

Investigating the Impact of School Feeding Program on Reducing Students' Absenteeism: The Case of Ruhango District, Rwanda

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Abstract: The School Feeding Program (SFP) plays a significant role in attaining Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality education) by effectively tackling hunger and malnutrition, which severely impede school attendance and academic achievement, particularly in rural regions such as Ruhango District, Rwanda. This study investigates the impact of the SFP on reducing students' absenteeism in Ruhango District, Rwanda. The research focuses on three main objectives: analysing the influence of SFP on students' attendance, identifying challenges in SFP implementation, and assessing the role that community and local government played in enhancing SFP effectiveness. This study employed a qualitative method. Data were acquired via questionnaires and document analysis, with a total sample size of 86 participants, including 60 students, 12 teachers, 10 parents, and 4 head teachers. Questionnaires offered extensive information about stakeholders' experiences and views of SFP, while document analysis augmented data collected from official publishing reports. Data was analyzed using theme analysis to uncover relevant patterns and insights from qualitative replies. Furthermore, simple statistical techniques in SPSS were used to create figures and tables that depicted descriptive frequencies and percentages. The findings reveal that SFP significantly improves students' attendance, academic performance, and social well-being. However, the study also identified key obstacles, including infrastructure constraints, limited food diversity, low parental engagement, and chefs' limited culinary skills. To ensure the long-term viability and efficacy of SFP, key recommendations include increased funding, expanded infrastructure such as dining halls, and enhanced parental participation.

Keywords: School Feeding Program, students' absenteeism, Impact, Rwanda.

1. INTRODUCTION

A mediocre feeding reputation in young people reduces psychological and physical wellness, which worsens learning outcomes (Zailani et al., 2023). Meals provided to children in school assist in reducing absenteeism and increasing attendance. Students' absences have been shown to have several negative impacts on their academic performance. School feeding program (SFP) in least developed countries, mainly in sub-Saharan countries, help children from vulnerable families study more and keep their well-being by providing healthy meals at their educational institutions (Mohammed et al., 2023a).

Since 2019, the Government of Rwanda has initiated a school feeding program to enhance enrolment and reduce absenteeism. This is done in alignment with the National Strategy for Transformation (NST1), and the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP 2018/19- 2023/2024) (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Both NST1 and ESSP were established in correspondence with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), number four; **Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.** (Walsh et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, despite the Rwandan government's best efforts to promote equitable and inclusive schooling for all Rwandans, some schools, particularly those with day-school programs, face obstacles in the efficient implementation of this policy. Some of those challenges are poor parent and teacher participation. The inclusion of teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in the decision on the school feeding program allows them to be mindful of the program's impact on their children's education. (Lichtenberg, 2021). Hence, their participation in implementation rises.

In many regions worldwide, particularly in low and middle-income countries like Rwanda, students' absenteeism poses a significant barrier to educational attainment and overall academic performance. Various factors contribute to this persistent issue, including poverty, food insecurity, health concerns, and lack of motivation. School feeding program has leaked out as a potential intervention to address these challenges by providing students with regular meals, which can improve nourishment and overall well-being. However, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the true extent to which school feeding program impacts students' absenteeism.

Absenteeism of Students from class remains a major issue in Rwanda's rural communities, particularly the Ruhango district. Food scarcity and malnutrition are major contributors to this problem, limiting students' capacity to be present at school consistently. This study will find a practical approach to ensure that students continuously attend school. The concentration on the Ruhango district provides a comprehensive grasp of the local concerns, ensuring that the findings are immediately helpful for the community. Ruhango's insights can help duplicate the successful components of these programs across different districts or nations possessing comparable socioeconomic conditions. This research is also linked to international programs such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically **SDGs Two (Zero Hunger) and Four (Quality Education)**, which aim to promote equal and accessible schooling for children, particularly those from low-income families.

Findings can inform policymakers about the efficacy of SFP, guiding decisions on funding and program implementation. Establishing a clear connection between SFP and absenteeism may serve as a framework for further research into other interventions aimed at improving students' attendance and overall school performance.

1.1 Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between the presence of a school feeding program and students' absenteeism in primary and secondary schools?
2. What are the key factors or challenges hindering the successful implementation of school feeding program in rural settings?
3. How can community involvement and local government policies affect the effectiveness of the school feeding program?

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To analyse the impact of the school feeding program on students' attendance.
2. To identify challenges that schools face in the implementation of the school feeding program.
3. To assess the effect of community involvement and local government on the school feeding program's effectiveness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of School Feeding Program (SFP) in Rwanda

The school feeding program involves providing meals to children in the school context to boost presence, enrollments, overall health, and academic achievements (Smalley, 2023). Many years ago, the school feeding program reflected a global commitment to improving students' nutrition, education, and social welfare. The National Comprehensive School Feeding Policy (NCSFP) in Rwanda was ratified in 2019. This policy of SFP aligns with the implementation of the National Strategy for Transformation (NST1) and the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP 2018/19-2023/2024).

School feeding program has been an important measure of the Rwandan government's strategy to deal with children's hunger during school hours, foster Rwanda's skilled workforce foundation, and increase possibilities for learning, particularly those underprivileged children from low-income families (Ministry of Education, 2021).

2.2 Theoretical Foundation

This study was grounded in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a psychological theory, advocates that human motivation based on a hierarchy of needs, often portrayed as a pyramid that has five levels. According to Hopper (2020), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is classified as follows: **Physiological Needs:** These are the necessities for human being, including food, water, breathing, shelter, clothing, sleeping, and sexual reproduction. **Safety Needs:** These include health, family, employment, and social ability. **Love and Belongingness:** This level involves friendships, intimacy, and a sense of connection. **Self-esteem Needs:** These involve confidence, achievement, and the respect of others. Finally, **Self-actualization** is the desire to achieve one's potential, acceptance, and engagement in creative activities. Among these needs, eating is one of the crucial physiological needs so that students can concentrate on their daily scholastic work (Tikkanen, 2009). SFP addresses physiological needs by providing food, which can lead to improved attendance, since students are not skipping school because of hunger.

2.3 The Relationship between Students' Needs and Their Absenteeism

School feeding program meet students' physiological needs by offering healthy food. Young people who fail to get sufficient nourishment are in danger of delayed development in both the brain and body (Atari et al., n.d.). If students do not have access to appropriate nutrition, their ability to concentrate and study decreases. Linked to Safety Needs, Absenteeism might result from hazardous living conditions or food shortages at home. During periods of food shortage in families, students may attend school but with poor motivation. When there is an issue of inadequate food in households, children tend to get diverted attention in class, and cooperation with their classmates reduces (Shankar et al., 2017). SFP can help to provide a secure and dependable atmosphere in which student feel certain that they will get something to eat. Feeling cared for at school might increase a students' feeling of comfort. Hence, he/she is inspired to attend school regularly. In terms of Love and Belongingness, SFP in school setting can promote feelings of unity and belonging. Sharing meals can foster social relationships among learners alongside teachers, strengthening their bond within the school milieu. This greater sense of relationship may motivate students to attend frequently. Besides, Students reinforced by SFP might notice improvements in their academic achievement and social connections. Excellence with schoolwork boosts students' self-esteem and sense of accomplishment, motivating them to keep going to school. Even though few people are thought to achieve the state of self-actualization, on the contrary, we can all have times of greatest experiences (Hopper, 2020). Therefore, students who highly focus on their learning, creativity, and personal development, under the support of SFP can partially feel a sense of self-actualization.

Moreover, SFP encourages students' retention mainly among adolescents and prevents parents from withdrawing their children from school (World Food Programme (WFP), 2023). This is because even the students feel strongly motivated and energetic to accomplish their daily schoolwork. Regular school meals offer an effective motivation to increase academic enrolment and attendance, lowering absenteeism and rates of abandonment (MINEDUC, 2019). This constant attendance gradually leads to better academic achievement. Furthermore, the comparative study done by Mohammed et al. (2023b) in Ethiopia, demonstrated that the SFP acts as a mechanism for reducing school absenteeism, mostly among adolescent students attracted by the presence of improved nutritious meals at school.

2.4 Challenges for the effective implementation of SFP in Rwanda

2.4.1 Funding Challenges

Inadequate Government Budget Allocation: Though the government makes vivid plans for SFP, the study done by Wineman et al. (2022) indicated that there is insufficiency and unexpected budgets problem related to supply chain which are common in most African countries, including Rwanda. This is because the government has more financial responsibilities to fulfill, and there may be competition in prioritizing financial resource allocation. Besides, SFP may cause reliance on foreign financing or food aid, rendering them unsustainable in the long run if local capacity is not established.

Sumberg & Sabates-Wheeler (2011) contended that unless there is local ownership and capacity building, SFP risks becoming ineffective and reliant on foreign help. This hinders the effective implementation of the desired goal of the SFP.

Inflation and rising food costs: According to Lakatos (2014), the most significant impacts of inflation are the misallocation of resources and increases in food prices. That is why with increased prices, schools may choose less healthful meal options. Furthermore, most of the time, government budgets do not rise in tandem with inflation, and resources set aside for feeding program at schools may be insufficient. This reduces meal quality, and a fixed quantity per student gets smaller at some schools.

Infrastructure hindrances: According to the World Food Programme (WFP,2020), poor road conditions and insufficient transportation facilities in rural areas hinder the accurate distribution of food supplies to schools in developing countries. Some schools struggle to preserve the safety and quality of their food supplies due to inadequate storage facilities, which causes food to spoil, particularly during holidays. This is similar to the research undertaken by Wineman et al. (2022), which demonstrated that in most African countries, foodstuff spoilage in storage and damage during transportation is widespread.

In addition, in some rural schools, there is the problem of limited access to pure water and basic sanitation makes washing food and utensils difficult, raising hygiene concerns that can jeopardize the program's success in preparing food and consumption. Furthermore, lack of designated eating areas (dining rooms) necessitates extra time to prepare the classroom before starting afternoon studies (Dieu et al., 2023). Thus, some teaching and learning periods get lost because students are busy mopping and sweeping the classrooms.

2.4.2 Implementation Challenges

Poor parent intervention: In many developing countries, parents frequently play a critical role in funding for SFP. In the schools where parents do not fully participate, there is a struggle to raise the necessary funds. The Rwandan government offers a subsidy for school food for nursery children, elementary students, and secondary grades students (MINEDUC, 2019). However, still, there is an issue whereby some parents do not contribute to SFP on time. Moreover, there is challenges related to limited parental involvement and cultural misalignment. When families rarely participate in school activities, schools struggle to transfer parents' expected roles, and students' needs may remain unsatisfactorily addressed. In some cases, the food offered does not reflect local dietary preferences or cultural norms. As Lichtenberg (2021) notes, ignoring local customs can weaken program efficiency.

Quality of food and Safety: World Food Programme (WFP, 2020) emphasized that ensuring food safety and nutritional quality is a constant problem, especially in areas with inadequate resources. This issue is common in sub-Saharan countries. In addition, some schools' nutrition staff, including school cooks, who lack training in safe food procurement, preparation, and delivery. This result in inappropriate handling and preparation, thereby threatening the quality of food.

Limited food variety: There is a tiny variety of foods available at school. In most African countries, cereals and oils are the dominant foods; cereals occupy ninety nine percent and oils ninety, with few dairy products (Wineman et al., 2022). This limits menu options and makes it difficult to fulfill each student's different dietary demands and preferences, especially those with food-related health conditions.

2.5 Community and local government policies' effect on SFP success

Rwanda's SFP also aimed at creating a secure and predictable market for local farmers by increasing demand for local food products (MINEDUC, 2019). It is through this regard that local communities can provide nutritious food from their farms through a home-grown school feeding program, which not only assures fresh foods for school meals but also boosts the prosperity of local farmers, particularly in rural areas where access to the market is problematic (Mensah, 2018). To eliminate barriers that some parents face regarding food given to their children, parents must be involved in menu designing action so that their children will get a meal that is culturally relevant and customized to them. In addition, Local government must provide adequate funding for SFP to ensure consistency and quality. Local government also establishes explicit rules that serve as frameworks for program execution, including meal quality, and delivery methods. The government-led mechanism of monitoring and evaluation of SFP creates sustainability (Report & Goals, 2016).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in Ruhango district, located in Rwanda's Southern Province, This research employed a qualitative approach. Using qualitative methodology enables researchers to gain truthful study findings because it allows the researcher to get authentic ideas from certain socioeconomic categories (Ugwu, Chinyere, N; Eze Val, 2017). The government reports, particularly from the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) of Rwanda have been contemplated to get an in-depth view about the role of government in the implementation of SFP throughout the country. The review of the literature has been employed to get insight into how improved nutrition from SFP affects students' ability to attend school and how community involvement and local government policies affect the effective implementation of SFP. Purposive sampling was utilized to choose schools that had adopted SFP. Within these schools, key informants (school principals, teachers, and students) have been identified based on their wealth of knowledge and experience.

The target population for this study consists of primary and secondary school teachers, secondary school students, and school principals/ head teachers from public schools. The sample size for this study consists of 10 parents, 60 students, 12 teachers, and 4 school principals/head teachers, sampled from four schools in Ruhango District. This study had 86 participants in total. To collect data, through electronic communication media such as WhatsApp and email, well-crafted closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires were used, with wording that is easily understandable for participants. According to Kirkless (2014), A questionnaire is an instrument for gathering information about a certain topic of interest, which comprises typical, logically structured questions.

To guarantee validity and reliability in this study, the researcher cautiously developed data collection methods that reflected the study's objective. To analyse data, thematic analysis was utilized to examine the acquired data. Thematic analysis is a very valuable qualitative data analysis method since it often splits texts based on themes, codes tiny pieces, and then aggregates them (Rosairo, 2023). Moreover, the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software was employed to generate descriptive statistics, including frequency and percentage tables and figures.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Perceived connection between SFP and students' absenteeism in schools

Participants' responses indicate that giving daily meals to students improves school attendance, punctuality, and participation.

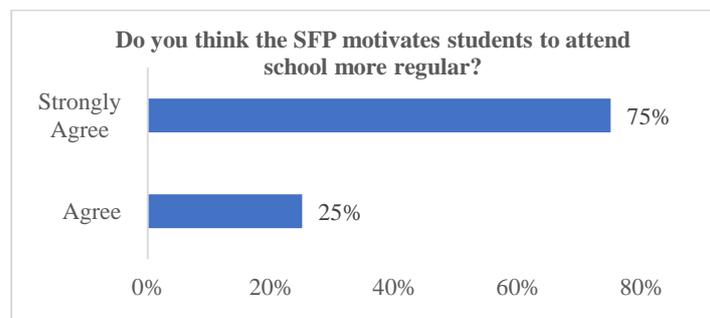


Figure 4.1 SFP's relationship to attendance: Principals' perception

As shown above in Figure 4.1, the majority of school principals/head teachers feel that the SFP has a major and beneficial influence on students' attendance. In addition, the school feeding program is thought to have a substantial favorable influence on students' academic performance by reducing hunger-related absenteeism and boosting students' concentration and participation in class. Teachers remarked that meals given at school assist students stay focused and energized, resulting in increased involvement as well as a decrease in hunger-related distraction in classes. Teacher X noted, "*Food given at school helps students stay energetic and contribute more actively to class activities.*" Besides, SFP considerably improves students' well-being, which may lead to increased school attendance and decreased absence. Teachers and school principals have noticed that students who previously suffered from hunger-related weariness tend to be increasingly active, engaged, and attentive in their studies. Teacher W pointed out, "*Because of the school feeding program, we do not see more cases of students feeling weak or leaving school early due to hunger-related issues.*" Moreover, meal time at school promote interpersonal relationships, working together, and a feeling of community among students, resulting in a friendlier and encouraging learning environment.

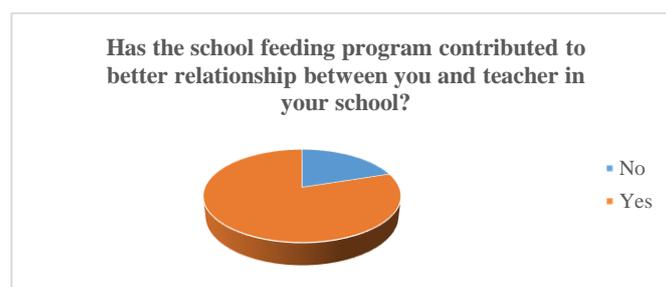


Figure 4.2 SFP's function in teacher-student relationships: Students' responses

This high proportion of reported benefits indicates that, for the majority of students, the availability of meals at school has led to more pleasant interactions and stronger connections with teachers.

4.2 Threat to the Implementation of SFP in Rural Settings

This study demonstrates that a large percentage of parents in the Ruhango district, Rwanda do not provide full support to their children's education, which has a negative impact. Financial issues are a major cause of poor parental participation. Because of this economic instability, some parents fail to support the SFP as required. A head teacher C in Ruhango district remarked, *"Some parents are ready to financially assist the program, but they have little money to contribute due to poverty."* Findings showed that low educational level among parents is coupled with low family planning adoption among rural parents. In many rural communities of Ruhango district, families with many children often face financial hardships, as their limited income must be stretched across multiple dependents. Student Q mentioned, *"The school feeding challenged my parents because every semester they spend the money for school feeding to me and to my three young brothers."* As a result, parents prioritize immediate household needs, such as food, healthcare, and shelter, leaving little or no disposable income to contribute to SFP. Most of day schools in Ruhango district challenged by lack of designated dining areas, requiring students to eat in their classrooms and sit on desks that have not been designed for eating. This circumstance presents various challenges, including a lack of cleanliness and sanitation, as well as the difficulty of successfully organizing meal delivery. Student D noted, *"The challenge is to use the classroom as a refectory, this affects us in cleaning because the sauces dirt our notebooks and disorder inside the classroom."*

In addition, the access to safe and adequate water is required for the successful operation of school feeding programs. However, some schools in the Ruhango district suffer major challenges of a lack of reliable water sources. A teacher E stated, *"The challenges observed are to miss clean water specifically in summer time and..."* This constraint has an impact on several areas of meal preparation, cleanliness, and overall program efficiency, particularly during the dry season. Besides, shortage of qualified cooks is a significant barrier to the implementation of SFP in distant regions. According to the participants, the school cooks have no formal experience in food preparation or sanitary requirements. The student M evidenced this, by noting that, *"the challenge is recruiting unskilled cooks who do not know to prepare well food."* The shortage of qualified cooks sometimes resulted in improperly cooked meals, thus reducing both the dietary value and the flavor of the food that affects students' willingness to consume school-provided meals. Furthermore, repetitive menus (e.g., maize and beans) and insufficient animal products (milk, eggs) reduced nutritional quality.

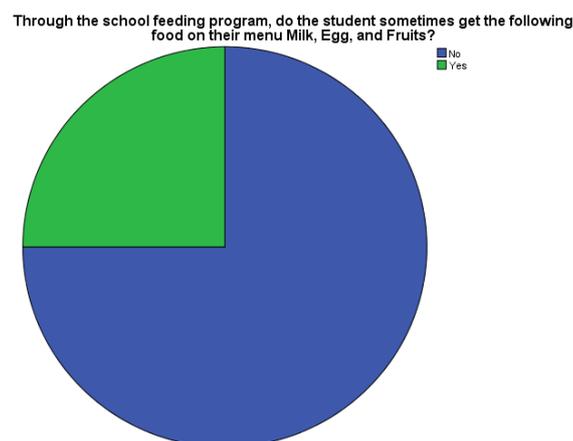


Figure 4.3 Head teacher's replies on SFP's menu items (Milk, eggs, and fruits)

As shown in Figure 4.3 above, students do not receive enough animal products and vitamins from fruits. This minimal food diversity reduces parental motivation to contribute to school feeding, as their children frequently present problem of repetitive menus. Moreover, shortages of enough foodstuff, forcing schools to lower lunch servings. A parent F noted, *"The challenge we are facing is the insufficient quantity of food given to our children"*. The teacher highlighted *"food shortage to some students during lunch hour"* and student K, mentioned, *"Because of the small quantity of meals we do not satisfy, so this affects us in our studying."* As highlighted by the majority of the teachers, 66.7% of them noted that there are logistic issues such as food shortages that affect the smooth running of the school feeding program.

Table 4.1 Teachers' responses on logistic issues affecting the SFP

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	4	33.3	33.3	33.3
	YES	8	66.7	66.7	100.0
Total		12	100.0	100.0	

Above all, the problem of lack of special dietary meals for students with health issues poses a significant difficulty in the accomplishment of SFP in rural areas. Little attention given to students with unique dietary requirements has a detrimental impact on their health, school attendance, and general well-being. Students with food allergies frequently eat almost nothing at all. This is because most school lunches consist of beans and maize. Student K noted, "*Sometimes students who have health problems don't have a way that supports them to get favourable meals for a better living.*"

4.3 Local government and community role in SFP implementation

The difficulties in collecting contributions from parents frequently result in food shortages or disruptions in meal distribution, significantly harming students' access to regular meals at school. Students themselves underlined the need for stronger awareness efforts for sensitizing parents on the positive effects of school food programs. As student M remarked, "*Government should always teach our parents about importance of school feeding fees to pay on time.*" In addition, fostering community self-reliance is critical to sustaining the long-term viability of SFP. Mobilizing local resources and cultivating a culture of self-sufficiency can lessen dependency on external help while increasing program efficacy. Local collaboration, such as collaborations with farmers and community-based organizations, can help to stabilize the food supply. A teacher D noted, "*The farmers who cultivate vegetables can collaborate with schools by signing contracts to serve them those vegetables.*" To foster support from government entities and local businesses, the majority of respondents agree that collaboration between schools, government institutions, and local businesses may strengthen the sustainability of the SFP. Parents commonly believe that local companies have an indirect but critical role in school feeding programs through tax payments.

A school principal, V stated, "*Business owners must be mobilized about tax payment on time for the reason that the government utilizes these taxes to finance school feeding programs and other educational undertakings.*"

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

SFP motivates students to attend school frequently, this is consistent with previous research, which indicates that food inducements lessen absenteeism by handling hunger-related obstacles to school attendance (Adelman et al., 2014). The research undertaken by Forrestal et al. (2021) indicates that the presence of food at school is a powerful draw factor, particularly in low-income communities with substantial food insecurity. Similarly, Bank (2013) highlights that in many developing countries SFP provides a tremendous incentive for students, particularly those from low-income families, to attend school regularly. In addition, enriched student well-being and physical health were declared as a crucial perspective. This is consistent with past research suggesting that SFP contributes to higher nutritional status, lowering occurrences of malnutrition and related diseases (Alderman & Bundy, 2012). Without doubt, Students are more likely to attend schools that provide School meals, School lunches greatly add energy to students' nourishment (Forrestal et al., 2021). Therefore, students with good health are less likely to leave school owing to sickness, confirming the function of SFP in reducing absenteeism. Besides, the perception that SFP improves academic achievement is well supported by empirical evidence. Research has consistently demonstrated that students who get school meals have superior focus, memory, and cognitive development (Jomaa et al., 2017). Additionally, Odoh et al. (2024) emphasize that both hunger and malnutrition affect a student's ability to study, whereas well-nourished student tend to attain higher academic performance. Furthermore, the study reported that SFP boosts the interaction between students and teachers. This is similar to research demonstrating that well-fed students are more motivated, mindful, and less likely to display disruptive conduct in the classroom (Buhl, 2010). When students perceive school as a place that promotes their well-being, their admiration for teachers grows thus, enhanced positive interactions in schools. This aligns with findings from Jomaa et al. (2017) which showed that students who engage in SFP feel closer to their friends and teachers, resulting in a better feeling of school connection, Thus lower absenteeism

SFP in Rural Schools hampered by numerous barriers, a key issue noted in this study is a lack of suitable infrastructure, such as better storage facilities and dining rooms. This finding is consistent with earlier studies showing that inadequate infrastructure in rural schools reduces the effectiveness of SFP (Gelli et al., 2007). A study conducted by Alderman &

Bundy (2012) discovered that the lack of effective storage facilities frequently results in food rotting and waste, and insufficient cooking facilities require schools to depend heavily on not effective cooking methods, slowing meal preparation. Besides, insufficient water and sanitation infrastructure can result in unsanitary food handling, accelerating the risk of foodborne infections (Kibret & Abera, 2012). Participants in this study noted that SFP frequently serves a repetitive diet consisting mostly of staple foods such as maize and beans, resulting in nutritional deficits. This is consistent with findings from Aurino et al. (2019), which revealed that many SFP are unsuccessful in satisfying students' nutritional needs due to insufficient meal variety. Research by Kristjansson et al. (2016) on SFP in low- and middle-income countries confirmed that when children consume repetitive meals with low micronutrient content, this may impair cognitive development and overall health, diminishing the program's efficacy in improving learning outcomes. In addition, some parents fail to contribute enough to the program monetarily. However, the research demonstrated that community involvement is critical for the sustainability of SFP (Nyarko-sampson, 2023). A study by Jomaa et al. (2011) showed that in many rural regions, school feeding program that actively incorporate parents through food distribution, cooking assistance, or cash donations are more sustainable and successful. However, in circumstances where parents lack financial means or have low awareness, their involvement is minimal (Gelli et al., 2019). Furthermore, in rural areas where skilled workers may be rare, many school cooks and chefs lack official training in food preparation, nutrition, and cleanliness, jeopardizing both the safety and nutritional content of school meals. This challenge aligns with findings from Bundy et al. (2009), which emphasize that insufficient training among school chefs frequently leads to badly prepared meals that do not match students' nutritional needs. Research indicates that the success of SFP is strongly dependent on the capability of food service providers. According to B. Kristjansson et al. (2009), SFP in low-resource contexts usually employs unskilled or undertrained chefs who lack expertise in portion management, dietary balance, and food preservation techniques. Thus, food is prepared in an unhygienic manner, obstructing the program's intended advantages.

Community and local government intervention is vital for the implementation of SF, the study found that on time parental financial support is critical for the effective running of SFP, as parental contribution delays frequently result in food shortages and interruptions. This finding is reliable with the study of Gelli (2015) which emphasized the importance of family contributions in sponsoring SFP in communities with limited incomes. Correspondingly, Dieu et al. (2023) discovered that intermittent financial assistance from parents could jeopardize the SFP's viability. The results of the study further highlight the significance of community self-reliance in maintaining SFP. Schools can lessen their reliance on foreign help by leveraging local resources, such as collaboration with farmers and community-based organizations. This aligns with the study findings of Sumberg & Sabates-Wheeler (2011), which stated that utilizing local farming products can improve the sustainability of SFP. Moreover, the study concludes that government and local business assistance are important to the effectiveness of SFP. The findings underscore the relevance of taxes paid by local companies in sponsoring SFP initiatives. This finding agreed with the report of Global Children Nutrition about school meal programs around the world (GCNF, 2021), which stated that government financing, sometimes obtained revenue as taxes from the private sector, is critical for expanding school feeding program efforts. Furthermore, A. U. Ahmed (2004) highlighted the need for public-private collaboration in addressing resource shortages in the successful implementation of SFP.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of the study show that SFP dramatically improves students' attendance, health, academic performance, and social well-being. SFP aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs by addressing physiological and safety needs, motivating students to attend school regularly, lowering dropout rates, and creating a suitable learning environment. Furthermore, the SFP strengthens student-teacher relationships, boosts self-esteem, and assists students in meeting long-term educational goals. However, the study highlighted significant impediments to effective SFP implementation, including infrastructure constraints, limited food diversity, poor parental participation, and low cooking skills among the school's cooks and chefs. Moreover, the study underlines the crucial importance of local government policies and community involvement in promoting SFP, as well as the effectiveness of the SFP partially depends on timely parental financial support, community self-reliance, and engagement with local companies. Finally, Government and private sector assistance, notably through taxes and public-private partnerships, can provide the resources required to close financial shortages and overcome logistical problems. Above all SFP in developing countries like Rwanda may become more sustainable and effective by using local resources and creating a feeling of ownership among stakeholders.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ministry of Education should prioritize boosting finance for SFP to address major challenges, including food scarcity, and poor infrastructure. Building infrastructure, such as improved storage facilities and dining halls, is critical to improving SFP implementation. Besides, to increase meal quality and safety, school chefs and cooks should get food preparation, cleanliness, and nutrition training. Moreover, the Ministry of Education should encourage public-private partnerships to acquire extra funds and resources for the SFP. The awareness efforts should be enhanced to continue educating parents and communities about the long-term advantages of SFP, resulting in more engagement and ownership. Finally, the School Feeding Committees at School Levels should monitor food quality and quantity frequently to ensure that meals match the nutritional requirements of students. Moreover, parents should pay their financial contribution to the SFP on time to help minimize food shortages and interruptions in foodstuff supply.

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