

Student Motivation Increases: The Impact of the Free Nutritional Meal Program on Attendance (MBG)

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Quality education is a fundamental right of every child, however many students, particularly those in resource-limited areas, face challenges in accessing education. This study aimed to explore the impact of a free nutritious meal program on student attendance and motivation in three sub-districts. Using a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data were collected through surveys involving 52 students and 34 teachers, while qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews. The results showed that average student attendance increased from 80% to 95% after program implementation, which aligns with teachers' reports of increased student enthusiasm for learning. These findings indicate that adequate nutrition contributes to increased student motivation and engagement. While this study provides valuable insights into the program's effectiveness, its focus on three sub-districts limits the generalizability of the results. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a wider area and employ a longitudinal approach to assess the program's long-term effects. These findings have important implications for education policy, highlighting the need for continued support for the nutritious meal program to improve access to and quality of education.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right of every individual and serves as a foundation for achieving broader developmental goals. This goal is outlined in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which emphasizes the need to ensure access to inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. However, challenges in educational accessibility often pose significant barriers for children, particularly in resource-constrained settings. One strategy to address these barriers is to implement programs that provide additional support, such as free nutritious meals. Research shows that meeting students' nutritional needs not only positively impacts their physical health but also plays a significant role in increasing their motivation to learn and attend school. For many students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, access to nutritious food is crucial for improving their ability to concentrate and actively participate in learning activities.

Student motivation is influenced by numerous factors that are classified as intrinsic and/or extrinsic. These factors influence student engagement and, consequently, performance. To better assess the factors influencing student motivation, comprehensive studies should be conducted to identify all factors and their drivers and how they influence student motivation(Kbar et al., 2019). These findings suggest that other factors, such as student culture, can significantly influencing student motivation(Tufue & So'otaga, 2024). Nutrition education programs can improve students' knowledge and attitudes toward healthy eating, although translating this knowledge into behavioral changes can be challenging. The findings point to the effectiveness of interactive nutrition education programs in schools in successfully influence students' knowledge and attitudes toward nutrition. While there was an improvement in attitudes, statistical differences were limited terms of in knowledge

gain. The results highlight the challenges of converting broader knowledge into better choices (Robertson & Zalles, 2005). Improved nutrition through school meals can enhance cognitive abilities and overall educational achievement. This study underscores the importance of school meal programs as an investment in human capital and offers useful lessons for politicians in China and other developing nations who are working to reduce educational disparity and enhance the health and well-being of their citizens of their population(Guan et al., 2025).

By examining the impact of the free nutritious meal program on student motivation and attendance, this study aims to provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between nutrition, access to education, and academic achievement. With this approach, it is hoped that this research will make a significant contribution to the achievement of SDG 4 and generate policy recommendations that can improve access to education more effectively and comprehensively across communities in future

Furthermore, although numerous studies have addressed the relationship between nutrition and education, there are several weaknesses in the existing literature, particularly related to the context of the free nutritious meal program in Indonesia, where many studies tend to focus primarily on health aspects without exploring its direct impact on students motivation and attendance. Furthermore, many studies fail to consider contextual variables, such as socioeconomic conditions, culture, and local education policies, which can influence the program's effectiveness. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of how the free nutritious meal program can contribute to improved access to education and support the holistic achievement of SDG 4.

The objectives of this study include: (1) analyzing the impact of the free nutritious food program by examining its influence on student motivation and their attendance rates at school; (2) determining influential contextual factors, including socioeconomic aspects and educational policies that support the success of the MBG program; and (3) providing data-based policy recommendations for the development of more inclusive and sustainable educational policies, which ultimately support the achievement of SDG 4. With these focuses and objectives, it is hoped that this research can make a significant contribution to improving access and quality of education, as well as strengthening efforts to achieve SDG 4 more effectively in the future.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the free nutritious meal program on student attendance and motivation.

Mixed methods is a research methodology that integrates multiple types of data (both qualitative and quantitative) for a single research project, using more than one analysis technique (Bazeley, 2020). Mixed methods research is a relatively new approach that combines qualitative and quantitative research into a single study. Traditionally, study designs have used either qualitative or quantitative methodologies to answer research questions (Warren, 2023).

Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires distributed to 52 students and 34 teachers in three sub-districts. These questionnaires were designed to measure student attendance levels before and after program implementation, as well as teachers' perceptions of changes in student motivation and enthusiasm.

Table 1. Details Participants By Sub-District

Subdistrict	Number of Students (N)	Number of Teachers (N)	Information
Telukjambe Timur	20	12	Representing elementary schools involved in the free nutritious meal program.
Telukjambe Barat	18	10	Consisting of various socio-economic backgrounds
Karawang Barat	14	12	Comes from schools that implement the same program.
Amount	52	34	86 total participants.

This study involved 86 participants, consisting of 52 students and 34 teachers, who were interviewed from three sub-districts. In Telukjambe Timur Sub-district, 20 students representing elementary schools participating in the free nutritious meal program were interviewed, while in Telukjambe Barat Sub-district, 18 students from various socio-economic backgrounds, represented diverse communities. Furthermore, in the Karawang Barat Sub-district, 14 students were interviewed, all from schools that implemented the same program. On the teacher side, 12 teachers from Telukjambe Timur Sub-district, 10 teachers from Telukjambe Barat Sub-district, and 12 teachers from Karawang Barat Sub-district participated in this study, providing a comprehensive view of the implementation and impact of the free nutritious meal program in the educational context. Thus, the combination of student and teacher perspectives is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the program's influence on student motivation and attendance.

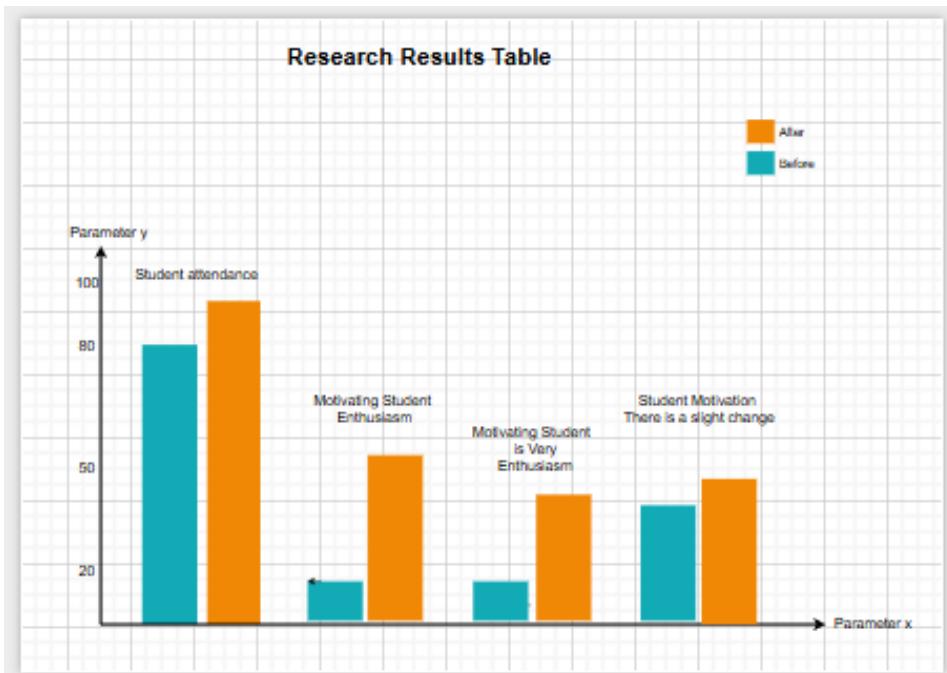
Thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts, allowing for the identification and grouping of key themes such as "positive influence on motivation" and "impact on attendance." Simultaneously, the questionnaire data were analyzed using a content analysis approach, where responses were organized based on emerging themes and frequency counts were performed to identify significant patterns.

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics to summarize the information regarding attendance and perceptions. Meanwhile, qualitative data was obtained through in-depth interviews with students and teachers, with the aim of exploring their experiences regarding the program and its impact on learning motivation. These semi-structured, interviews, provided, insight into emerging themes. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the qualitative data, and the results from both data types were combined to provide a holistic picture of the program's impact. Through this mixed-methods design, the study aims to provide in-depth insights into how the free nutritious food program can impact education, and support more effective and sustainable development policies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on questionnaires and interviews with students and teachers in Karawang Regency, the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) positively impacted student attendance and learning motivation. The following summarizes the data collected from the student and teacher respondents.



The table above shows a significant increase in student attendance and motivation following the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program. The data obtained from this study indicate that the percentage of students showing enthusiasm for school has increased sharply, with attendance reaching 95%. This increase is particularly striking considering that the average student attendance rate before the program was only 80%. This finding reflects a substantial positive change in student attendance patterns, where the program's success in attracting students to school is immediately visible. This demonstrates that interventions focused on providing nutritious food not only serve to meet nutritional needs but also have a positive impact on students' enthusiasm for school attendance.

The results of this study confirm that the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) has a significant impact on students learning motivation. Prior to the program, many students demonstrated a lack of motivation to participate in learning activities, as evidenced by their low attendance. However, after the program's implementation, there was clear evidence that providing of nutritious meals played a significant role in encouraging students to be more enthusiastic about attending school and learning. With nutritious meals provided, students felt more cared for and appreciated, which in turn increased their confidence in participating in learning activities at school.

In terms of learning motivation, most teachers reported significant positive changes. As many as 54.8% of teachers stated that students became more enthusiastic about participating in lessons after experiencing the benefits of the MBG Program. This increased motivation not only impacts student engagement in class but also creates a dynamic and interactive learning environment. When students feel more motivated, they are more likely to actively ask questions, engage in discussion discussions, and engage in learning, which are essential elements for creating an effective learning environment. This interactive environment allows students to develop the critical thinking and social skills needed for the future.

More profoundly, the MBG Program also contributes to the creation of a healthier and more conducive learning environment. By providing nutritious food, students feel

more focused and energized, which positively impacts their ability to concentrate on learning activities. This healthy environment not only supports the learning process but also helps students develop healthy lifestyle habits that can last into their adulthood. This demonstrates that the nutrition program is not only beneficial in the short term but also has the potential to positively impact students' health and education in the long term, ultimately contributing to the development of quality human resources in the future.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that nutritional interventions through the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) play a significant role in supporting students attendance and motivation to learn. This program not only provides nutritional benefits but also creates a better learning environment and supports students academic achievement. Therefore, it is important for relevant parties to continue developing and supporting similar programs that can improve students well-being and the overall quality of education. The sustainable implementation of nutrition programs will be a strategic step in achieving national education goals and improving the quality of human resources in the future.

Discussion

A 95% increase in student attendance demonstrates the effectiveness of the Free Nutritional Meal Program (FMBG) in attracting students to schools. Interviews with students revealed that the availability of nutritious food played a significant role in their decision to attend schools. One student stated, "The food provided makes me feel more enthusiastic and keeps my energy up throughout the learning day." This statement confirms that good nutrition not only meets physical needs but also positively impacts students' mental health, contributing to increased attendance rates. Research by Borbely et al. (2024) also supports these findings, noting that the free meal program can reduce absenteeism by providing incentives for students to engage in the learning process. **Impact on Learning Motivation**

Furthermore, the 54.8% increase in motivation reported by teachers reflects how this intervention can optimize student engagement in the academic process. Interviews with teachers demonstrated the tangible impact of providing nutritious meals on students enthusiasm. One teacher explained, "After this meal program, students became more active in asking questions and exhibited less disruptive behavior." This finding aligns with that Tohidi and Jabbari (2012), who stated that motivation is a key factor in achieving good academic performance. In this context, nutritional intervention can serve as a motivation booster.

By comparing student and teacher quotes with quantitative data on attendance and motivation levels, this study strengthens the argument that FMBG is not only successful in increasing attendance rates but also in boosting student motivation and engagement in learning. This integration of quantitative and qualitative data underscores the importance of a mixed-methods approach, in which both types of data complement each other to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the program's impact in educational settings.

The interviews also highlighted the importance of emotional engagement in improving students attendance. Students expressed that sharing meals at school created a strong sense of community. One student stated, "Eating with friends at school makes me feel happier and more likely to attend." This echoes Hecht et al.'s (2021) assertion,

that emotional engagement contributes to students' academic progress and well-being. Good nutrition and shared meals help build a supportive community among students.

The quantitative data showing a 54.8% increase in motivation is supported by teachers observations that students are more active and engaged. Tohidi and Jabbari (2012), that, motivation is a key factor in good academic performance. The student and teachers experiences gained through interviews provided deeper context to the quantitative data, strengthening the argument that nutritional interventions have a significant impact on student motivation and discipline.

Despite these encouraging results, several challenges were identified, particularly regarding menu variety, which was sometimes perceived as monotonous. This response highlights the importance of regularly evaluating and improving the menu to maintain students interest. Students expressed strong hope for the program's continuation, reflecting their commitment to improving their well-being and learning.

Ruffini (2022) noted that reforms in school meal programs, such as the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), also positively impact student participation and academic achievement. Therefore, continuing the program, and considering feedback from students and teachers, is crucial for its long-term success.

Overall, the combination of quantitative findings and qualitative insights from interviews in Karawang provides an in-depth look at the effectiveness of the Free Nutritious Meals Program. The program not only improves students' physical health but also positively impacts their motivation, emotional engagement, and attitudes toward learning. Continuing the program, and considering feedback from students and teachers, is crucial for achieving continued success in improving student well-being and academic performance.

As a step towards addressing nutrition and poverty, Kyrgyzstan's public schools implemented free meals for all primary school children in 2006. This study analyzes the impact of participation in the free meal program on student attendance in primary and secondary schools. Demographic disparities in school attendance among income categories, and their consequences. Annual panel data from the Life in Kyrgyzstan survey from 2010 to 2013 were used to analyze the effect of free meals on student attendance. The study sample encompassed approximately 3,200 students in the first and ninth grades throughout the academic year. The number of weeks that students were absent from school was used as a measure of their attendance. According to the parents, the program was conducted in schools during the previous academic year. The panel regression models show that program participants were less likely to have lower odds and rates of truancy in the following years (Muktarbek kyzzy, 2019).

The midday meal program (MMT) was introduced in India to improve school attendance, nutritional status, and educational outcomes for school children. The MMT program in India was effective in improving academic achievement and several nutritional outcomes for schoolchildren, underscoring the importance of sustaining the MMT program in India(Raveenthiranathan et al., 2024)

Free school meal programs not only provide essential nutrition but also enhance a sense of belonging and attention from the school. This can increase students' motivation to participate and engage in learning activities. It has been suggested that school meals can impact students' Nevertheless, current studies in this field areis is still restricted and inconclusive. The major conclusion, based on the informants' experiences, is that free school meals improve the learning environment. contributes to a calmer lunch

environment, improved social equity, favorable social interactions among students, and fewer student absences throughout lunch. In summary, the implementation of free school meals has a beneficial effect on children's educational health and learning environments, as well as fostering social equity because all students eat the same healthy school meals(Heim et al., 2022).

The findings of this study regarding the impact of the Free Nutritional Meal Program (FFM) on student motivation and attendance can be integrated with existing literature, where previous research has shown empirical evidence that the Free Nutritional Meal Program can be an effective strategy in improving student motivation and attendance in elementary schools (Knapp et al., 2024).

Supplementary school feeding programs (SFP) influence school attendance and performance because better nutrition automatically implies better physical and mental performance. SFP are an important motivation for school attendance, especially in areas with extreme poverty and food insecurity. The results indicate that the supplementary school feeding program has a consistent and statistically significant positive effect on school attendance (Barnabas et al., 2024).

Based on the results of questionnaires and interviews with 52 students from grades 5 and 6 in a number of Public Elementary Schools (SDN) in Karawang Regency, as well as 34 teachers from three sub-districts in the region, where in Telukjambe Timur Sub-district interviews were conducted with 52 students and 16 teachers, in Telukjambe Barat Sub-district there were 10 special teachers, and in Karawang Barat Sub-district there were also 10 teachers interviewed, this analysis was conducted to identify the impact of the Free Nutritious Food Program (MBG) on students and teachers in the area.

Of the 52 students who participated in this analytical research, 10 students considered the existence of the Free Nutritional Food Program (MBG) as something ordinary and did not feel that it had a significant impact for them, while 2 other students explicitly stated that they felt less enthusiastic due to the program; On the other hand, the majority, namely 40 students, were of the opinion that the implementation of the Free Nutritional Food program had significantly succeeded in increasing their enthusiasm for attending school, which in turn contributed positively to their learning motivation. This indicated that although there were variations in perceptions of this program, most students felt a constructive impact on their attendance and learning motivation.

Based on the analysis of the opinions of 34 teachers regarding student motivation before and after the implementation of the Free Nutritious Food Program (MBG), it was found that before the program, 14 teachers thought that student motivation was low, while 19 other teachers stated that student motivation and attendance had increased, and one teacher thought that student motivation was in the average category; , after the implementation of the Free Nutritious Food Program, there was a significant change, where 16 teachers reported that student motivation had increased, 14 teachers stated that student motivation had increased greatly, and 4 teachers thought that there was no significant change in student motivation, which shows that this program has had a positive impact on student learning motivation but at school, and indicates that the presence of food can function as a motivating factor that helps in increasing students' enthusiasm and motivation to learn.

Overall, this study provides empirical evidence of the importance of nutrition programs in supporting students learning motivation. These findings are expected to inform the development of more effective and sustainable educational policies and encourage the implementation of similar programs in other regions facing similar challenges in improving student motivation and school attendance.

The implementation context of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) in Indonesia is influenced by unique social, economic, and cultural conditions that vary across regions. This program aims to address nutrition issues, which remain a major challenge, particularly in areas with high poverty rates. MBG's implementation involves synergy between the central government, local governments, schools, and communities, thereby ensuring students' central access to nutritious food at school. Local governments play a crucial role in distributing resources and ensuring that the food provided meets the established nutritional standards. Active participation of parents and communities is also a crucial in supporting children in adopting healthy eating patterns. However, challenges such as lack of infrastructure, variations in the quality of implementation across regions, and differences in culture and eating habits require attention.

Overall, the context of MBG implementation in Indonesia has the potential to create a supportive environment for improving student nutrition and health, which is expected to contribute to increased attendance and motivation in elementary schools, although there are differences in approach and implementation compared to similar programs in other countries. Future research directions should include longitudinal studies to assess sustainable impacts, qualitative analyses of stakeholder experiences, comparative studies with international programs, and the development of more comprehensive evaluation tools to measure various aspects of program success.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study found that the free nutritious meal program had a significant positive impact on student attendance and motivation, with average attendance increasing from 80% to 95% after the program's implementation, as supported by teachers' reports of increased student enthusiasm for learning. These findings suggest that education policy should maintain or expand this program to improve the quality and access of education, particularly in resource-limited areas. However, this study has limitations, including its focus on three sub-districts, which may limit the generalizability of the results, and the subjective nature of the qualitative data obtained through the interviews. Future research is recommended to expand the scope of the study to a wider area and involve more participants to ensure the generalizability of the findings, as well as to conduct longitudinal research to explore changes over time and identify additional contextual factors that may influence the effectiveness of the nutritious meal program, with optimal use of mixed methods to improve the understanding of the program's impact on education.

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