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

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ABSTRACT

This study assessing the impact of school feeding program (SFP) on academic performance of standard five primary school learners at Kasangadzi primary school in Nkhotakota district. The study aimed to assess impact of school feeding program (SFP) on academic performance of standard five primary school learners. Employing a triangulation approach and descriptive study design, involving 107 respondents including learners, teachers and parent were selected through purposive and basic random sampling methods. For the qualitative data, the study has employed thematic analysis, which is suitable for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within interview and observational data Quantitative data obtained from the structured questionnaires was analyzed using descriptive statistics with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 26 and where applicable , inferential statistical techniques such as the paired-sample t-test or chi-square test was used to test relationships between variables such as participation in SFP and improvement in academic performance. The findings revealed a positive correlation between school feeding Programme and academic performance of standard five primary school learners at Kasangadzi primary school. In conclusion, the study underscores the interconnectedness of School feeding program and learner academic performance. It suggests that learners who receive meal at their place of education are more likely to attend lessons hence increasing chances of doing well in their tests.

KEYWORDS: Kasangadzi primary school, Nkhotakota.

INTRODUCTION

The key question of this study is what is the effect of the School Feeding Program on the average academic test scores of Standard Five learners at Kasangadzi Primary School after one school term of implementation. In the context of this research, average academic test scores of standard five is positioned as the dependent variable, and school feeding Programme is the independent variable. This strategic segmentation allows for a more in-depth investigation of the ways in which the adoption and effectiveness of school feeding program affect learners' academic performance, attendance, enrolment and overall class participation levels, specifically in relation to Kasangadzi primary school, Nkhotakota district, Malawi, Central Africa. Three essential features of school feeding Programme indicators are examined as the main focus of the investigation: enrolment, attendance, and academic performance. These factors were selected because they play a crucial role in determining how the School Feeding Programme impacts education outcomes. Enrolment refers to the number of learners registered and retained at Kasangadzi Primary School. Attendance concerns the regularity with which learners report to school and participate in classroom activities. Academic score refers to learners' performance in tests and examinations, which reflects their level of understanding and achievement in school subjects. Together, these indicators provide measurable evidence of the effectiveness of the school feeding Programme on learners' participation and learning outcomes.

This chapter lays forth the study's goals, objectives, and underlying logic, acting as the framework for the investigation. The background of the study provides a contextual foundation that explains the educational and nutritional challenges faced by learners at Kasangadzi Primary School and the increasing role of school feeding Programme in supporting vulnerable pupils. In this context, the statement of the problem establishes the basis for the significance and relevance of the research by identifying gaps in knowledge regarding the effect of school feeding on enrolment, attendance, and academic performance at the school.

The overall goal and specific objectives of the research are clearly stated to guide the inquiry. The study seeks to generate useful insights for education stakeholders, school administrators, and policy makers by systematically examining the relationship between the school feeding Programme and learners' educational outcomes. The research questions and hypotheses

outline the key issues and assumptions that guide the empirical investigation, providing a structured framework for data collection and analysis.

The scope of the study defines the boundaries within which the research is conducted. It outlines the geographical, institutional, and conceptual limits of the inquiry by focusing on Kasangadzi Primary School. The study recognizes the unique socio-economic and community conditions surrounding the school, which may influence learners' participation, nutrition, and performance. By concentrating on this setting, the research ensures that findings and recommendations are relevant and applicable to improving the effectiveness and sustainability of the School Feeding Programme at Kasangadzi Primary School.

Background of the Study

This section focuses on historical background, theoretical Background, conceptual Background and contextual Background.

Historical Background

Globally, school feeding programs have become indispensable tools for promoting educational equity and combating hunger. The World Food Programme (2020) reports that over 388 million children benefit from school meals globally, reflecting the scale and importance of such programs in advancing both health and educational outcomes. These programs are especially critical in low- and middle-income countries, where children often attend school on an empty stomach, adversely affecting their concentration and learning ability. According to Gelli et al. (2019), school meals significantly contribute to improved school attendance, enrolment, and academic performance, especially among vulnerable populations. UNESCO (2021) further asserts that school feeding initiatives help in achieving Sustainable Development Goals, notably those related to hunger eradication (SDG 2) and inclusive education (SDG 4). A systematic review by Kristjansson et al. (2016) reinforced that regular school meals enhance children's cognitive functions, time-on-task, and examination scores, thereby positively affecting overall educational outcomes.

In Africa, school feeding programs are viewed as powerful tools for increasing educational access, reducing dropout rates, and improving learning outcomes, particularly among disadvantaged children. Several studies conducted in countries such as Kenya, Ghana, and Ethiopia show that these programs play a critical role in addressing the twin challenges of malnutrition and low school participation. For instance, research by Aurino et al. (2019) in

Ghana found that school meals significantly improved dietary diversity, academic test scores, and attendance. Similarly, Gelli et al. (2019) observed that in Kenya, learners in SFP-supported schools exhibited higher performance in literacy and numeracy due to enhanced classroom engagement. The African Union, through the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–2025 (CESA 16–25), has positioned school feeding as a foundational strategy for achieving inclusive education and child development (African Union, 2016). A recent review by Drake et al. (2020) also found that SFPs contribute to improved learning outcomes and can be scaled effectively with adequate planning and community involvement.

In Malawi, school feeding programs have become an essential part of both educational and food security policy frameworks, especially in rural districts like Nkhotakota. The Government of Malawi, in partnership with development agencies such as the World Food Programme and organizations like Mary's Meals, has implemented large-scale school feeding initiatives across primary schools (WFP, 2020). Empirical studies highlight that these programs have led to increased enrolment, reduced absenteeism, and improved academic performance among learners (Chirwa & Ngalawa, 2021). The Malawi Ministry of Education (MoE, 2022) has consistently recognized school feeding as an important strategy for enhancing education equity and supporting learner achievement in resource-constrained environments. However, challenges such as erratic food supply, inadequate infrastructure, and weak community engagement often affect the sustainability and effectiveness of these programs (Mtika, 2019).

General Objective of the study

The main objective of this study was to assess the impact of the School Feeding Program (SFP) on the academic performance of Standard Five learners at Kasangadzi Primary School in Nkhotakota District during the 2025–2026 academic year.

Specific Objectives of the study

1. To measure the change in average academic test scores of Standard Five learners before and after the implementation of the School Feeding Program over a period of one school term (three months).
2. To assess the extent to which the School Feeding Program influences learners' classroom participation and concentration levels at Kasangadzi Primary School
3. To identify and analyze key challenges affecting the implementation of the School Feeding Program at Kasangadzi Primary School.

4. To determine the impact of school feeding program on enrolment and attendance rate of standard five learners at Kasangadzi primary school in Nkhotakota.
5. To provide practical recommendations for improvement in the School Feeding Program (SFP) on the academic performance of Standard Five learners at Kasangadzi Primary School in Nkhotakota District

Literature Review

Theoretical Review

In this study it was guided by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory and the Human Capital Theory. Maslow (1943) posits that basic physiological needs such as food must be met before individuals can focus on higher-order needs like education. This theory supports the idea that school feeding helps satisfy hunger, enabling learners to concentrate and perform better academically. At Kasangadzi Primary School, many learners come from households facing food insecurity. As a result, pupils often arrive at school without adequate meals, which negatively affects their classroom engagement and test performance. The implementation of the school feeding Programme at Kasangadzi directly addresses this challenge by reducing hunger during school hours, increasing learners' energy levels, class attendance, and ability to focus on lessons. In this way, Maslow's theory explains how meeting basic needs through feeding creates a foundation for effective learning at the school.

The Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993) argues that investments in education, nutrition, and health enhance individuals' productivity. School feeding, as a nutritional intervention, is thus seen as a direct investment in the cognitive development of learners, improving their educational attainment and future economic productivity. In the context of Kasangadzi Primary School, the feeding Programme serves as a human capital investment by improving learners' health status, reducing absenteeism, and enhancing academic test scores. By supporting learners' cognitive functioning and school participation, the Programme contributes to better educational attainment and long-term socio-economic benefits for both the learners and the surrounding community. Thus, both Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Human Capital Theory provide a strong theoretical basis for examining the effects of the school feeding Programme on academic performance at Kasangadzi Primary School.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Methodology

The research has adopted a descriptive study design, which has allowed for an in-depth investigation into the effects of the School Feeding Program within a specific real-life context Kasangadzi Primary School. This design has enabled the researcher to explore interactions, behaviors, and processes related to school feeding and educational outcomes from multiple stakeholder perspectives. A descriptive study design was suitable because a researcher seeks to deeply understand a phenomenon within its contextual setting (Yin, 2018). Stake (2015) notes that descriptive are valuable for educational research that focuses on interventions, such as school-based feeding, whose outcomes may be shaped by environmental, socio-economic, and institutional factors. The primary methodological approach employed by the researcher was triangulation, emphasizing quantitative methodologies. Quantitative data analysis focused predominantly on descriptive and inferential statistics, presenting results in tabular formats for clarity and accessibility.

However, the research also integrated qualitative methods, recognizing their efficacy in providing detailed and insightful responses within reasonable time and resource constraints. Qualitative data were particularly valued for their potential to offer in-depth insights into the study's research questions. These qualitative findings served as foundational elements for a deeper understanding of the subject under investigation. Consequently, the study aimed to achieve a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the research topic by incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

The adoption of descriptive design was motivated by its practicality in gathering data from a targeted sample within a specific demographic. This design was selected for its descriptive capabilities and the straightforward presentation of data, aligning with the research goals (Sekaran, 2003). Triangulation served as the principal methodological strategy, with a predominant focus on quantitative approaches. The analysis of quantitative data primarily utilized descriptive and inferential statistics, which were structured in tabular forms to enhance readability and comprehension.

Nevertheless, qualitative methods were also integrated into the study, acknowledging their ability to provide comprehensive and insightful answers to the research questions. These qualitative insights played a pivotal role in facilitating a deeper understanding of the subject

matter. Thus, the study aimed to offer a thorough and nuanced exploration of the research topic by combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

The selection of a cross-sectional approach as the research design was driven by its effectiveness in collecting data from a specific sample within a defined demographic. This design was chosen for its descriptive nature and its ability to present data in a straightforward manner, which aligned with the research objectives (Sekaran, 2003). The researcher primarily employed a triangulation strategy, emphasizing quantitative methods. Quantitative data analysis focused on descriptive and inferential statistics, presenting results in tables for clarity and ease of interpretation.

However, qualitative approaches were also incorporated into the study, recognizing their capacity to provide detailed and insightful responses within practical constraints. Qualitative data were particularly valued for their potential to offer thorough insights into the research questions addressed. These qualitative findings formed the foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. As a result, the study aimed to achieve a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the research topic by integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Study Population

According to Burns (2000), a population is any group of people who have similar traits, whether they are related to living quarters, occupations, economic pursuits, or other distinguishing qualities. A total of 107 respondents made up the population under consideration in the context of the current study. These people were selected from three main groups: Standard five primary school learners, teachers and parents at Kasangadzi primary school in Nkhotakota District. There were other divisions within these groupings, which included standard 5 learners, class teachers, head teacher and parents who are volunteers for preparing the meal.

This population was chosen because of their familiarity with and direct participation with the school feeding Programme. assess the impact of the School Feeding Program (SFP) on the academic performance of Standard Five learners at Kasangadzi Primary School in Nkhotakota District during the 2025–2026 academic year. This population offered diverse insights, that enabling a more holistic analysis of the program's impacts.

Data Collection Methods

Two key methods were regarded while gathering data. The questionnaire method and the interview method

Data Analysis & Interpretation

Response Rate

The response rate was computed using a formula of the number of actual responses divided by the target response and the findings below.

Table 4.1: Response rate.

Method	Target Response	Actual response	Response rate
Interview	5	5	100%
Questionnaire	107	107	100%
Total	112	112	100%

Source: Primary data

The study recorded a high response rate across all targeted categories of participants. Out of the intended sample of 107 respondents, which comprised 92 learners, 10 parents, and 5 teachers, all 107 successfully participated, representing a 100% response rate

4.3 Demographic data of the respondents

This part included the characteristics of the respondents, including their age, gender, experience, and level of education. Below is a presentation of the findings.

4.3.1 Gender of the respondents

Below are the results of the gender assessment.

Table 4.2: Gender of respondents.

	Gender	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Male	60	56.1%
	Female	47	43.9%
	Total	107	100.0

Source: Primary data

Table 4.2 males constituted 56.1% (60 respondents), while females represented 43.9% (47 respondents). This slight variation is mainly attributed to learner participation, were boys

slightly outnumbered girls. Among parents, representation remained balanced, ensuring equal contribution of male and female viewpoints. Teacher representation showed a gender imbalance, with 80% male and 20% female teachers. These proportions highlight that although representation varies by category, both genders contributed meaningfully to the study, strengthening the credibility and depth of insights provided.

4.3.2 Level of Education of the respondents

Below are the results of the education assessment.

Table 4.3: Level of Education.

Level	Frequency	Valid Percent
Primary	92	86.0%
Secondary	5	4.7%
Tertiary	7	6.5%
No education	3	2.8%
Total	107	100%

Source: Primary data

According to Table 4.3, the majority 86.0% are primary going school children. Followed by tertiary education with had tertiary education, such as certificates and diplomas, 4.7% Malawi School of Education Certificates and 2.8% had no education at all. These findings demonstrate that most participants were aware of the study's basic principles. They clearly understand School feeding Programme.

4.3.3 Age of the Respondents

Below are the results of the age assessment.

Table 4.4: Age of respondents

Age bracket	Frequency	Valid Percent
6-18	92	86.0%
31-45	8	7.5% %
46-58	7	6.5%
Total	107	100%

Source: Primary data

According to table 4.4 above, shows that learners below 18 years formed 86.0% of respondents, parents aged 18–46+ represented 6.5%, and teachers aged 31–45 constituted 6.5%. The dominance of the below-18 age group aligns with the study's aim to assess how the School Feeding Program influences academic engagement among primary school learners; the results suggest that they were mature enough to comprehend and value the study.

4.3.4 Experience

The study further examined the experience of the respondents in using questioners, interview and observation. The findings are presented below;

Suggestions & Recommendations

The study findings indicate that introducing more food varieties such as beans, rice, or nsima to improve nutritional quality, upgrading kitchen facilities to speed up preparation, need for larger portions, particularly for older learners who experience greater hunger and improve hygiene through increased water supply and cleaner utensils. These suggestions demonstrate that learners are aware of both the nutritional and operational aspects of the program. Addressing these recommendations could enhance academic performance, attendance, and overall well-being.

The study also revealed that several operational and logistical challenges affect the effectiveness of the school feeding program. The study shows that porridge sometimes is prepared late, causing delays in morning lessons, indicated that portions are insufficient when attendance and enrolments are high. Shortages of firewood, pots and stoves), and long queues further disrupts delivery and consumption.

CONCLUSION

After discussing the results, the study came to the conclusion The study found that the SFP has a strong positive effect on learners' concentration and participation during lessons. Quantitative results showed that 85% of learners experienced improved concentration, while 93% indicated enhanced classroom participation after receiving porridge. Qualitative responses from learners, teachers, and parents consistently supported these findings, highlighting improved attentiveness, reduced restlessness, and greater willingness to engage in class activities. Although a small proportion of learners reported feeling sleepy when they missed porridge or showed no significant change, their challenges were primarily linked to

late arrival and inconsistent home routines. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the SFP significantly boosts learners' cognitive readiness and active engagement in learning activities. Findings showed overwhelmingly positive improvements in key learning behaviors. Attentiveness improved among 88% of learners, task completion rose to 96%, and adherence to teacher instructions reached 100%. Teachers observed fewer cases of lesson abandonment and noticed that learners demonstrated stronger discipline and focus in class. Parents also confirmed improved behavior at home, including increased willingness to study and complete homework. Observation records validated these perspectives, showing that learners became more organized and responsive shortly after receiving porridge. These results indicate that the SFP plays a critical role in shaping disciplined and goal-oriented learning behaviors among primary school learners.

The study revealed that the SFP has a substantial influence on academic outcomes. Seventy-six percent of learners reported improved performance in key subjects such as English, Mathematics, and Chichewa. Girls highlighted better comprehension, while boys reported increased energy and participation in class tasks. Although 16% indicated no major improvement due to factors such as personal study habits and learning difficulties, and 8% continued to struggle in mathematics, the majority attributed their academic gains to improved concentration and energy levels derived from the feeding program. These findings align with existing research which links adequate nutrition to improved cognitive functioning and academic achievement.

The study identified several operational challenges limiting the full potential of the feeding program. These included delays in porridge preparation (43%), insufficient portions during high attendance (27%), firewood shortages (22%), and long queues (11%) which disrupted morning lessons. Girls also reported hygiene concerns due to limited water supply. These challenges point to systemic limitations in resource allocation, planning, and program management. Despite these constraints, learners acknowledged that the SFP remains beneficial, though its effectiveness would improve significantly with better operational coordination and infrastructural support.

Evidence from the study showed that the SFP strongly encourages school enrolment and consistent attendance. Eighty-seven percent of learners stated that school attendance increased because of the feeding program, with girls reporting reduced absenteeism especially during menstruation and boys indicating high attendance on feeding days. Some

learners (13%) noted that peers stayed home when porridge was unavailable, highlighting dependency on the program for motivation. The program also indirectly attracted new enrolments, with younger siblings joining school after hearing about the feeding initiative. These findings confirm that school feeding acts as both an educational and nutritional incentive, promoting regular attendance and improved access to education.

Learners provided several useful recommendations aimed at improving program quality and sustainability. The majority suggested introducing food variety to improve nutritional value, while others recommended increasing portion sizes, enhancing kitchen facilities, improving hygiene practices, and adding supplementary foods such as fruits and eggs. Some learners proposed serving porridge twice daily to maintain energy levels throughout the school day. These recommendations reflect an informed understanding of the nutritional, logistical, and operational aspects of the program and point to areas where improvements could significantly enhance program impact.

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