

MBG Program: Identifying Values of Togetherness and Motivating Elementary School Student Attendance

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ABSTRACT

Free Nutritious Meal Programs generally aim to meet students' nutritional needs and support their learning quality. These programs are often viewed as routine nutritional interventions that unconsciously foster character traits such as greater care and empathy in students. No studies have yet linked culturally and religiously based values of togetherness to changes in student behavior within the context of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG). Therefore, this study was conducted to identify the values of togetherness and student attendance motivation formed through the implementation of the MBG Program in elementary schools. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. Research data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and document review. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, encompassing data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results of the study indicate that the MBG Program has proven effective in enhancing elementary students' learning experiences. The routine of eating together fosters positive social interactions among students, and improved student attendance is evident in the increased consistency of students arriving early to participate in school activities; this behavior is shaped because the program serves as a motivator for students to ensure they do not arrive late.

INTRODUCTION

Ensuring a balanced diet starting in elementary school is a fundamental aspect of supporting children's educational quality (Saavedra & Prentice, 2023). Good nutrition not only serves to maintain physical health but also plays a crucial role in cognitive development, concentration, and memory, which ultimately impact students' academic achievement (Adolphus et al., 2019). The implementation of school meal programs creates a social space that fosters positive interactions among students, such as a sense of togetherness, care, and

solidarity within the learning environment (Neely et al., 2015). Character development in education through shared meals at school has the potential to foster religious values such as gratitude, the habit of sharing, and proper food etiquette, which indirectly strengthen students' moral and spiritual dimensions (Anto et al., 2023). Providing nutritious meals at school is not only a strategy for enhancing human capital from a cognitive perspective but also plays a role in fostering social and religious values that support students' holistic development (Abbas et al., 2024).

Basic education serves as the primary foundation for developing high-quality human resources (Van Hiep, 2021). Empirical evidence from various developing countries, including Indonesia, indicates that low student attendance remains a structural issue that cannot be reduced solely to pedagogical factors but is closely linked to children's health conditions and nutritional status (Angèle et al., 2020). High rates of malnutrition among school-age children significantly impact low attendance rates, leading to decreased academic achievement (Kawafha et al., 2024). Student attendance motivation, as a prerequisite for engagement in the learning process, is a multidimensional construct influenced by complex interactions between biological, psychological, and social factors (Gonzaga & Arellano, 2022) (Haryana et al., 2025). Efforts to improve the quality of basic education that focus solely on instructional interventions become insufficient if not accompanied by the fulfillment of students' basic needs (Masino & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016). School feeding programs which have been globally proven to increase attendance, reduce dropout rates, improve nutritional status and support academic achievement serve as an essential and integrated policy strategy (Kolbe, 2019). The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program is a public policy that is not only oriented toward meeting nutritional needs but also serves as a strategic effort to rebuild student motivation for attendance through the creation of a learning environment that is inclusive, supportive and responsive to students' developmental needs (Thorndike et al., 2022).

The Free Nutritious Food Program (MBG) is an Indonesian government program launched in January 2025 that provides free nutritious meals to students in schools (Abadi et al., 2025). The MBG is a systematic intervention designed to provide free healthy and nutritious meals in elementary schools with the main objective of ensuring that students' daily nutritional needs are met so that they can grow healthily, avoid malnutrition and have enough energy to participate fully in the learning process (Ma et al., 2025). Several previous studies on MBG have highlighted the link between nutritional adequacy, health status, and increased student motivation to learn (Basch, 2011; Binyang, 2025; Yamin et al., 2025). Basch (2011) Explaining that the Free Nutritious Meals program contributes significantly to improving the quality of student learning through two main dimensions, namely physical health and learning motivation. In terms of health, MBG is able to improve students' physical condition by increasing their endurance and concentration and reducing drowsiness, which often disrupts the learning process. Adequate nutritional support strengthens students' readiness to actively participate in learning activities, while also potentially improving their nutritional status in a sustainable manner.

Wasehudin et al. (2024) explains that the practice of eating together in class plays an important role in strengthening character education, particularly through the development of manners and social ethics, thereby highlighting the social dimension and values of togetherness that arise naturally in daily interactions between students. Fontanilla (2023)

showed that the Free Nutritious Food Program (MBG) was able to significantly improve student concentration and attendance during the learning process, confirming the role of this program as an intervention that not only supports physical health but also influences academic engagement. Hayes et al. (2018) This program is not only oriented towards meeting nutritional needs, but also towards strengthening social values such as togetherness, responsibility, and care among school members. Dilger (2017) emphasize that the internalization of socio-religious values through routine school activities can shape students' moral dispositions more sustainably than conventional instructional approaches.

The practice of eating together cannot be separated from cultural dimensions and religious values that have historically been the foundation for character building in Indonesian society. A number of studies show that religious values such as gratitude, sharing, and caring for others, which are internalized through the ritual of eating together, have a positive correlation with the formation of children's social character (Mujahid, 2021). In Islamic tradition, for example, the concepts of ta'awun (mutual assistance) and ukhuwah (brotherhood) instilled through the habit of eating together collectively have been proven to strengthen social bonds and empathy among students (Na et al., 2025). The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) has been proven effective in reducing stunting and malnutrition rates, improving physical resilience, and reducing student absenteeism due to health problems (Shinde et al., 2025). Therefore, access to nutritious food at school contributes to improved concentration, learning motivation, and academic achievement, thereby strengthening the role of this program in developing healthy and productive human resources (Alcantara & Fronteras, 2024)

Based on the results of studies and analyses of previous research, the focus has been on health and academic aspects, while social and psychological dimensions have not been studied extensively. There is a gap in research focusing on the value of togetherness formed through shared meals and its influence on student attendance motivation. The implementation of shared meals in the MBG Program has not been integrated with the reinforcement of social values. These activities are seen merely as a routine for fulfilling nutritional needs without any habits that foster values of togetherness, cooperation, and mutual respect. In addition, teachers' attention is focused on technical supervision, such as discipline and cleanliness, so that the potential of this activity as an educational tool for building empathy and mutual cooperation has not been optimally utilized. These conditions emphasize the need for research that examines the value of togetherness and its influence on student attendance motivation. Therefore, this study is novel in that it highlights the relationship between social values and attendance motivation in the context of the MBG program in elementary schools. This study aims to identify the values of togetherness formed through the implementation of the MBG program in elementary schools and to analyze the program's influence on student motivation to attend learning activities.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive analysis method based on a school case study. Qualitative research is a research method based on a naturalistic paradigm with the aim of understanding phenomena in depth through the collection of non-numerical data in the form of words, texts, or images, which are then analyzed to reveal the meaning, patterns, and characteristics of the objects being studied (Haki et al., 2024). The

qualitative descriptive approach aims to describe and explain phenomena in depth through direct observation of field conditions based on empirical facts (Novianti, 2023). The study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the MBG Program and its impact on students' sense of community and motivation to attend school, as conducted at SDN 3 Mataram, Mataram City, in October 2025. The selection of the research location was based on the consideration that this school was one of the first elementary schools to implement the MBG program, thereby allowing the researcher to obtain more comprehensive data regarding the dynamics of program implementation and changes in student behavior over a relatively longer period compared to other schools. The research subjects consisted of 10 informants selected using purposive sampling, namely the principal (KS), Class Teachers (GK), Homeroom Teachers (WK), two parents (OTS), and five fifth-grade students (S). The selection of informants was based on their direct involvement in the implementation of the MBG program and their relevance in providing in-depth information related to the research focus

Data collection was conducted using three main techniques: observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observations focused on the implementation of the MBG program, social interactions among students during shared meals, and the role of teachers in fostering a sense of community. Interviews were conducted in person with all informants using a flexibly structured interview guide to elicit in-depth information, with an average duration of 20–30 minutes per informant. Documentation was used as supporting data in the form of photographs of activities relevant to the program's implementation. The research flow is shown in Figure 1.

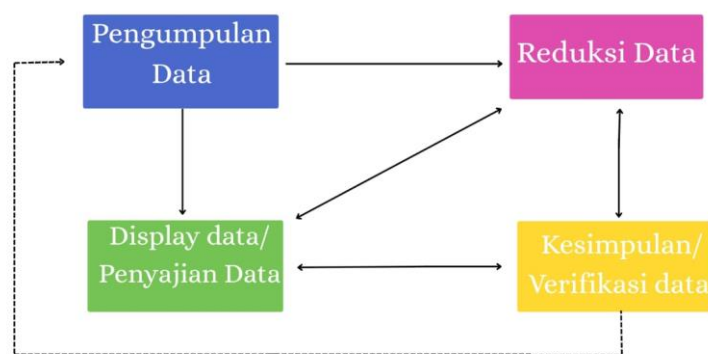


Figure 1. Data analysis components (Miles and Hubberman)

Figure 1 shows the Miles and Huberman analysis research process, which explains that there are four types of activities in data analysis, namely data collection, data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions (Munawaroh et al., 2022). In Phase (1) of data collection, the researcher conducted a literature review to examine previous studies related to the MBG program, the value of togetherness, and student attendance motivation, and collected field data through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to monitor program implementation, social interactions among students during shared meals, and the teacher's role in fostering a sense of togetherness. Interviews were conducted with the school principal, classroom teachers, homeroom teachers, parents, and students to obtain comprehensive and contextual data, while documentation including

photos of activities and school records served as supporting data. All data obtained were then transcribed and organized as material for analysis. Next, in stage (2) of data reduction, the researcher conducted a systematic coding process that included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding involved identifying and labeling relevant data units from the results of interviews, observations, and documentation. Next, axial coding was performed by grouping these codes into categories based on shared meanings and relationships between concepts, such as social interaction, camaraderie, and motivation for attendance. The selective coding stage involved integrating these categories into main themes that represent the research focus. In stage (3) of data presentation (data display), the analysis results are presented in the form of narrative descriptions and thematic tables to clarify patterns, relationships, and connections between categories, thereby facilitating data interpretation. Next, stage (4), drawing conclusions, is carried out by interpreting the findings based on the patterns and themes that have emerged, as well as conducting continuous verification through rechecking data in the field and comparing sources.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program in Support of the Education System

The research findings indicate that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at the elementary school level has been systematically integrated into the school's daily routine and aligned with the academic schedule. Based on interviews with school principals, mealtime is conducted as a structured activity in the morning, specifically after literacy activities, and lasts approximately 15–20 minutes before classes begin. *GK The principal stated that the meal activity is conducted after literacy activities, after which students eat breakfast together before continuing the learning process, and the entire process is always under teacher supervision.* In the implementation of the MBG program, all classroom teachers are directly involved in supervising students' meal activities, including arranging seating and ensuring the distribution of food proceeds orderly. *As KS explained all teachers monitor the eating process in the classroom, and some teachers are specifically assigned to oversee food distribution.* Additionally, the program has received positive feedback from parents, particularly because it has reduced student tardiness caused by waiting for breakfast at home. An overview of the MBG program's implementation is shown in Figure 2



Figure 2. Implementation of the MBG Program

Source: Personal document, 2025

Figure 2 illustrates that the success of this program's implementation heavily depends on stakeholder engagement, which is a crucial component in supporting the program's effectiveness. Scheduling meal times in alignment with literacy activities reflects an educational management approach that prioritizes a balance between meeting students' physiological needs and optimizing learning time. The implementation of the MBG program at SDN 3 Mataram demonstrates that the program's success is built upon several key elements: structured time management, collaborative engagement among stakeholders, and integration with learning activities. The active involvement of teachers as direct supervisors indicates that this program is not merely administrative but is integrated into pedagogical practices within the school environment. This aligns with the view that school-based nutrition programs can function as part of an integrative educational strategy that supports students' readiness to learn and their engagement in the learning process. On the other hand, positive parental feedback and a reduction in student tardiness indicate that this program also serves as a social support mechanism that strengthens the relationship between the school environment and the family.

SDN 3 Mataram does not merely use the MBG program as a nutritional intervention it has adopted it as an institutional strategy to create a structured and conducive learning environment from the very start of the school day. Integrating meal times into the formal schedule helps foster students' discipline, regularity, and readiness to learn. The effectiveness of this program's implementation heavily depends on consistent teacher supervision and the sustainability of collaboration among stakeholders. Without continuous coordination and monitoring, the integration of nutrition provision and the educational process risks not functioning optimally. Although this program demonstrates potential as an educational innovation, systematic management and ongoing evaluation are necessary to ensure its impact is not merely procedural but also makes a tangible contribution to improving students' readiness and participation in learning.

Strengthening the Value of Togetherness through Shared Meals

Shared meals in the MBG program serve as a natural, routine, and inclusive space for social interaction among students. Based on interviews with homeroom teachers, changes in students' social interaction patterns were observed after the program was implemented. GK *noted that daily interactions have become more evident; students help one another and demonstrate positive social behavior, and mealtime routines are no longer conducted individually in the cafeteria as they were before.* Prosocial behavior also emerges spontaneously, as described by WK, *who noted that students who were late in getting their food were helped by their peers without being told to do so, and that there is a habit of waiting for friends before starting to eat together.* Supporting activities such as praying together and cleaning the classroom after eating further strengthened collective social interactions. KS *also emphasized that these activities encouraged students to interact without social barriers and strengthened friendships in a more equal atmosphere.* Furthermore, the process of students eating together unconsciously fosters character development, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Eating Together
Source: Personal document, 2025

Figure 3 illustrates the implementation of shared meals in the MBG program, which not only serves to meet students' physiological needs but also makes a significant contribution to the development of their social and emotional aspects. Through in-depth observation, the MBG program indicates that shared meal activities contribute to the formation of a sense of togetherness through three main aspects: repeated social interaction, the cultivation of collective behavior, and the contextual internalization of character values. Routine interactions allow students to develop empathy, care, and the ability to cooperate through direct experience. Habits such as waiting one's turn, helping peers and maintaining cleanliness reflect the natural development of self-regulation and social awareness. These findings align with previous research indicating that collective activities in the school environment, such as eating together, can strengthen social cohesion, a sense of belonging and students' interpersonal skills (Veerman & Denessen, 2021) (Ziegler et al., 2020). Teachers' involvement in managing the dining atmosphere further reinforces the role of these activities as part of character education practices integrated into daily school life.

The shared meals organized through the MBG program serve as a means of fostering students' social character and reinforcing religious values, which are reflected in the values of togetherness, empathy, and cooperation, thereby strengthening solidarity among students. The positive emotional atmosphere during these meals also boosts students' self-confidence and comfort in interacting within the school environment. The success of reinforcing these values of togetherness is heavily influenced by the active role of teachers in managing interactions and creating a conducive environment. Without consistent guidance, the potential of this activity as a vehicle for social learning may diminish. SDN 3 Mataram maintains the shared meals activity within the MBG program as part of a non-formal educational strategy that supports the development of collective character as well as a collaborative and inclusive school culture.

The Role of Free Nutritious Meal Programs in Attendance Motivation

Many students go to school without having eaten breakfast, due to various factors ranging from waking up late to disliking the breakfast their mothers prepare at home. Hunger causes weakness, mild headaches, and a lack of concentration, leading children to be reluctant to go to school or to arrive late. The implementation of the MBG program has brought about changes in the form of increased motivation regarding attendance and punctuality among students. Based on an interview with KS, *before the MBG program was implemented, some students often arrived late because they had to wait for breakfast at home, preventing them from fully participating in the morning literacy activities.* However, after the program was

implemented, a significant behavioral change occurred, as noted by OTS, *who mentioned that the children became more eager to leave for school earlier so as not to miss the shared meal.* This was further supported by *WK's statement explaining that students began to demonstrate more proactive behavior in preparing themselves before lessons began; in fact, some students arrived early so they could participate in the entire sequence of activities, from literacy sessions to the shared meal.* The students' condition after breakfast also showed an improvement in readiness for learning, such as being more focused, less sleepy, and more enthusiastic about participating in the first lesson.

The MBG program influences student attendance at SDN 3 Mataram by fostering structured habits implemented in the morning before the first class begins. This encourages students to arrive at school earlier, ensuring that all students can participate in the literacy activities scheduled for the morning and supporting their readiness to learn following the MBG session. The routine meal activity scheduled after literacy creates a behavioral pattern that encourages students to arrive on time or even earlier. Additionally, the sense of togetherness during shared meals serves as a social stimulus that strengthens students' intrinsic motivation to attend school not merely out of obligation, but because of the enjoyable social experience. This finding aligns with previous research stating that the availability of breakfast at school significantly influences improvements in students' punctuality and participation in learning activities (Ogum et al., 2020). Meeting students' physiological needs enhances concentration and engagement in learning, so this program impacts not only attendance but also the quality of student participation in class. The morning literacy activity prior to the MBG session is shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Literacy Activities

Source: Personal document, 2025

Figure 4 shows a 20 minute literacy activity conducted by all students at SDN 3 Mataram prior to the MBG session. The consistent implementation of this program has helped foster a school culture that prioritizes punctuality as part of the students' learning ethos. Building sustained discipline and motivation regarding student attendance, as well as the behavioral changes that occur, are not driven solely by formal school rules but develop through the internalization of values formed by meaningful collective habits and experiences. The implementation of the MBG program, which is scheduled to be carried out together, not only becomes a daily routine but also functions as a social stimulus that encourages students' active involvement in school life. The sustainability of these positive impacts heavily depends on the consistency of program implementation and support from all school stakeholders. Therefore, proper management is essential to ensure that the MBG program not only increases attendance quantitatively but also strengthens the quality of student engagement and readiness for learning in the long term, thereby transforming the quality of education in Indonesia.

Program Effectiveness Regarding Teachers' Roles and Parental Involvement

Key factors in the elementary education system are the pedagogical role of teachers and the level of parental involvement. The effectiveness of the MBG Program in enhancing character education regarding the value of togetherness and reducing student tardiness is not linear and cannot be attributed solely to a single variable. This effectiveness only reaches its optimal point when teachers and parents collaborate to support the program's sustainability. As stated by KS, *during the program's implementation, there were no significant challenges, particularly for students, as the eating process was always monitored by the classroom teacher*. The obstacles that arose were primarily technical in nature, such as ensuring that eating utensils were not lost, which falls under the school's responsibility. Furthermore, in interviews, classroom teachers stated that this program has a direct impact on students' readiness to learn. GK remarked *Students are better prepared to receive lessons because they have already had breakfast, and their physical condition is more stable, so they no longer need to sneak out to the cafeteria when the teacher is not in the classroom*. From the parents' perspective, the program also offers practical benefits, such as reducing the burden of preparing breakfast in the morning. A parent (OTS) *noted that the program is very helpful because the child receives more varied and nutritious meals, so as a parent, I no longer worry if the child leaves home without breakfast*. These findings indicate the involvement of multiple stakeholders supporting the program's successful implementation. Teachers actively monitor, motivate, and report. Meanwhile, parents have concrete incentives to support their children's attendance. When these two groups work in sync, students especially those from vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds receive motivational support from both directions simultaneously, substantially reducing the likelihood of tardiness.

The program's effectiveness extends beyond students to have a broad impact on the educational ecosystem by strengthening the role of teachers and parental involvement. It fosters a more conducive learning environment, improves classroom management efficiency, and builds more structured family support for children's readiness to learn. Sustaining the program's effectiveness requires consistent management, particularly in addressing technical challenges and maintaining high-quality coordination among all stakeholders. Without sustainable management, the potential for collaboration between schools and parents may diminish. The MBG program needs to be continuously developed as an educational strategy to strengthen the partnership between schools and families in supporting the success of the educational process.

The MBG program is designed to improve the quality of education by providing balanced nutritious meals for students. This program not only has an impact on nutritional fulfillment, but also has a positive influence on attendance motivation, discipline, and the quality of student social interactions that take place in a structured and consistent manner. Theoretically, the effectiveness of this program's implementation can be explained through the Whole School Approach, which emphasizes that educational success is the result of synergy among all school components in creating a comprehensive supportive learning environment (Langford et al., 2015). Based on this theory, effective educational strategies do not only focus on academic aspects, but also pay attention to supporting factors such as physical health, emotional well-being, and student social interaction.

The MBG program fosters a sense of togetherness through regular daily meals. This activity encourages students to interact positively with one another, creating a more

harmonious classroom atmosphere and strengthening bonds between students. These findings are in line with Whiting et al. (2022) which shows that eating together can strengthen social bonds and a sense of belonging within the learning community. In addition to strengthening social relationships, these routine activities also create a more supportive and orderly school environment. It is these repeated positive experiences that motivate students to attend school, as they feel a sense of closeness, comfort, and continuous involvement that supports the creation of a quality learning environment.

CONCLUSION

The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) has proven to serve not only as a nutritional intervention but also as an integrative educational strategy that contributes to improving the quality of the learning experience for elementary school students. Integrating shared meal activities into the school routine can strengthen readiness for learning, foster discipline and motivation for attendance, and encourage positive social interaction through a structured habituation process. This study emphasizes the perspective that programs based on meeting students' basic needs can function as a pedagogical medium in character building and social-emotional development, thereby broadening the scope of previous research that focused primarily on health and academic achievement alone.

This study underscores the importance of incorporating the MBG program into sustainable educational policies and integrating it into the learning system. Strengthening implementation requires standardizing program management, enhancing teachers' roles as facilitators of social learning, and strengthening collaboration between schools and parents. Continuous evaluation is necessary to ensure that the program not only operates administratively but also has a tangible impact on students' readiness to learn, character development, and participation. The MBG program has the potential to become a model for educational policy that supports the holistic and sustainable development of student quality.

As a direction for future research, a more comprehensive study is needed on the sustainability of the MBG program, particularly in the context of food safety, which has been a major concern in recent times. New studies could focus on ingredient quality standards, distribution processes, and hygiene control mechanisms in the provision of MBG menus. In addition, it is also important to explore the possibility of integrating the MBG program with nutrition education and healthy lifestyle habits, so that more comprehensive recommendations can be made for policy development and improvement of program implementation quality in the future.

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