floor and classrooms daily. Toilets and playground were found to be clean. Mid-day meal provided to the students was healthy and served in an adequate amount. Servers wore caps and gloves while serving. Water was available for drinking. The teachers also drank water from school taps. Water was always available in toilets. Students just had to focus on their studies because the other factors cleanliness, health and hygiene were maintained by the school, which is good for students' mental and physical health. This was the reason that students were regular in this school and teachers were also found to take initiatives like checking student's nails regularly, their dress, shoes etc. which is necessary in schools for the benefit of their health. Hence, in the school where there was more focus on a health and hygiene provided Healthy School Environment, there was an increased regularity of students coming to school, which lead to better learning outcomes.

Some more simple steps can be taken such as conducting a session for students and teachers on the need and importance of a healthy school environment every once in a week. Similar sessions should be planned for parents as well. Water tanks which supply water should be cleaned on a regular basis, may be once in a month. Health checkup sessions should be done at least twice a year and investigations with a proper course of action should be discussed with their parents. Teacher need to play an active role to ensure that the students follow different things which are discussed in sessions. An adequate number of staff members need to be employed for cleaning and to fulfil other roles like that of maid. Incidentally, the two particular schools under study had the required number of teachers. However, it was observed that a lot of schools did not have the required number of teachers. An availability of resources as well as the

maintenance of those resources is required to provide a Healthy School Environment.

Conclusion

It was found that schools and their authorities, including teachers, mainly focused on facilities like halls, classrooms, common areas (playground), furniture, lightning, water and ventilation. These are basic requirements of a healthy school environment. However, other important aspects such as the health and hygiene of students were left to chance development. In the annual health check-up of students, it was found that anaemia was the main deficiency disease found. However, the school authorities did not acknowledge any sort of responsibility. The reason behind students being unhealthy was majorly because of their lifestyle – their home’s unhygienic conditions and the lack of resources needed for living a healthy life. However, it was observed that the schools did not take many initiatives to improve their student’s health and hygiene. They just added more to the problem. The mere placement of posters at different places did not result in creating any awareness about health among students.

In the pilot study, a few steps were taken to improve student’s health such as discussing the importance of personal hygiene and its linkage to health, focusing on proper hand-washing

before and after eating, nail cutting, eating at least one fruit a day, clean tiffin boxes. This continuous focus on hygiene helped in inculcating healthy habits among the students.

The detailed observations of these schools led to the conclusion that students’ health and hygiene was affected by their lifestyle. Due to their parents’ lack of awareness, the scarcity of resources, poor economic condition of families, and their physical environment, students were living in an unhealthy environment. Their lives revolved around managing everyday life necessities. They fought on small issues in their societies and the illness of any family member caused an added suffering in their daily lives. These challenges affected not only their physical, but also their mental health. All these factors resulted in an irregularity in attending school, thus adding to the hindrance in learning at school. It seems like schools have become institutions where students waste their time and compromise their health. It is said that a healthy mind lives in a healthy body, and if students are suffering from health-related issues and live in unhygienic areas, then their learning will also get affected. Therefore, there is a need to take an initiative to raise an awareness regarding health and good hygiene in order to improve the quality of life of students as well as the society.

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Notes

1. At present, the Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed) programme is offered in eight women colleges of University of Delhi, Delhi. Aditi Mahavidyalaya is one of the eight colleges.
2. In the fourth and final year of B.El.Ed programme, students are placed in schools to complete a sixteen week long School Internship. During the internship period, students (Interns) teach and interact with a group of students. Interns teach for twelve weeks in a primary school and four weeks in a middle school.
3. The action research observations discussed in this paper were drawn from the school internship experience of fourth year B.El.Ed student - Renu Singla.