

Contribution of Food Provision Strategy Employed By Heads of Public Secondary Schools in Enhancing Students' Attendance in Sikonge District, Tanzania

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the contribution of food provision strategy employed by heads of public secondary schools in enhancing students' attendance in Sikonge District, Tanzania. A convergent design under a mixed methods approach was used. The target population included 21 secondary schools, 21 heads of schools, 543 teachers, 6418 parents, and 3209 students. A sample of 6 schools, 6 heads of schools, 54 teachers, 321 students, and 12 parents was obtained using probability and non-probability sampling techniques. Heads of schools were sampled through criterion purposive, parents through snowball, teachers and students through stratified random sampling. Data collection instruments included questionnaires for teachers and students, interview guides for heads of schools and parents, and document analysis guides. Validity was ensured by three experts from Educational Planning and Administration. A pilot test in one secondary school involved 40 respondents, who were excluded from the main study. Reliability of questionnaires was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding .930 for teachers and .747 for students. Trustworthiness of qualitative data was ensured through peer debriefing and triangulation. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics with Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 23, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Research ethics, including consent and confidentiality, were observed. Findings revealed that food provision strategy in public secondary schools positively influence students' attendance and classroom concentration. However, the current strategy remains inadequate. The study concluded that the government should support parents in providing at least one meal daily and educate them on their responsibility in food contribution.

Key Words: *Food Provision Strategy, Students' Attendance, Secondary Education, School Leadership Strategies.*

1.Introduction

Education plays a key role in both personal and societal development by helping individuals to better understand themselves and their surroundings. A year after the UN Convention, in 1990, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) affirmed in Article 10 that "every child has the right to education" (Lee 2022). This effort is reinforced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and quality education for every individual. According to Adipat and Chotikapanich (2022), Goal 4 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda stresses the transformative role of education in shaping a better world. To realize this vision, public schools hold the responsibility of providing all students with inclusive and a high-quality education. One of the things that have proved to be central in provision of quality education is school attendance.

School attendance is vital for student learning, academic success, and future growth. Inconsistent attendance disrupts students' progress and hinders their ability to reach their educational goals. The World Bank 2011 discloses that school feeding strategy which provide meals at school (SFS) or related take home rations (THR) can improve enrolment and attendance, address chronic hunger or micronutrient deficiencies, improve health increase child's focus in the classroom, and hence improving learning (Kapur et al, 2011), Canbolat et al. (2024) highlights that food insecurity causes hunger to students which leads to unsatisfactory attendance among school children.

In Sub-Saharan Africa countries provision of food strategy in secondary schools is considered very crucial to make a student participate fully during the teaching and learning process. Ogidi et al. (2025) highlight school feeding strategy initiatives such as the Home-Grown School Feeding strategy (HGSF) of 2004, and National Home-Grown School Feeding strategy (NHGSF) of 2016. Despite the efforts, attendance is still a problem, as highlighted by Miya et al. (2023), who identified various forms of attendance in Nigerian secondary schools, including students leaving class early or avoiding school totally. Such kinds of poor attendance led to disengagement in the learning process and hinder academic achievement. Liguori et al. (2024) study pointed out school meals as a solution to attendance, they insisted that, breakfast, lunch, snacks or take-home rations to students should be done to improve attendance.

In East Africa, countries like Rwanda, have also introduced strategies to reduce absenteeism. Rwanda's School Feeding strategy 2018-2024 aimed to address socio-economic barriers that prevented students from attending school. Studies like those by Rojas et al. (2020) and Nizeyimana et al. (2021) found that providing meals can significantly improve attendance by alleviating hunger, which is a major barrier for many students.

In Tanzania, various efforts have been in place to improve attendance including enactment of policies, such as the Education and Training Policy of 2014 and education Sector Development Plan 2021/22 – 2025/26 which emphasize involvement of the community, especially parents in various school development activities. The policies aim to improve access to quality and inclusive education, including children with special need, by creating conducive teaching and learning environment including the provision of food in schools, according to the United Republic of Tanzania (URT (2023). The child policy No. 21 of 2009, amended in 2019 (section 8 (1)), directs that parent, guardian, or any other person responsible for a child to ensure that a child is accorded with the rights, including food, education, counselling and guidance. In 2018, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST) issued Education circular No. 1 of 2018, encouraging parents and the broader community to advice school leadership on how to manage school effectively in enhancing students' attendance.

Furthermore, the guidelines of the head of school section 3.2.5 emphasizes the cooperation between school leadership and the community to enhance school development. The goal is to involve parents and community members in various activities such as infrastructures improvement, and food contributions to ensure attendance. The strategy of offering food is designed to contribute and encourage attendance. A student is required to attend the school 194 days according to educational document No.3 of the year 2024 on the study calendar for primary and secondary schools in 2025. Circulars from the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST) No.3.6 (v) of 2016 highlights provision of food strategy to reduce absenteeism whereby, emphasis are put on creating collaboration of parents' teachers' platform to improve attendance as they address both nutritional and economic challenges, ensuring that through their contribution, students can attend school without any distraction due to hunger. The effort by the government to address the problem of absenteeism seem to meet the dead end. Tabora region is among the regions where absenteeism is most prevalent. Among the 8 districts of Tabora the worse scenario is seen in Sikonge. Table 1 summarizes prevailing situation in Tabora as far as absenteeism is concerned.

Table 1.

¹*The magnitude of absenteeism in Tabora Region Districts*

ƒ DISTRICT	2019	2020	2022	2023
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¹ *The magnitude of absenteeism in Tabora Region Districts*

	Enrolment	Absenteeism	%	Enrolment	Absenteeism	%	Enrolment	Absenteeism	%	Enrolment	Absenteeism	%
Igunga	11160	919	8.2	12116	2182	18.0	12805	1778	13.8	13396	1732	12.9
Kaliua	8606	422	4.9	10549	920	8.7	13212	1404	10.6	13918	1541	11.0
Nzega	9047	34	0.3	10591	785	7.4	10893	1052	9.7	10724	1316	12.2
Nzega TC	3500	109	3.1	4125	257	6.2	4798	379	7.8	4995	154	3.0
Sikonge	4286	473	11.7	5087	651	12.8	6263	735	11.7	6938	918	13.2
Tabora MC	12361	406	3.2	13584	393	2.8	15760	633	4.0	16504	380	2.3
Uyui	7945	251	3.1	9559	917	9.5	9555	783	8.1	10187	883	8.6
Urambo	6161	284	4.6	7741	566	7.3	11891	1197	10.0	12850	1077	8.3

Source: URT BEST (2019-2023)

Absenteeism rate in Sikonge, is high compared to other districts in Tabora Region as shown in Table 1. The data indicate that on yearly bases Sikonge exceeds all other districts in the sense that in 2019 were = 473 (11.0 %), 2020 = 651 (12.8 %), 2022 = 735 (11.7 %) and 2023 = 918 (13.2 %). The statistics in Table 1 demonstrates the increase of students' absenteeism year after year. It was on basis of this background that a study was conducted to investigate the contribution of the heads of schools' food provision strategy to enhance students' attendance in Sikonge District. The previous studies failed short in terms of addressing the contribution of food strategy on enhancing students' attendance. Thus, the current study investigated the contribution of food provision strategy employed by heads of public secondary schools in enhancing students' attendance in Sikonge District.

2. Statement of the Problem

The problem of student inconsistent attendance remains a persistent concern in public secondary schools within Sikonge District. Inconsistent attendance in schools contributes to a variety of social issues, such as an increase in the number of beggars in the streets, early pregnancies, drunkards, and drug abuse which leads to poor performance. Despite several governmental efforts and local school interventions, such as policies and strategies which aimed at enhancing school attendance, the situation persists, continuing to limit students' chances for educational success. Studies by Kataga and Mwila (2024), Masenya (2023), and Pezuro et al. (2022) have highlighted the consequences of the inconsistent school attendance on students' ability to reach their educational potentials. Data from the Basic Education Statistics in Tanzania (BEST) report 2019-2023 shows that students' inconsistent attendance is very high which is an alarming concern as to what could be the root causes of such a situation. Additionally, research by Kitambazi and Lyamuya (2022) highlights how child labour worsens the problem of school attendance. Thus, without appropriate mechanisms in place of improving attendance the problem will limit students' future opportunities. Various efforts as explored by Misinde (2020) have shown some positive results in addressing this problem, but a clear understanding of a specific strategy that heads of schools employ to manage poor attendance remains limited. There is a limited investigation of how specific actions taken by heads of schools' influence attendance in Sikonge District. Hence, this study aimed to fill this gap by investigating the contribution of food provision program strategy employed by heads of schools to enhance students' attendance in the district.

3. Research Question

The following research question guided the study:

1. How does food provision strategy employed by heads of public secondary schools enhances students' attendance in Sikonge District?

4. Significance of the Study

The study significantly contributes to addressing attendance in public secondary schools by revealing the way food provision strategy enhances student presence. The findings are expected to empower school heads

to strengthen feeding program, and promote consistent students' attendance. Teachers are expected to benefit from improved learners' attendance by enabling better instructional delivery and academic outcomes. Students through supportive environment and daily provision of meals, will be attentive and actively engaged in teaching and learning process. Parents become more committed in supporting food contribution and reinforcing attendance at home. Furthermore, policymakers may use the findings to revise and implement effective policies aligned with the Education and Training Policy of 2014 reviewed in 2023. The study also offers empirical evidence on the contribution of food provision in improving student attendance, which future researchers can build upon in different context. Additionally, controlled attendance through food provision validates Maslow's theory by showing that fulfilling physiological needs of food supports educational engagement.

5. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by Abraham Maslow's theory (1943) which highlights that, human behaviour is motivated by the fulfilment of hierarchical needs, begins with the most basic physiological needs, such as food water and shelter. According to Maslow, individuals cannot effectively pursue higher level goals such as learning, achievement, or self-actualization until their foundation needs are met. In the school context, according to Ozherelev (2025), providing meals addresses these foundational needs, enabling students to focus and learn. Thus, food provision plays a critical role in promoting attendance, attentiveness, and academic participation.

The strength of Maslow's theory it emphasizes on meeting basic needs, such as food, before higher level goals like learning can be effectively attained. It provides a clear framework for understanding student motivation. The theory supports general approaches to student welfare. It aligns well with inclusive and equity educational policy by emphasizing the need to provide vulnerable learners who may face food inadequacy. It confirms the role of school food provision in enhancing attendance. Its wide applicability makes it a useful tool in education planning to enhance attendance.

The weaknesses of the theory are seen in its assumption of the available progression of needs, which may not reflect real life situations. It oversimplifies motivation and overlooks the existing issues like poverty, inequality and inadequate of school infrastructures. The focus on individual needs may ignore broader social and economic barriers that influence student behaviour and educational access.

Despite all these weaknesses, the Maslow's theory justifies school food strategy by showing that hunger must be addressed to improve attendance. It explains how meeting basic needs can enhance student engagement, attendance and academic success. The theory supports policies aimed at student wellbeing. It helps school heads maintain sustained school feeding strategy. Also, it provides a strong foundation for linking nutrition to attendance.

6. Review of the Empirical Studies

The review of the empirical studies focused on the contribution of food provision strategy employed by heads of public secondary schools in enhancing students' attendance specifically addressing the question on how Provision of Food Strategy Employed by Heads of Public Secondary Schools Enhances Students' Attendance

To improve student attendance and academic engagement, many heads of public secondary schools' have adopted the food provision strategy. This strategy aims to address hunger-related barriers to learning, ensuring students are present, focused, and ready to succeed.

Shrestha et al. (2020) studied home-grown school feeding strategy in Nepal. This study piloted home-grown school feeding in 30 schools reaching nearly 4000 children in Sindhupalchok and Bardiya districts in Nepal with the aim to assess operations and outcomes in comparison to the regular cash-based school meals strategy. The study used a one-time post evaluation with a mixed methods approach. Data were collected qualitatively through 12 focus group discussions and 28 key informant interviews with government and school staff, parents, cooks, cooperative members, World Food Program representatives and other stakeholders were involved in the pilot program. The quantitative part applied a quasi-experimental design and used cross-sectional data collected from 1512 children in 30 pilot and 30 control schools. Although the

study found that the HGSF strategy led to improved meal quality and nutritional intake, sustaining these improvements would require additional funding. The findings were crucial to the current study. However, thorough investigation on how financial mechanisms for securing the sustained additional funding on food provision was kept silence which would have added in depth information to the findings. Hence, this study was conducted in Sikonge District to fill the gap on the provision of food strategy employed by heads of public secondary schools enhances student attendance rates.

Tamiru et al. (2024) studied the Perceived benefits and challenges of school feeding program in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. A qualitative and phenomenological study was conducted to collect data from 20 schools participating in the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP). Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 98 purposive selected participants. The study encompassed 48 student mothers in 5 FGDs, 20 students, 20 school heads, and 10 experts from the Ministry of Education, Sub-cities, and the School Feeding Agency. It was found that the program improved attendance, concentration, and academic performance. Challenges such as underpaid kitchen workers, rising food costs, and inadequate infrastructure were identified. Addressing these issues is crucial for the program's sustainability. While this study provided rich qualitative insights into the program's benefits and challenges, a quantitative component to measure the extent of this accord was required. The study was conducted in Ethiopia which differs significantly from Tanzania in terms of economic advancement which has effect on school feeding strategy. Therefore, a mixed-method approach was used to fill the gaps. The current study provides more vital evidence on the contribution of food provision strategy employed by heads of public secondary schools to enhance students' attendance rates.

De-Dieu et al. (2023) researched on school feeding program effectiveness and its challenges in basic education schools in Rwanda. The study was directed by a descriptive research design, and 227 were selected using stratified and simple random sampling approaches. Questionnaires and Interview guides were used to obtain quantitative and qualitative data respectively. The numeric data were descriptively examined using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), and the qualitative data were studied using theme analysis. The study established a moderate level of school feeding effectiveness in terms of programs coverage, school meal and cost, school meal preparation, and service. The findings highlight positive insight on student attendance and learning outcomes, yet ongoing issues with food quantity and quality underline significant challenges. While the call for increased government funding was critical, addressing infrastructure limitations and ensuring consistent food standards were also essential for sustaining the program's benefits. Therefore, without these improvements, the program's long-term effectiveness could remain limited. Thus, mixed methods approach allowed for a detailed investigation of the strategy challenges on filling the gap of population using the Heads of school, teachers, students and parents for more views on the triangulation of data concerning the provision of food strategy employed by heads of public secondary schools enhances student attendance rates.

Roothaert et al. (2021) did a study on policies, multi-stakeholder approaches and home-grown school feeding programs for improving quality, equity and sustainability of school meals in public secondary schools in Northern Tanzania. The study has shown that school meals can reduce school absenteeism, improve concentration in class and reduce early drop-outs. The study consisted of a systematic review, key informant interviews and focus group discussions in Arumeru and Babati, Tanzania. In total, 21 key informant interviews with 27 participants and 27 focus group discussions with 217 participants were involved. The results showed that lack of clear policy and guidelines hindered the program's contribution. The study recommended a multi-sector approach to improve meal variety and community participation. The research conveyed valuable information to the current study though, the study lacked quantitative data to measure outcomes like school attendance and academic performance. Furthermore, the sample sizes for interviews and focus groups would slightly capture the variety of view across the entire context, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings. Finally, relying solely on self-reported data from stakeholders may introduce response bias, as participants might emphasize positive aspects avoiding to discussing sensitive challenges, consequence the objectivity of the results. Thus, mixed method approach was used to obtain more comprehensive data on the provision of food strategy employed by heads of public secondary schools enhances student attendance rates.

Mabula et al. (2023) conducted a study on Effectiveness of school feeding program on enhancing students' learning in public secondary schools in Misungwi District, Tanzania. A mixed research approach and a convergent parallel design were employed. A sample size of 196 selected from 8829 target population was used where probability and non-probability sampling techniques were employed to select participants. Questionnaires and Interview guides were used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The results also indicated that School Feeding Programme (SFP) contributes to reduced students' absenteeism and drop-out, enhanced students' academic performance, and increased students' concentration in the learning process. The study has broadened the knowledge to the current study. Though, parents' views were left out where their insights could reveal additional part on meal quality, program sustainability, and their children's well-being which are vital for a whole understanding of the food provision strategy. However, without parents' information, the findings had overlooked critical aspects of community support and home-related factors affecting student attendance. Therefore, the current study filled the gap by involving the parents to weigh out their ideas on the provision of food strategy employed by heads of public secondary schools enhances student attendance rates.

7. Demonstration of Research Gaps

The reviewed empirical studies have identified, knowledge and contextual gaps. The gaps identified in the reviewed studies highlighted areas for improvement in researches addressing attendance in public secondary schools.

Knowledge gap

The reviewed studies like Shrestha et al (2020) conducted a study on a home-grown school feeding program, identifying the improvement in meal quality and nutritional intake. Similarly, Tamiru et al (2024) studied on the benefits and challenges of home feeding program examining how the school administrative decision influenced program success. These studies provided the findings on the school feeding outcomes but limited on addressing how heads of schools direct enhanced student attendance through implementation strategies. The current study filled the gap by investigating the specific strategy employed by heads of schools to ensure contribution and sustainability of school feeding in enhancing student attendance

Contextual gap

Most of the reviewed studies were conducted in settings that differ significantly from the Tanzanian context, limiting the applicability of their findings to local educational environments. Shrestha et al. (2020) research focused on Nepal, while Tamiru et al. (2024) examined schools in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, De-Dieu et al. (2023) also studied the program in Rwanda. Both settings characterized by unique socio economic and educational frameworks that differ from those found in Tanzania. These contexts may not reflect the realities of the remote area such as Sikonge District, where education and infrastructure are challenging. Therefore, the current study addressed the contextual gap by focusing on Sikonge District to provide insights into the duty of school heads in managing feeding strategy and its enhancement on student attendance.

8. Research Methodology

The study employed a convergent design under the mixed methods approach, where the quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analysed independently and then merged for interpretation. Cresswell and Cresswell (2018) highlighted its usefulness in addressing research questions through the collection which is simultaneous and comparison of both quantitative and qualitative data. The target population was 21 public secondary schools, 21 heads of schools, 543 teachers, 3209 of form two, three and four students and 6418 parents, making a total of 10191 from which the respondents for the study were drawn. The sample was obtained through criterion purposive sampling for heads of schools, snowball for parents and stratified random sampling techniques for teachers and students. The sample of 6 heads of schools, 54 teachers, 321 students and 12 parents were involved in the study. Quantitative data was collected by using questionnaires, whereby qualitative data used interview guide, and document analysis guide. Validity was ensured by three research experts from Faculty of Education at Mwenge Catholic University (MWECAU) from the field of Educational Planning and Administration. Pilot testing was done in one (1) of the public secondary schools which was not included in the actual study. The sample consisted of 1 head of school, 5 teachers, 32 students and 2 parents. The reliability of Likert items was estimated by using

Cronbach's Alpha coefficient whereby, .930 for teachers and .747 for students were obtained. Hence, the instrument was acceptable for the study. The trustworthiness of qualitative data was done through peer debriefing and triangulation. The descriptive statistics was used to analyse quantitative data using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 23. Qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis. Ethical considerations were adhered to by the researcher which included obtaining consent from the respondents and ensuring confidentiality of the information.

9. Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented based on the research question that aimed to investigate the contribution of food provision strategy employed by heads of public secondary schools in enhancing students' attendance in Sikonge District. Both quantitative (from questionnaires) and qualitative data (from interviews and document analysis guide) were collected. The study used five levels Likert scale to analyse the responses. According to Vasileiou et al. (2018), the scale was presented by numbers ranged from 1= Strongly Disagree (SD) 2= Disagree (D), 3= Undecided (U), 4 = Agree (A), 5 = Strongly Agree (SA). This was used to measure the level of agreement, and of disagreement with various statements. Taherdoost (2019), the rate of percentages is described as ≤ 20 = Extremely minority, 21 – 49 = Minority, 50 – 59 = Moderate, 60 – 69 = Majority, 70 – 89 = Very High Majority, 90 – 99 = Extremely Majority, 100 = overwhelming Majority. Also, the mean score greater than ≥ 3 indicated that food provision strategy enhances students' attendance, whereby, a mean score below than 3 suggested otherwise. A mean score accurately equal to 3 implies uncertainties regarding food provision strategy enhances students' attendance (Hutchinson & Chyung, (2023). Table 2 summarizes the data collected from teachers and students.

Table 2

²*Teachers' and students' responses on How Food Provision Strategy Employed by Heads of Public Secondary Schools Enhances Students Attendance (n =54 teachers and 321 students).*

Statements		SD		D		U		A		SA		Mean
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	
1. The school head ensures food is provided regularly to students to attract school attendance	Teachers	14	26	16	30	7	13	8	15	9	17	2.67
	Students	206	64	27	8	23	7	20	6	45	14	1.98
2. The school head uses food program to motivate students to attend school regularly	Teachers	13	24	12	22	11	20	9	17	9	17	2.80
	Students	185	58	39	12	26	8	32	10	39	12	2.07
3. The food program provided by heads of schools helps to reduce absenteeism related to hunger issues.	Teachers	15	28	11	20	4	7	15	28	9	17	2.85
	Students	182	57	29	9	31	10	39	12	40	12	2.15
4. The school head ensures meals are enough to encourage student attendance.	Teachers	12	22	17	31	6	11	11	20	8	15	2.74
	Students	193	60	25	8	27	8	36	11	40	12	2.08
5. The school head monitors and provides meals program to help students to focus and attend school regularly.	Teachers	9	17	17	31	8	15	11	20	9	17	2.89
	Students	179	56	36	11	20	6	35	11	51	16	2.20
6. The school head collaborates with parents in providing food to support the school feeding program for students to enhance regular attendance.	Teachers	8	15	14	26	11	20	12	22	9	17	3.00
	Students	136	42	46	14	40	12	38	12	61	19	2.51
7. The school head ensures food programs enhances students' concentration and improve attendance.	Teachers	9	17	18	33	8	15	12	22	7	13	2.81
	Students	165	51	50	16	28	9%	41	13	37	12	2.17
8. The school head uses food programs to create a supportive learning environment enhancing students' regular attendance.	Teachers	6	11	20	37	6	11	13	24	9	17	2.98
	Students	162	50	43	13	31	10	36	11	49	15	2.27
9. The school head links food programs with academic performance to enhance attendance.	Teachers	6	11	15	28	7	13	14	26	12	22	3.20
	Students	142	44	45	14	30		43	13	61	19	2.49
10. The school head ensures that the	Teachers	16	30	15	28	2	4%	10	19	11	20	2.72

² *Teachers' and students' responses on How Food Provision Strategy Employed by Heads of Public Secondary Schools Enhances Students Attendance*

student does not miss meals to attend school regularly.	Students	178	55	33	10	28	9	36	11	46	14	2.19
	Teachers											2.87
Grand Mean	Students											2.21

Source: Field data (2025)

Keys: 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD), 2 = Disagree (D), 3 = Undecided (UN), 4 = Agree (A), 5 = Strongly Agree (SA), f= Frequencies, % = Percentages, and Mean scores.

Data in Table 2 indicate that, 56% of teachers and 72% of students disagreed with the statement that the school head ensures food is provided regularly to students to attract school attendance while 32% of teachers and 20% of students agreed with the statement. On the other hand, 13% of teachers and 7% of students were undecided. Moreover, the mean scores obtained from the statement were 2.67 for teachers and 1.98 for students which imply disagreement. The findings imply that school heads do not provide the food regularly to students to attract school attendance. These findings could be due to the fact that the food that is supposed to be used in schools is contributed by parents. The economic status of the parents is not the same; there are some parents who are able to contribute regularly and others contributing rarely and others are unable to contribute for food to support their children. Students whose parents contribute money for food in schools are given food while those whose parents do not contribute, they are not given food. This leads to nonstop of students' poor attendance especially those from low-income families. This confirms that the school heads need support from parents and government to attract attendance. The head of school 'B' shared that:

The food program, especially porridge, helps keep students in school. Not all parents contribute food. The cost is 5,000 TZS per term for porridge and 15,000 TZS per month for full meals. Students whose parents do not contribute, do not get the meals (*HoS B personal communication, 24th January 2025*).

The analysis of the report from the Quality assurer in school A conducted on 16th March 2023 (pg. 10), recommended the provision of food to be improved by saying that, "the school does not provide food for all learners. Correspondingly, Quality assurer report on 15th March 2025 in school E advised the head of the school to put an emphasis on the parents to understand the importance of school feeding to make all learners attain the food at school through their contribution. The report shows that food provision at schools was insufficient as the schools do not provide food for all learners, a condition linked to weakened students' attendance and diminished participation in class activities. Furthermore, the report recommended that the school leadership and parents should cooperatively work together to develop feeding strategy to enhance school feeding to all learners at school for effective teaching and learning. A joint initiative is essential for improving attendance together with teaching and learning environment (School A & E documents, reviewed on 23rd & 29th January, 2025).

The findings show that school head struggle to provide regular food. This highlights the inequality in access based on family contributions whereas efforts are not consistent. Student feel it more strongly than teachers due to their responses. Thus, it reflects totally poverty especially for students whose parents cannot contribute. This was confirmed by Misinde (2020) who found that the Cohort of students with food provision program had a minimal number of absentees compared to the cohort of students without food provision program. Also, Acquah (2023) supported the findings that, schools with Grown School Feeding Programme (GSFP) have an increment in their students' enrolment and attendance, before the program, students from weak financial background's, educational progress was negatively affected.

Data in Table 2 indicate that 46% of teachers and 70% of students disagree with the statement that the school head use food to motivate students to attend school regularly while 34% and 22% of teachers and students respectively agreed with the statement and 20% of teachers and 8% of students remained neutral. The mean scores were 2.80 for teachers and for students 2.07 which imply that most of school heads do not provide food program to motivate students' attendance due to inadequate contribution from parents. This calls heads to ensure provision of food throughout the year to make students attend regularly. The head of school 'C' said:

From 2022 to now 2025, food contributions from parents have been poor, making it hard to run the program. Even when I talk to village leaders, they say their people do not have food. So, it's difficult to ask them to contribute food to school. I talked to Tanzania Social Action Fund (TASAF), (a poverty reduction program) to help support students from poor families by sending food directly to school instead of home. I have not received a response yet, but if approved, it will help (*HoS C personal communication, 27th January, 2025*).

Additionally, head from school 'E' responded by saying:

This depends on policy. Parents are expected to contribute to meals, but many are too poor to manage that. At our school, food is usually available from June to November. When we do have food, day students eat lunch, and boarding students get all meals. This encourages students to stay in school. This year we planted on 3 acres; next year we hope to have enough food for everyone (*HoS E personal communication, 29th January, 2025*).

This means that food is not used strategically to motivate students. The program is not reliable as a result, many students cannot attend school regularly, especially when hungry. The findings are supported by Mabula et al. (2023) who indicated that school feeding program (SFP) contributes to reduce students' absenteeism and drop-out, enhances students' academic performance, and increases students' concentration in the learning process. Appiah (2024) supported by emphasizing that, school feeding programs significantly boost student attendance, reduces hunger, increases engagement, lower dropout rates and enhances performance

Data in Table 2 unveil that 48% of teachers and 66% of students maintained that the food provision program ensured by heads of schools did not reduce absenteeism related to hunger issues while 45 % of teachers and 22% of students supported that the food provision program reduced absenteeism related to hunger and 7% of teachers and 10% of students were undecided. The mean scores of 2.85 for teachers and 2.15 for students implied that, food is not provided in most of the schools which could help to reduce absenteeism related to hunger. Without reliable food, especially for students coming from far away or poor homes, school attendance continues to be a problem. This was confirmed by the parent interview in school 'A' that, *"the food is not provided at schools because we parents have not contributed"* (Parent's communication, 23rd January, 2025).

Thus, head of school D added:

The school has tried to help by farming two acres of land. one acre is managed by the school in partnership with the council's agriculture officer, and the other acre is funded by the school using a small part of the school's capitation grant (*HoS D personal communication, 28th January 2025*).

On the other hand, document analysis in school 'A' revealed that there was shortage of food in a sense that the school had no kitchen inventory records on types of meals provided or the regularity of the food supply. This report from the documents exposed the real situation of food that it is not provided consistently in most of the schools. This lack of documentation limits the school's ability to monitor and manage the school feeding properly. Without food it is hard for the students to stay longer at school especially those who comes from far. (Document from school A, reviewed on 23rd January, 2025). These findings concur with Rojas et al. (2020) and Nizeyimana et al. (2021) who found that providing meals can significantly improve attendance by alleviating hunger, which is a major barrier for many students.

Data from Table 2 show that majority of teachers 53% and students 68% of students disagreed with the statement that school head ensures availability of enough meals to encourage student attendance while 35% of teachers and 23% of students agreed with the statement and 12% of teachers and 9% of students remained neutral. The mean scores of the statement were 2.74 for teachers and 2.08 for students which suggests general dissatisfaction. This implies that, the school head had not ensured availability of enough meals which could encourage students' attendance. This scenario calls on the school' head to have another alternative to ensure meals are provided to the whole school to encourage students' attendance. The information from document analysis shows that schools' B', 'C', and 'D', had no daily meal provision schedule and kitchen inventory records to show the food being provided (School B, C and D documents,

reviewed on 24th, 27th and 28th January 2025). The absence of such records showed that no structured meal program was in place during the period of reviewing the documents. This inadequacy of meal provision points to a critical problem in school leadership, particularly in ensuring basic welfare services that support students' attendance.

Furthermore, the findings imply that failure to ensure food provision not only affects students' attendance but also undermines efforts to improve academically. Without strategic intervention or alternative mechanism to assure daily meal, students' absenteeism is likely to persist as a challenge within Sikonge District while schools' 'A', 'E' and 'F' had documents showing some of the students who's their parents had contributed for meals (School A, E and F documents, reviewed on 23rd 29th, & 30th January, 2025). In the interviews with the heads of schools, the head of school 'D' said:

Currently, only form two and form four students get food at school. form one and three students do not. Many parents are struggling because of weather changes and food shortages, so it has been hard for them to contribute food (*HoS D personal communication, 28th January, 2025*)

Also, the parent from school 'D' said: "*right now, we do not contribute food. Before, the students were only given porridge. Currently, we do not contribute food unless it's for examination classes like form two and form four*" (Parent's personal communication, 28th January, 2025). This means that usually forms one and three are not provided with food, except form two and four who live in camp for few months before their national examination. The findings show that there is no sustainable or full year food plan. This creates irregularity that directly impacts student attendance and academic focus. Roothaert et al. (2021) indicates that, school meals can reduce absenteeism, improve concentration in class and regular attendance.

Data from Table 2 indicate that 48% of teachers and 67% of students disagree with the view that the school head monitors and provides meals program to help students to focus and attend school regularly while 37% of teachers and 27% of students supported the statement and 15% and 6% of teachers and students respectively remained undecided. The mean scores from the statement were 2.89 for teachers and students 2.20 which imply that, very minimal number of school heads monitored and provides meals to help students to focus and attend school regularly. However, the findings suggest that the head of school should ensure that all meals are provided to help students focus and attend school regularly. This has been revealed by the head from school 'A' interview of face to face by saying:

Some students travel 12 to 20 kilometres from different places. The food plan starts when parents agree to contribute. For example, in yesterday's parent meeting on 22nd January 2025, we agreed to start serving porridge on Monday 27th January 2025 using maize grown at the school last year. Parents contribute food during harvest time. Before then, we have no food unless from our own school farm, which is now three acres and helps to provide porridge before parents harvesting (*HoS A personal communication, 23rd January, 2025*).

Thereafter, a parent in school 'A' added by saying: "*I contribute food and money when we have harvested crops*" (Parent of school A personal communication, 23rd January, 2025).

Another head from school 'F' said:

In previous years, students were only given porridge. Now, we have a little maize left from last year (five sacks), which will be used to make porridge three times a week (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday). The school has planted crops on 3 acres of land to help feed students. The main challenge is getting inputs like fertilizers, the land is exhausted (*HoS F personal communication, 30th January, 2025*).

This shows weak monitoring and planning. Programs are not proactive. Without active follow up and structured plans, the food provision programs cannot serve the schools intended purpose. Liguori et al. (2024) concur with the findings when indicates that school meals as a solution to absenteeism, the breakfast, lunch, snacks or take-home rations to students should be done to improve attendance.

Table 2 shows that 41% of teachers and 56% of students had contrary opinion to the statement that the school head collaborates with parents in providing food to support the school feeding program for

students to enhance regular attendance while 39% of teachers and 31% of students supported the statement and 20% of teachers and 12% of students were undecided. The mean scores obtained from the statement were 3.00 for teachers and 2.51. This implies that, the head of school had a very little collaboration with parents in providing food to support the school feeding program for students to enhance regular attendance. However, inadequate of parental involvement is a major challenge; school head need to build stronger relationship with parents and help them understand their role in supporting student wellbeing. During interviews with heads of schools, the head of school 'D' said: *"Cooperation between parents and teachers is still low. Many parents feel that once they bring their child to school, it is the teacher's full responsibility to take care of them"* (HoS D personal communication, 28th January, 2025). Myende and Nhlumayo (2022) confirm that parents understand the need for their involvement but need better communication and empowerment to support food program.

Data in Table 2 unveil that half of teachers 50% and majority of students 67% were against the statement that the school head ensures food programs enhance students' concentration and improve attendance while 35% of teachers and 25% of students agreed with the statement and the extremely minority of teachers 15% and of students 9% were undecided. The mean scores attained from the statement, 2.81 for teachers and 2.17 imply that, only few school head had implemented the food programs thus enhancing students' concentration and improve attendance. This suggests that for school heads to stimulate students' concentration in class and improve attendance, food should be provided to all students who comes from very far and near, together with those who are living on camps. Interviews reveal that where food is available, students' behaviour and outcome improve. The information from the interview with the heads of schools supported the above findings when head of school 'E' remarked: *"When food is provided at school, students prefer attending school instead of staying at home and going hungry. Well-fed students are more attentive and perform better"* (HoS E personal communication, 29th January, 2025), finally, the parent from school 'A' said: *"Yes, if food is provided, it motivates students to come to school and concentrate because they won't be hungry"* (Parent's personal communication, 23rd January, 2025). The findings correspond with the study of Tamiru et al. (2024) which found out that food provision program improved students' attendance, concentration, and academic performance.

Data in Table 2 indicate that 48% of teachers and 63% of students disagreed with the statement that that the school head used food programs to create a supportive learning environment and thus enhancing students' regular attendance; while 41% of teachers and 26% of students supported the statement and 11% of teachers and students 10% were undecided. The mean scores obtained from the statement were 2.98 for teachers and 2.27 for students which imply that, food program is not well implemented to support learning environment enhancing students' regular attendance. The findings suggest that, school heads have little support from parents, should have specific measures on using food provision program to create supportive environment enhancing student regular attendance. In the interview from the head of school 'A' shared that:

Educating and encouraging parents to participate in food provision is very important. For example, in previous meeting 22nd January 2025, parents agreed to support the food strategy. We decided every parent must contribute, and if someone refuses, action will be taken (*HoS A personal communication, 23rd January 2025*).

The parent from school 'F' said: *"last year 2024, food was a big challenge. Parents were called and asked to contribute, but very few responded. Some parents understand the importance of education, but others do not. Right now, the situation at school is still difficult"* (Parent's Personal communication, 30th January, 2025)' this shows that, food provision programs must not be seasonal or selective. Instead, a sustainable school feeding should be established and supported by school farms and local government or national education policies. The findings confirmed with Maslow's theory (1943) which emphasizes that basic needs like food must be met before higher level goals such as learning can be achieved. Thus, Shrestha et al. (2020) concurred with the findings that, the HGSP program to improve meal quality and nutritional intake, needs more additional funding to sustaining the improvements.

Table 2 show that minority 48% of teachers and 58% of students were of the idea that the school head links of food programs with academic performance did not enhance attendance. While 39% of teachers and 32% of students link food enhanced attendance and 13% of teachers and 9% of students remained

undecided. The mean scores obtained from the statement were 3.20 for teachers and 2.49 for students. This implies that, teachers understood that hunger affects learning, but students seemed unable to see direct link between meals and academic outcomes. School head needs to make these connections more visible to both students and parents. When food strategy is well used enhances students to attend frequently and they perform well. The head of school 'E' during face-to-face interview had this to say: *"When food is provided at school, students prefer attending school instead of staying home and being hungry. Well-fed students are more attentive and perform better"* (HoS E personal communication, 29th January, 2025).

The head of school "F" said that:

For other students, parents prefer that their children eat at home. Many parents have three to four children in school and say that they cannot afford to contribute to school meals. This is mostly due to lack of awareness; what the child eats at home could instead be provided at school (HoS F personal communication, 30th January, 2025).

Also, the parent of school "E" shared that;

"I haven't contributed food yet, but I plan to do so. It's hard to study or work on an empty stomach. In the past, when I contributed, and students were given meals, I saw my child start improving in school, having good results" (Parent's personal communication, 29th January, 2025).

The head of school "C" added: *"Some students only eat once a day or sleep hungry, and walk long distances, some up to 18 kilometres one way. Without transport, many miss school"* HoS C personal communication, 27th January, 2025). The findings concur with the study of Sitali (2021) who discovered that school feeding initiative have several opportunities such as equitable access to education which is appropriate to aid intervention and relevant in improving class attendance; hence, improved class performance.

Data in Table 2 indicate that 58% of teachers and 65% of students disagreed with the statement that the school head ensures that the student does not miss meals to attend school regularly while 30% of teachers and 25% of students agreed with the statement and 10% of teachers and 9% of students were undecided, replied moderate effective that the student does not miss meals to attend school regularly. The mean scores of the statement were 2.72 and 2.19 for teachers and students respectively which imply that, meals at school were not provided frequently effectively to make students attend the school regularly. The findings suggest that, food contribution from parents was very low. In this scenario, school heads should emphasize the parents to contribute more food to enhance frequent attendance. The school head of school 'B' shared that: *"The parent contribution program is somehow effective, though not all parents pay on time. Some pay late, while others do not contribute at all"* (HoS B personal communication, 24th January, 2025). The parent from school 'A' replied: *"Food is not provided at schools because we parents have not contributed. Few parents do that and most of parents does not. My child gets food at home because we live near to the school"* (Parent's personal communication, 23rd January, 2025). The findings correspond with De-Dieu et al. (2023) who found that consistence food standard is also essential for sustaining the programs benefits on student attendance and learning outcome. Also, Marcelline et al. (2021) concurred by emphasizing that food provision can be achieved by involving the stakeholders.

10. Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concluded that, the current school feeding strategy is largely inadequate in promoting students' attendance. Most of the teachers reported that the provision of food employed by school heads is neither sufficient nor consistent, with only a few perceiving it as sufficient. The students' responses further indicate inadequacy in the provision of food. Additionally, the reliance on parental contributions, which are often inconsistent due to economic constraints and geographical changes, exacerbates the problem. This situation is heightened by the absence of comprehensive meal schedules and monitoring systems in many schools. Consequently, students, particularly those from low-income families and long distance from home to school, frequently attend school on an empty stomach and arrive home late while hungry; this leads to an increase of poor attendance. Therefore, there is a need for a more strong and consistent approach to school feeding strategy to enhance students' attendance.

11.Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the study comment that:

The government under the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST) should support the parents' efforts on food contribution at least one meal per day in public secondary schools to enhance students' attendance and make long education to parents on their responsibility on food contribution.

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