

More than a meal: A case study on the effects of a sponsored feeding program on Grade 1 learners' motivation and attendance in elementary school

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Abstract

This case study explores the effects of a sponsored feeding program on grade 1 learners' motivation and school attendance in elementary school. The study focuses on the 11 grade 1 learners, their parents/guardians, and the adviser. A qualitative research design was utilized; the researcher employed semi-structured interviews with the grade 1 learners, their parents/guardians, and their grade 1 teacher, supplemented by direct observations, and a document analysis of attendance records to corroborate the participants' accounts. Findings indicate that, while the sponsored feeding program did not significantly improve formal school attendance records, it had a remarkable positive impact on learners' motivation and willingness to attend school, leading children to wake up earlier, arrive prepared and excited, and avoid lateness due to feeding. Learners were more active, more responsive, and less likely to feel sleepy during afternoon classes on days when they had been fed. Furthermore, this study also found the essence of intrinsic motivation, particularly in reading and writing, parental or guardian encouragement, and the prospect of playing with their friends at school, were factors that drove attendance regardless of whether a feeding session was scheduled. Based on the findings, DepEd and local government units should support and reproduce similar community-based and private partnerships in other underserved schools to address nutritional gaps and enhance learner motivation.

Keywords: sponsored feeding program, school attendance, learner motivation, willingness to attend, qualitative design

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1. Introduction

Sponsored feeding programs are recognized for providing nutritional benefits and for their capacity to encourage regular school attendance among young learners. This impact is particularly important for Grade 1 students, who are at a pivotal stage of early childhood development. Consistent school attendance during this period establishes the basis for lifelong learning and is crucial for minimizing learning gaps and promoting academic achievement (Bautista and Aranas, 2023). However, despite the benefits of Early Childhood Education for young children, the early childhood education sector in the Philippines faces challenges, including higher rates of absence that could lead to dropouts. The Department of Education (DepEd) reports a 5% drop in total enrollment for School Year 2025-2026, with enrollees numbering only 24.9 million, down from last year's 27 million. This report is alarming because education is vital, as it offers learners and students a bright future by providing the skills and employability or credits to pursue further education (Aliero, 2020).

Furthermore, another dilemma found is the chronic malnutrition (Bautista & Aranas, 2023), which is in line with the World Food Programme's report in 2026 stating that 23.6% of children from the Philippines under 5 suffer from stunting. As stated by Dhea et al. (2024), malnutrition can be influenced by a lack of healthy eating habits from an early age, which can make children susceptible to fatigue, drowsiness, and learning difficulties, resulting in decreased academic achievement. To combat this, the Philippine government, particularly the education sector, has taken institutional steps. The DepEd has implemented the School-Based Feeding Program (SBFP) to address malnutrition among young elementary learners, aiming to significantly improve students' health and academic performance. According to DepEd Order No. 023, s. 2020 or Operational Guidelines on the Implementation of the School-Based Feeding Program, the primary beneficiaries are all kindergarten students and learners in grades 1 to 6 who were wasted or severely wasted, for whom they provided snacks such as Nutritious Food Products (NFP) and Fresh Milk drinks. But then, again, not all learners can benefit from it.

Despite that, Santiago Elementary School is fortunate to have a sponsored lunch program on Mondays and Wednesdays. Santiago Elementary School is located in Brgy. Santiago — a rural community 15.3 kilometers from the town. Moreover, the main source of livelihood for the people is farming. This project launched in 2015 and is funded and sponsored by Sir Niels Berger, a Swedish businessman. In this project, all learners enrolled in the school are beneficiaries, ensuring no learner is left behind. During lunchtime, learners are given rice and nutritious meals to ensure no one is hungry, and they can ask for as many servings as they want as long as there is still extra food left. Existing Philippine studies on feeding programs have largely focused on the DepEd's School-Based Feeding Program (SBFP) and its nutritional and attendance outcomes (Bautista & Aranas, 2023). However, little attention has been given to privately or community-sponsored feeding programs and their psychosocial effects on young learners, particularly at the Grade 1 level. This study addresses that gap by focusing on a private-sector-funded program and its influence on learner motivation and willingness to attend school — dimensions that remain underexplored in the Philippine context. With that in mind, this study focused on the effects of a sponsored feeding program on grade 1 learners' motivation and school attendance.

Statement of the Problem - To address the contextual gaps in private-sector-sponsored feeding programs in the Philippines, this study aims to explore the effects of such programs on grade 1 learners' motivation and school attendance. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following question:

- How do Grade 1 learners describe their school attendance during feeding days compared to non-feeding days?

- How do Grade 1 learners think the feeding program affects their willingness and motivation to come to school?
- What changes have teachers and parents noticed in learners' attendance and motivation since the feeding program started?

2. Methodology

This section will show the research design and the process of conducting the research. The following are included here:

Research Design - This study employed a qualitative case study design (Baxter & Jack, 2008) to examine how and why a sponsored feeding program influences Grade 1 learners' school attendance and motivation. The qualitative approach was appropriate for capturing participants' experiences, perceptions, and observed behavioral changes within the specific school context.

Research Participant - The study included 11 Grade 1 learners, their parents or guardians, and the Grade 1 adviser at Santiago Elementary School, for a total of 23 participants. Total population sampling was employed, which is appropriate when the entire population shares a relevant characteristic, and the sample size is relatively small (Etikan et al., 2016). In this context, all Grade 1 learners were recipients of the sponsored feeding program. The manageable class size facilitated the inclusion of all learners, allowing for a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the program's effects on motivation and school attendance.

Research Instrument - Semi-structured interviews served as the primary research instrument. Three sets of interview guides were developed: one for learners, one for parents, and one for the class adviser, each containing five open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research because they offer a flexible yet structured approach to data collection, enabling participants to articulate their experiences and perspectives in their own words (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The questions were designed to elicit information regarding the effects of the sponsored feeding program on learners' motivation and school attendance. To ensure age-appropriate and meaningful participation, the interview guide for Grade 1 learners incorporated child-friendly language and simple prompts, recognizing that young children require developmentally sensitive approaches to participate effectively in research (Dockett & Perry, 2011).

Data Gathering Procedure and Analysis - Data collection employed three complementary methods to achieve methodological triangulation (Guion et al., 2011): one-on-one, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with learners, parents, and the class adviser in a private and comfortable setting within the school. Each interview lasted approximately 10 to 15 minutes and was conducted in Cebuano, the participants' preferred language, to ensure clarity and comfort. Interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. Classroom observations took place on both feeding and non-feeding days to document learners' behavior, engagement, and participation. Document analysis involved reviewing official school attendance records to corroborate participants' accounts and provide an objective basis for comparing attendance patterns across feeding and non-feeding days.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns across participants' responses, following a six-phase process: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Interview transcripts were coded inductively, with open codes generated directly from participants' verbatim responses. Related codes were grouped into categories and refined into broader themes. The coding process was iterative, with themes reviewed and revised multiple times to ensure they accurately reflected the data and addressed the study's research questions. Findings from interviews were triangulated with data from observations and document analysis to enhance the credibility and depth of the results.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework were implemented. Credibility was established through methodological triangulation (Guion et al., 2011), combining interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the research context, participants, and setting. Dependability was maintained through systematic and consistent data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was ensured by grounding all interpretations in participants' verbatim responses, thereby minimizing researcher bias.

Ethical Considerations - Prior to data collection, written informed consent forms were distributed and signed by the parents or guardians of the Grade 1 learners, as well as by the school head and Grade 1 class adviser. Because the participants included minors, child assent was also obtained using age-appropriate, child-friendly language to ensure voluntary and informed participation (Dockett & Perry, 2011). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, all participants were assigned codes rather than identified by name throughout the study. All data collected was stored securely and used exclusively for this research.

3. Results and discussions

In this section, the study's findings were presented, focusing on Grade 1 learners' feelings and experiences during feeding and non-feeding days, and on parents/guardians' and advisers' observations, on the learners' attendance, and motivation since the feeding program started. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participants shared their personal perceptions, emotional responses, and insights. Their narratives offer a deep understanding of the effects of a sponsored feeding program on learners' motivation and school attendance.

3.1 Consistent school attendance regardless the feeding schedule

As Grade 1 learners shared, their attendance remains consistent regardless of the feeding schedule. Three main categories emerged: First, the learners shared their desire to learn, particularly in reading and writing, even when there was no feeding. Second, they are driven by parental/guardian encouragement. Lastly, they are looking forward to playing with their classmates.

Learners' desire to learn. Most of the participants shared the following snippets:

"Oo, mo skwela para makahibaw mo basa." (Yes, I go to school so I can learn how to read.)

"Oo, kay ganahan ko mag answer." (Yes, because I like to answer.)

"Oo, ganahan ko makakat-on ug suwat ug basa." (Yes, I want to learn how to write and read.)

"Oo, di ko ganahan mo absent para maka answer." (Yes, I don't want to absent so that I can answer.)

These interview snippets illustrate the students' desire to learn, particularly in reading and writing, despite the lack of a feeding program at school. These findings support the study by Makokha & Ongwae (1997) that, for a learner to make an effort, there must be a motive. Motive means a desire, need, urge, or drive to achieve a certain goal. Based on these findings, learners' motive is to learn to read and write.

Looking forward to playing with classmates. The participant shared:

"Oo, para makaduwa me sa ako classmates." (Yes, so I can play with my classmate.)

One participant shared that playing with his friends always drives him to go to school. The study supported the findings that friendships are fundamental support systems that encourage collaboration, knowledge-sharing and motivation among students are critical factors in students' overall academic experience (Alotaibi et al., 2023).

Driven by parental/guardian encouragement. Another participant also shared that he always goes to school because of his guardians' encouragement. These findings support Omar's (2024) study indicating that when parents demonstrate interest and support, children often show improved motivation, better attendance, and higher grades. The participant shared:

"Oo, kay sabi ni lola nga mo skwela para makakat-on." (Yes, because grandma said you should go to school so you can learn.)

3.2 Impact of the Feeding Program on Learners' Willingness and Motivation

The participants viewed the various impacts of the feeding program on their willingness and motivation. In their narratives, three main categories emerged: a) food as a source of motivation to go to school, b.) improved energy and learning engagement, and c.) positive emotional responses to the feeding program.

Food as a source of motivation to go to school. Grade 1 learners shared positive responses as to how the feeding program affects their willingness and motivation to come to school. The majority of their answers fall under the first category: Food as a motivator to attend school. This indicates that they are more excited to go to school to eat their favorite nutritious meals and that they become full afterward. These findings support the studies by Mwendwa and Gori (2019) and Díaz et al. (2023), which show that providing free, nutritious meals in schools can significantly increase students' motivation to learn. The following snippets were shared by the participants:

"Excited kay makakaon ug baboy." (Excited because I can eat pork.)

"Excited kay makakaon man ug utan...utan ako ganahan." (Excited because I can eat vegetables... I like vegetables.)

"Ganahan mo skwela...mabusog man ko sa feeding." (I like going to school... because I get full from the feeding program.)

"Mas excited mo skwela kay naa man pagkaon ug mabusog ko" (More excited to go to school because there's food and I get full.)

"Mas ganahan mo skwela para makakaon sa feeding." (I like going to school more so I can eat during the feeding program.)

Improved energy and learning engagement. The participants also shared that, through the feeding program, they feel more engaged in classroom activities and more energetic in participating in class. Below are the interview snippets supporting this finding.

"Ma happy ug ganahan mo answer... busog di sakit tiyan." (I feel happy and enthusiastic to answer... I'm full and my stomach doesn't hurt.)

"Mas ganahan ko mo answer kay busog." (I feel more enthusiastic to answer because I'm full.)

"Dili nako magluya ganahan ko mo answer." (I don't feel weak anymore, so I like to answer.)

These interview snippets support the finding that providing the free, nutritious school meal program contributed to improved student well-being, learning readiness, and classroom engagement, particularly among students who previously experienced hunger (Dedy et al., 2026).

Positive emotional responses to the feeding program. Some respondents also shared narratives that the feeding program makes them happy because they are satisfied with the food served to them, which is tasty. These findings indicate that students' school meal satisfaction is positively correlated with their school happiness and their overall happiness (Kwon et al., 2018). Two of the participants shared the following snippets:

“Happy kay lami ang sud-an.” (Happy because the food is delicious.)

“Ma-happy ko sa skwelahan ug nay feeding.” (I feel happy at school every time there’s feeding.)

3.3 Feeding Program as a motivation rather than an attendance factor

All parents/guardians stated that the sponsored feeding program doesn’t affect learners’ attendance. Even if there’s feeding or not, their children would still want to go to school. However, most of them claimed that it makes their child more excited and motivated to go to school. Therefore, the feeding program serves as a motivation rather than an attendance factor. These findings support the findings of no significant increase in school attendance among schools participating in the feeding program in a study in Burkina Faso (Asmamaw, 2014). However, a recent study found that free, nutritious meals significantly improve students’ enthusiasm for learning (Sudadio et al., 2025). The following are the parents’ narratives:

“Mao ra gihapon ang attendance. Pero, excited kayo molakaw ug mo skwela kay naa man pagkaon ihatag sa ilaha.” (Attendance remains the same. However, they are very excited to go and attend school because food will be given to them.)

“Mo skwela man gihapon ug nay feeding or wala. Pero di siya ganahan ma late nig sulod sa klase ug nay feeding. Dili siya pukawunon inig klase kay excited gyd siya mo skwela basta nay feeding.” (They go to school whether there is a feeding program or not. However, they do not like being late when there is feeding. They do not need to be woken up for school because they are very excited to attend when there is feeding.)

“Parihas ra ug nay feeding ug wala ang attendance. Pero mas interesado mo skwela. Malipay siya nay feeding kay makakaon siya ug lami nga pagkaon.” (Attendance is the same with or without feeding. However, they are more interested in going to school. They feel happy when there is feeding because they can eat delicious food.)

In addition, another parents/guardians also supported:

“Parihas ra gihapon, mo skwela ra gihapon. Pero mas ganahan siya mo skwela kung nay feeding. Moingon siya nga nay feeding karon mo skwela ko lola. Niya abtik mo dala sa bawnanan kay nay feeding.” (It is still the same—they go to school anyway. However, they like going to school more when there is feeding. My grandson would say, ‘There is feeding today, I will go to school, Grandma.’ He also quickly prepare their food container because there is feeding.)

“Parihas ra ang attendance ug nay feeding or wala. Pero mas madasig siya nga mo skwela. Mas interesado siya ug nay feeding. Parihas anang mo mata siya ug sayo kay feeding. Dili ganahan ma late kay feeding” (Attendance is the same whether there is feeding or not. However, they are more motivated to go to school. They are more interested when there is feeding. For example, they wake up early because of feeding and do not want to be late.)

Improved Energy and learning readiness. One parent and the grade one adviser claimed that the feeding program improved learners’ energy levels at school and their learning readiness. Below is the adviser’s narrative, followed by the other parents’ narrative.

“Perfect attendance sa both, ma feeding or ma wala. Siguro kay naanad na sila nga since kinder naa nay feeding. Pero mas active sila kay busog man sila, which I believe can affect their performance sa school. Energetic pud sila kay di man sila gutom, mas ganahan mo answer sa klase ug dili magduka sab inig afternoon session.” (They have perfect attendance both with or without the feeding program. Perhaps because they have already become used to it since kindergarten when there was already feeding. However, they are more active when they are full,

which I believe can affect their performance in school. They are also energetic because they are not hungry, they are more willing to answer in class, and they do not feel sleepy during the afternoon session.)

Additionally, this is the narrative of the parent:

“Bisan init kayo mo linya gyd sila para sa feeding. Dili sila mahutdan ug energy. Murag dili maka feel ug kapoy.” (Even in the heat, they line up eagerly for the feeding. They don't seem to run out of energy and hardly feel tired.)

These answers support findings of studies that the atmosphere became more lively and the interaction between students and teachers became more enjoyable after the implementation of the nutritious school meals program (Sudadio et al., 2025).

4. Conclusion

This case study found that the program does not significantly affect formal school attendance, as learners are primarily motivated by intrinsic interest in reading and writing, parental or guardian encouragement, and opportunities to socialize with peers. However, the program has a substantial positive effect on learners' motivation and willingness to attend school. Learners reported increased excitement and enthusiasm on feeding days, greater satisfaction with the meals provided, a higher willingness to participate in class discussions, and reduced drowsiness during afternoon sessions. These observations were consistently supported by parents and guardians, who noted that their children woke up earlier and prepared more eagerly on feeding days, as well as by the class adviser, who observed that learners were more active, responsive, and less likely to feel sleepy after receiving meals. These findings suggest that, although the feeding program may not be the primary factor influencing attendance, it plays a significant role in improving learners' energy, mood, and overall engagement in school activities.

Implications and Recommendations - This study suggests several directions for further research. Given the limited sample from a single school, future studies should include a broader population to improve generalizability. A longitudinal design is also recommended to assess the long-term effects of feeding programs on academic performance, nutritional status, and school engagement. The study recommends that DepEd and local government units support and expand similar community-based and private partnerships in other underserved schools to address nutritional gaps and improve learner motivation.

Implications for Educational Practice - The study's findings have important implications for teachers, learners, and schools, particularly those in underserved communities.

- For **teachers and practitioners**, the results emphasize that nutritional well-being is essential for effective learning. Educators should watch for signs of hunger or fatigue, especially in the afternoon, and work with administrators or community sponsors to advocate for feeding support during school days. Teachers can also schedule more demanding or interactive lessons when learners are well-nourished to maximize engagement and participation.
- For **learners**, the study confirms that food security directly supports motivation, energy, and participation in school activities. The positive responses of Grade 1 learners to the feeding program, including increased happiness and eagerness to participate, highlight the importance of meeting basic needs in early childhood education. Beyond nourishment, the findings show that young learners are intrinsically motivated to develop literacy skills and interact with peers. Schools should foster these drives by creating engaging and supportive classroom environments.
- For **schools and administrators**, the Santiago Elementary School model shows that community- and private-sector-funded feeding programs can effectively supplement government initiatives like the SBFP.

Schools in underserved areas should seek partnerships with local businesses, non-governmental organizations, and benefactors to establish or maintain similar programs. Administrators are encouraged to document and monitor the motivational and behavioral impacts of these initiatives, as the most significant benefits may be affective and motivational rather than purely statistical. Adopting a whole-child approach that integrates nutrition, parental involvement, and a supportive environment can greatly enhance learner well-being and academic success in the early grades.

AI Use Disclosure - I used Grammarly for language editing and grammar improvement. All outputs were reviewed, verified, and edited by the author, including fact-checking sources and validating content. No confidential or personally identifiable data were entered into AI tools. The author takes full responsibility for the content.

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