

## Undernutrition-A Cause Of // Failure At School //

—S. Van Der Vynckt

**Malnutrition as drop-out cause has been overlooked**

**A** MAJOR RISK factor of educational wastage has been consistently neglected or overlooked: mal- or undernutrition, an important contributor to school failure which is jeopardizing the educational future of millions of school-children.

For years educational policy makers and planners have overlooked its effects on learning ability and school achievement despite the fact that undernutrition among school-age children is widespread throughout the developing world and that its cost is awesome in terms of physical and possibly mental retardation, in debilitating disease and low energy levels.

The most prevalent of the nutritional problems affecting school-age children living in economically impoverished environments is protein-energy malnutrition. Children afflicted by this form of malnutrition often live in unsanitary environments which constantly expose them to infectious communicable diseases. They tend to learn at a slower pace than their better-fed school fellows, encounter difficulties in mastering school subjects, are frequently absent from school, tend to repeat grades and drop out of school, some even before acquiring the basic reading and writing skills.

Iron Deficiency Anaemia is the second leading problem. It is estimated that 1.3bn people are debilitated by weakness and fatigue caused by iron deficiency. It can seriously affect children's ability to concentrate

and perform normally in a school environment. Given proper therapy, the effects of iron deficiency can be reversed. However, anaemic children never do catch up on the classroom learning prior to treatment, and throughout their lives bear the cognitive consequences of "lost learning time."

The third leading nutritional problem of the developing world is Vitamin A Deficiency which is especially common in areas where children subsist on diets that include small amounts of animal foods, green leafy vegetables and fruits. Generally vitamin A deficiency exists in conjunction with protein-energy malnutrition which in turn accentuates physiological and behavioural ill-effects. Vitamin A deficiency causes a significant reduction in the body's capacity to resist infection (especially respiratory infections), it creates digestive disorders and causes dry eyes that become easily infected even to the point of actual blindness.

"Night blindness", or the inability to see in dim light, is caused by vitamin A deficiency. It is frequently found among children under 5 years of age and results in eye lesions. As the lesions grow worse, the victim becomes irreversibly blind.

Iodine Deficiency, the fourth world-

wide nutritional deficiency, can result, in mild to severe, intellectual retardation and cretinism. Because of their severe mental limitations, cretin children are unable to attend school; they represent one of the most dramatic examples of how nutritional deficiencies can compromise a child's educational achievement and its entire future.

Moreover, in both developed and developing countries it is common that children go to school without eating breakfast. This has negative scholastic effects on any child, even more so on the already undernourished.

Protecting the child's nutritional status will result in better student achievement and significantly reduce the human and capital costs of school wastage.

A comprehensive approach to nutrition in educational policy making and planning would begin with increased budgetary appropriations and include:

Improving teacher training so that teachers can play a more significant role in promoting better nutrition and health both inside and outside the classroom.

Developing more effective educational materials targeted specifically at the nutrition problems of children,

their families and communities.

Serving nutritious snacks and meals at school especially to undernourished children at high educational risk;

Organizing school gardens that can provide additional food for both school and the community and serve as a learning ground for productive work; and

Coordinating education sector activities with nutrition activities of other ministries (health, agriculture and information).

In an attempt to sensitize key people in the education sector and encourage them to promote nutrition policies and programmes in both formal and non-formal education, UNESCO is making available to UN agencies, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and national agencies and institutions, a media package consisting of slides, printed material and a 30-minute video film highlighting successful nutrition activities from around the world. The film deals with such subjects as curriculum design, teacher training, school meals, school gardens and community education activities.

It also supplies visual and statistical illustrations of how malnutrition affects educational performance, as well as interviews with leading educational planners on the value of investing resources from their budget in nutrition. The slide presentation shows the social and economic returns that can be expected from investment in this field. UNESCO Special.