

Mid Day Meal Scheme

An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This article is based on research conducted in thirty schools of Gurgaon district, Haryana in 2014. The objectives of the study was to understand the opinions of parents, children as well as teachers including head teachers of primary schools who have been a part of the scheme implementation over a long period of time. There have been a good number of research studies on different dimensions of the Mid Day Meal (MDM) scheme such as infrastructure, health and hygiene, teacher time on task, central kitchens, etc. However, it is also important to implement scheme at the grassroots level and provide a chance to the people who are directly affected by it to raise their voice and affect the implementation at the school level. It realised during the study that parents are aware of what is served in the MDM scheme and they also estimate the nutritive value of the MDM food. By talking to their own children and other children in the neighbourhood they understand what items are liked and what are not liked by children served under MDM. This paper would shed light on their perceptions on significant issues related to MDM implementation. It has been found through a number of research studies that school meal programme has a positive influence on enrolment and attendance. But the common perceptions regarding quality of food and effect of MDM on teaching-learning time needs to be explored at the micro level. Such micro level qualitative analysis can hint at crucial factors which, if considered, can add to the quality of implementation and better achievement of objectives of the scheme.

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INTRODUCTION

The National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NPNSPE) popularly known as the Mid Day Meal scheme was launched by the Government of India as a centrally sponsored scheme on 15 August 1995. Under the scheme, free cooked meal is provided during all school days to all the children studying in government, local body and government-aided primary and upper primary schools. The programme was initially launched at the primary stage in 2,408 blocks in the country. By 1997–98, it was introduced in all blocks of the country and in 2002, it was further extended to cover children studying centres set up under Education Guarantee Scheme and Alternative and Innovative Education (EGS and AIE) Centres.

Until September 2004, central assistance under the scheme consisted of free supply of foodgrains. In September 2004, the scheme was revised to provide cooked mid day meal with 300 calories and 8–12 grams of protein to all children studying in Classes I–V in government and aided schools and EGS/ AIE centres. In July 2006, the scheme was further revised to raise assistance for cooking cost. In October 2007, the scheme was extended to cover children in upper primary classes (Classes VI to VIII) initially in 3,479 Educationally Backwards Blocks (EBBs). Around 1.7 crore upper primary children were included by this expansion

of the scheme. From 2008–09, the programme covers all children studying in government, local body and government-aided primary and upper primary schools and the EGS/ AIE centres including *Madarsa* and *Maqtabas* supported under SSA. It is the largest school feeding programme in the country.

NP-NSPE, 2006 (*Revised Mid Day Meal Scheme*) seeks to address two of the most pressing problems for the majority of children in India, namely, hunger and education by:

- (i) Improving the nutritional status of children in Classes I–VIII in government, local body and government aided schools and EGS and AIE centres.
- (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 primary and elementary stage in drought-affected areas during summer vacation.

THE STUDY

The research study was undertaken in 30 schools of district Gurgaon of the Haryana state. The ISKON Food Relief Foundation, Gurgaon is providing cooked food to all the schools under the scheme. The implementation of MDM and the time of teacher on MDM activities may have significant

bearing on the teaching-learning processes and the time involved. Considering the fact that MDM has been universalised in all the States and Union Territories (UTs) from the year 2001, it was thought crucial to get a first hand feedback from primary stakeholders, *viz.*, teachers, children and their parents on the programme to understand the implementation of the scheme at the grassroots level. Keeping this in view, the study was planned and initiated in 30 primary schools of the Gurgaon district of Haryana from both rural and urban areas in both boys' and girls' primary schools. This study was conducted with the following objectives.

- To find out the impressions of the Mid Day Meal scheme on the minds of the young children who are the direct beneficiaries of the scheme.
- To find out the perceptions of the parents about the scheme and its management.
- To find out teachers' opinion about the strengths and weaknesses of the scheme.
- To suggest how the benefits of the scheme can be increased through better management.

METHODOLOGY

This study was a perception based qualitative study. It is descriptive and seeks answers to questions which are related to the functionaries and beneficiaries directly. The data was collected from three categories of the respondents — students, teachers

and parents. Accordingly three tools were developed. In addition, one more questionnaire was developed for the District Elementary Education Officer who is the controlling officer at the district level for the implementation of the MDM scheme. A brief description of each tool is given below:

An *Interview Schedule* for children of Class V was developed. It contained questions related to taste and quality of the meals; regularity in the supply of meals, hygiene and cleanliness of the place where meal is served, nutritive value and wholesomeness of the food, involvement of parents and community members in the management of meals, vitamin supplements and health check-up, what changes children would like in the serving and other aspects of the food, etc. About five students were interviewed on individual basis from each school. The total sample comprised 143 students out of which 54 were boys and 89 were girls. There were total 13 items in this tool out of which 11 were with restricted answer supply and two were open-ended to allow children speak freely.

Guidelines for *Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with Parents* were also developed. There were about four to five members including female and male respondents in each FGD. The efforts were also made to include member of School Management Committee. The discussion points were developed taking into consideration various provisions of the scheme concerning

parents and community, e.g., parents are supposed to supervise mid day meal (MDM) serving, help teachers in organising MDM related activities, point out if food quality is not good or if food is not regularly served. The Focus Group Guide contained 12 points of discussion. The discussions were organised in a friendly and non-threatening way with prior consent of the participants. About 26 FGDs were conducted for the present study.

Questionnaire for the Teachers was designed to collect opinions of teachers as their role is crucial in the management of the MDM scheme. They have to balance their teaching time and at the same time they supervise MDM implementation. A questionnaire having both quantitative and qualitative questions was developed to collect perceptions of the teachers from the sampled schools. The teacher who is in-charge of MDM in the school was preferably the respondent for the tool. The number of respondents for this category was 58 teachers. There were 15 items in this tool out of which three questions were open-ended. The opinion of respondents on a four point scale was obtained on 13 statements having a mix of good and bad side of the scheme.

Questionnaire for the District Elementary Education Officer was developed to collect the factual information about the implementation of the scheme in the district. There were 13 questions in this tool exploring the information on the number of

schools and beneficiaries, supplier of the cooked food, monitoring regarding quality and timely adequate supply of food, etc.

Besides data collected on these tools, personal observations of the researcher and data gathered through informal interactions with the community members have been utilised to substantiate opinions of respondents and findings of the study.

FINDINGS

PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS

There were 143 students from 30 schools. All of them were Class V students and out of 143 students, 54 were boys and 89 were girls. The value of chi-square was calculated to know if there is a difference in the opinion of boys and girls in taking MDM. Four groups were formulated for calculating the value of chi-square — “boys who take meals always”, “boys who take meals sometimes”, “girls who take meals always”, “girls who take meals sometimes”. There was no significant difference found between the perceptions of boys and girls. Both boys and girls take MDM either “always” or “sometimes”.

The perceptions of children about the MDM scheme seem quite favourable. Majority of children (78.3) told that all students eat MDM. Most of them have indicated that they like to eat meals provided under the scheme and do not waste food. Regarding taste of the food, a high majority of

students, 99.3 per cent, expressed that the taste of food is good. When children were asked whether they came to school only because they get food, about 50 per cent of them disagreed with it while about 39 per cent children said “Yes”. Children were asked to respond whether they get sufficient quality of meals under MDM scheme, 93.7 per cent of students gave a positive reply. The boys and girls also differed in their opinion regarding adequate quantity of MDM. There was a significant difference at 0.1 level.

Children do not feel that their time is wasted due to participation, serving and eating mid day meals. Therefore, it may be concluded that children consider it essential as part of the school learning experience. However, their readiness to offer suggestions also indicates that they wish their voice to be heard while deciding menu items and there should be some flexibility in the menu to accommodate their choice.

With the help of an open-ended question, children were asked to specify the role played by teachers while MDM is served, maximum number of students (55) indicated that teachers observe hygiene and discipline during MDM time, while about 40 responses indicated that their role is to distribute the food among children. Another important activity performed by teachers is observing hand-washing by children. Some other tasks of involvement of teachers, as perceived by students,

are checking the utensils and tasting the food supplied by the centralised kitchen.

PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS ABOUT MDM SCHEME

The data to understand the perceptions of teachers regarding advantages and disadvantages of the MDM Scheme was collected with the help of Teachers’ Questionnaire. In all, 57 teachers from 30 schools provided information on the items of the tool. Among 57 teachers, 22 teachers were male and 35 were female.

Teachers’ responsibilities as perceived by teachers with regard to the implementation of the scheme are that each class teacher should ensure proper distribution and consumption of food by children of her class; hygiene and cleanliness should be observed throughout; children should be educated on the importance of hygiene and cleanliness; food under MDM should be tasted before serving the same to children ensuring that food is tasty, sufficient and nutritious for children. If these perceptions are analysed with respect to duties expected from the teachers under the MDM Scheme, there is no difference in the expectations under the scheme and perception of teachers regarding their duties for implementing the scheme. As informed by the teachers, the three major activities in which they are engaged are — supervision and observing discipline during distribution of MDM followed by supervising cleaning of kitchen,

dining area and utensils and hygiene of cooks and helpers and observing hand wash by children before and after food.

The study reveals that most of the teachers have appreciated MDM scheme. Regarding parents' satisfaction with the implementation of MDM, about 93 per cent teachers agreed that the parents were satisfied with the scheme; 98.3 per cent teachers agreed that the food served under MDM scheme is suitable to the health of children. About 86 per cent teachers expressed that the health status of children has improved because of MDM while about 14 per cent teachers disagree with this statement. Most of the teachers (93 per cent) responded that MDM promotes social equality by providing opportunities to children to informally interact and take care of each other while eating MDM. About 86 per cent teachers agreed that MDM scheme has helped in developing habits of cleanliness and hygiene among children. About 70 per cent teachers have expressed that attendance of children in schools has improved because of Mid Day Meal scheme, while about 30 per cent teachers have denied that MDM is a reason for children's better attendance in the school. They expressed that in fact, it depends on the location of schools and economic background of children. The teachers' opinion was divided on the issue that responsibility of MDM has further increased their workload. Those who feel that workload on

teachers have increased due to MDM responsibilities outweigh those who do not agree with it.

The statements of teachers were evaluated on a four-point scale and aggregate values of their statements were calculated for male and female teachers. Both have shown a positive perception on the implementation of MDM scheme. The data was tabulated on the basis of the gender of the respondent teachers.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The research technique of focus group discussion (FGD) was used to obtain the opinion of parents including mothers and fathers and also local community persons who were helping in some way or the other in the implementation of the MDM scheme. In all, 24 FGDs were conducted and there were total 12 questions for discussion in the focus group guide. In all, there were 67 participants including 36 male and 31 female participants who gave their opinions on the implementation of the MDM scheme in district Gurgaon. The conclusions emerging from these FGDs were that the MDM does not cause any loss of teaching-learning time. The parents in one FGD suggested that children do not like sweet servings, instead they prefer salty preparations. So they should be provided food to their taste. In 9 out of 24 FGDs, parents and members of community agreed that there are some children who attend school for mid day meals. In one FGD, parents

told that school does not listen to the complaints regarding MDM while in one FGD parents revealed that school listens to the complaints but does not take any action on the complaints.

HOW IMPLEMENTATION OF MDM CAN BE IMPROVED

In most of the FGDs, parents have suggested that the menu items should be changed from time to time because it would attract children. Children feel happier when they get a variety of food and new types of food items. Some other good suggestions were that the active participation by parents could help in better management of the scheme; some told that less time should be spent on distribution of MDM; instead of *roti, poori* should be served, more vegetables should be served; for proper dining, dining tables should be provided. Out of 24 FGDs, parents in 22 FGDs agreed that the scheme has brought awareness in children regarding cleanliness and hygiene.

Teachers also shared their opinion for better implementation of the scheme. The major suggestions which emerged from the analysis are that the food should be more nutritious and tasty, menu items should keep changing as per the suggestions by children, parents and teachers; the meals should reach school timely and distributed within the stipulated time and food should be as per the taste of children so that they feel happy while eating.

ADVANTAGES OF THE MDM SCHEME

Most of the parents expressed that due to MDM scheme children get nutritious food items. Children do not suffer from hunger as food is received and served timely. All these advantages have contributed to advantages such as regularity in the attendance of children in schools, children are relatively healthier. Some of the parents expressed that MDM has also benefited the marginalised sections of society as they are employed as cooks and helpers in the schools.

DISADVANTAGES OF THE MDM SCHEME

Out of 24 FGDs, six groups expressed that there are as such no harms/disadvantages due to MDM scheme. In other places, parents and other members felt that MDM causes distraction and there is a loss of teaching-learning time due to MDM. Some of them expressed that children fall sick if food served is not of good quality, children throw food if it is not tasty; lot of time is wasted if cooked food does not reach school in time. MDM also takes away teachers' time which ultimately affects the time they might have devoted to teaching children. Children also expressed that their suggestions should also be considered while preparing the menu. Teachers somehow feel that there should be some alternative arrangements that can be explored for managing the MDM as it takes time from teaching-learning. Many

parents also feel that studies are neglected due to MDM. Any scheme is successful if it is understood by its beneficiaries and they feel satisfied.

CONCLUSION

The major findings of the study are as follows:

- The Mid Day Meal scheme is appreciated largely by the beneficiaries and functionaries of the scheme. Most of the parents have expressed that children get nutritious food timely.
- Children and their parents have appreciated the scheme by informing that food served by ISKON Food Relief Foundation is fresh and tasty.
- Teachers, parents and children have also indicated that food supplied by the NGO helps to save the time of teachers and MDM food distribution and consumption does not take lot of time. The result is that there is no loss of teaching-learning time during school hours.
- There has not been any complaint of food poisoning, etc., in any of the schools in the district as informed by the office of District Elementary Education Officer, Gurgaon. This in a way reflects that quality of food is observed and maintained by the supplying agency.
- Teachers are performing the duties they are expected to do under the scheme. These activities are generally related to observing cleanliness, hygiene and hand

washing by students before and after the meals. They also taste the food before it is served to children. Their presence actually ensures proper distribution of food and avoiding any wastage by throwing the food.

- Both teachers and parents have agreed that the MDM scheme has led to an improvement in the attendance of the children though both children and parents have informed that children do not attend school just to eat the meals served under the scheme.
- MDM scheme has also spread awareness about good health, hygiene and cleanliness. This is a life skill which will help children throughout their lives.

It can be fairly concluded, based on the discussions above, that the MDM programme has been conceived to minimise the problem of poverty and scarcity in matters of providing universal literacy and compulsory education up to the age group of 14 years. Further to it, it indirectly encourages mothers to relieve the girl child from the household chores to attend neighbourhood schools. However, MDM should not be taken as a filler of the empty stomachs but a means to provide wholesome food that would promote health, nutrition, sharing social equity and attention of the parents.

It is also necessary to include schemes like MDM in the training programmes for teachers, both in-service and pre-service training

programme, and help them learn how taking food together promotes spirit of children to learn and grow. It is interesting to recall Mahatma Gandhi who conceived the scheme of Basic Education and included food as an aspect around which curriculum could be correlated.

India is a country where examples of extreme poverty and extreme richness are seen. It is necessary to encourage voluntary organisations to share child welfare programmes like MDM and involving the young parents to share the labour involved in it.

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