




# Challenges and Opportunities of Utilising School Nutrition Programme to Achieve Educational Goals in South African Rural Communities



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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the challenges and opportunities faced by schools in utilising the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) to achieve educational goals in South Africa. The NSNP was established in post-apartheid South Africa as a poverty alleviation and educational democratisation measure to improve educational access, attendance, and participation outcomes of learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds. The thesis of this paper was informed by Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs to explain how food is a basic need for learners to ascend to the level of learning aspirations. The study adopted a phenomenological paradigm and a qualitative research approach. Purposive sampling was employed to select 2 secondary school principals, 8 teachers responsible for NSNP and 10 learners who were beneficiaries of the NSNP within a rural community setting. The study used face-to-face and focus group interviews and observations for data collection. Data was analysed and interpreted thematically. The study revealed that challenges such as poor hygienic conditions, poor quality and poor nutrition value of the menu, and consumption of teaching and learning time compromised the quality of NSNP provision in schools. However, despite these challenges, schools in rural communities use the NSNP for school attendance.

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## INTRODUCTION

Chapter Two of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Bill of Rights indicates that every child has the right to basic education.<sup>1</sup> The Guideline for Management of the National School Nutrition Programme indicates that one of the objectives of the programme is to provide learners with food to alleviate hunger which subsequently contributes to the enhancement of their attendance and participation in learning.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, some of the children, largely in rural communities, are not part of this basic education drive because poverty prevents parents from getting food for their children with nutrients which are needed for physical and intellectual development.

<sup>1</sup> Republic of South Africa, "The Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa," *Government Gazette (No.17678)*, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Basic Education, *Annual Performance Plan 2013-2014* ( Republic of South Africa: Department of Basic Education, 2013).

It is against the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa for children to drop out of school due to poverty because the Bill also specifies that every child has the right to basic nutrition.<sup>3</sup> Realising that poverty and poor nutrition were affecting school attendance, the South African government came up with a Strategic Plan from 2007 to 2011, which contained five broad priorities on which to focus the work of the Department of Education. The priority areas sequentially aim to address poverty in schools, shortage of skills, educational quality improvement, health in education and institutional development.<sup>4</sup> This research focused on the first broad priority that deals with poverty in schools.

The recital of the NSNP can be assessed in terms of indicators that relate to the population of learners who access the programme and the functioning of the programme. Some of these indicators are the actual number of learners provided with meals and the number of schools served by the NSNP.<sup>5</sup> An increase in the total number of learners that partake in meals should indicate the attractiveness of the programme.

Despite the national expansion of the programme and the related cash injection by the government to ensure a wide section of learners is provided with food whilst, at school, there appear to be significant problems that work to blur efforts towards the achievement of desired objectives. Any signs of cracks in the implementation of the NSNP must be remedied to prevent a return to a former situation where learners failed to achieve their academic potential due to the shortage of nutritious meals and hunger. Therefore, this study seeks to explore challenges faced by schools as well as opportunities to utilise the NSNP to achieve educational goals of improving child nourishment and school attendance and participation.

Informed by the basic NSNPs' key aims of poverty alleviation, provision of healthy food and increasing school attendance and participation, the objectives of this study were to:

- Explore the views of the key school-based education stakeholders on the challenges faced by schools in utilising the nutrition programme to achieve educational goals.
- Examine the influence of NSNP on school punctuality and attendance on learners
- Explicate the opportunities of the NSNP to increase access to schooling in poor rural communities

Using a phenomenological paradigm and a qualitative research approach the study seeks to find out the views of 2 secondary school principals, 8 teachers responsible for NSNP and 10 learners who were beneficiaries of the NSNP within a rural community setting. The study findings are presented in subsequent sections.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### History and Aims of School Feeding Scheme

In every country, there is a programme that provides school meals to learners, also known as a school feeding scheme. This programme is considered a social safety net on a global scale. The advantages of having a school meal programme are many. It helps achieve the second, third, and fourth sustainable development goals, which are to end hunger, good health and well-being, and to provide high-quality education.<sup>6</sup>

The school feeding programme is an old initiative in South Africa, dating back to the apartheid era. Several reports conducted succeeded in cutting the provision of school meals to blacks. The advent of new democratic governance in South Africa in 1994 also resuscitated the abandoned programme of school feeding. The new school feeding programme is transformative. It promotes access and redress of past inequalities, to reduce food shortage and play a part in schools through giving learners nutritious meals of quality.<sup>7</sup> At its inception, the programme was known as the Primary School Nutrition Program (PNSP) and was presided over by the Department of Health (DoH). It was moved to the Department of

<sup>3</sup> Republic of South Africa (RSA), *The Constitution of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996)* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 1996), <https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/images/a108-96.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Education, *Strategic Plan 2007-2011* (Pretoria: Department of Education, n.d.), [www.education.gov.za](http://www.education.gov.za).

<sup>5</sup> Department of Basic Education, *National School Nutrition Programme Annual Report 2009/2010* (Pretoria: Department of Basic Education, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> World Food Programme, "State of School Feeding Worldwide, Overview," 2013, [https://executiveboard.wfp.org/document\\_download/WFP-0000037816](https://executiveboard.wfp.org/document_download/WFP-0000037816).

<sup>7</sup> Department of Basic Education, *National School Nutrition Programme Annual Report 2009/2010*.

Education (DoE) in 1994. At first, the National School Nutrition Education Programme focused on learners who were in need in primary schools. From April 2009, the programme was spread out to secondary schools. Food that was supplied by the National School Nutrition Programme aimed to keep learners alert and concentrated during lessons and provide them with the energy that is required to engage in physical activities.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that the National School Nutrition Program (NSNP) is one of the components of the Government Programme of Action that strives to forge an improvement in the area of access to education as well as the health of those children who attend school. The responsibility of the programme was to address the ability of children by offering them nutritious and healthy meals. All secondary school learners in the bottom quartile institutions began to benefit in May 2011.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Rationale for School Feeding Schemes**

The following points justify the implementation of the NSNP which includes ensuring the well-being of learners, bridging the gap between nutrition and school, and improving health and education as well as health and school.

The role of promoting the well-being of learners appears to rest hugely on schools. This might be caused by the fact that the well-being of learners plays a part in the education of the child and that psychological and physical health are just crucial imperatives. This requirement is strong in those schools which are located in communities that are the poorest. There is a close link among well-being, health and education. Effective learning tends to occur as a product of the well-being of an individual and his/her healthy mind. Individuals who are better educated are perceived to be well-placed to contribute to their own emotional and physical health. The ability to read with understanding allows one to engage in appropriate behaviours to prevent or manage it. The bad effects of social ills such as bullying, teenage pregnancy and abuses of various kinds become understood.<sup>10</sup>

The Department of Basic Education states that the bulk of the contributions of people about the first draft of the 2010 Action Plan hinged on strategies that schools can adopt to enhance the well-being of learners.<sup>11</sup> The concept of well-being, ideally, should be intertwined with aspects of belonging to some space, either a community or country. Schools can cultivate the spirit of belonging by exposing learners to various activities such as sports, culture and community engagements.

The added reward in the improvement of the health status of learners is the enhancement of their educational performance. Constructive outcomes of education which are connected to better health in learners encompass enhanced classroom achievement, participation, attendance and positive attitudes. It is evident that the promotion of school health activities that include families and society has a widespread influence, inclusive of school-going children.<sup>12</sup>

According to Grantham-McGregor and Olney, the nutritional status is connected with the behaviours of learners that focus on attendance, concentration and participation.<sup>13</sup> Many research works demonstrate a linkage between weak nutrition levels, disruptive class behaviours and high drop drop-out rates from school. Alleviation of hunger from participation in the School Nutrition Programme might encourage learners' attention and reduce delinquent behaviour. School meals that are of low quality, delivered in an irregular manner and limited portions would never be expected to achieve the intended outcomes.

The unpredictable school participation of malnourished learners might be a crucial factor in poor performance. Attendance at school without taking a breakfast meal might create drastic effects on learning.

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<sup>8</sup> Department of Basic Education, *National School Nutrition Programme Annual Report 2009/2010*.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Basic Education, *Annual Performance Plan 2013-2014*.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas M Rehle et al., "A Decline in New HIV Infections in South Africa: Estimating HIV Incidence from Three National HIV Surveys in 2002, 2005 and 2008," *PloS One* 5, no. 6 (2010): e11094.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Basic Education, *Action Plan to 2014 towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025* (Pretoria: Department of Basic Education, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Cynthia Wolford Symons et al., "Bridging Student Health Risks and Academic Achievement through Comprehensive School Health Programs," *Journal of School Health* 67, no. 6 (1997): 220-27.

<sup>13</sup> Sally Grantham-McGregor and Deanna K Olney, "School Feeding, Cognition, and School Achievement," *Current Medical Literature: Clinical Nutrition* 15, no. 1 (2006).

Learners who experience hunger have challenges with concentration and performing complex exercises.<sup>14</sup> Edstrom et al., further indicate that school feeding is effective in targeting groups.<sup>15</sup> This has proved helpful in increasing the enrolment of girls in situations where there are limited chances of attendance at school.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted Maslow's Theory of Learning. Abraham Maslow developed a five-stage theoretical model known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Chapman, 2012). These needs clarify how needs are gratified. Maslow believed that some human needs, especially physiological needs, are basic to others and that certain lower needs must be satisfied before the individual becomes concerned with higher needs.<sup>16</sup> Crowl, Kaminsky and Podell add that Maslow believed that human beings have a variety of needs that are hierarchically organised so that individuals cannot satisfy higher needs until they have satisfied more basic needs.<sup>17</sup>

The needs that are to be satisfied are arranged in a hierarchy of precedence.<sup>18</sup> Implied in this hierarchy is the proposition that lower, survival-based, deficiency needs took precedence over higher-level growth needs. Thus, the higher needs are more predominant and directive of human actions only when the lower needs have been satisfied. From this perspective, it was understandable why the NSNP was so essential to the proper motivation of learners who lack resources to meet those needs outside school. The implication is that learners must be free of the pain of hunger before they can appreciate the need for learning and academic achievement.

The assumption by the democratic South African government from 1994 was that expansion of the NSNP was an instrument for expanding educational access in basic education for the low-income groups in rural communities where this study was conducted. Availability of nutritious food in schools should have twofold educational outcomes; firstly, to provide food as a basic human physiological need and secondly to attract enrolment, reduce absenteeism and even improve the quality of learning since a healthy mind resides in a healthy body. As supported by the World Food Programme a meal that a child gets at school works as a magnet to lure them into the classroom.<sup>19</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative research approach to examine the views of the key school-based NSNP stakeholders on how the programme was achieving its key objectives. Welman, Kruger and Mitchell label the qualitative research approach as an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and come up with the meaning of naturally occurring phenomena in the social world.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the researchers adopted the phenomenological research paradigm to capture the experiences and views of the sampled participants of the NSNP in their natural set-up at two schools where the programme was implemented.<sup>21</sup> The participants' narrative views were complemented by naturalistic capturing and assessment of the realities of how the NSNP food was warehoused and shared with its beneficiaries through photos and school feeding scheme documents.

Study findings were generated from a total of 20 purposively selected samples, which comprised 10 learners as beneficiaries of the feeding scheme, 2 school principals as managers of the two NSNP stations where the study was conducted, and 8 teachers who directly administered the NSNP at the schools. The sample was equally distributed between the two schools on each of the three categories of the selected

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<sup>14</sup> Enrique Jacoby, Santiago Cueto, and Ernesto Pollitt, "Benefits of a School Breakfast Programme among Andean Children in Huaraz, Peru," *Food and Nutrition Bulletin* 17, no. 1 (1996): 1–11; Sally M Grantham-McGregor, Susan Chang, and Susan P Walker, "Evaluation of School Feeding Programs: Some Jamaican Examples," *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 67, no. 4 (1998): 785S-789S.

<sup>15</sup> J. Lucas Edstrom, H. Sabates-Wheeler, and B. Simwaka, *A Study of the Outcomes of Take Home Ration: Food Rations for Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Malawi* (Nairobi: UNICEF ESARO, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> M.N. Dembo, *Applying Educational Psychology* (New York: Longman, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> T.K. Crowl, S. Kaminsky, and D.M. Podell, *Educational Psychology: Windows on Teaching* (New York: Brown and Benchmark Publishers, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> R.D. Parsons, S.L. Hinson, and D.A. Brown, *Educational Psychology: A Practitioner Research Model of Teaching* (USA: Wardsworth Thomson Learning, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> World Food Programme, "State of School Feeding Worldwide, Overview."

<sup>20</sup> C. Welman, F Kruger, and B. Mitchell, *Research Methodology* (South Africa: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> C. Wagner, B. Kawulich, and M. Garner, *Doing Social Research: A Global Context* (United Kingdom: McGraw-Hill Higher Education Companies, Inc., 2012).

study participants. Purposive sampling was employed because we needed rich first-hand information from the people who were actively involved in the NSNP at two rural schools where the school feeding scheme was fully running at the time of data collection.<sup>22</sup>

The study used face-to-face interviews with the 2 school principals, focus group interviews with 4 teachers from each school and 5 learners at each school as beneficiaries of the NSNP and the researchers made live observations and captured the conditions and process of rolling out the NSNP programme at the two schools to collect data. Face-to-face and focus group interviews were the appropriate data collection instruments as the participants had experience with the programme under study, were prepared to speak out and were articulate to share ideas both individually and in a group (Creswell, 2007; Punch, 2009).<sup>23</sup> The learners who participated in focus groups were homogeneous (Babbie, 2007) in that they were familiar with one another as they took meals at school together daily.

Observation as a data collection instrument is a systematic process of recording the behavioural patterns of participants, objects and occurrences without necessarily questioning or communicating with them.<sup>24</sup> The observation was used as a triangulation measure of verifying and collaborating information from interviews and also enhanced deeper insight into the conditions under which the NSNP was being rolled out at the two schools. The storerooms where food was kept, the kitchens, utensils, meal menus, food preparation, meal times, the process of dishing out food and the general environment in which the programme activities transpired were issues of interest for the research observations, which were captured live.

Data was analysed thematically, following a qualitative framework and protocol that involves transcription, member checking, data segmentation, and display of descriptive narrations which elaborate the experiences, feelings and attitudes of study respondents.<sup>25</sup> Out of this process, the following themes, under which the findings are presented and discussed emerged:

- Stakeholder's knowledge of the educational aims of the NSNP
- Stakeholder's views on the level of efficacy in the management of the NSNP
- Nutrition and hygienic qualities of the NSNP
- The NSNP and enhancement of teaching and learning
- Class teachers and the NSNP feeding time
- The challenges and opportunities of utilising NSNP for achieving educational aims within a rural South African school setting

## PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In presenting the results, the participants were coded as follows: the principal for School A as PA and PB for the principal of School B, Class teachers for School A were coded as CTA and those of School B were coded CTB and both were numbered in the order in which they were interviewed. The 5 learners in the programme from each of the two sampled schools were divided into two groups. Those from School A were coded LPA whilst those from School B were coded LPB and numbered from 1 to 5.

According to the Department of Basic Education, the challenges that impact the NSNP include the provision of equipment and spaces appropriate for food preparation at schools<sup>26</sup>. Ritter reports that more than one hundred and fifty learners from one primary school in Ridgefontein were admitted to the hospital for cramps and vomiting after crushed glass was found inside their food.<sup>27</sup> It was alleged that school food suppliers had poisoned the food in a bid to secure tenders over rival suppliers. Victoria (2013) reports that the delay in the delivery of food supplies to schools hampers the effective implementation of the programme. The inability of schools to provide mandatory meals constitutes a violation of the rights of learners to equality, nutrition and basic education. Civil society organisations and communities continue to put pressure on the NSNP to scale up the provision of nutritious meals to children. However, limited funds remain a problem. This allocation is supposed to cater for the supply of food to all learners regardless

<sup>22</sup> Wagner, Kawulich, and Garner, *Doing Social Research: A Global Context*.

<sup>23</sup> K.F. Punch, *Introduction to Research Methods in Education* (London: Sage Publications, Inc., 2009); J.W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. (London: Sage, 2013)..

<sup>24</sup> K. Maree, *First Steps in Research* (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Punch, *Introduction to Research Methods in Education*.

<sup>26</sup> Department of Basic Education, *Annual Performance Plan 2013-2014*.

<sup>27</sup> S.M. Ritter, "National School Nutrition Programme Continues in Limpopo," *Mail and Guardian*, 2014.

of family background to avoid the stigmatisation of a portion of learners participating in the programme. However, the shortage of food remains a problem owing to high rates of poverty and unemployment in the country.<sup>28</sup>

**a. Stakeholders knowledge of the educational aims of the NSNP**

The success of a project normally depends on the presence of some laid down objectives that can be used as a yardstick to check the extent to which the project achieves its goals. The views of participants were solicited regarding their understanding of the objectives of the NSNP as outlined in the policy of the programme. It was revealed that the programme was meant to address the problem of poverty and hunger so that learners would stay at school. The nutritious meals were to be given to learners to boost their attendance and attention at school and to allow teachers to extend contact time with learners. Lessons could be extended into the afternoons. Knowledge about the programme is important as it enhances the implementation and interpretation of related activities and practices. On the knowledge of NSNP, the participants said:

*I remember when they picked the issue of alleviating poverty, hunger and this issue of school dropouts. [PA]*

*Ok, the main objectives were to provide nutritious meals to all learners, in primary and secondary schools. The food supplied gave learners energy which made them alert and receptive during the lesson. [PB]*

*I think the programme was started with the aim of extending working hours, in order for educators to go the extra mile, so that they can have afternoon studies, and learners be able to attend without the problem of being hungry. [CTB2]*

The above views indicate that participants are familiar with and knowledgeable about the aims of the programme. Literature states that the NSFP enhances the well-being of learners' school attendance and participation.<sup>29</sup> Participants were aware that the programme was meant to alleviate hunger among the school-going children, as they come from families with different socio-economic backgrounds. It served to assist poor families that cannot afford food for their children to curb school dropouts as children cannot concentrate on studying on an empty stomach.

Those who participate in a programme must be aware of the circumstances that led to its being set up. The study revealed that participants were generally familiar with the reasons for the introduction of the NSNP. The face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions showed that the NSNP emerged in an attempt by the government to provide food to learners, particularly to those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Learners from poor families barely have enough food to sustain them at school and the feeding programme serves as a stop-gap measure to remove class distinctions at school and facilitate learning. It intended to make all learners equal so that those from poor and rich families cannot be distinguishable in ways that negatively impact teaching and learning. The Participants had this to say:

*... the government started this feeding programme, so that all learners are equal, so that we cannot see those who have and those who don't have money as all would have eaten. [LPA5]*

*...I think the government has seen that families are not the same. So the government sees it fit that they bring food to schools so that all students can look the same. [LPB4]*

*..., this programme gives them the opportunity to have a meal. [LPA3]*

*... Even during break if the learner does not have money to buy food, he would eat at school and will just be like all other learners. [LPB5]*

*... Now money or no money one will be able to have something to eat during break [LPB1].*

<sup>28</sup> K Hall and G Wright, "A Profile of Children Living in South Africa in 2008," *Studies in Economics and Econometrics* 34, no. 3 (2010): 45–68.

<sup>29</sup> Department of Basic Education, *Action Plan to 2014 towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025*.

The observations above further prove that learners who participated in the programme are very much aware of the reasons for the starting of the NSNP at different schools. They understood that poverty was the main impetus for the start of the programme as many parents could not afford to get their children to school, let alone provide some food that could sustain them at school throughout the day. It was to bring about social justice and equality of opportunity to the learners so that no one might blame failure to succeed academically on poverty.<sup>30</sup> The government then introduced the NSNP so that learners, especially those from poor families could concentrate on school activities without worrying about food provision which tend to push them out of classes. This is supported by literature which states that the government used the national quintile rankings to select institutions that would benefit from the no-fee schools and fell in the range of the poorest of the poor.<sup>31</sup>

#### **b. Stakeholders' Views on the level of efficacy in the management of the NSNP**

In this section, participants were asked to present their responses on the roles that different stakeholders play in the organisation of the NSNP. Included in the following discussion are the principals, class teachers and learners.

This sub-theme outlines the role of the principals in organising and managing the NSNP in the two schools of the study. A review of documents and the responses of participants from interviews revealed that principals were the overseers in the running of the programme. They work as accounting officers to ensure books that are used for the programme are balanced and that the activities are carried out as guided by policy. This included the grant frame of the government and the school-based regulations. They ensure that the meals are as per daily plans and that all learners are served and receive food deliveries during the school holidays. Participants stated:

*..in our school, the principal is an accounting officer, he is the one who monitors the whole programme daily, he monitors if the meal is prepared according to the real measurement and follows the right menu. [CTB3]*

*...the principal checks if learners are being provided food or dished fairly. [CTB1]*

*The principal helps by checking and signing all the documents that are taken to the department. He oversees all the processes of the feeding programme. [CTA1]*

The excerpts above reveal that the principal is responsible for managing the NSNP. However, some of the roles indicated above contradicted what was observed during the field study, as during the visit to the schools none of the principals of either school were seen moving around checking what was happening during eating time. They were both seated in their offices. Therefore, this means that the roles are there and known by different participants but they are not consistently put into practice. One might claim that they might have delegated, but no teacher was seen monitoring or going around during break helping learners. This is consistent with the literature which states that the programme is beset with management difficulties, which entails monitoring.<sup>32</sup>

Teachers are close to the learners who are NSNP beneficiaries. It emerged that class teachers are responsible for distributing food to learners in a fair manner so that learners would not fight over food. They maintain order as learners queue for food and complete forms which are required by the district which request statistics of learners who ate the prepared food and those who did not. Teachers also ensure that learners wash their hands and eat during break time. Participants revealed:

*We help by dishing out the prepared food to learners, and we help so that learners do not fight for the food and maintain discipline whilst eating. [CTA3]*

<sup>30</sup> M. Belot and J. James, *Healthy School Meals and Educational Outcomes* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> C. Langsford, *Enough on Our Plate. The National School Nutrition Programme in the Two Schools in Katlehong* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Mark Tomlinson, "School Feeding in East and Southern Africa: Improving Food Sovereignty or Photo Opportunity," *Equity Discuss Paper N*, 2007, 46.

*When the department started this programme, it emphasised that learners must be given food in their respective classrooms by their class teachers. That simply means during break time as a class teacher I must go to my class and dish out food for them. [CTB4]*

*Teachers are the ones who should observe learners during breaks whilst consuming meals and take the statistics of the learners who are eating and not eating, to find the challenges for those who are not eating the meal so that they can report it and find a proper solution because the meal was meant for all learners. [PB]*

*Class teachers check if the right menu for the day is cooked, and the right kilograms cooked and monitor the feeding process, when it's break time. They must see to it that learners have washed their hands, then they are eating in class so that table manners are being followed by learners. [PA]*

The above observation shows that participants were aware of the roles that are supposed to be played by the class teachers in running the programme; which are to supervise learners whilst eating during break, check if the correct menu is cooked and make sure that hygiene is maintained by those involved in the programme. The lack of uniformity in school menus and the timing thereof constitute some of the weaknesses of the NSNP.<sup>33</sup> Some class teachers tended to withdraw their involvement in the programme, save for those attached to the programme, which explains the existence of some challenges in the running of the NSNP. One participant said:

*...but with us here I only see one educator, class teachers are supposed to be there for learners during a break, making sure learners are eating well but they are not doing their work. [PB]*

*... it would be better if our educators were part of the process of feeding the learners so that all learners could get an equal share of food. [LPB5]*

This confirms that some class teachers were not executing their roles, which are to see to it that learners are eating food in class, making sure that learners wash their hands before and after eating, keeping order whilst learners are eating and filling the day-to-day eating registers effectively. Literature is, however, emphatic that children should enjoy the highest standard of health through the provision of nutritious meals and water, which they should use, in this case, to drink and wash their hands during meals.<sup>34</sup> During the field study on the two selected schools during break time, when learners were queuing for their meals, it was chaos as learners were all over each other. There was no order at all, no single teacher was there to help learners in the process. It was realised that teachers may have been familiar with their roles but they were not executing them as expected. This implies that monitoring systems need to be improved.<sup>35</sup>

Food handlers are expected to play a critical role in organising the NSNP. The study revealed that food handlers are the most important people in the NSNP as they make sure that food that is delivered is prepared on time for learners. This constitutes the most committed part of the staff which runs the programme. These also make sure that the food store rooms are clean, food is prepared in clean environments and that utensils are washed and returned to their respective places after use. Participants said:

*...they are responsible for preparing the food. They are responsible for cleaning where they prepare food for learners. They have to make sure that the utensils that they are using are also clean. [PA]*

*Food handlers are so committed, that they make sure they prepare food on time. After dishing the food, they wash those pots and all those utensils and make sure everything is in order. [PB]*

<sup>33</sup> Peter Kallaway, "Policy Challenges for Education in the New South Africa: The Case for School Feeding in the Context of Social and Economic Reconstruction," *Transformation*, no. 31 (1996).

<sup>34</sup> World Health Organization, *The World Health Report: 2004: Changing History* (World Health Organization, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> Department of Basic Education, *Action Plan to 2014 towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025*.

*They see to it that the store room is always clean because food should be put in a clean area with no dirt. [CTA2]*

The above accounts indicated that food handlers are the ones who cook and clean the area where they prepare food for learners. This is backed by literature which concurs that food handlers prepare meals and that they should also ensure that the places for preparing food are kept clean (Provincial Guidelines on Engagement of Food Handlers (2013). Observations during the study corroborated the above view. When the researchers arrived at one of the selected schools at half past six, the food handlers were already there busy with the big food pots. This led to the conclusion that food handlers were very much committed to their work of preparing the correct quality of food for learners every morning of each day and making sure that the food was ready for consumption on time. They dish out the food into bowls and clean the food storage rooms and the kitchen.

### **c. Nutrition and Hygiene Qualities of the NSNP**

The findings from the observation were mainly focused on hygienic issues in relation to learners and food handlers. Some learners indicated that food handlers at times appeared too dirty to handle food as well as failed to cook food properly. LPA2 said *“The food is not cooked in a better way, the rice is dished with starch, it is not rinsed, and the pumpkins are tasteless. LP1B added that “the cleanliness of food handlers is not good enough.”* The findings from participants suggest that food handlers might be contributing to questionable health conditions in the feeding of learners in schools.

In both schools, learners did not bother to wash their hands before eating their meals. At the ringing of the bell, it was observed that learners rushed straight to places which were set aside for eating. At school A, the place was just outside next to a shed which was used as a kitchen as there was no proper structure that was used for preparing meals. The existing water taps were not utilised by learners for washing their hands and plates even though there was running water. School A was a combined institution but things were done differently for secondary learners and primary learners. Primary learners observed hygienic measures as there were some bowls of water with soap next to each class for learners to wash their hands from. They also took their meals inside their classrooms under the supervision of their class teachers. This was supported by PA, who said that *“... the department emphasises that learners must be given food in their respective classrooms by their class teachers.* The supervision for secondary school learners was very poor as only two teachers were seen trying to organise learners who were trying to wrestle the bucket of food from each other.

At school B, it was worse because learners were eating under a big tree (see Figure 1 below), as there was no proper kitchen. A lot of dust was witnessed as each learner attempted to be the one to be served first. Some learners were carrying plates whilst others were holding papers to be used for serving food. After receiving their share of the food, they were seen going to the vendors to buy more food, as if the portion given to them was too little. Very few learners were seen washing their plates and hands after eating but instead strolled back to their classes to resume lessons as if there was no running water.



***Figure 1: Learners eating in a dusty environment***

The challenges were that there were no proper kitchens or dining halls to be used to feed learners in the two schools that were visited. Makeshift sheds were used as firewood-powered kitchens. There were no properly built storage facilities for learners' food. Old classrooms with no proper shelves were being used to store food. Learners, at times, eat food in dirty surroundings. Some of the participants indicated the following:

*The main challenge is that the conditions of the storerooms and the kitchens are very poor. There are no proper storerooms and kitchens at the schools. Learners are still eating their meals outside the classrooms, some under the trees, in the open space and we do not expect that. We expect learners to eat their meals in the dining hall or in their classes. [CTB3]*

There is still a lot to be done to meet the expected standards of the implementation of the NSNP, which requires the existence of a proper kitchen, dining hall and a storage facility for food. The absence of adequate infrastructure shows that the government has not provided suitable infrastructure such as dining halls, kitchens, and proper storerooms so that the hygiene of learners is not compromised. It is the shortage of equipment and resources that presents challenges in the programme to achieve its educational goals.<sup>36</sup> Figures 2 and 3 below show the kitchen and store room used for the NSNP in school B.

<sup>36</sup> Department of Education, *The Guideline for Management of National School Nutrition Programme* (Polokwane: Limpopo Department of Education, 2013).



*Figure 2: The kitchen used for the NSNP*



*Figure 3: The storeroom used for keeping food for the NSNP*

#### **d. The NSNP and enhancement of teaching and learning**

The main reason for learners to be at school is for teaching and learning to take place. This is facilitated by the provision of food through the NSNP which is intended to alleviate hunger, especially for learners coming from poor backgrounds. To determine if learners were learning better due to the introduction of the NSNP, participants were asked how NSNP has impacted learning in the school. The responses indicated that learners are no longer eager to be dismissed early for home as they will have eaten at school.

This has also reduced theft of food from other learners as all of them are assured of a meal. Learner participation in class activities is boosted and learning time has even been extended into the afternoon. Participants stated:

*... I can learn until school is out and even do my studies. [LPB4]*

*Yes, I see it helping a lot because those learners are now able to concentrate when we are learning and they can also be part of what is happening in class in terms of teaching and learning. [LPB3]*

*...learners are very active because they have eaten and they can even participate in class activities. You can easily see that these learners are really learning. [CTA4]*

The study revealed that in both schools where the study was conducted, learners, teachers and principals are in agreement that teaching and learning are taking place. Learners are always at school from morning until afternoon, they attend classes, and truancy is not frequent, a sign that learning is taking place. A meal per day acts as a magnet to get learners into class.<sup>37</sup> The programme is helping a lot in making sure that learners do not worry about what they are going to eat at school.

The study further revealed that school attendance by learners has increased as a result of meals which were given to them at school. Participants were asked to express their views on the attendance of learners before and after the implementation of the NSNP. They were unanimous that the introduction of the NSNP has led to an increase in school enrolment. Learners regularly attend school with the assurance of getting a meal that assists them in participating in learning activities. Participants said:

*Before the programme learners didn't come to school in large numbers because they were afraid of hunger and the school was dismissed late, but now because there is food they come to school regularly knowing that they will eat and go home happy.[LPA2]*

*Before this programme, the rate of absenteeism was very high, but with the introduction of this programme, you can see only one or two learners are absent.[PB]*

*Attendance increased since the introduction of the NSNP in 1994.[PA]*

The quotes above reveal that school attendance has increased due to the introduction of the NSNP. The review of the learners' attendance register revealed indeed that learners were attending school regularly. These are marked every day to show the learners who are present and those absent. The marking must be done by the class teacher in class, verifying by headcount if learners are there or not. The daily feeding register was also used to confirm learner attendance, although in this case, the teachers counted only the number of learners who were fed during a particular meal.

During the observations, it was noted that all these registers were marked, however, what they reflected left much to be desired in terms of the truth. It emerged that on a particular day, some learners were marked as absent in the school attendance register but surprisingly all learners were indicated as present in the daily school feeding register. Still, on a similar visit to a school, it was witnessed that some learners did not take part in the NSNP food but were enjoying food that they had brought from home. However, it was surprising to see that the number of learners indicated to have been fed on that day was equal to the size of the school enrolment. This implied that teachers involved in the NSNP and class teachers were not marking their registers faithfully. They were just marking in order to fill the spaces without whether learners were present or not. As such, it is difficult to determine if attendance was improving or not based on the records. However, it was evident that learner enrolment for the past year was lower than for the year the study was carried out. Maslow's theory of learning posits that providing learners with basic needs such as food motivates them to attend school and learn for better outcomes.<sup>38</sup>

The study also showed that the introduction of the NSNP has helped in minimising learner dropout. Interviews with different participants revealed a decrease in school dropouts as a result of the programme.

<sup>37</sup> World Food Programme, "State of School Feeding Worldwide, Overview."

<sup>38</sup> World Food Programme, "State of School Feeding Worldwide, Overview."

More learners were indicated to be retained at school because they believed that school attendance would guarantee them free reliable meals unlike when they stay away from school. Two participants said:

*This programme is limiting the number of dropouts as learners know that there are no more worries about what to eat during breaks. [CTB4]*

*... as I have indicated no more dropouts, even if they are there they are very few. [PB]*

Statements from participants and analysis of records confirm that school dropout is very minimal because learners are getting meals at school. The theoretical framework corroborates this view which presents food as working as a motivation for learners to attend school and to benefit academically.<sup>39</sup> This indicated that one of the objectives of the programme was met as the NSNP was meant to curb learners from dropping out of school because of hunger and poverty.<sup>40</sup>

#### **e. Class Teachers and the NSNP Feeding Time**

The feeding period during break time is crucial in the implementation of the NSNP as a majority of learners are part of the programme. Class teachers are expected to play an active part in monitoring the feeding process. They had to ensure learners go for meals on time, queue and collect food in an orderly manner and complete forms after the feeding process. However, observations showed that class teachers did not have adequate time to monitor the activities because they also had their meals during break time. They endured some levels of harassment from learners who may at times experience shortages of food. Participants responded and said:

*It would be better if our educators were part of the process of feeding the learners so that all learners could get an equal share of food. [LPB3]*

*The time allocated for break is too short because, by this thirty minutes, the educator has to help learners whilst eating and then when they finish the educator does not have enough time to eat. [CTB4]*

*... I think for us teachers, it is burdening because on the other hand, we are supposed to be teaching our learners, and at the same time we have to submit forms to the circuit. We need to make sure that learners have eaten, we are also supposed to have our lunch too and doing all these within thirty minutes is impossible. [PA]*

These citations show that there are challenges during feeding time. Teachers are not helping and that may lead to learners fighting. Teachers consider this programme as another way the government is punishing them by adding more work as they already feel overloaded with their academic duties. They end up not giving adequate support and supervision to learners during break time. The time for feeding is also a serious challenge because thirty minutes is too little compared to the number of learners to be fed. The limited time for feeding tends to affect the periods that come after the feeding process as some learners will still be eating when break time ends. It is, however, difficult to curb social and emotional harm in the feeding process due to the limitations of teachers in psycho-social support skills and the shortage of external professionals such as social workers to visit schools for assistance.<sup>41</sup>

#### **f. The Challenges and Opportunities of Utilising NSNP for Achieving Educational Goals in Rural South African School Settings**

It is common for reports of theft and corruption to be heard regarding the food that should be given to learners. Whilst it is the objective of the government to feed all learners, at times the perception is that the food should be served to children of unemployed parents and orphans. Schools at times do not operate

<sup>39</sup> N Jerome, "Application of the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory; Impacts and Implications on Organizational Culture," *Human Resources and Employee's Performance*, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Ernesto Pollitt, "Does Breakfast Make a Difference in School?," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 95, no. 10 (1995): 1134–39.

<sup>41</sup> Department of Basic Education, *Action Plan to 2014 towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025*.

normally, with some either closing in the early morning of the day or not functioning at all. Rural roads can be impassable at times, more so during the rainy season. This renders it difficult for the delivery trucks to get to schools to supply the needed food to run the feeding programme. Children are reported to suffer from diarrhoea because of feeding activities being conducted in schools that do not have potable water (Government Programs and Policies, 2002).

The real daunting task currently is the maintenance of the momentum of the NSNP in addressing the nutritional and health status of children who attend school. The rollout of the programme nationally is affected by provincial inequalities, especially between urban and rural provinces. The province where this study was conducted is largely rural and most of the learners depend on the NSNP due to disadvantaged family livelihood, and this implies that the ability to provide learners with nutritious meals in a cost-effective manner could be a challenge for some of the schools.

Alderman and Bundy state that school feeding programmes improve school attendance and mental and educational achievement.<sup>42</sup> This programme can help to get learners into school and to be retained. They enhance enrolment and reduce absenteeism which further contribute to their learning. NSNP helps to alleviate hunger and promotes cognitive abilities. In addition, school feeding programmes improve the health of, especially when infused into broad school health and nutrition programmes. Healthy and well-fed children learn better. School feeding and school health and nutrition programmes generally are currently realised as contributing immensely to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All commitment.<sup>43</sup>

The study revealed that school attendance by learners increased as a result of meals which were given to them at school. Participants were asked to express their views on the attendance of learners before and after the implementation of the NSNP. They were unanimous that the introduction of the NSNP led to an increase in school enrolment. Learners regularly attend school with the assurance of getting a meal that assists them in participating in learning activities. Participants said:

*Before the programme learners didn't come to school in large numbers because they were afraid of hunger and the school was also dismissed late, but now because there is food they come to school regularly knowing that they will eat and go home happy.[LPA3]*

*Before this programme, the rate of absenteeism was very high, but with the introduction of this programme, you can see only one or two learners are absent.[PB]*

*Attendance increased since the introduction of the NSNP in 1994. [LPB4]*

The quotes above reveal that school attendance increased due to the introduction of the NSNP. The review of the learners' attendance register revealed indeed that learners were attending school regularly. These are marked every day to show the learners who are present and those absent. The marking must be done by the class teacher in class, verifying by headcount if learners are there or not. The daily feeding register was also used to confirm learner attendance although in this case, the teachers counted only the number of learners who were fed during a meal.

Class teachers, principals and NSNP officers were doing everything within their power to help learners who might not have food to eat during weekends and holidays. They identify needy learners and then give them leftovers so that they may also enjoy the meals whilst on holiday. This encourages learners to always go to school knowing that they are taken care of even during school holidays. These take-home meals provide a direct way for policy-makers to possibly reduce disparities in diet between children from more and less privileged socio-economic backgrounds, which in turn could contribute to reducing differences in educational outcomes.<sup>44</sup> The ability to feed learners from poor homes even during school

<sup>42</sup> Harold Alderman and Donald Bundy, "School Feeding Programs and Development: Are We Framing the Question Correctly?," *The World Bank Research Observer* 27, no. 2 (2012): 204–21.

<sup>43</sup> Sarah Adelman et al., "The Impact of Alternative Food for Education Programs on Learning Achievement and Cognitive Development in Northern Uganda," *Unpublished Manuscript*, 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Belot and James, *Healthy School Meals and Educational Outcomes*.

holidays ensures continuity in the implementation of the NSNP and encourages a sustained effort by learners to engage in school work.

### **Discussion Summary**

The findings revealed that all the stakeholders were aware of the aims and objectives of the establishment of the NSNP by the government. The NSNP programme was found to be beneficial to learners from poorly resourced and disadvantaged homes or backgrounds as it fosters the social and economic development of the communities. It was confirmed that school enrolment, attendance and retention improved significantly with the provision of the NSNP. The provision of school meals motivates learners to participate better academically as they are encouraged to be at school throughout the day. However, there is a need to improve the structures for storing and preparing meals, the actual food preparation and the serving thereof, to achieve desired health standards. Teachers were overloaded with work as they had to complete registration forms, supervise the feeding process and have their meals during break time. There was also evidence from the study that teaching time was eaten into by the NSNP feeding sessions. These challenges however are outweighed by the benefits accrued from the national feeding programme which attracted learners to school and benefited their nutritional needs.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Although it emerged that stakeholders were conversant with the main aim and objectives of the NSNP, namely to support learners from disadvantaged backgrounds to attend school on a full stomach, it was noted from the study that implementation of the feeding scheme met with challenges, especially with regards the hygienic procedures. It is, therefore, recommended that regular assessments by health professionals and workshops be held to improve food storage facilities and handling. As school enrolment, attendance and retention improved significantly with the provision of the NSNP, it is recommended that all rural and township schools be included in the provision of NSNP as these communities are generally poorly resourced. These will make both food and education to be realised as basic human rights, which can be accessed by the majority in South Africa. In terms of curriculum implementation, teachers were found to be overloaded with work as they had to complete NSNP registration forms and supervise the feeding process for learners to have meals during break time. Therefore, there is a need to relieve teachers from NSNP responsibilities by employing staff that is primarily responsible for the feeding scheme so that curriculum implementation is not compromised by the involvement of teachers in the NSNP. The NSNP staff must include health professionals to monitor the quality imperative of the feeding programme.

From this observation, it is recommended that teachers be exempted from this responsibility and personnel should be engaged who are primarily responsible for the administration and actual feeding of learners. The concluding recommendation is that the national Department of Basic Education (DBE) must provide every school with clear guidelines on how the NSNP is to be implemented and all school governing bodies should be trained annually on the guidelines.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has confirmed the importance of the National Schools Nutrition Programme as a key intervention to the social development goal (SDG) of poverty alleviation in rural and poor communities, in terms of improving learner retention and reducing attrition rate. The NSNP should therefore not only be retained but expanded nationally to improve access to and quality of basic education in South Africa. However, to achieve this objective, the Department of Basic Education should design clear guidelines on the administrative roles of the NSNP and all school-based duty bearers such as school managers and school governing body members must be continuously staff-developed to conceptualise and implement the NSNP guidelines. There is a need to relieve teachers from NSNP responsibilities by appointing staff that primarily implement the feeding programme in schools.

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