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## Mid-day Meal Policy and Student Retention in Nepalese Community Schools

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### Abstract

*This study has been prepared based on the topic “The Impact of the Mid-Day Meal Program on Student Attendance in Community Schools in Nepal.” This study is limited to Dhankuta District. Its main objective is to identify the current status of the mid-day meal program in community schools and to examine the changes it has brought about in students’ attendance rates. This study examines the necessary processes for providing nutritious meals at school during the daytime in order to create an environment where students who are unable to attend school regularly due to high levels of poverty and hunger can come to school regularly, in agreement with the spirit of Education for All. Since the mid-day meal program is a relatively new practice in Nepal, its effectiveness has also been examined. This study is primarily based on a qualitative research approach. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through observation, interviews, and discussions. Interviews were conducted with head teachers, teachers and students of the tested schools, while the condition of the canteen and the meal distribution system were observed by the researcher. This study concluded that several challenges affect the effective implementation of the program. These include the irregular supply of locally available raw materials required for preparing meals; the inadequacy of the NPR 15 allocated by the government per student for the school meal program, the lack of properly managed canteens, and the absence of training for the personnel responsible for preparing the meals in food preparation and cooking. Furthermore, because the canteens are often too small and congested,*

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*proper arrangements should be made to ensure that all students can sit comfortably and eat their meals in an organized manner.*

**Keywords:** Meal, Retention, Sufficient, Nutrition, Allocated

### **Introduction**

This study focuses school attendance, classroom participation, and nutritional well-being. This program has been introduced particularly to ensure the effective application of compulsory and free education. In agreement with the Basic Education Act 2075 B.S. and the Basic Education Rules 2077 B.S., preparations are made to provide meals to students during the daytime. It is expected that the provision of midday meals increases students' school attendance and, so, contributes to improving the quality of education. On the management, practices, and legal features of the midday meal program in community schools in Nepal. The main objective of the Mid-Day Meal Program is to improve students' health by providing nutritious meals at school. This program was introduced in Nepal mainly under the Integrated Health Improvement Program, as intended by the Fifteenth Plan within the School Sector Reform Program. According to the Ministry of Education (2077 B.S.), the World Food Programmed initially provided monetary help to implement the program. Subsequently, the Government of Nepal has been allocating the necessary budget for the program through its annual budget speeches. Initially, the program was implemented in nineteen selected districts. After studying its effectiveness, it was gradually expanded throughout the country. Over time, the government has been regularly providing funds to schools at the rate of **Rs. 15 per student per day** for students studying from the Early Childhood Development (ECD) level to Grade Five. Schools are expected to collect locally produced food items according to their local context and prepare the meals in their own school kitchens or cafeterias. Therefore, the Mid-Day Meal Program is regarded as an important and effective inventiveness for improving students' health and supporting their educational participation.

In recent years, the former District Education Office played an important role in making the program effective. However, due to the limited budget allocated by the state, weak monitoring, and inadequate supply of locally produced materials, the program has not been as effective as expected. Although the program was introduced targeting economically disadvantaged students, providing the facility to all students in accordance with the principle of equality has also created a situation of discrimination. Economically well-off students may choose not to consume the snacks provided by the school and instead bring food from home or purchase snacks

from the market. Nevertheless, this program should be regarded as an important opportunity for improving students' well-being. The government has allocated approximately NPR 7.82 billion for the school meal program in the forthcoming fiscal year, with an estimated 2.7 million students nationwide expected to benefit. The funding devoted to the Mid-Day Meal Program represents about 3.6 percent of the total education budget, making it the third-largest area of expenditure within the education sector (MoEST, 2077).

This program has been introduced to bring all students in the community to school, increase their regular attendance, ensure that they complete a certain level of schooling, and make necessary improvements in education policies. It has also been implemented to improve students' health by providing nutritious food, reducing malnutrition, and ensuring quality education accordingly. Various countries have provided financial support to make the school mid-day meal program more effective. Thus, the mid-day meal program is not merely intended to satisfy the hunger of students attending school; it also aims to increase their attendance, retention, promotion rates, and academic achievement, while addressing other health-related problems.

Considering international commitments and various aspects of the Nepalese context, the Mid-Day Meal Program was implemented in 64 districts from 2074 B.S., benefiting about 2.7 million students. The program donated to an increase in students' school presence rates and was also found to improve their educational achievement. Also, it provided students with extra motivation to attend school regularly (Educational Sanjal, 2021). The school mid-day meal program in Nepal's community schools represents an important intervention for addressing both educational and nutritional needs among schoolchildren. According to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on education, every child should have equitable and accessible opportunities to receive education. However, in the context of Nepal, many students in some areas are unable to attend school due to poverty and hunger, and consequently, they are deprived of educational opportunities. In such circumstances, providing nutritious and delicious meals at school can increase students' attendance, encourage regular school participation, and promote their active involvement in teaching and learning activities, thereby improving the quality of education. It also supports students' physical and mental development and, overall, contributes to the equitable distribution of educational opportunities (MoEST 2077). The quality of the food provided at school should be good. Snacks should be prepared using locally produced ingredients, and commercially prepared and packaged food items available

in the market should be completely prohibited. Regular consumption of such foods can adversely affect children's health and nutritional status (Paudel, 2022). The major objectives of implementing the School Mid-Day Meal Program are to provide children with nutritious food that meets their nutritional needs, encourage students to become more active in classroom teaching and learning, enhance their academic performance and classroom participation, and strengthen the relationship between schools and local communities. Another important objective is to create an environment in which locally produced food items, vegetables, and fruits can be consumed at the local level. Thus, the program is not limited to providing nutritious meals to students; it also aims to promote the local production and consumption of agricultural products. This helps strengthen the relationship between schools and communities while creating a market for products produced by local farmers (MoEST, 2077). Community schools play a significant role in providing educational opportunities to children who come from economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized communities (Aryal, 2070). Within the school education system, student retention can be understood as the ability of learners to stay enrolled in school and make continuous progress in their studies. Children from poor families, including those of farmers and laborers may be at risk of dropping out of school before completing their education. The school-based midday meal program can help prevent such dropouts and thereby contribute to achieving the goal of inclusive education. It can also enable students to achieve educational success more easily. However, the midday meal program alone is not sufficient; it must be complemented by the creation of a supportive and learner-friendly environment in which students can learn easily and effectively (Kushiyat, 2009)

The midday meal program also has a direct and positive impact on the relationship between schools and the community. Locally produced food grains, vegetables, and fruits can be used to prepare nutritious meals. This helps create a local market by ensuring that some of the products produced in the community are consumed locally. Moreover, the income generated from the program also remains within the local community. The study focuses on the policy provisions and implementation status of the Mid-day meal program in one of the eleven secondary schools operating within the municipality.

The main objective of this study is to explore the current status of the Mid-Day Meal Program in Community schools and to analyze the challenges encountered in its implementation. The study will seek to answer the following research question(s).

- a) How do teachers and students understand the provisions of the Mid-Day Meal

Program?

- b) What types of challenges are created in the implementation of mid-day meal programmed in Nepal?

The answers to the above-mentioned questions will be required in this study.”

### **Methods and Materials**

This study was conducted using a qualitative research design. At present, the Mid-Day Meal Program is being implemented in almost all community schools in Nepal. However, while some schools have achieved positive outcomes from its implementation, others have encountered various challenges and problems. In this context, the researcher selected Dhankuta Municipality from among the three municipalities in Dhankuta convenience sampling method to examine how the program is actually being implemented at the school level.

There are thirty-five schools within Dhankuta Municipality. Among these, one school was selected through convenience sampling. The researcher explored the participants' personal experiences, perceptions, views, and practices regarding the implementation of the Mid-Day Meal Program. In particular, interviews and discussions were conducted with the principal, the person responsible for operating the school canteen/mid-day meal service, three teachers, and ten students. The researcher also visited the school canteen and conducted direct observation of the meal preparation and distribution process. Thus, substantial data were collected through face-to-face interactions, interviews, discussions, and direct observations.

Since the study was conducted in a community school, where a large proportion of students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, particular attention was given to the status of mid-day meal distribution and its implementation practices. methodological & Theoretical Approach Data collected via interviews, group discussions, and field observations were systematically categorized, analyzed, and triangulated across multiple stakeholder perspectives. The study employs a qualitative phenomenological design to explore participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the school midday meal program.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### ***Effectiveness of programmed***

Students are generally required to stay at school for approximately six hours each day. Those who come to school without having adequate food at home often find it difficult to remain at school for the entire day and may leave for home before the school day is over. Students who actively participate in learning activities tend to achieve comparatively better academic results. Therefore, this program was

introduced with the intention of ensuring that even children from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds have equitable access to education. However, when the principal was asked about the situation in your school regarding the effectiveness of this program, he/she expressed the following view:

*“The program has increased the student attendance rate at schools and enhanced their active participation in learning, which has consequently contributed to an increase in their pass rates. It has also created some level of demand for locally produced agricultural products through their consumption in schools. However, since the amount of funding provided by the government is very limited, the program has not yet been implemented effectively.”* Core Role & Socioeconomic Necessity

In particular, economically disadvantaged students and those affected by social discrimination, such as caste-based discrimination and untouchability, are sometimes unable to attend school. Therefore, one of the main objectives of the program is to promote social inclusion and strengthen a sense of belonging by bringing all children together and encouraging them to share meals. The program has particularly benefited children from families living below the poverty line and those living in remote areas. However, the quality of the meals provided must be maintained at an appropriate standard.

### ***Health & Educational Impact***

Children need nutritious food, and if they receive sufficient energy from food to perform their daily activities, they can avoid malnutrition. This helps maintain good physical health among children. In such circumstances, they are also likely to remain mentally healthy. Since a healthy body contributes to a healthy mind, giving special attention to children's nutritional needs and making the necessary arrangements can further justify the importance of such a program.

### ***How many Rupees to effectively manage Mid-day meal ?***

According to the respondents, the amount provided by the government is **Rs.15** per meal per student. Given the rising inflation rate and the increasing costs of food and other essential commodities, schools have been compelled to collect additional funds from various sources to ensure the regular provision of mid-day meals. All respondents indicated that the amount provided by the government is inadequate to cover the current cost of providing nutritious meals to students. The head teacher further explained that

*“I have been teaching at the school for approximately ten years. They noted that, at present, students up to Class 6 are provided with mid-day meals, with*

*Rs. 15 charged per student per day. According to the head teacher, this amount alone is insufficient to cover the cost of the meals. However, the municipality contributes an additional Rs. 10 per meal, bringing the total to Rs. 25 per student, which is considered adequate to provide the meals. Nevertheless, the head teacher emphasized that the amount provided solely by the government is not sufficient to meet the required food costs.”*

The teacher response is quite similar to the head teacher. The limited and not sufficient governmental funds and the funds collected locally by the teachers from their monthly salary were found.

*“I have been teaching at this school for the past five to six years, and the mid-day meal program has been a regular practice since I joined. However, the government’s allocation of Rs. 15 per Student is not sufficient, especially given the current high rate of inflation. This amount does not adequately cover the costs of kitchen utensils, the cook, food ingredients, and other management expenses. Therefore, we have to contribute a portion of our monthly salaries to ensure that the students receive proper meals. Without these additional Contributions, the allocated amount would not be enough to provide sufficient food for all the students. The amount provided is extremely low; these days, even a glass of black tea costs around Rs. 15. It is therefore difficult to understand how a complete and nutritious meal can be provided to a student with the same amount.”*

The third respondent expressed a similar view, noting that the school faced insufficient government funding, while the funds collected through the school fund were also taken into consideration

*“The amount provided for the midday meal is insufficient. Nevertheless, the meal program has significantly reduced children’s consumption of junk food. If adequate funding were available, we would also provide children with seasonal, locally produced fruits. However, since the government-provided funds are insufficient, we have to cover the additional costs from the school’s own budget.”*

Despite the inadequacy of government funding, schools continue to provide meals to children through financial assistance from local authorities, contributions from teachers’ monthly salaries, and the use of school resources. This initiative plays a significant role in supporting children’s physical, psychological, and intellectual development. It also aligns with the government’s goal of improving children’s nutritional status by ensuring that school meals meet approximately 30% of their

daily nutritional needs. Overall, school feeding programs aim to alleviate hunger and Malnutrition while encouraging students' regular participation in education and improving their learning outcomes." (Conklin & Bordi, 2003; Murphy et al., 2000; Russell et al., 2007).

### ***Has the grant amount been fully utilized?***

The head teacher explained that the grant amount has been suitably and fully utilized. In addition to the grant, a small amount of financial support is also provided through donations from the local government. Using these funds, the school prepares six different plates on six different days. The availability of seasonal vegetables and locally produced food items has also contributed definitely to the effective utilization of the grant. The teacher's response was quite similar to that of the head teacher regarding the use of the grant the amount provided by the government has been fully utilized. Teachers informed me about this."

*"The amount has been fully and most appropriately utilized also the children who were surviving by having cheap junk foods with poor quality available in the market, this mid-day meal campaign has given them locally produced quality food with good nutrition. Also, it has directly contributed to the local farmers and their products and also their employment and financial sector"*.

The allocated funds have been completely utilized, with additional support provided through generous contributions from teachers and the broader community. Students' dietary habits are shaped by various factors, including school-based education, the school's mid-day meal program, and parental influence. Beyond preparing meals for their children, parents also serve as role models by demonstrating healthy or unhealthy food choices. Likewise, teachers have an important role in encouraging students to avoid unhealthy eating practices, such as excessive consumption of junk food, and in promoting healthier dietary Habits. (Fleary & Ettienne, 2019).

Several community schools have reported that children consume unhealthy foods, such as instant ice-cream doughnuts and bhujia, during their midday meals (Pande, 2022). At the same time, the school meal program promotes the use of locally produced food products. Despite the limited government funding available for the program, teachers and local communities frequently make additional efforts to ensure its effective implementation.

Recognizing the vital role of adequate nutrition in children's education and development, school lunch programs have been implemented in many countries to enhance access to education, increase school participation, and improve learning outcomes, while also promoting children's overall health and well-being. In the long

term, these programs aim to alleviate childhood hunger, improve nutritional and health status, and strengthen children's access to education, regular school attendance, educational continuity, and academic performance. (MoEST, 2077 BS). The mid-day meal program is one of the government initiatives aimed at improving students' educational participation and well-being. Program Reach & Socioeconomic Context Targeted at primary students in Nepal's community schools, the mid-day meal scheme primarily serves children from lower-income, laboring, and farming households. Because many parents face financial hardship or demanding work schedules that limit their ability to provide sufficient food at home, students often risk going hungry.

### ***Impact on Attendance, Retention, & Academic Quality***

The major positive aspect of the midday meal program is that it increases students' school attendance rates. Once meals are provided at school, students are less likely to leave school during the afternoon and spend the entire school day at school. Other important benefits include regular school attendance, reduced tendency to leave school midway through the day, stronger relationships with peers, increased learning engagement, and access to quality education.

### ***Implementation & Stakeholder Collaboration***

Parents, School Management Committees, local governments, head teachers, and other stakeholders can play an important role in making the program more organized and effective, tasty and nutritious meals can be made readily available to students at school.

### ***Overall Student Well-Being & Development***

Effective implementation of this program promotes the physical, mental, and overall development of students, enabling them to perform better in the learning process. As a result, the quality of education provided by schools improves, and the students' pass rate also increases.

Therefore, the school meal program should be implemented and managed in a well-organized, efficient, and effective manner.

Furthermore, the program has contributed to improving the overall condition of government schools. In addition to supporting quality education, it has helped reduce student dropout rates and malnutrition among children. The provision of school meals has positively influenced children's physical and mental growth. While also improving their participation in education and the general situation of government schools.

*“The financial burden of providing children with a nutritious diet has also been alleviated for parents who have contributed to improving their household’s economic situation. Creating an environment that supports students’ educational pursuits requires recognizing and addressing the various factors that influence student retention.”*

Since last year, the campaign has been extended to Grade 6 and implemented across all 77 districts of Nepal. Similarly, the midday meal program has been introduced nationwide in all 70 districts (MoEST, 2077 BS). The provision of midday meals has encouraged children to attend government schools, particularly those that were previously at risk of decline. Students now attend school six days a week, which has contributed to a significant reduction in dropout rates.

This program has helped, to some extent, to eliminate the situation in which children are unable to attend school because of hunger. Food is the most basic and fundamental human need. On the one hand, poverty forces some children to engage in work to meet their basic needs instead of attending school. On the other hand, education is a fundamental right of every individual under the concept of compulsory and free education. Therefore, this program helps eliminate the situation in which children are unable to learn because they have to study on an empty stomach.

The program was first implemented on a pilot basis in Jumla District in 1957(ozga, 2000). When the program was initially introduced, Rs. 15 per student was allocated for the midday meal. However, as the prices of goods and commodities have gradually increased over time, the allocated amount has become insufficient for the effective implementation of the meal program. In such a situation, either the government needs to increase its financial support in line with inflation, or the program can be sustained only if parents and local governments, in addition to the state, also provide financial resources. Chisala, 2017; Nagaraju, 2014)

Many schools still use low-quality commercially prepared foods, such as instant noodles and *chatpate*, as snacks for students under the Mid-Day Meal Program. Such practices should be discontinued, and locally available food items should instead be used to prepare school snacks. This would help ensure that students are provided with nutritious and healthy meals. After enrolling, students benefit from educational opportunities and can contribute more actively in classroom teaching and learning. Improving the quality of education helps protection reasonable access to basic education, reinforces students’ participation, and improves learning attainments. In addition, creating a positive and helpful school environment is vital for behind students’ interest in education. Therefore, various social, economic, and educational

factors moving students' holding and regular participation should be carefully considered to safeguard their continued attendance and successful learning experiences.

Using locally produced agricultural products in school mid-day meals can reinforce companies between schools and farming communities, increase demand for local goods, and support local economies (MoEST, 2077). School meals also reduce hunger and food-related absence. So, the program can improve regular presence, reduce dropout rates, increase enrolment, and inspire students' active contribution in educational activities.

## Conclusion

The program was introduced targeting children from farmer, poor, laborer, and marginalized families who, for various reasons, are unable to attend school. Its main objectives are to increase access to education for children from these groups, improve students' attendance and regularity, create an environment that encourages their active participation in the learning process, foster socialization within the classroom, and enhance educational achievement. However, since the amount of **Rs. 15 per student** allocated for the midday meal is currently very low, increasing the amount in accordance with market prices would help provide students with tasty and nutritious food. For this, the head teacher, School Management Committee, parents, local government, and the central government should all take the necessary initiatives.

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