

Title

**ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAM (SFP) ON ACADEMIC
PERFOMANCE OF STANDARD FIVE PRIMARY SCHOOL LEARNERS AT KASANGADZI
PRIMARY SCHOOL IN NKHOTAKOTA DISTRICT.**

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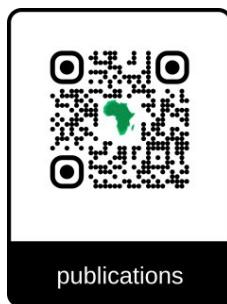
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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the impact of the School Feeding Program (SFP) on the academic performance of Standard Five learners at Kasangadzi Primary School in Nkhota Kota District, Malawi. The School Feeding Program was introduced as a social protection and educational intervention aimed at improving school attendance, and academic achievement among primary school learners, particularly those from food-insecure households. In many rural areas hunger remains a major barrier to effective learning, as it affects learners' ability to concentrate, participate actively in lessons, and remain in school. Although the SFP has been widely implemented in Malawi there is limited school-level empirical evidence demonstrating its direct influence on learners' academic performance, especially in rural schools such as Kasangadzi Primary School.

The main objective of the study was to examine the impact of the School Feeding Program on the academic performance of Standard Five learners. Specifically, the study assessed the effects of the program on school attendance and examination performance. A mixed-methods research approach was employed to enhance the reliability and depth of the findings. Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to teachers and a review of learners' academic records, including attendance registers and examination results. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and patterns in learners' performance and attendance.

The findings revealed that the School Feeding Program had a positive impact on learners' academic performance. Learners benefiting from the program showed improved school attendance, concentration during lessons, and increased classroom participation.

It concludes that the School Feeding Program plays a significant role in

enhancing the academic performance of Standard Five learners at Kasangadzi Primary School. It recommends strengthening program sustainability.

Keywords: School Feeding Program, Academic performance, Primary school learners, School attendance, Nkhota Kota District

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental pillar for national development, human capital formation, and poverty reduction. In many developing countries, however, children's access to quality education and their ability to perform well academically are often undermined by poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition. Hunger and poor nutrition negatively affect children's concentration, school attendance, cognitive development, and overall academic achievement. As a response to these challenges, governments and development partners have implemented School Feeding Programs (SFPs) as a social protection and educational intervention aimed at improving learners' health, school participation, and academic performance.

Background of the Study

Education plays a critical role in the social and economic development of individuals and nations. However, effective learning is closely linked to learners' physical well-being, particularly adequate nutrition. In many developing countries, poverty and food insecurity continue to negatively affect children's ability to attend school regularly and perform well academically. Hunger has been shown to reduce concentration, memory, and participation in classroom activities, leading to poor academic outcomes.

To address these challenges, School Feeding Programs (SFPs) have been introduced in many parts of the world as an intervention

aimed at improving learners' nutritional status while promoting educational outcomes. These programs provide meals or snacks to learners during the school day, thereby reducing short-term hunger and supporting cognitive development. Studies have shown that SFPs can contribute to improved school enrolment, attendance, retention, and academic performance, particularly among learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In Malawi, school feeding initiatives have been implemented in selected primary schools with support from the government and development partners. These programs are intended to mitigate the effects of food insecurity on school-going children and to enhance their learning capacity. Despite the widespread implementation of SFPs, there is still a need for localized studies to assess their effectiveness in improving academic performance at the school level.

Context of the Study

Nkhota-kota District is predominantly rural, with most households relying on subsistence farming for their livelihoods. Seasonal food shortages and high poverty levels are common in the district, affecting the nutritional status of school-aged children. Many learners attend school without adequate meals at home, which limits their ability to concentrate and actively engage in learning activities.

Kasangadzi Primary School serves learners from communities that experience frequent food insecurity. To address hunger-related challenges among learners, a School Feeding Program has been introduced at the school. The program aims to improve learners' attendance, concentration, and academic performance by providing meals during the school day.

Standard Five learners at Kasangadzi Primary School are at a critical stage of their education, where foundational skills in literacy and numeracy are further developed. Adequate nutrition at this level is essential

for sustaining attention, improving memory, and enhancing learning outcomes. However, there is limited documented evidence on how the School Feeding Program at Kasangadzi Primary School specifically affects the academic performance of Standard Five learners. This study is therefore conducted within this context to evaluate the effectiveness of the SFP in supporting learners' academic achievement.

Research Objectives

General Objective

- To assess the impact of the School Feeding Program on the academic performance of Standard Five primary school learners at Kasangadzi Primary School in Nkhota-kota District.

Specific Objectives

To examine the relationship between participation in the School Feeding Program and academic performance of Standard Five learners.

- To assess the influence of the School Feeding Program on learners' attendance and concentration in class.
- To identify challenges affecting the effective implementation of the School Feeding Program at Kasangadzi Primary School.
- To propose strategies for improving the effectiveness of the School Feeding Program in enhancing academic performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a review of existing literature relevant to the study on the impact of the School Feeding Program (SFP) on academic performance. It discusses key concepts, theoretical underpinnings, and

empirical findings related to school feeding and learning outcomes. The chapter is organized into definitions of key terms, an empirical review based on the study objectives and perspectives (global, African, and Malawian), the theoretical framework guiding the study, and a chapter summary.

School Feeding Program (SFP)

A School Feeding Program refers to a school-based intervention aimed at improving learners' nutritional intake by providing meals during school hours. The primary goal of SFPs is to enhance learners' learning capacity, school attendance, retention, and academic performance. According to FAO (2018), Bundy et al. (2016), and the World Food Programme (WFP, 2020), school feeding programs also serve as social protection measures for vulnerable children and contribute to improved health and educational outcomes.

Academic Performance

Academic performance refers to the level of achievement attained by learners in their studies and is commonly measured through examination scores, test results, and continuous classroom assessments. UNESCO (2016) and Adelman et al. (2019) describe academic performance as an indicator of learners' understanding, skills acquisition, and overall progress in education.

Classroom Participation and Concentration

Classroom participation and concentration involve learners' active engagement in learning activities, including asking and answering questions, participating in group work, completing tasks, and maintaining attention during lessons. Gelli et al. (2019) and Jomaa et al. (2019) emphasize that adequate nutrition plays a critical role in

sustaining learners' attention and promoting meaningful participation in classroom activities.

Impact of School Feeding Programs on Academic Performance

Globally, numerous studies have demonstrated that school feeding programs positively influence learners' academic performance. Adelman et al. (2019) reported that in regions such as Latin America and South Asia, the regular provision of school meals led to improvements in learners' test scores, cognitive development, and learning outcomes. These effects were particularly pronounced in disadvantaged communities, where school meals often constitute a significant portion of children's daily nutritional intake.

Kristjansson et al. (2016), through a global meta-analysis, found that school feeding programs reduce short-term hunger, which directly enhances concentration, memory retention, and cognitive functioning among learners. Improved cognitive abilities subsequently translate into better academic performance, especially in subjects that require sustained attention such as mathematics and science. *The World Food Programme (2020)* further supports these findings, noting that schools with feeding programs tend to record higher attendance rates, reduced dropout levels, and improved academic achievement.

In Africa, school feeding programs have increasingly been adopted as strategies for improving both access to education and learning quality. *Gelli et al. (2019)*, in a study conducted in Ghana, Kenya, and Ethiopia, observed a positive relationship between school feeding and improved learner outcomes, including academic performance, punctuality, and grade promotion. *Drake et al. (2020)* also found that learners in Nigerian schools benefiting from SFPs achieved higher literacy and numeracy scores compared to learners in

schools without feeding programs. *Alderman and Bundy (2019)* further reported that despite financial constraints, African countries implementing SFPs have achieved notable gains in academic outcomes, particularly among learners from food-insecure households and girls.

In Malawi, school feeding programs have become an essential component of education strategies, especially in rural and vulnerable communities. *Mussa et al. (2019)* found that learners in schools with consistent feeding programs, such as those supported by Mary's Meals, performed better in both national examinations and internal assessments. Similarly, *UNICEF (2021)* reported that the Home-Grown School Meals Programme contributed to improved cognitive alertness, better retention of learning materials, and reduced absenteeism. *Ngwira and Mvula (2022)* observed that in districts such as Kasungu and Nkhotakota, school feeding helped stabilize enrolment and enhanced learners' academic motivation, leading to improved performance.

Influence of School Feeding Programs on Classroom Participation and Concentration

At the global level, studies indicate that learners who receive school meals demonstrate improved concentration and active classroom participation. According to *WFP (2020)*, learners who benefit from school feeding exhibit reduced restlessness, improved behavior, and increased engagement in classroom discussions and group activities. *Adelman et al. (2019)* further noted that reduced anxiety related to hunger allows learners to focus more effectively on lessons, thereby enhancing participation and learning outcomes.

UNESCO (2018) emphasized that in low-income settings, school meals reduce fatigue and increase stamina, enabling learners to remain attentive throughout the school day. This improved concentration contributes to more effective teaching and learning

processes. In sub-Saharan Africa, *Jomaa et al. (2019)* found that school feeding significantly improved learner engagement during lessons, including increased responsiveness and participation in collaborative learning activities.

Gelli et al. (2019) reported that breakfast programs in Ethiopia improved learners' concentration, particularly during morning lessons, while *Drake et al. (2020)* observed improved classroom behavior in Kenya and Nigeria as a result of enhanced nutrition. Teachers reported fewer disruptions and improved learner focus, which facilitated effective lesson delivery.

In Malawi, the introduction of school feeding programs has resulted in noticeable improvements in classroom behavior and participation. *Ngwira and Mvula (2022)* reported increased punctuality and attentiveness among learners in SFP-supported schools. *Mussa et al. (2019)* found that in Nkhotakota District, school feeding enhanced learner participation in interactive activities such as group discussions, quizzes, and role-plays. *UNICEF (2021)* concluded that school feeding programs have contributed to more dynamic and participatory classroom environments, leading to improved academic engagement and performance.

Challenges Affecting the Implementation of School Feeding Programs

Despite their benefits, school feeding programs face several implementation challenges globally. *Bundy et al. (2016)* identified logistical challenges such as delays in food procurement, inadequate storage facilities, and shortages of trained personnel as major barriers to program effectiveness. *WFP (2020)* highlighted sustainability concerns, particularly in low-income countries that rely heavily on donor funding, where shifts in funding priorities can disrupt program continuity.

In Africa, *Alderman and Bundy (2019)* noted that limited government budgets and over-reliance on external partners constrain the consistency and coverage of SFPs. *Gelli et al. (2019)* reported irregular food supply and low community involvement in countries such as Ghana and Zambia, resulting in inconsistent feeding schedules. *Drake et al. (2020)* also identified challenges related to mismanagement and corruption, which reduce food quality and undermine program effectiveness.

In Malawi, several studies have documented challenges affecting SFP implementation. *Ngwira and Mvula (2022)* reported inadequate kitchen infrastructure, lack of trained cooks, and delays in food delivery in many schools. *UNICEF (2021)* emphasized that donor dependency poses sustainability risks, while *Mussa et al. (2019)* noted that climatic shocks such as droughts and floods disrupt local food supply chains, particularly under the Home-Grown School Feeding model.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory and the Human Capital Theory. *Maslow (1943)* argues that basic physiological needs, such as food, must be satisfied before individuals can effectively pursue higher-order needs such as learning and self-actualization. In this context, school feeding programs help meet learners' basic nutritional needs, enabling them to concentrate and perform better academically.

The Human Capital Theory, as advanced by *Becker (1993)*, posits that investments in education, health, and nutrition enhance individuals' productivity and economic potential. School feeding programs are therefore viewed as investments in learners' cognitive development and educational attainment, with long-term benefits for both individuals and society.

METHODOLOGY

It describes the research approach, design, study population, sampling techniques, sample size, research instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis methods, ethical considerations, and the pilot study conducted for the research.

Research Approach

The study employed a mixed-methods research approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative approach was used to collect numerical data on learners' academic performance, school attendance, and classroom participation. The qualitative approach was used to explore the perceptions and experiences of learners, teachers, and parents regarding the School Feeding Program (SFP).

The use of a mixed-methods approach enabled triangulation of findings, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. According to *Creswell and Plano Clark (2018)*, mixed-methods research allows the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data to complement each other, enhancing the reliability and validity of research findings. *Tashakkori and Teddlie (2015)* further argue that mixed methods are ideal for examining complex social issues such as the impact of school feeding programs on educational outcomes.

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive case study research design, which allowed for an in-depth investigation of the effects of the School Feeding Program within a real-life context Kasangadzi Primary School. This design enabled the researcher to explore interactions, behaviors, and processes related to school feeding and academic outcomes

from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

A descriptive case study design was appropriate because it facilitates a detailed understanding of a phenomenon within its natural setting (Yin, 2018). Stake (2015) notes that case studies are particularly valuable in educational research focusing on interventions such as school feeding programs, whose outcomes are influenced by environmental, socio-economic, and institutional factors.

Study Population

The study population consisted of all Standard Five learners, their teachers, and parents or guardians at Kasangadzi Primary School. The learners were the primary focus of the study as the direct beneficiaries of the School Feeding Program. Teachers and parents served as key informants due to their regular interaction with learners and their ability to observe changes in academic performance and behavior.

The estimated population comprised 120 Standard Five learners, 4 subject teachers, and an active parents' committee. This population provided diverse perspectives, enabling a holistic assessment of the impact of the School Feeding Program.

Sampling Technique

The study employed both stratified random sampling and purposive sampling techniques. Stratified random sampling was used to select learners, ensuring proportional representation based on gender and academic performance levels. This approach enhanced fairness and minimized sampling bias.

Purposive sampling was used to select teachers and parents who had direct experience with the School Feeding Program. Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016) state that purposive sampling is effective for selecting participants with specific

knowledge or experience, while stratified random sampling enhances representativeness in quantitative research.

Qualitative Sample (Teachers and Parents)

A total of 15 participants were purposively selected for interviews, comprising 5 teachers and 10 parents or guardians. These participants were chosen based on their involvement in or familiarity with the School Feeding Program. This sampling strategy ensured a balance between numerical analysis and in-depth qualitative insights, consistent with Creswell (2018).

Research Instruments

The study used structured questionnaires, semi-structured interview guides, and observation checklists to collect data. Structured questionnaires were administered to learners to collect quantitative data on attendance, academic performance (termly grades), concentration, and classroom participation. The questionnaires consisted of closed-ended questions written in simple language appropriate for Standard Five learners. According to Kothari (2014), structured questionnaires are effective for collecting standardized data suitable for statistical analysis.

Semi-structured interview guides were used to collect qualitative data from teachers and parents. The interviews focused on perceptions of learners' academic performance, concentration, classroom behavior, and changes observed before and after the implementation of the SFP. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility while maintaining focus on the research objectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

An observation checklist was used to document classroom behavior, learner alertness, participation, and engagement during lessons. Observations enabled the researcher to validate data obtained from

questionnaires and interviews. *Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018)* note that observation is a valuable method for understanding classroom dynamics and contextual influences.

All instruments were pre-tested during a pilot study to identify ambiguities and improve clarity. Expert validation was also sought from specialists in educational research and school health programs. The instruments were translated into Chichewa to ensure inclusivity and accurate responses.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection commenced after obtaining permission from the Nkhotakota District Education Office and Kasangadzi Primary School authorities. Questionnaires were administered to learners during school hours under teacher supervision. Interviews with teachers and parents were conducted at convenient times. Classroom observations were carried out during regular lessons without disrupting teaching activities.

RESULTS

It will present the findings of the study on the impact of the School Feeding Program (SFP) on the academic performance of Standard Five learners at Kasangadzi Primary School in Nkhotakota District. The results are presented according to the study objectives and are based on both quantitative and qualitative data collected through questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. Quantitative results are presented using tables and descriptive statistics, while qualitative findings are presented thematically.

Response Rate

A total of 92 questionnaires were distributed to Standard Five learners. All 92 questionnaires were completed and returned, representing a 100% response rate. In addition, interviews were

successfully conducted with 5 teachers and 10 parents/guardians, yielding a full response from all selected participants. Classroom observations were conducted across multiple lessons during the data collection period.

Demographic Characteristics of Learners

Gender Distribution of Learners shows the gender distribution of the sampled learners.
Gender Distribution of Learners (n = 92)

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	47	51.1
Female	45	48.9
Total	92	100

The results indicate a relatively balanced gender distribution among the learners, suggesting that the findings are representative of both male and female learners.

Challenges Affecting the Implementation of the School Feeding Program

Qualitative data from interviews with teachers and parents revealed several challenges affecting the effective implementation of the SFP.

Identified Challenges

The major themes that emerged included:

- Irregular food supply, which occasionally disrupted feeding schedules
- Inadequate kitchen facilities and cooking equipment
- Shortage of trained cooks, leading to delays in meal preparation
- Dependence on donor support, raising concerns about sustainability

Teachers expressed concern that interruptions in food supply negatively affected learners' morale and concentration on days when meals were not provided.

Influence of School Feeding Program on Classroom Participation

Learners were asked about their level of participation in classroom activities since the introduction of the SFP.

The findings indicate that 66.3% of learners were actively participating in classroom activities. Observation data confirmed increased engagement in group work, oral responses, and interactive learning activities. Teachers attributed this improvement to increased energy levels and reduced hunger among learners.

DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings of the study on the impact of the School Feeding Program (SFP) on the academic performance of Standard Five learners at Kasangadzi Primary School in Nkhotakota District. The discussion is organized according to the study objectives and integrates quantitative and qualitative findings with existing literature and theoretical perspectives.

Impact of the School Feeding Program on Academic Performance

The study findings indicate that the School Feeding Program had a positive and significant impact on the academic performance of Standard Five learners at Kasangadzi Primary School. Learners' academic results improved notably after the introduction of the SFP, with a marked increase in the proportion of learners achieving high and average performance levels and a corresponding reduction in low performance. These findings suggest that the provision of regular school meals contributes positively to learners' cognitive functioning and learning outcomes.

These results are consistent with global studies that have established a strong link

between school feeding and academic achievement. *Adelman et al. (2019)* and *Kristjansson et al. (2016)* reported that school feeding reduces short-term hunger, enhances concentration, and improves memory retention, which are essential for academic success. The current study supports these conclusions by demonstrating improved learner performance in a rural Malawian context, where food insecurity remains a major challenge.

At the African level, the findings align with those of *Gelli et al. (2019)* and *Drake et al. (2020)*, who found that learners in schools with feeding programs achieved higher literacy and numeracy scores than their counterparts in non-feeding schools. Similarly, the improvements observed at Kasangadzi Primary School reflect findings by *Alderman and Bundy (2019)*, who argued that SFPs are effective educational investments even in resource-constrained settings.

Within Malawi, the study corroborates findings by *Mussa et al. (2019)* and *UNICEF (2021)*, which reported improved academic performance and learning outcomes among learners benefiting from school feeding programs. The consistency of these findings suggests that school feeding programs play a critical role in supporting academic achievement among learners from food-insecure households.

Influence of School Feeding on School Attendance and Learner Concentration

The study revealed that the School Feeding Program significantly improved learner attendance and concentration. A large proportion of learners reported improved school attendance following the introduction of the SFP, and classroom observations confirmed that learners were more attentive and alert during lessons. Improved attendance ensures continuity in learning and allows learners to benefit fully from instructional time, which contributes to better academic outcomes.

These findings are in line with the *World Food Programme (2020)*, which reported that school feeding programs act as incentives for regular school attendance, particularly in poor communities. When meals are provided at school, parents are more motivated to send their children to school consistently, and learners themselves are more willing to attend. The current study supports this assertion, as parents interviewed emphasized that the availability of meals reduced absenteeism.

Improved concentration observed in this study also aligns with *UNESCO (2018)* and *Adelman et al. (2019)*, who noted that adequate nutrition reduces fatigue and anxiety related to hunger, thereby enabling learners to focus on academic tasks. In the Malawian context, where many children attend school without breakfast, the provision of school meals plays a crucial role in sustaining attention throughout the school day.

The findings are further supported by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, which posits that basic physiological needs such as food must be met before individuals can engage effectively in higher-order activities like learning. By addressing learners' hunger, the School Feeding Program creates a conducive environment for concentration and learning.

Influence of School Feeding on Classroom Participation

The study found that learners who benefited from the School Feeding Program demonstrated higher levels of classroom participation. Most learners actively engaged in group discussions, responded to questions, and participated in classroom activities. Teachers reported that learners appeared more confident, energetic, and willing to participate after receiving meals.

These findings are consistent with global research by *WFP (2020)* and *Jomaa et al. (2019)*, which indicated that school feeding

enhances learner engagement and reduces disruptive behavior. In sub-Saharan Africa, *Gelli et al. (2019)* and *Drake et al. (2020)* similarly observed that school feeding programs improved classroom behavior and participation by increasing learners' energy levels and emotional stability.

In Malawi, the current findings align with those of *Ngwira and Mvula (2022)*, who reported improved learner attentiveness and participation in schools implementing SFPs. The increased participation observed at Kasangadzi Primary School suggests that improved nutrition not only enhances academic performance but also promotes interactive and learner-centered teaching and learning processes.

From a theoretical perspective, the Human Capital Theory supports these findings by emphasizing that investments in nutrition enhance learners' cognitive and social capacities. Improved participation reflects enhanced learning engagement, which contributes to long-term educational attainment and productivity.

Challenges Affecting the Effectiveness of the School Feeding Program

Despite the positive impacts of the School Feeding Program, the study identified several challenges affecting its effective implementation. These included irregular food supply, inadequate kitchen facilities, shortages of trained cooks, and heavy reliance on donor funding. These challenges occasionally disrupted feeding schedules, which negatively affected learner morale and concentration.

These findings are consistent with *Bundy et al. (2016)* and *WFP (2020)*, who identified logistical constraints and sustainability concerns as major challenges facing SFPs globally. In Africa, similar challenges have been reported by *Alderman and Bundy (2019)* and *Gelli et al. (2019)*, who highlighted infrastructure limitations and inconsistent food supply as barriers to

program effectiveness.

In the Malawian context, the challenges identified in this study align with those reported by *Mussa et al. (2019)* and *UNICEF (2021)*, particularly regarding donor dependency and vulnerability to climate-related disruptions. These challenges underscore the need for sustainable, community-supported, and government-led approaches to school feeding.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed the impact of the School Feeding Program (SFP) on the academic performance of Standard Five learners at Kasangadzi Primary School in Nkhotakota District. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study examined academic performance, attendance, concentration, classroom participation, and challenges affecting the implementation of the program. The findings provide clear evidence that school feeding plays a vital role in enhancing learners' educational outcomes in food-insecure contexts.

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