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**Stakeholder's Perceptions on the Influence of School Feeding Programmes on
Attendance and Dropout Rates of Public Primary School Pupils in Tharaka-Nithi
County, Kenya**

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Stakeholder's Perceptions on the Influence of School Feeding Programmes on Attendance and Dropout Rates of Public Primary School Pupils in Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya



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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to assess stakeholder's perceptions on the influence of school feeding programmes on pupil's attendance and dropout rates in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya.

Methodology: The study adopted a mixed methods approach. The target population for this study was Tharaka Nithi County Education Officials, Headteachers, teachers, and parents of Grade three pupils in public schools. The data collection instruments included: questionnaires, interview guide, observation checklist and focus group discussion guide. Data were analysed using the *statistical package for social sciences* (SPSS) Version 27. Quantitative data were analysed and presented in the form of frequencies and percentages. The qualitative data were presented in a narrative form in themes.

Findings: The study established that stakeholders perceived that: school feeding programs significantly boosted pupils' class attendance; reduced absenteeism; and improved concentration and academic performance, while encouraging consistent school attendance. The schools' feeding programs significantly reduced pupils dropout rates, and also enhanced academic performance. It was concluded that school feeding programs was perceived to significantly improve pupil attendance and reduced dropout rates.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study was anchored on Abrahams Maslow's Hierarchy Theory of Human Motivation. There is need for the County Government and National Governments and NGOS to increase the school feeding programmes in ASAL schools. Vulnerable children in ASAL areas should be given special attention in school feeding programmes. School stakeholders should support the availability of feeding programmes in all the ASAL schools.

Keywords: *Dropout Rates, Attendance, School Feeding Programmes*

JEL Codes: *J13, J18*

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INTRODUCTION

The UNICEF report of 1998 and the Government of Kenya (2000) indicated that Kenya was performing poorly in both income and Nutritional support. In semi-arid and marginalized areas such as Tharaka Nithi, enrolment, attendance, participation and completion rates were very poor for some school age going children. As per this report, it was established that there was an increase in enrolment from 77% in 2002 to 97% in 2007 that was attributed to provision of meals at school. These findings indicate that that school meals entice and attract children to school on daily basis.

The WFP Report (2006) paints a negative picture about the conditions of children in Kenya. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) statistics, show that 44% of the population are undernourished and 23% falls below the international poverty line of US\$1 per day consumption.

According to UNESCO report of 2007, the nutritional aspect enhances children's concentration making them learn more and enjoy being in school. They also generate nutritional improvements in school going children and create a desire to attend school. The improved nutritional status can lead to more health benefits thus strengthening immunity and preventing infectious diseases that could keep children out of school. The report concluded that school-feeding programmes has contributed to improved school attendance globally. Though many children enrol in school, millions of them still drop-out of school. UNESCO (2018) maintains that one in every five children that begins school, dropout before completion. The problem of school drop-outs is more prevalent in ASAL regions such as Tharaka Nithi County (<https://www.nutritionintl.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Nutrition-International-KEN-05-Tharaka-Nithi-CNAP-Final-1.pdf>)

The *National School Meals and Nutrition Strategy 2017-2022* reports that a school feeding programme must be secured on sound financial capacity, community involvement, policy and legal frameworks, institutional capacity and proper design and implementation in order to be sustainable. More often than not, school feeding programs failed due to fund limitations, non-involvement of community members in planning, inadequate policies especially at school level, and limitations of staff that lack technical capacity and insufficient monitoring of the programs (World Bank, 2014).

According to School Nutrition and Meals Strategy for Kenya (2016) for most pupils in ASAL regions school meals are often the only meal a child receives in a day and in most cases children who receive meals in school are given less amounts of food at home. School meals should therefore not only aim at alleviating short-term hunger but should also strive to meet the daily nutrient requirements of children. Examining the diet quality of school meals is important to determine their capabilities in satisfying the nutrients needs of children.

Objective

The purpose of this study was to assess stakeholder's perceptions on the influence of school feeding programmes on pupil's attendance and dropout rates in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya.

Problem Statement

The Kenyan School Feeding Programme has been hailed for being beneficial in increasing school enrolment and attendance, but a number of challenges have been reported that hinder its success. This includes ensuring that there is food security, its affordability, and its quality,

among others. Specifically, this programme has limited funding, inconsistent political commitment, and a lack of clear operational plans that also hamper its effectiveness in addressing food insecurity and malnutrition among school-going children.

Despite Kenyan government and Tharaka Nithi county government efforts, the problem statement for the school feeding programme in Tharaka Nithi County can be said to be high levels of malnutrition, school attendance, and lack of active stakeholders' participation. This problem has persisted particularly among vulnerable populations in the county. This indicates a need for a more effective and sustainable school feeding program to address these challenges. The school feeding programme in the county intend to benefit thousands of pupils and their parents.

Theoretical Framework

This research has used Abrahams Maslow's Hierarchy Theory of Human Motivation, which emphasizes that basic physiological needs like food are a prerequisite for higher-level needs like early childhood education. This theory suggests that school feeding programs can address hunger, which is taken as the leading fundamental physiological need for human survival, which enables children to focus on learning and, in the long run, improve attendance and academic performance.

This theory provides a framework for understanding how basic needs such as food, shelter, etc. must be met before individuals can pursue other higher-level needs such as education and social interaction. In the context of the school feeding programme, the theory explains how providing nutritious meals can satisfy physiological needs, enhance learning capacity, reduce absenteeism, and support children's well-being.

Research Gaps

The study looked at the research gaps in school feeding programmes in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. There was need for research studies that include the need for more studies on the long-term impact of SEP on child nutrition and education, as well as the sustainability of the programme in the long run. Additionally, more research is needed on the effectiveness of different SEP implementation models and the role of community involvement in the programme success. Other areas needing further research includes the long-term impact of the school feeding programmes, implementation models, the role of parents, community members, the impact of SEP on the nutritional status of children, including micronutrient deficiencies and the prevalence of malnutrition and the relationship between SEP and academic performance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approaches

This study adopted a mixed methods approach. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed.

Instruments

Data collection instruments included: questionnaire, interview guide, observation checklist and focus group discussion guide.

Target Population

The target population for the study was Tharaka Nithi county Education Officials, Headteachers, teachers, and parents of grade three pupils in public schools.

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

Ten (10%) of the target population was included in the study that is 11 public primary schools with their headteachers, 97 teachers, 22 school board members and 110 grade three pupils with their parents. Simple random sampling was used to select the study respondents. The sampled respondents was a representative of the whole population. Only schools that have operational school feeding program were included in the study. The education officers in both counties were purposely selected for the study.

FINDINGS

Demographic Information

The following table show the percentage of boys and girls of the schools that were covered in the research study in Tharaka Nithi County.

Gender of Children					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	104	52.0	52.0	52.0
	Male	96	48.0	48.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

The table show that 52 % and 48 % of the pupils that were covered during the study represented females and males respectively. This shows that more girls were in schools offering SFP than boys in Tharaka Nithi County.

Teacher's Gender					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	46	65.7	65.7	65.7
	Male	24	34.3	34.3	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

The majority of teachers in lower classes in most schools were female.

During the study, questionnaires were administered to the Head teachers and teachers to gather information in relation to school feeding programs operations & management and school attendance. Five propositions were given with rates on a scale of 1 to 5 where: 1 = Strongly disagree (SD), 2 = Disagree (D), 3 = Neutral (N), 4 = Agree (A) and 5 = Strongly Agree (SA).

Table 1: Whether SFP Increased Attendance

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	29	41.4	41.4	41.4
	Strongly Agree	41	58.6	58.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

The Table 1 shows that there was unanimous agreement that that SFP increased class attendance at grade three level.

Table 2: Whether SFP made pupils school attendance become regular

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	42	60.0	60.0	60.0
	Strongly Agree	28	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 shows that unanimous agreement that SFP made pupil's school attendance become regular.

Table 3: Whether SFP increased attendance rates to very great extent

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	36	51.4	51.4	51.4
	Strongly Agree	34	48.6	48.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 3 shows that a unanimous agreement that that SFP increased attendance to very great extent

Table 4: Whether SFP Increased Attendance Rates of Lower Classes

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	38	54.3	54.3	54.3
	Strongly Agree	32	45.7	45.7	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 4 shows that there was a unanimous agreement that SFP increased attendance of lower classes

Table 5: Whether SFP Increased Attendance Rates of Mid Classes

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	32	45.7	45.7	45.7
	Neutral	6	8.6	8.6	54.3
	Neutral	4	5.7	5.7	60.0
	Strongly Agree	28	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 show that there was a unanimous agreement that SFP increased attendance of mid-classes.

Table 6: Whether SFP Increased Attendance Rates of Upper Level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	38	54.3	54.3	54.3
	Neutral	3	4.3	4.3	62.9
	Strongly Agree	26	37.1	37.1	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 6 show that 91.4% of headteachers and teachers agreed, that SFP increased attendance of upper levels,

Table 7: Whether SFP improved pupils' level of activeness and participation in classroom

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	29	41.4	41.4	41.4
	Neutral	5	7.1	7.1	48.6
	Strongly Agree	36	51.4	51.4	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 7 shows that 92.8% of headteachers and teachers agreed that SFP improved pupils' level of activeness and participation.

Dropout Rates

The questionnaires were administered to the Head teachers and teachers to gather information in relation to school feeding programs operations & management, and pupil's dropouts. Five propositions were given with rates on a scale of 1 to 5 where: 1 = Strongly disagree (SD), 2 = Disagree (D), 3 = Neutral (N), 4 = Agree (A) and 5 = Strongly Agree (SA).

Table 8: Whether Hunger, Insecurity, and Lack of Motivation and Child Labour Encouraged Dropout

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	17	24.3	24.3	24.3
	Strongly Agree	47	67.1	67.1	91.4
	Strongly Disagree	6	8.6	8.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 8 show that 91.4% of headteachers and teachers agreed that lack of motivation and child labour encouraged dropout.

Table 9: Whether Dropout Rates of Pupils is Influenced by Food Availability

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	18	25.7	25.7	25.7
	Disagree	6	8.6	8.6	34.3
	Neutral	10	14.3	14.3	48.6
	Strongly Agree	24	34.3	34.3	82.9
	Strongly Disagree	12	17.1	17.1	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 9 show that 60 % of Headteachers and teachers agreed that dropout rates of pupils was influenced by food availability.

Table 10: Whether SFP Improved Attendance of Most Vulnerable Kids within Schools

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	16	22.9	22.9	22.9
	Disagree	4	5.7	5.7	28.6
	Strongly Agree	50	71.4	71.4	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 10 shows that 94.3 % of headteachers and teachers agreed that SFP improved attendance of most vulnerable kids within schools.

Table 11: Whether SFP Reduced Dropout Rate of Pupils

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	30	42.9	42.9	42.9
	Neutral	6	8.6	8.6	51.4
	Strongly Agree	34	48.6	48.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 11 show that 91.4% of headteachers and teachers agreed that SFP reduced dropout rates of pupils.

Table 12: Whether SFP Attracted and Helped Retain Pupils in School

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	32	45.7	45.7	45.7
	Strongly Agree	34	48.6	48.6	94.3
	Strongly Disagree	4	5.7	5.7	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 12 shows that 94.3% of head teachers and teachers agreed that SFP attract and help retain pupils in school.

Table 13: Whether Dropout Rates of Pupils was Influenced by the Availability of Food

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	32	45.7	45.7	45.7
	Neutral	9	12.9	12.9	58.6
	Strongly Agree	21	30.0	30.0	88.6
	Strongly Disagree	8	11.4	11.4	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 13 shows that 75.9 % of headteachers and teachers agreed that dropout rates of pupils was influenced by the availability of food.

Table 14: Whether Long Distances Travelled to School Encourage Pupil School Dropout

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	21	30.0	30.0	30.0
	Disagree	13	18.6	18.6	48.6
	Neutral	18	25.7	25.7	74.3
	Strongly Agree	18	25.7	25.7	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 14 show that 55.7% of the headteachers agreed that long distance travelled to school encouraged pupil school dropout.

Table 15: Whether SFP had Reduced Dropout of Pupils

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	23	32.9	32.9	32.9
	Disagree	5	7.1	7.1	40.0
	Neutral	1	1.4	1.4	41.4
	Strongly Agree	41	58.6	58.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 15 show that 32.9 % of headteachers and teachers agreed, 7.1 % disagreed, 1.4% were neutral and 58.6 % strongly agreed that SFP has reduced the dropout rate.

Table 16: Whether SFP Attracted and Retained Pupils in School

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	26	37.1	37.1	37.1
	Disagree	2	2.9	2.9	40.0
	Neutral	7	10.0	10.0	50.0
	Strongly Agree	35	50.0	50.0	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 16 show that 87.1% of headteachers and teachers agreed that SFP attracted and retained pupils in a school.

Table 17: Whether Dropout had increased since Introduction of SFP

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	4	5.7	5.7	5.7
	Disagree	17	24.3	24.3	30.0
	Strongly Disagree	49	70.0	70.0	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table shows that 94.3% of headteachers and teachers agreed that dropout had decreased since the introduction of SFP.

Table 18: Whether SFP had Improved School Progression and Reduced Number of Children Dropping out of School

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	32	45.7	45.7	45.7
	Disagree	12	17.1	17.1	62.9
	Strongly Agree	26	37.1	37.1	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 18 shows that 82.8% of headteachers and teachers agreed that SFP has improved school progression and reduced number of children dropping out of school.

Table 19: Whether Poverty and Food Insecurity Increased Dropouts of Many Children

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	17	24.3	24.3	24.3
	Disagree	4	5.7	5.7	30.0
	Strongly Agree	37	52.9	52.9	82.9
	Strongly Disagree	12	17.1	17.1	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 19 shows that 78.2% of headteachers and teachers agreed that poverty and food insecurity increased dropouts of many children.

Table 20: Whether Finance Challenges in Funding SFP Hindered Reduction of Student Dropouts Rates

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	16	22.9	22.9	22.9
	Disagree	8	11.4	11.4	34.3
	Neutral	11	15.7	15.7	50.0
	Strongly Agree	22	31.4	31.4	81.4
	Strongly Disagree	13	18.6	18.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 20 show that 54.3% of headteachers and teachers agreed that finance challenges in funding SFP hindered reduction of student dropout rates.

Table 21: Whether there was more Dropout among Boys than Girls

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	23	32.9	32.9	32.9
	Disagree	14	20.0	20.0	52.9
	Neutral	17	24.3	24.3	77.1
	Strongly Agree	10	14.3	14.3	91.4
	Strongly Disagree	6	8.6	8.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 21 show that 57.2% of headteachers and teachers agreed that there was more dropout among boys than girls.

Discussions

These findings are consistent with the WFP study (2021) that was implemented by the government in 1980 and was active until 2009. The impact of these School Feeding Programme in Kenya was found to be positive on education. The SFP impacted positively on education in Kenya during the study period. It was established that enrolment increased significantly in the participating schools. The attendance trends also improved in the participating schools while the drop- out rates went down from 33% in 1966 to 13% in 2009. The performance of children in the National Examinations trends indicated a positive impact on schools participating in the SFP during the study. These findings also agrees with the SEP results on attention and participation of children in class. The Tharaka Nithi study findings were also in tandem with the SEP findings that found out that attention and participation were in resonance with good health and attendance to school.

Qualitative Findings on the Influence of School Feeding Programmes on Attendance

Demographic Information

The following table show the percentage of head teachers, teachers, parents and education officers interviewed during the research study in Tharaka Nithi County.

Table 22: Demographic Information

		Frequency	%	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent		
Valid	Headteachers						
	Teachers	30	48.0	48.0	100.0		
	Parents	Gender of Children	9100.0	100.0			
Total			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
	Valid	Female	104	52.0	52.0	52.0	
		Male	96	48.0	48.0	100.0	
		Total	200	100.0	100.0		

The table show the distribution of head teachers and parents interviewed during the study.

The following responses were captured verbatim from the interview data:

The Head teachers confirmed that school attendance increased when there was SFP in place. There were reduced cases of absenteeism because children looked forward to lunch time.

One of the head teachers had this to say:

‘When children know that there will be food, they do not miss school. When the SFP is functional, we record 100% attendance. When we have no lunch, some learners do not even come to school. Sometimes the learners survive only on the lunch they eat at school because there is no food at home.’

Another head teacher supported this by saying:

When there is SFP, there is good attendance. There is no absenteeism. “when children are in school, parents are not concerned about what their children eat for breakfast or supper since food is prepared for them at school.’

Another school head said:

“the SFP has decreased illnesses and this reduces cases of learners’ absenteeism when there is no food at school, parents keep some food meant for supper to be eaten the following day at lunch time, by the time these children get home for lunch, the food is already spoilt because of the heat. The children end up getting stomach related problems which keeps them from attending school. With the implementation of SFP, exposure to such risks has significantly reduced”

On the Programmes and dropout Rates, most headteachers were unanimous that SFP had an advantage of curbing drop out. Most of the principals agreed that the provision of lunch in school ensured that children remained in school throughout the term. Sampled class attendance registers in some schools showed almost one hundred percent attendance in schools where there was a functional school feeding programme. Class attendance register from schools that did not have a SFP showed gaps in attendance.

Some parents that were interviewed had this to say during the Focus Group Discussion:

“We would love to have a school feeding programme in our school because it prevents drop out. Children prefer to be in school because they know they will eat”

Another parent had this to say:

“But now that the school feeding programme has been introduced, almost all children are now in school, let me add that now children stay in school longer and learn than before. Before the programme was implemented most children report at school and run back home but it is no longer so because they know they will miss their meals if they run home, so it is a good programme”

The Head teachers had this to say about pupil’s dropout:

“School dropout rate was higher among pupils before the introduction of the SFP compared to the period after the introduction of the programme”

Another head teacher had this to say:

“with the inception of the programme we do not experience much dropout rate now.”

Conclusion

The school feeding program significantly improved attendance and reduced dropout rates. This incentive encouraged regular school attendance and alleviated hunger-related distractions,

enhancing focus and academic performance. Consequently, the program fostered a more stable and conducive learning environment, ultimately promoting higher retention rates.

Recommendations

1. There is need for the County Government and National Governments and NGOS to increase the school feeding programmes in ASAL schools
2. Vulnerable children in ASAL areas should be given special attention in school feeding programmes.
3. School stakeholders should support the availability of feeding programmes in all the ASAL schools
4. Stakeholders should build more short distance schools especially in lower classes in ASAL schools.
5. Stakeholders should ensure that measures are put in place to increase food security.
6. There is need for stakeholders to come up with ways of ensuring that boys stay and succeed in education system.

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