

SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMME AND ITS EFFECT ON ENROLMENT AND RETENTION OF LEARNERS IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THARAKA-NITHI COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

Access to universal primary education is a key priority for many countries trying to achieve the millennium development goals. Education is a fundamental right for every person due to its contribution to equity. Kenya has not been left behind. Her Vision 2030 overall goal is to provide a global competitive quality education, reduce illiteracy, improve transition rates from primary to secondary schools and raise the quality and relevance of education. This dream can only be realized if learners from marginalized communities especially in Arid and Semi-Arid Lands accessed and got retained in schools. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of School Feeding Programme on enrolment and retention of learners in public primary schools in Tharaka-Nithi county in Kenya. The study adopted mixed methods approach and gathered both qualitative and quantitative data. The multi-stage study made use of varied data collection tools including questionnaires, interview schedules, focus group discussions and school records. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data was organized into themes. The target population for this study was the County Director of Education, school management board members, headteachers, teachers and parents of Grade six pupils in public primary schools. The study established that school feeding program influenced the enrolment of pupils in primary school in Tharaka Nithi county. The study also established that the school feeding programme influenced the retention of pupils in schools in the county. The study established that school feeding programmes enhanced the participation of the pupils in class as their participation was described as lively. The study therefore concluded that school feeding program influenced the enrolment of pupils in primary school; the retention of pupils in schools and enhanced active participation of the pupils in class as hunger was the number one reason for dropout. The study recommended that the government should increase the coverage of the areas under school feeding programme especially the regions prone to drought with the view to improving the enrolment rates; the government should ensure there is a constant supply of school meal so as to retain the pupils in school. attend school regularly; the government and the donors should ensure the school meal has the right nutrients so as to keep the children alert in class to actively participate in the learning process.

Key words: Enrollment, Retention, Active Participation, Tharaka- Nithi County

Introduction

The Government of Kenya has invested heavily in upgrading both the quality of education and enrolment in order to attain the basic education goal captured in *Kenya's Vision 2030* and the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGS). However, despite major efforts by the government including the free primary initiative in 2003, full education participation of all children has not been achieved. The problem of primary school age children not enrolling, attending, participating and completing school is more persistent in *arid and semi-arid regions* (ASAL) such as Tharaka-Nithi County. According to *UNICEF Kenya Country Kit 2020-2022* the high prevalence of children not attending school in ASAL regions in Kenya has mainly been attributed to vicious cycle of poverty, hunger, infections among other factors. To mitigate the growing number of children who are missing out on education opportunities the Government of Kenya has put in place the school feeding programs. School feeding programs are focused on alleviating hunger improving nutrition and health of primary school children in marginalized regions. School feeding programs aim at providing school meals eliminating short term hunger, promoting hygiene, creating awareness through nutrition education in turn improving children's health, reducing episodes of sickness and motivating more children to enrol, attend, participate and complete their education (World Food Programme, 2020). Tharaka Nithi county borders the counties of Embu to the South West, Meru to the North East, Kirinyaga and Nyeri to the West and Kitui to the East. The county lies between latitude 000 07' and 000 26' South and between longitudes 370 19' and 370 46' East. It is classified as an Arid and Semi-Arid Land, characterized by warm climate

The area being an arid region is typically constrained by the harsh and severe environmental conditions and recurrent drought which makes it hard to produce enough food. Increased famine in the area interrupts learners' education due to hunger leading to low retention rates in schools. If this scenario is not addressed, it is likely to exacerbate the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals and Universal Primary Education.

In Kenya, the School Feeding Program was started in 1966 by the National School Feeding Council (NSFC). As a result of this, the enrolment of learners increased significantly by 70%t in 1966. In 1979, school milk programme was introduced by the government and attracted more learners in schools, though it lasted only for a short time. World Food Programme's School Feeding Programme in Kenya was one of the largest and most long-standing since 1980. The initiative was launched in the most vulnerable arid and semi-arid districts and informal urban slums in the large

cities of Mombasa and Nairobi. Its objective was to improve attendance in these areas. The World Food Programme in its five-year development plan (2003- 2013) emphasized the need to hand over the program to national government after 28 years of assistance. The Home-Grown Meals Programme policy began in July 2009 under the Ministry of Education (MOE) in the arid and semi-arid districts previously covered by WFP-assisted programme. The main aim was to improve educational indicators in terms of enrolment, attendance and retention and, delink from WFP assistance, thus creating a more sustainable and locally integrated programme . A survey by World Food Programme (2009) showed that as a result of introduction of school meals, the enrolment increased from 92% in 2007 and 93% in 2009. The proponents of school feeding programme initiatives contend that education and learning depended on good nutrition.

Many studies have shown a positive relationship between School feeding programme and enrollment. An evaluation on an ongoing school feeding programme in Burkina Faso found that school canteens were associated with increased school enrollment, regular attendance and consistently lower dropout rates in disadvantaged provinces (Lambers, 2009). Similarly, a small pilot SFP carried out in Malawi was evaluated for its effect on enrollment and attendance. Over a three-month period, there was a 5% increase in enrollment. A study by Adekunle and Ogbogu (2016) in Nigeria, found that SFP had resulted in increased learners' enrolment (78.4%), retention (44.8%), as well as regularity (58.6%), and punctuality (69%), in school attendance. It had also enhanced the pupil's performance in curricular and extra-curricular activities (55.2%). Another study on 32 Sub-Sahara African countries shows that providing food in school under the Food for Education (FFE) scheme contributed to increasing absolute enrollment in WFP assisted schools by 28% for girls and 22% for boys. In neighboring Tanzania, a study by Navuri(2011) found that when schools were provided with SFP, the enrolment of primary school pupils in 2007 rose to 8.4 million from 6.6 million, while dropouts declined from 6% to 3%. Studies done in Kenya by Khatete et al. (2013), Salee (2013) and Mkanyika (2014) in Taita -Taveta, Machakos and Tana River counties respectively agreed that school feeding programme enhanced pupil's enrollment and retention at school.

UNICEF (2009) recommended two critical items that had to be addressed in order for Universal Primary Education (UPE) to be attained. It recommended that policies governing school progression must be improved and the development of strategies to ensure reduction in the dropout rate of school going children. According to a World Bank (2014) report, most of the developing countries' existing educational systems are far from meeting their objectives towards Education for All (EFA)

goals due to high dropout rates in their schools. The demand for education in these countries has been curtailed by poverty since it affects the capacity of households to pay school fees for their children, provide food for them and other educational associated costs (World Bank, 2014). WFP (2016) established that there was an improvement in attendance, punctuality and retention rates among school going children in schools where universal breakfast programmes were introduced. Similarly, Ahmed and Del-Ninno (2013) indicated that the school feeding programme has significantly improved the retention rates since the meals acted as an incentive for the learners to attend school. They stated that the significant increase in retention was due to the fact that the SFP motivates the learners to remain in school.

In Kenya, a study conducted by UNICEF (2021) established that 77% and 80% of boys and girls respectively who were enrolled in class one reached class four while only 35% of girls and 55% of boys reached standard eight in the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL) regions. High dropout rates in these regions were majorly due to factors such as poverty and food insecurity which significantly jeopardized retention of learners at school hence increasing cases of dropout among learners. According to this report, provision of school meals would have a positive influence on pupils' retention.

Methodology

The target population for this study was the County Education Officials, Schools Management Board Members, Head teachers, teachers, and parents of Grade six pupils in public schools in Tharaka-Nithi County. The study adopted a mixed methods approach. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected and analyzed. Data collection tools included pre-tested study questionnaires, interview guides, school record analyses, observation checklists and focus group guides. The primary six pupils were selected because they have the highest prevalence of drop-out in primary schools in Kenya. This level of primary school grade was selected since it also guides on the number of children transitioning to secondary school. It is evident from the Kenya Demographic Health Survey (2014) that only 29.2% of the population completes primary school education in Tharaka-Nithi County.

Results and discussions

This sub-section presents the study findings on the effects of school feeding programmes on enrollment of pupils in primary schools in Tharaka -Nithi county. The respondents were presented with statements on the impacts of the school feeding programme on pupils' enrollment in which they were supposed to state their level of agreement with each of them. The responses are presented on Table 1.1

TABLE 1:1 Effect of SFP on Enrollment Rate of Pupils

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	31	44.3	44.3	44.3
	disagree	0	0	0	0
	neutral	0	0	0	8.57
	Strongly agree	39	55.7	55.7	100
	Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

From the findings, (100%) of the respondents acknowledged that the school feeding programme had increased the enrollment rate of the pupils in their schools. This means that the enrolment of pupils in schools in Tharaka- Nithi county has been on the increase since the introduction of school feeding programmes.

The study sought to find out the effect of school feeding on the enrollment of learners in upper classes. The results are shown in Table 1:2

TABLE 1:2 Increased Enrollment Rates in Upper Classes

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	32	45.7	45.7	45.7
	Neutral	6	8.6	8.6	54.3
	Strongly Agree	32	45.7	45.7	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Most of the respondents (91.4%) pointed out that the school feeding programme had increased the enrollment rate of pupils at the upper-level classes of their schools respectively.

The study further sought the effects of the school feeding programme on enrollment rate of mid-level classes. The results are shown on Table 1:3.

TABLE1:3 Effects of SFP on enrollment rate of mid-level classes

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	28	40.0	40.0	40.0
	Neutral	10	14.3	14.3	54.3
	Strongly Agree	32	45.7	45.7	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Results on Table 1:3 indicated that (86%) of the respondents acknowledged that school feeding programme increased enrollment rate of pupils in mid- level classes in primary schools. Only 14% of the respondents remained neutral.

Thematic analysis of Qualitative Findings on effects of SFP on enrollment rate of learners.

Head teachers were interviewed on the effect of school feeding programmes on enrollment of learners in the schools. Most head teachers confirmed that the presence of a school feeding programme increased enrollment. The head teachers had this to say:

Headteacher A: When there is food, enrollment is good. Children attend school because they are assured that there is lunch. They come to school because compared to home, school is better because they are sure there is food.

Headteacher B: When there is a functional SFP (where learners are assured of food) in place, enrollment just goes up.

Headteacher C: Many parents are willing to send their children to school since the SFP was started. It frees the children from engaging in casual jobs.

Study findings confirm that the presence of a functional school feeding programme increases enrollment of learners in school. These findings agree with the findings of (Lambers, 2009) who established that SFP significantly increased enrollment of learners in the disadvantaged provinces of Burkina Faso by the mere introduction of school canteens. Similar findings were noted in Kenya by Khatete et al. (2013), Salee (2013) and Mkanyika (2014) in Taita -Taveta, Machakos and Tana

River counties respectively who discovered that that school feeding programme enhanced pupil's enrollment in school.

Findings on the effect of SFP on retention of learners

This section presents information on the retention rate of pupils in primary schools in Tharaka Nithi County. Respondents were requested to express their views pertaining to the retention rate of pupils at their schools, extent to which they attribute the retention rate at their schools to school feeding programme. A Likert scale was used in this section, which comprised of statements on the effect of school feeding programme on pupils' retention in which the respondents were required to give their responses on the level to which they agree with the statements.

The findings are presented in Table 1:4

Table 1:4 Effect of SFP on retention of learners in school

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	34	48.6	48.6	48.6
	disagree	0	0	0	0
	neutral	0	0	0	
	Strongly agree	36	51.4	51.4	100
	Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

From the findings, all the respondents (100%) acknowledged that school feeding programme contributed to retaining learners in school. None of the teachers was of a contrary opinion.

The study sought information on whether the presence of an operational School feeding programme helped to attract and retain learners in school. The results are shown on Table 1:5.

Table 1:5 Effect of SFP on attraction and retention of learners 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	

From the findings on Table 1:5 (94.3%) maintained that a functional school feeding programme where learners were assured of daily school meals attracted and retained learners in school. However, (5.7%) of the respondents were of the opinion that other factors served to attract and retain learners in school.

Thematic analysis of Qualitative Findings on the effect of SFP on Retention of learners

Head teachers were interviewed on the effect of school feeding programmes on enrollment of learners in the schools. Most head teachers confirmed that the presence of a school feeding programme increased enrollment. The head teachers had this to say:

Headteacher D:

Food has contributed to retaining learners in school and this has led to improved academic performance.

Headteacher E:

Food retains learners in school. They learn with ease, are happy and confident and this keeps them in school. It gives them a positive attitude and a motivation to remain in school.

Headteacher F:

When food is depleted, learners come to school in the morning but do not come back to school in the afternoon. Some come from as far as five kilometers. They also may not get any lunch at home and even if they manage to come back to school in the afternoon, they are unable to learn due to exhaustion.

Headteacher G:

Learners are very happy when they come to school in the morning and see the cook. When there is no smoke coming from the kitchen, they get very sad and some do not come to school in the afternoon.

Study findings confirm that the presence of a functional school feeding programme increases enrollment of learners in school. These findings concur with WFP (2016) report which established

that there was an improvement in attendance, punctuality and retention rates among school going children in schools where school meals were introduced. Similarly, the findings agree with Ahmed and Del-Ninno (2013) that the school feeding programme has significantly improved the retention rates since the meals acted as an incentive for the learners to attend school. They found out that the significant increase in retention was due to the fact that the SFP motivated the learners to remain in school.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study investigated the effect of school feeding programme on pupils' enrollment and retention rates. Based on the key findings, the study concluded that the presence of a school feeding programme promoted pupils' enrollment and retention rates in schools in Tharaka- Nithi county. The government should ensure that the food supplied to schools through the school feeding programme is regular, adequate and timely delivered with the aim of promoting enrollment and retention of learners. Moreover, the government through the Ministry of Education and other partners should empower members of the school board of management by strengthening their oversight roles in SFP implementation, decision making and best management practices.

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