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Bitter Truth Behind Sweet Treats

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Walk into any school canteen today, and it's almost guaranteed you'll find shelves stocked with chips, candies, instant noodles, and sugary sodas. These snacks, while appealing for their taste and low price, have become lunchtime regulars for many students. But beneath the convenience and flavor lies a deeper issue – are these foods silently endangering the health and future of our youth?

According to Arya and Mishra (2013), many school canteens are offering food items that are high in sugar and fat, significantly contributing to weight gain among students. But the problem doesn't stop there. They also point out rising cases of food poisoning, infections, and dental diseases – conditions that are now more common among school-aged children due to poor food quality in schools.

What exactly qualifies as junk food? Levasseur (2021) defines it as consumables packed with sugar, fat, and sodium, but with very low nutritional value. While it may fill up stomachs, it fails to nourish growing bodies and minds. Worse, these quick snacks can lead children to skip more balanced meals either at school or at home, missing out on essential nutrients (Arya & Mishra, 2013).

There's a broader contradiction at play here too. On one hand, schools teach students about the food pyramid and healthy living in class. On the other, their canteens promote the very opposite by selling nutrient-poor products. This inconsistency not only muddles the message but also undermines the foundation of nutritional education.

Still, some experts argue that banning junk food entirely is not the answer. A better approach might lie in balance – offering healthier choices while empowering students with information to make informed decisions. And this is where policy comes into play. Musingarimi (2009) and Cutler and Lleras-Muney (2019) suggest that educational measures such as school-based campaigns, clearer food labeling, and regulations on advertising – can play a powerful role. These efforts, supported by Brunello et al. (2014), are believed to shape behavior by raising awareness about the consequences of poor eating habits.

Even small changes in the school menu – like replacing fried chips with baked alternatives or offering fruit-infused water instead of soda – can make a difference. Meanwhile, the food industry also holds a key role. Reformulating products to reduce sugar and fat, without sacrificing taste, could help steer young consumers toward better choices.

There may still be a place for the occasional treat, the overwhelming presence of junk food in schools raises serious concerns. Ensuring our children grow up strong, healthy, and focused in class requires a joint effort – from parents and teachers to policymakers and manufacturers. After all, when it comes to children's health, what's on their plate today shapes the future they step into tomorrow.

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