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Impact of the Free Mid-Day Meal Program in Community Schools

Madhav Prasad Dahal

Lecturer, Tejganga Multiple Campus, Kavrepalanchok, Nepal

dahalmadhav124@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Government of Nepal has the provision of free mid- day meal (tiffin) to the primary level students in community school. It is one of the key educational and nutritional interventions intended to support early childhood development and the foundational learning of children. The main objective of this program is to improve student health, increase school participation, enhance regularity and strengthening academic achievement. This study explores the effectiveness of the tiffin program in the Community School of Panauti municipality of Kavrepalanchowk district. A total of 36 student and 15 parents were participated in this study. Questionnaire, class observation, attendance and parental interviews were taken for the collection of data on focusing children's regularity, overall health condition, children's motivation to the learning platform. It is found that the positive impact of the program on regularity, classroom participation, student interest on going to the school, nutritional awareness and parental involvement. This study concludes that the mid

day meal (tiffin) program is an effective tool for promoting equitable access to education, enhancing the learning environment and reducing absenteeism. Despite the positive outcomes, the programs face some challenges such as inconsistent budgeting, occasional shortages of locally grown food items and need for the stronger community level monitoring.

This research suggests ongoing expansion, better coordination among stakeholders, regular evaluation, integration of nutritional education within the school curriculum and diversification of meal varieties. The article may contribute valuable localized evidence to support the sustainability of Nepal's school mid-day meal initiatives.

Keywords: *Day-meal, parental involvement, student interest, academic achievement.*

Background of the study

Education plays a significant role in national development and ensuring equitable access for all children is a constitutional and policy priority of Nepal. Education stands as the foundation of social and economic development, mostly in low- and middle-income countries like Nepal. Most of the citizens depend on community schools for their children's education or learning in our country Nepal. Most of the community schools of Nepal have been struggling with several issues such as low attendance, nutritional deficiencies, insufficient parental engagement among the various children. Primary education in developing countries often faces challenges related to poverty, malnutrition and limited parental awareness.

Many investigations found that there is close relationship between nutrition and learning. Panauti municipality considering as semi urban municipality, many students come from economic backgrounds where consistent access to nutrients food cannot be guaranteed. This poor economic condition directly influences their school participation, cognitive abilities, physical and mental development of the learners. Recognizing the various challenges related on regularity, academic achievement and nutritional insufficiency, the Government of Nepal introduced the mid-day meal (tiffin) program aiming to support children from early childhood development (ECD) to class five students. The MDM

programs seek to provide a light but nutritious meal often comprising locally available foods. The provision of such kind of meal address hunger, encourages school attendance, increases concentration in classrooms and contributes to long -term educational success.

Despite the government continuous investment in school feeding programs, the empirical evaluation of the tiffin initiatives in the school or Municipal level is still Limited. Many available studies concentrate on national level frameworks or rural food security but do not fully capture local experience from community schools. This study aims to fill this research gap by examining the effectiveness of the free tiffin program in three community schools in Panauti municipality. Free day meal contributes in improving enrollment rate, attendance rate increased and reduction in dropout rate to the economically disadvantages areas.

Structured School feeding program in Nepal, began in the mid 1970's. In cooperation with World Food Program (WFP), Nepal introduced the mid-day meal program at the beginning. After sometime, the program is extended to all community School throughout the nation. Today the program is launching for the students of all community schools from ECD to grade five across the country.

Literature review

The literature indicates that school feeding programs like the Mid-Day Meal Scheme are theoretically justified and empirically associated with improved attendance and enrollment. However, there is limited localized evidence for their impact in specific settings such as Panauti's community schools.

School feeding program is community adopted program as educational interventions worldwide. Many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America including Japan, Brazil, India and United States etc. has implemented this program to address childhood hunger, encourage School attendance and support cognitive development. Sustained School feeding programs can significantly enhance student participation and reduced dropout rates.

Global perspective on school -feeding programs

Kristiansson et.al. (2007), highlighted that school feeding interventions have measurable

effects on literacy, regularity and remarkable reduction in dropout rate. Also, the long-term academic outcomes and nutritional status had been found improved after years of program implementation.

Aurino (2017), concluded that the children receiving daily meals in school exhibit better concentration in their study and improve short term memory. According to him, Mid-day meal program concerned for providing the nutritious food from locally available items with the regularity in the school.

Pant (2025), found that increase student enrollment, enhances social interaction among students and improved dietary habits with the help of mid- day meal programs in far western region of Nepal. Several resources on mid -day meal show that school meals improve attendance and reduced dropout rate enhancing concentration, cognitive functions and academic performance of the students

Mid -day meal program in south Asia

The world's largest School feeding initiative is found to be in India. Mid- day meal scheme in India has demonstrated miserable improvements in student enrollment, gender parity and learning outcomes. Parallel programs in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka highlight that feeding programs are effective especially when targeted at early learners. South Asian mid-day meal programmed experiences that the locally sources mil improves sustainability and cultural acceptance. Also the parents teacher cooperation increases when families contribute ingredients or monitoring. Quality food to the children directly influences student health learning.

Mid -day meal program in Nepal

Nepal has implemented School feeding initiative for more than two decades. Beginning with support from the World Food Program (WFP), UNICEF and later transitioning to government ownership. Earlier programs focused on high-food insecurity districts primarily in the hill and mountain regions. At present, the government has increasingly taken

ownership of school feeding as part of its education reform initiatives. The national school meal guidelines emphasize the use of locally grown crops, seasonal vegetables and nutritional traditional foods such as 'kwati', 'dhido', 'bhuteko makai', 'gundruk', 'khir', 'pidalu' etc. The federal government allocates fixed amount per student per day. But the school often get supplement with local government and community support. Studies in various district has found significantly improved attendance of early grade learners, physical health and nutritional balance as well as community school collaboration with the help of mid-day meal.

However, challenges persist including irregular budget flow, insufficient kitchen, facilities and lack of trained cooks and variance in food quality. Nutrition plays a crucial role in the cognitive, physical and mental development of children. It is found that the provision of mid- day meal at school can affect nutritional disparities giving children equal opportunities to successes. Parental involvement is a key determinant of educational success. When parents observe improvement in their children energy, enthusiasm and school participation due to institutional support as meals, they develop a larger trust in overall school system. Hence the mid -day meal is not only an educational intervention but also a social one, shaping community attitudes towards schooling.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed method. Descriptive Research Design incorporating both the qualitative and quantitative data to examine and fulfill the research objects. This study includes three different community schools from Panauti Municipality of Kavrepalanchok district. The schools were selected randomly. Information was collected from 60 sample students out of 300 students from ECD level to grade five, selected parents and school teachers. The data and information were collected using structured questionnaire, interview and observation check list.

Teachers' perspectives on mid-day meal program

From our teaching experience, the mid-day meal program has positively influenced students' performance, attendance and classroom participation. Many students who previously came

to school without eating are now more attentive and energetic during study the lessons. We have observed improved concentration, of their classes. This program also promotes equality, as all students share the same tiffin or mid day meal regardless of their background. However, we sometimes have faced challenges such as food management, hygiene monitoring and time allocation. Overall, we believe the Mid-Day Meal program supports both learning outcomes, eating habits and the overall

Students perspectives on mid-day meal program

As being the students of community school, we feel very happy and excited about the mid-day meal program. It helps us stay full and focused during classes with great concentration in learning the lessons. Many of us enjoy eating together with our friends, which builds dense relationship with friendship and unity. The meal provided freely by the school reduces hunger and gives us energy to participate in sports and academic activities. For some students, this may be the most nutritious meal of the day. We highly appreciate the support from the school and the government. The mid-day meal program makes school life more comfortable and encourages us to attend regularly.

Parents perspectives on mid-day meal program

As being the parents of students studying at different community School of Panauti Municipality's, we feel the mid-day meal program as a great support for our families. It reduces the burden of preparing tiffin daily and ensures our children receive at least one balanced meal separately in the different days in a week. We have really noticed improvements in our children's health, attendance, and interest in school. The program also gives us confidence that our children are cared for during school hours. Although we hope for continued improvement in food quality, quantity and consistency, we strongly believe the mid-day meal program contributes positively to our children's education, health, well-being and overall academic achievement.

Findings and discussions

Findings and discussion include students' attendance and regularity, classroom participation and learning motivation, health status and nutritional outcome, parental and community perceptions towards the day-meal program.

Student's attendance and regularity

Analysis of attendance records indicates a substantial improvement in students' school regularity following the implementation of the free mid-day meal program to the primary students. Approximately 91.67% of the sampled students demonstrated increased attendance, with notable reductions in absenteeism and late arrival, particularly among children from economically disadvantaged and backward households. The provision of free tiffin appears to function as a strong motivational incentive for regular school attendance. Free mid-day meal (tiffin) programs significantly reduce absenteeism by alleviating short-term hunger and reducing household economic burdens.

Classroom participation and learning motivation

Classroom observations and teacher feedback revealed a marked improvement in students classroom behavior and engagement. Nearly 86.11% were observed to be more attentive, participatory and responsive during instructional activities after receiving the free mid-day meal. Improved nutritional intake during school hours enhances student's concentration and cognitive engagement. The findings from this study support existing literature that identifies nutrition as a critical determinant of learning readiness and academic participation, particularly at the basic level (grade 1-5).

Health status and nutritional outcomes

Parental responses and observational data suggest positive changes in student's physical and mental well-being. Approximately 80.55 % respondents reported noticeable improvements in their children's energy levels, appetite, hygiene and general health. The free mid-day meal program contributes meaningfully to addressing mild nutritional deficiencies among school-

aged children. Improved physical health serves as an enabling factor for sustained attention and participation in learning activities and enhancing the educational achievement in the future time.

Parental and community perception

Interview data revealed a high level of parental satisfaction with the free mid-day meal initiative. About 80 % of parents expressed increased confidence in community schools and greater willingness to support their children's regular attendance. The program helps to reduce the financial and preparing burden on households while enhancing trust in public education. It also saves the economy of the parents. As a result, parental engagement with schools has improved, reinforcing the role of school feeding programs as both social and educational interventions.

Challenges in program implementation

Despite its positive impact, several operational challenges were identified. These include irregular budget disbursement, occasional shortages of locally sourced food items, inadequate kitchen facilities, and limited availability of trained cooking personnel. Also the budget is not sufficient to provide required quantity of the meal. These challenges highlight the need for systematic planning, enhancing infrastructure and stronger coordination among schools, parents, local governments and other community stakeholders to ensure consistent program delivery.

Conclusion

The study indicates that the free mid-day meal (tiffin) program has significantly improved basic level students' regularity and attendance in community schools. Students demonstrate enhanced motivation, classroom participation and learning outcomes. The program contributes positively to student's health and nutritional status. Parental trust and involvement in community schools have increased. The program supports educational equity

by benefiting children from socio- economically disadvantaged backgrounds family. Implementation challenges persist, particularly related to funding consistency, infrastructure, trained cook and food supply management.

In conclusion, the free mid-day meal (tiffin) program is an effective and multidimensional intervention in basic level probably say primary-level community schools of Panauti Municipality of Kavrepalanchok district. The program plays a crucial role in improving student attendance, enhancing classroom engagement, promoting nutritional well-being and strengthening parental direct involvement in the school. Beyond its immediate nutritional benefits, the program contributes to broader educational objectives such as equity, inclusion and learner retention. However, the long-term sustainability, budgetary sufficiency and effectiveness of the program depend on addressing existing implementation challenges through improved resource allocation, infrastructure development and coordinated effective monitoring mechanisms from the authorized bodies.

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