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The Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) in Supporting the Development of Elementary School Students: A Literature Study

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A B S T R A C T

Optimal nutritional fulfillment is a crucial factor in supporting the development of elementary school students, both in terms of health and learning readiness. One national policy designed to address this issue is the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG). This study aims to analyze the role of the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) in supporting the development of elementary school students and identify key findings and implementation challenges based on a literature review. This study used a qualitative approach with a literature review method on 20 relevant scientific articles published in the last five years and obtained through the Google Scholar, Garuda, and SINTA databases. The study results indicate that the MBG Program contributes positively to fulfilling students' nutritional needs, improving concentration and learning readiness, cognitive development, learning motivation, and character building and healthy lifestyle habits. However, the implementation of the MBG Program still faces various challenges, particularly related to the readiness of facilities and infrastructure, human resources, and program sustainability. Therefore, strengthening cross-sectoral coordination and a continuous monitoring system is needed so that the benefits of the MBG Program can be optimized in supporting the quality of basic education.

1. Introduction

Optimal nutritional fulfillment is a fundamental factor in supporting physical growth, cognitive development, and student readiness for learning, particularly at the elementary school level. Elementary school age is a crucial phase in child development, where balanced nutritional needs play a vital role in supporting brain function, concentration, endurance, and the development of healthy lifestyle habits. However, various reports and research findings indicate that nutritional imbalances persist among school-age children in Indonesia, including malnutrition, anemia,

and unbalanced eating patterns. This situation has the potential to impact the quality of learning and overall student development.

In response to these issues, the Indonesian government initiated the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) as a national strategic policy aimed at improving the nutritional status of schoolchildren, particularly at the elementary school level. The MBG program is positioned not only as a health intervention but also as an educational support instrument expected to improve student concentration, attendance, motivation, and cognitive and social development. Thus, the MBG has a multidisciplinary dimension encompassing aspects of health, education, and human resource development.

Previous studies published in the *Journal of Educational Sciences* highlight that effective learning at the elementary level is closely related to students' readiness and the quality of instructional support. For instance, the development of interactive teaching materials has been shown to enhance students' engagement and learning outcomes (Fajri et al., 2026). In addition, systematic literature review studies emphasize the importance of synthesizing research findings to understand trends in educational practices (Astuti et al., 2026; Muhaimin et al., 2025). Furthermore, innovative learning approaches have been proven to improve students' cognitive abilities, particularly critical thinking skills (Andriani et al., 2024). These findings suggest that educational interventions, including school-based programs such as the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG), should be viewed as part of a broader effort to support students' holistic development, both academically and physically.

Along with the implementation and discourse of the MBG policy, various studies have been conducted to examine this program from various perspectives, ranging from policy effectiveness, impact on nutritional status, to its implications for student learning processes and outcomes. However, these research findings are scattered across publications with varying focuses and approaches, thus not providing a comprehensive picture of the MBG Program's contribution to the holistic development of elementary school students. Furthermore, some studies still emphasize nutrition and health aspects, while analyses linking MBG to cognitive development, character, and student learning readiness still require more in-depth synthesis.

Therefore, this research is important and relevant to conduct through a literature review approach, in order to systematically collect, review, and analyze various research findings discussing the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) in the context of primary education. Based on this description, this study aims to analyze the role of the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) in supporting elementary school student development and identify key findings and challenges to its implementation based on the literature review. The results of this study are expected to serve as an academic reference for researchers, educators, and policymakers in optimizing the implementation of the Free Nutritional Meals Program as part of efforts to improve the quality of basic education in Indonesia.

This research focuses on answering two crucial questions related to the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) in elementary schools. First, what is the actual role of the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) in supporting the development of elementary school students, as reviewed in light of various existing literature reviews? Second, what are the key findings obtained and the challenges faced in implementing the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) in elementary schools, based on previous research results? With this background, this research has two main objectives. First, to analyze in depth the role of the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) in supporting the development of elementary school students based on relevant previous research results. Second, to comprehensively identify the key findings and challenges that arise in implementing the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) in elementary schools, based on the literature review.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a literature review method to analyze and synthesize previous research on the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) in the context of elementary school education. The literature review design was chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of the MBG program in supporting student development across multiple dimensions, including health, cognitive development, and learning motivation**.**

The data in this study were derived from 17 selected scientific articles published between 2023 and 2025**,** which were obtained from nationally accredited journals and reputable international journals indexed in SINTA and other recognized indexing systems**.** These articles consist of both empirical studies and literature reviews that discuss the implementation, effectiveness, and impact of the MBG program and similar school feeding programs in elementary school contexts. The selection of recent and relevant articles ensures the credibility and contextual relevance of the findings.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through a systematic literature search using several academic databases, including Google Scholar, GARUDA, and SINTA. The search process employed specific keywords such as “Free Nutritional Meal Program,” “MBG,” “school feeding program,” and “elementary school student development.” The articles included in this study were selected based on strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria required that the articles: (1) be published in peer-reviewed journals, (2) be published within the last three years (2023–2025), (3) focus on the MBG program or similar school feeding programs, (4) involve elementary school students as the research subjects, and (5) examine outcomes related to health, learning concentration, motivation, or cognitive development. Additionally, only studies with clear methodologies and well-defined findings were included.

Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria included articles that were not relevant to the elementary school context, lacked methodological rigor, were opinion-based or non-scientific, or focused solely on nutritional aspects without linking them to educational outcomes. Based on this selection process**,** 17 articles were identified and included in the analysis**,** namely studies conducted by Agustini and Mulyani (2025), Febryanti (2024), Hidayat et al. (2024), Kiftiyah (2024), Lestari et al. (2024), Marzulina et al. (2025), Nurhayati et al. (2024), Prasetyo et al. (2023), Rahmah (2024), Rahman et al. (2025), Rozak et al. (2024), Sari et al. (2025), Suprapto et al. (2025), Sulastri et al. (2023), Tanziha (2023), Wulandari et al. (2023), and Yelvianti (2024). The selection process involved screening titles, abstracts, and full texts to ensure the relevance and quality of each article.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis techniques. Each selected article was systematically examined to identify research objectives, methodologies, and key findings related to the implementation and impact of the MBG program. The analysis process consisted of several stages, including data reduction, coding, categorization, and synthesis. In the coding stage, the researcher manually identified recurring keywords, concepts, and findings across the selected studies. These codes were then grouped into thematic categories such as nutritional impact, learning concentration, cognitive development, learning motivation, and implementation challenges.

Furthermore, the categorized data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns, similarities, and differences among the studies. The findings were then synthesized using a narrative approach to produce a comprehensive and integrated understanding of the role and challenges of the MBG program in elementary school education. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, this study applied source triangulation by comparing and cross-checking results from multiple studies with similar contexts and methodologies. This approach strengthens the credibility of the conclusions drawn from the literature review.

3. Results and Discussion

Result

To provide a clearer and more systematic overview of the reviewed studies, Table 1 presents the characteristics of the 17 selected articles, including publication year, research method, sample or subject, and research focus. The selected studies consist of a combination of quantitative, qualitative, and literature review approaches, which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) from multiple perspectives. Quantitative studies dominate the dataset, particularly those examining the relationship between nutrition and student outcomes such as academic achievement, concentration, and attendance. Meanwhile, qualitative studies contribute deeper insights into implementation challenges, policy perspectives, and contextual factors influencing program

success. Literature review articles further strengthen the analysis by synthesizing broader findings across different contexts. The samples involved in these studies vary, including elementary school students, teachers, school administrators, and policy documents. This diversity of samples enhances the validity of the findings by incorporating both micro-level (student) and macro-level (policy) perspectives. Overall, the characteristics of the selected studies indicate that the MBG program has been examined through diverse methodological approaches, providing a solid foundation for drawing comprehensive conclusions.

Table 1. Characteristics of Selected Studies on MBG / School Feeding Programs

No	Author (Year)	Method	Sample/Subject	Research Focus
1	Agustini & Mulyani (2025)	Qualitative	Schools & policymakers	Policy effectiveness
2	Febryanti (2024)	Qualitative	Elementary schools	Program implementation
3	Hidayat et al. (2024)	Quantitative	Elementary students	Attendance
4	Kiftiyah (2024)	Qualitative	Policy documents	Education policy
5	Lestari et al. (2024)	Quantitative	Elementary students	Learning motivation
6	Marzulina et al. (2025)	Literature review	Previous studies	Policy barriers
7	Nurhayati et al. (2024)	Quantitative	Elementary students	Learning effectiveness
8	Prasetyo et al. (2023)	Quantitative	Elementary students	Nutrition & achievement
9	Rahmah (2024)	Literature review	Previous studies	Program evaluation
10	Rahman et al. (2025)	Literature review	Previous studies	Student development
11	Rozak et al. (2024)	Quantitative	Elementary students	Learning concentration
12	Sari et al. (2025)	Literature review	Previous studies	Policy framework
13	Suprapto et al. (2025)	Qualitative	Policy analysis	Implementation review
14	Sulastri et al. (2023)	Qualitative	Schools	Implementation challenges
15	Tanziha (2023)	Quantitative	Elementary students	Cognitive development
16	Wulandari et al. (2023)	Qualitative	Elementary students	Character education
17	Yelvianti (2024)	Quantitative	Elementary students	Nutritional status

The findings of the reviewed studies consistently indicate that the MBG program has a significant positive impact on students' nutritional status and overall health. Quantitative studies, such as those conducted by Yelvianti (2024) and Prasetyo et al. (2023), demonstrate measurable improvements in students' dietary intake, including increased consumption of essential nutrients and reduced intake of unhealthy foods. These improvements contribute to better physical conditions, which are essential for supporting children's growth and development. In addition, several studies highlight that students who participate in school feeding programs experience fewer cases of hunger during school hours. This condition enables students to maintain their energy levels throughout the learning process. Furthermore, improved nutrition has been linked to stronger immune systems and better physical endurance among students. These findings reinforce the argument

that the MBG program plays a crucial role as a foundational health intervention in elementary education. Therefore, the program not only addresses nutritional deficiencies but also supports broader aspects of student well-being.

In terms of learning readiness and concentration, the reviewed studies reveal a strong relationship between adequate nutrition and students' ability to focus during classroom activities. Research by Rozak et al. (2024) and Hidayat et al. (2024) shows that students who receive nutritious meals demonstrate higher levels of attention and engagement in learning activities. They are able to participate in lessons for longer periods without experiencing fatigue or loss of concentration. Additionally, these students tend to respond more actively to teacher instructions and classroom interactions. The availability of food at school also reduces distractions caused by hunger, which often interferes with students' learning processes. As a result, the classroom environment becomes more conducive to effective learning. Improved concentration also contributes to better comprehension of learning materials. These findings indicate that nutritional support is directly linked to students' readiness to learn and their overall academic engagement.

From a cognitive development perspective, the literature suggests that the MBG program contributes to improvements in students' cognitive abilities, although the extent of its impact varies across studies. Research by Tanziha (2023) and Nurhayati et al. (2024) indicates that students with adequate nutritional intake show better performance in memory, problem-solving, and comprehension tasks. Nutrition plays an important role in brain function, particularly in supporting cognitive processes such as attention, information processing, and recall. However, several studies emphasize that nutrition alone is not sufficient to determine academic success. Instead, it acts as a supporting factor that enhances students' capacity to learn. Other factors, such as teaching quality and learning environment, also play significant roles. Nevertheless, the contribution of the MBG program in strengthening students' cognitive readiness cannot be overlooked. These findings highlight the importance of integrating nutritional interventions with educational strategies.

In addition to cognitive aspects, the reviewed studies also indicate that the MBG program has a positive impact on students' motivation and attitudes toward learning. Studies by Lestari et al. (2024) and Rahman et al. (2025) show that students who participate in the program tend to have higher enthusiasm for learning and demonstrate more positive classroom behavior. The availability of nutritious meals creates a sense of comfort and security, which supports students' emotional well-being. As a result, students are more willing to engage in learning activities and participate actively in class discussions. Increased motivation is also reflected in improved attendance rates, as reported by Febryanti (2024). Students are more likely to attend school regularly when they know they will receive meals. This condition contributes to more consistent learning experiences. Overall, the MBG program supports both the psychological and behavioral aspects of student development.

Furthermore, qualitative studies highlight the role of the MBG program in fostering character development and healthy lifestyle habits among elementary school students. Research by Wulandari et al. (2023) shows that structured meal routines encourage discipline and responsibility among students. Students learn to follow rules, maintain cleanliness, and respect shared spaces during meal times. In addition, Sulastri et al. (2023) emphasize that the program promotes social interaction and cooperation among students. Eating together fosters a sense of community and mutual respect. These experiences contribute to the development of positive character traits that extend beyond the classroom. The program also increases students' awareness of healthy eating habits and personal hygiene. Such outcomes demonstrate that the MBG program has broader educational implications beyond academic achievement. It plays a role in shaping students' character and social values.

Despite its many benefits, the reviewed studies also identify several challenges in the implementation of the MBG program. Research by Agustini and Mulyani (2025) highlights issues related to policy effectiveness and coordination among stakeholders. Kiftiyah (2024) points out that governance and management systems are still not fully optimized. Additionally, Sulastri et al. (2023) report limitations in infrastructure and facilities, which affect program delivery. Other challenges include insufficient human resource capacity and lack of training for program implementers. Funding sustainability is another critical issue, as continuous financial support is required to maintain the program. Distribution and logistics of food also present practical challenges in some regions. These obstacles indicate that successful implementation requires more than just policy formulation. It requires strong coordination, adequate resources, and continuous evaluation.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) plays a vital role in supporting the holistic development of elementary school students. The consistent evidence from quantitative studies demonstrates that adequate nutrition is a fundamental requirement for effective learning. Students who receive proper nutrition are better prepared physically and mentally to engage in educational activities. This supports the theoretical perspective that basic physiological needs must be fulfilled before higher-level learning can occur. The MBG program, therefore, serves as an essential intervention that bridges the gap between health and education. By addressing nutritional deficiencies, the program contributes to improving students' readiness to learn. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of integrated approaches in education policy. Thus, the MBG program should be viewed as part of a broader strategy for human resource development.

The relationship between nutrition and learning concentration further strengthens the argument that the MBG program has direct educational benefits. Students who are not distracted by hunger are able to focus better and participate more actively in classroom activities. This improved concentration leads to more effective learning processes and better comprehension of materials. Moreover, increased attendance

rates indicate that the program also influences students' commitment to schooling. These findings suggest that the MBG program contributes to creating a more supportive learning environment. However, it is important to recognize that the program's effectiveness depends on consistent implementation. Without proper management, the potential benefits may not be fully realized. Therefore, attention must be given to both program design and execution.

In terms of cognitive development, the findings highlight the importance of combining nutritional interventions with pedagogical strategies. While adequate nutrition enhances cognitive readiness, it does not automatically guarantee academic success. Effective teaching methods and supportive learning environments are still necessary to maximize student outcomes. This indicates that the MBG program should be integrated with broader educational reforms. Collaboration between teachers, school administrators, and policymakers is essential to ensure that the program contributes effectively to learning outcomes. Additionally, continuous monitoring and evaluation are needed to assess program impact. These efforts will help identify areas for improvement and ensure sustainability.

The findings also emphasize the importance of addressing implementation challenges to optimize the effectiveness of the MBG program. Issues related to infrastructure, human resources, and funding must be carefully managed to ensure program sustainability. Strong policy support and cross-sector collaboration are crucial in overcoming these challenges. The involvement of multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, schools, and communities, is necessary for successful implementation. Furthermore, the development of standardized monitoring systems can help ensure program consistency across different regions. Without these efforts, the program's impact may remain uneven. Therefore, improving implementation quality should be a key priority for policymakers.

4. Conclusion

Based on a literature review of various studies discussing the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at the elementary school level, it can be concluded that the MBG plays a strategic role in supporting the holistic development of students. This program has been proven to contribute positively to meeting students' nutritional needs, which in turn impacts their health, concentration, readiness to participate in learning, and active engagement in class. Furthermore, the study results indicate that the MBG Program also plays a supporting role in the cognitive development and learning motivation of elementary school students. Good nutrition enables students to learn more optimally, improves memory and comprehension of material, and fosters a positive attitude towards the learning process. The MBG Program also has implications for character development and healthy lifestyle habits in students through the instilling of discipline, togetherness, and compliance with school rules.

Despite its numerous benefits, the implementation of the MBG Program in elementary schools still faces several challenges, particularly related to the

readiness of facilities and infrastructure, human resources, and the sustainability of the program. Therefore, the success of the MBG Program depends heavily on the quality of implementation, cross-sector coordination, and a continuous monitoring and evaluation system. Suggestions for improving the effectiveness of the MBG Program include: increasing budget allocation to ensure the availability of quality and sustainable nutritious food, training for teachers and school staff to better manage the program, regular evaluations to identify problems and improve program implementation, and increasing parental and community participation in supporting the program. The implication of this research is that the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) needs to be continuously optimized and reviewed within the context of education policy and practice in Indonesia, particularly in efforts to improve the quality of basic education and student welfare. Thus, this program can become a crucial pillar in achieving national education goals.

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