



VOICES FROM THE CENTRAL KITCHEN: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY ON THE PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION IN DIVISION OF SULTAN KUDARAT SCHOOL-BASED FEEDING PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Malnutrition among school-age children continues to be a significant public health and educational concern, particularly in developing countries, as it adversely affects children's physical growth, cognitive development, school attendance, and academic performance. This study explored the implementation of the Central Kitchen–Based School Feeding Program (SBFP) in the Division of Sultan Kudarat through the lived experiences of central kitchen personnel and School-Based Feeding Program coordinators for the school year 2025-2026. Employing a qualitative research design using narrative inquiry, the study involved ten (10) participants, consisting of five (5) central kitchen personnel and five (5) SBFP coordinators selected through a lottery method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that central kitchen personnel experienced time-intensive preparatory responsibilities, characterized by early morning food preparation, weekend supply management, food safety and preservation practices, and extended working hours requiring personal sacrifice. Opportunities encountered centered on collaborative teamwork in ensuring safe and efficient food service operations, reflected in role rotation, shared responsibility, collective accountability, food safety practices, and commitment to learners' health and well-being. SBFP coordinators described the program's effects as enhanced learner attendance and school engagement, evidenced by improved attendance and increased motivation to attend school. Best practices identified included securing health clearances from the Rural Health Unit, maintaining effective communication among personnel, strictly observing cleanliness and sanitation protocols, and strengthening partnerships with the Local Government Unit. The study recommends providing remuneration for personnel rendering services on Sundays, sustaining

identified best practices and LGU partnerships, and conducting quantitative studies examining the relationship between the feeding program and learners' academic performance.

Keywords: *Central Kitchen, School-Based Feeding Program, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

Malnutrition among school-age children remains a significant public health and educational concern, particularly in developing countries. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), undernutrition adversely affects children's physical growth, cognitive development, school attendance, and academic performance. Learners with inadequate nutrition often experience poor concentration, frequent absenteeism, and reduced academic achievement (Bundy et al., 2018).

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) addresses this issue through the School-Based Feeding Program (SBFP), which aims to improve learners' nutritional status and readiness to learn (Department of Education, 2017). To enhance program efficiency, DepEd introduced the Central Kitchen model, which standardizes meal preparation, strengthens food safety, and improves resource management, particularly in divisions serving multiple schools.

The Division of Sultan Kudarat adopted the Central Kitchen–Based School Feeding Program to streamline food preparation and delivery while ensuring compliance with nutritional standards. Although previous evaluations have focused on measurable outcomes such as weight gain and feeding completion rates, these provide limited insight into the experiences of those implementing the program. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize that qualitative research is valuable for understanding participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to a phenomenon.

This study explored the lived experiences of stakeholders involved in the Central Kitchen–Based School Feeding Program in the Division of Sultan Kudarat. The findings are expected to generate insights that can inform policy improvements, strengthen program implementation, and support the sustainability of the Central Kitchen model in DepEd divisions.

Research Questions

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of stakeholders involved in the Central Kitchen–Based School Feeding Program in the Division of Sultan Kudarat.

Specifically, it aims to address the following questions:

1. How do the central kitchen staff describe their experiences in implementing the Central Kitchen–Based School Feeding Program?
2. What are the opportunities do central kitchen personnel encounter during the implementation of the school-Based Feeding Program?
3. How school-based feeding coordinator describe the effects of implementing the Central Kitchen School-Based Feeding Program?
4. What strategies or best practices do kitchen staff employ to ensure effective program implementation?

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach specifically narrative inquiry to explore and improve the implementation of the Central Kitchen–Based School Feeding Program in the Division of Sultan Kudarat. Action research is appropriate as it allows practitioners to systematically investigate their own practices, identify challenges, implement context-specific interventions, and reflect on outcomes to enhance program effectiveness (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014).

The study followed the cyclical action research process of planning, action, observation, and reflection, enabling continuous improvement of program implementation based on the lived experiences of central kitchen staff and stakeholders.

The participants of the study were selected using a lottery method from a pool of ten (10) School-Based Feeding Program coordinators, from which five (5) will be randomly chosen. The same selection procedure will be applied to the central kitchen staff, wherein five (5) participants will be selected through the lottery method. In addition, one (1) district nurse involved in the monitoring and implementation of the feeding program will be included as a participant.

RESULTS

Findings revealed that central kitchen personnel experienced time-intensive preparatory responsibilities, characterized by early morning food preparation, weekend supply management, food safety and preservation practices, and extended working hours requiring personal sacrifice. Opportunities encountered centered on collaborative teamwork in ensuring safe and efficient food service operations, reflected in role rotation, shared responsibility, collective accountability, food safety practices, and commitment to learners' health and well-being. SBFP coordinators described the program's effects as enhanced learner attendance and school engagement, evidenced by improved attendance and increased motivation to attend school. Best practices identified included securing health clearances from the Rural Health Unit, maintaining effective communication among personnel, strictly observing cleanliness and sanitation protocols, and strengthening partnerships with the Local Government Unit.

DISCUSSION

On the Lived Experiences of Central Kitchen Personnel in Implementing the School-Based Feeding Program

The analysis of the narratives revealed the overarching theme Time-Intensive Preparatory Responsibilities in Central Kitchen Operation. This theme illustrates the demanding nature of the work performed by central kitchen personnel to ensure the timely preparation and delivery of nutritious meals to beneficiary learners.

The first category, Early Morning Preparation Activities, highlights the participants' daily routine of beginning work before dawn to prepare ingredients, cook meals, and organize food for distribution. Participants emphasized that early preparation was necessary to ensure that meals reached schools on time without compromising food quality.

The second category, Weekend Supply Management, reflects the participants' responsibility for purchasing, receiving, sorting, and storing food supplies during weekends. This additional workload ensured that ingredients were sufficient and readily available for the succeeding week's feeding activities.

The third category, Food Safety and Preservation Practices, demonstrates the personnel's commitment to maintaining food quality through proper sanitation, storage, handling, and preservation procedures. Participants recognized that strict adherence to food safety protocols was essential in protecting learners from foodborne illnesses while complying with health standards.

The fourth category, Extended Hours and Personal Sacrifices, captures the physical and emotional demands experienced by the personnel. Participants shared that the program often required them to work beyond regular office hours, including Sundays, resulting in reduced family time and increased fatigue. Despite these challenges, they remained committed to fulfilling their responsibilities because they believed in the program's benefits for learners.

Overall, the findings indicate that implementing the Central Kitchen-Based School Feeding Program requires significant dedication, careful planning, and personal commitment from kitchen personnel. Their experiences demonstrate that successful implementation depends not only on operational efficiency but also on the willingness of personnel to extend their efforts beyond normal work expectations.

On the Opportunities Encountered by Central Kitchen Personnel During Program Implementation

The narratives generated the central theme Collaborative Teamwork in Ensuring Safe and Efficient Food Service Operations. Although the work was demanding, participants viewed collaboration as one of the greatest strengths of the program.

The category Role Rotation and Shared Responsibility illustrates how kitchen personnel distributed tasks according to individual skills while remaining flexible enough to assist one another whenever necessary. This practice reduced workload imbalance and improved operational efficiency.

The category Collective Accountability in Food Preparation demonstrates the team's shared commitment to producing nutritious, safe, and quality meals. Participants emphasized that everyone took ownership of the feeding process, recognizing that the health of learners depended on their collective efforts.

The category Team-Based Food Safety Practices reflects how food safety responsibilities were shared among all personnel through routine sanitation, quality inspection, and compliance with standard operating procedures. Working together minimized errors and strengthened food safety compliance.

Finally, the category Commitment to Learner Health and Well-being reveals that participants were intrinsically motivated by the positive impact of the feeding program on children's nutrition and welfare. Their shared purpose fostered teamwork, strengthened interpersonal relationships, and sustained morale despite operational challenges.

These findings suggest that collaborative teamwork serves as a critical enabling factor in the successful implementation of the Central Kitchen-Based School Feeding Program. Effective coordination, communication, and mutual support contribute significantly to efficient food service delivery.

The findings highlight that collaborative teamwork is a key enabling factor in the successful implementation of the Central Kitchen-Based School Feeding Program. Participants demonstrated shared responsibility, collective accountability, and mutual support in carrying out daily operations, resulting in efficient food preparation and service delivery. This finding supports the work of Salas et al. (2018), who emphasized that effective teamwork is characterized by coordination, communication, mutual trust, and shared goals, all of which contribute to improved organizational performance. The collaborative culture observed among the personnel enabled them to overcome operational challenges while maintaining high-quality service for learners.

On the Effects of the Central Kitchen-Based School Feeding Program as Described by School-Based Feeding Program Coordinators

The narratives of the School-Based Feeding Program coordinators generated the theme Enhanced Learner Attendance and School Engagement.

The category Improved Learner Attendance indicates that coordinators consistently observed increased attendance among beneficiary learners during the feeding period. The availability of nutritious meals encouraged learners to attend school more regularly, reducing absenteeism.

The category Increased Motivation to Attend School demonstrates that learners became more enthusiastic about attending classes because they anticipated receiving healthy meals each day. Coordinators also observed improved classroom participation and greater learner interest in school activities.

These findings imply that the Central Kitchen-Based School Feeding Program extends beyond nutritional support by promoting positive educational outcomes. Improved attendance and increased motivation contribute to greater learner engagement, creating a more conducive environment for teaching and learning.

The findings indicate that the Central Kitchen-Based School Feeding Program positively influenced learner attendance and motivation to attend school. Participants observed that providing nutritious meals encouraged learners to attend classes more regularly and participate actively in school activities. This supports the World Food Programme (2022), which reported that school feeding programs improve learner attendance, retention, and participation by reducing short-term hunger and creating incentives for children to remain in school. Similarly, UNICEF (2021) emphasized that school feeding programs contribute not only to improved nutrition but also to learners' motivation, educational participation, and overall well-being, particularly among vulnerable children.

On the Best Practices of Central Kitchen Personnel and School-Based Feeding Program Coordinators

Several best practices emerged from the participants' narratives. These include securing health clearances from the Rural Health Unit to ensure personnel are medically fit to handle food; maintaining open and effective communication among kitchen personnel, coordinators, and school administrators to facilitate smooth operations; implementing strict cleanliness and sanitation protocols to maintain food safety; and strengthening partnerships with the Local Government Unit (LGU) for logistical, financial, and technical support.

These practices contributed to the efficient implementation of the feeding program and promoted accountability, transparency, and quality service delivery. The findings emphasize that sustainable partnerships and adherence to health and sanitation standards are essential components of successful feeding program implementation.

The best practices identified in this study—including strict adherence to food safety and sanitation protocols, effective communication, securing health clearances, and strengthening partnerships with the Local Government Unit—contributed significantly to the efficient implementation of the program. These practices are consistent with the World Health Organization (2022), which emphasizes that maintaining high standards of hygiene and food safety is essential in institutional feeding programs to safeguard public health. Furthermore, the strong collaboration between schools, health authorities, and local government units reflects the framework of Epstein (2018), who asserted that effective school-community partnerships enhance educational programs by mobilizing

shared resources, expertise, and community support. Such partnerships strengthen program sustainability and improve service delivery for learners.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn based on the findings of the study.

The study concludes that the successful implementation of the Central Kitchen–Based School Feeding Program relies on the dedication, resilience, and collaborative efforts of central kitchen personnel and School-Based Feeding Program coordinators. Despite the demanding nature of food preparation and extended work responsibilities, stakeholders remained committed to delivering safe and nutritious meals for learners. Effective teamwork, strict adherence to food safety and sanitation standards, and strong partnerships with the Rural Health Unit and Local Government Unit contributed significantly to efficient program implementation. Moreover, the program positively influenced learner attendance, motivation, and school engagement, demonstrating that the Central Kitchen model not only addresses nutritional needs but also supports educational participation. These findings highlight the importance of sustaining collaborative practices and institutional support to strengthen and ensure the long-term success of the Central Kitchen–Based School Feeding Program.

Recommendations

From the salient findings of this study and the conclusion reached, the following recommendations are presented;

1. DepEd may include the remuneration of the kitchen personnel rendered on Sunday.
2. Strengthen the best practices and partnership with Local Government Unit, and
3. Conduct quantitative research on the relationship of feeding program and academic performance of pupils.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This is a declaration by the author/s in his/their own words and in paragraph form which includes compliance with obtaining informed consent, the respondents' freedom to withdraw from the study at any time, the anonymity of the respondents was maintained, the respondents' well-being was safeguarded, no conflict of interest exists in the conduct of the study, plagiarism was strictly avoided, there was no bias in the interpretation of the findings and that the results were used purely for research.

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