



**De-Stigmatising the Food Queue:
Suggestions for a More Inclusive School Meal at Bridgetown High School**

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PROBLEM STATEMENT

Many of the learners at Bridgetown High School who seem to be in need of an additional meal do not participate in the school's feeding scheme. This study looked at factors that influence the sense of marginalisation among learners and draws on experiences elsewhere for suggestions of how this problem may be addressed.

BACKGROUND

In a context of development, access to healthy food constitutes a fundamental basic human need. Hunger and malnutrition among children in developing countries continue to impair health, quality of life and survival. School-age children are particularly vulnerable to under-nutrition, hence the priority in nutrition interventions is often to prevent malnutrition during the most critical period for growth and development. School feeding schemes thus offer an excellent opportunity for targeted intervention in this age group, both as a means for enhancing nutrition, and improving school attendance and educational outcomes. Progress toward these ends is directly in line with Millennium Development Goal 1: to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger around the world.

Response from the South African Government

The National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) has been an integral part of the overall strategy of government to address the imbalances and inequities of the apartheid era. The overall purpose of the NSNP is to “improve the health and nutritional status of South African primary school children, to improve levels of school attendance and to improve the learning capacity of children”. The programme has been in operation for nearly 20 years. During the first ten years of its implementation, the programme was coordinated by the Department of Health. However, in 2004 the programme was relocated to the Department of Education.

The main objectives of the programme are to:

- contribute to enhanced learning capacity through school feeding programmes;
- promote and support food production, and improve food security in school communities;
- strengthen nutrition education in schools and communities;

- enhance children's active learning capacity;
- alleviate short-term hunger;
- provide an incentive for children to attend school regularly and punctually; and,
- address certain micro-nutrient deficiencies.

More recently some changes were made, i.e. “a switch to a menu of daily hot, cooked meals, instead of a cold meal; school feeding programmes that target all learners in a school instead of targeting just the poorest learners in each school; and an expansion to secondary schools since 2009” (Department of Basic Education, 2014) The selection for the school feeding scheme works in two ways. First, whole schools are selected for funding for this programme because most of their learners come from poor families. Secondly, within selected schools, learners are selected by age or grade or some other criteria for feeding. Previous research found that “not all children entitled to school feeding received food. While 90% of eligible children were reported to be receiving free food at school in the rural site, only 56% of eligible children in the urban site were receiving food” (Mokgalaka Foundation, n.d.). This shows that it is not a challenge unique to Bridgetown High, but that indeed many children that are eligible for the programme in urban schools show little interest in participating in the programme.

Though the programme is an engine for contributing to better performance of learners at school, there are several challenges regarding its administration and ensuring that beneficiaries feel comfortable in participating.

This study addressed the problem at two levels. The first being the challenges associated with the policy from national to provincial level hence advocacy recommendations are offered. Second are the challenges at the school for which some practical solutions are offered. There are some issues that can be clarified if further research is done. The researchers suggest a qualitative exploratory research to follow this report.

A challenge in getting learners to participate in the feeding scheme is the lack of understanding of marginalisation and its impacts of everyday societal activities in RSA. The concept of marginalisation has its history from Apartheid. It was manifested by lack of human development programmes amongst many African and coloured people with the Africans being most affected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to acknowledge that there are positive approaches that the school is implementing to make the programme more relevant to every learner: Amongst these is the fact that the programme is openly advertised. A clean and comfortable place is provided for lunch. These two elements may serve as positive incentive to create social interest for learners to participate.

In order to make the food programme successful, the following practical approaches to the situation are suggested. It is important to note that these recommendations are not based on deep assessment of the situation.

1. **Leading by Example:** The perception of marginalisation can be changed if teachers who are the role models within the school partake the school lunch either in class or in the kitchen along with the learners. This in a way promotes the idea that the scheme is a facility for everyone, not for any specific group such as “the poor”, as no learner would be comfortable to be labelled poor. This will make it fun and children learn by example from the teachers.¹

In Limpopo the Public Service Commission report of 2008 states that almost everyone participates in the schools where data were collected. This may be a step towards encouraging participation throughout the whole school and may assist learners to unlearn the poverty connotations regarding the scheme and take it simply as another school facility.

Making suitable announcement at assemblies will also be helpful.

2. **Marketing and Branding the Scheme:** The words that need to be used by staff and other learners should not portray an imagery of poverty. Calling it a lunch programme rather than a school feeding scheme would assist in shedding some of the connotations associated. Secondly, the school should advertise the food programme and facility as an established school programme with the aim to create a social bond between learners from different backgrounds and not to benefit those from disadvantaged backgrounds. No one would like to be associated with under privilege.

¹ Please note that teachers may not agree but they need to be convinced that this would further the objectives of the feeding scheme.

3. **Partnerships with all Stakeholders:** It is important that during meetings of the school governing body and at parents' meetings the principal and the management committee of the school inform parents about the importance of the Lunch programme so that they would educate their children about it. Parents are the backbone of the school and if they encourage the children at home, learners are likely to participate. This would also be used as an integration tool within different racial groups, as well as inter-racial community.
4. **Active Community Involvement in the implementation of the NSNP:** Community involvement is ensured through active participation of parents on the school governing bodies which appoint local community members to prepare meals and where possible, as food suppliers. Working collaboratively with community development workers for information dissemination is also important. Additionally, there is a need to make sure that every caregiver understands the philosophy around the programme, so that they are able to support it.
5. **Culturally Appropriate Food:** There is a need to find out if the food given to young people is in line with what they would want to eat. Since this is a multicultural school, questions should determine if the food accommodates these cultures.
6. **Advertise the Menu:** It is clear from several studies done (e.g. Seoketsa, 2007 at Manamelong Primary school in North West) that learners do not know their menu options even though they are entitled to it. Letting learners know the menu would be a step towards their involvement and it could motivate them and create a sense of ownership. This is in line with Batho Pele principles, such as access to information.

Recommendations to National Policy

It is important that the school feeding programme initially targets communities that need such intervention the most, especially low-income communities. Once target areas have been identified, schools within those areas are screened to identify those to receive food and if possible it should be made a compulsory process rather than optional since most of the children may lack the wisdom to make the best decision for themselves.

Research Recommendations

- **Local Factors:** The timing and composition of school meals depend on such local factors as the length of the school day and nutritional status of children, local eating habits, and availability of commodities. This was noted through the research done by the World Bank (Bundy et al., 2009) in East and Central Africa about school feeding schemes and poverty eradication. Research could establish what is most the most appropriate food and approach for the learners at Bridgetown High.
- **Local Problem Analysis:** The design of an effective school feeding intervention is to a large degree dependent on a thorough problem analysis of the educational and social reality in a given context. This shows that there is a need to conduct a qualitative study with the beneficiaries instead of assuming their problem. The needs assessment should include an analysis of the main barriers to children not eating, covering different levels of stakeholders ranging from individual children to communities and the Department of Education. In Seaketsa's study learners are regarded as the clients who must receive the best service. Ideally the service providers should be involved in this process.

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