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Free Nutritious Meal Program at SMPN 10 Bekasi: A Phenomenological Study of Teacher and Parent Perceptions

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Abstract:

The Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program is a strategic national policy intended to improve students' nutritional well-being, health, and readiness for learning. This study explored the lived experiences and subjective meanings of teachers and parents regarding the implementation of the MBG Program at SMPN 10 Bekasi City. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, informed by George C. Edward III's Policy Implementation Theory, Joyce L. Epstein's School-Family Partnership Theory, and Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenological perspectives. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving five teachers and eight parents selected through purposive sampling. The findings revealed three interconnected dimensions. First, teachers perceived that the program supported students' learning endurance, particularly among students who previously had difficulty accessing adequate meals. However, this perceived benefit was accompanied by increased non-pedagogical workload, including food distribution, supervision of students' eating behavior, classroom cleaning, and waste management. Second, parents perceived economic benefits through reduced daily expenditure on children's meals and pocket money, while expressing concerns about food hygiene, menu variety, nutritional adequacy, freshness, and children's selective eating preferences. Third, the implementation generated operational challenges related to time management. Meal distribution, consumption, and sanitation compressed break periods and contributed to delays in subsequent lessons. These findings indicate that the MBG Program is experienced not only as a nutritional intervention but also as a policy that reshapes teachers' responsibilities, household food practices, and school-parent relations. The study recommends dedicated logistical support, clearer separation of pedagogical and operational responsibilities, schedule restructuring to protect instructional time, and transparent digital communication regarding menus and nutritional information.

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Introduction (مقدمة)

Background

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is one of Indonesia's strategic national policies that has begun to be implemented on a large scale across various levels of education. The main focus of this program is to improve students' nutritional status, reduce stunting, and support students' concentration in school learning (Alderman et al., 2021; Bundy et al., 2018; Pradhan et al., 2019).

Bekasi City, as one of Jakarta's supporting urban areas with a heterogeneous population, faces its own challenges in implementing this program. SMPN 10 Bekasi City was selected as the research locus because it represents an urban public school with diverse socioeconomic dynamics among students' parents. The success of the program depends not only on logistical distribution, but also on how it is perceived by frontline actors, namely teachers and parents. Differences in viewpoints, concerns about hygiene, shifts in the role of home food provision, and the operational burden on schools constitute dynamics that are important to examine through a phenomenological approach (Kristianto & Sukanto, 2023).

Research Questions

This study is formulated into six main questions:

1. What are the concrete experiences and dynamics of teachers' workloads at SMPN 10 Bekasi City in supervising the daily operational implementation of the MBG Program?
2. How do teachers perceive the direct impact of the program on students' learning focus, attendance levels, and classroom behavior?
3. How do parents interpret and respond economically to the program in the context of reducing household expenditure?
4. What concerns and expectations do parents have regarding food hygiene, menu variety, and nutritional adequacy?
5. What forms of collaboration and communication patterns are built between school management and parents, through the School Committee, in supervising the program?
6. What structural technical constraints in the field, such as time management and waste management, and what supporting factors influence the effectiveness of the program's implementation?

Research Objectives

This study aims to describe in depth the concrete experiences and workload dynamics of teachers, explore teachers' assessments of changes in students' focus and discipline, analyze parents' interpretation of the economic impact, identify parents' concerns and expectations regarding nutritional quality and cleanliness, map school-parent collaboration patterns, and examine structural technical constraints in the field to support the sustainability of the program at SMPN 10 Bekasi City.

Research Benefits

Theoretical Benefit: Enriching the sociology of education literature regarding the shift in the responsibility for nutritional provision from the domestic sphere to the public sphere, while

providing an empirical contribution to phenomenology-based qualitative public policy evaluation.

Practical Benefit: Providing evaluation material for the Bekasi City Education Office in formulating derivative regulations and catering standards; providing input for the management of SMPN 10 Bekasi City in organizing time and waste management; providing a channel for teachers' workload aspirations; and strengthening the partnership between the School Committee and parents.

Theoretical Foundation

Public Policy and the Free Nutritious Meal Program

Policy Implementation Theory (George C. Edward III): The success of policy implementation is determined by four main variables: Communication (transmission of technical guidelines, clarity, and consistency), Resources (human resources, facilities, and operations), Disposition (attitudes and commitment of implementers), and Bureaucratic Structure (standard operating procedures and cross-sector coordination).

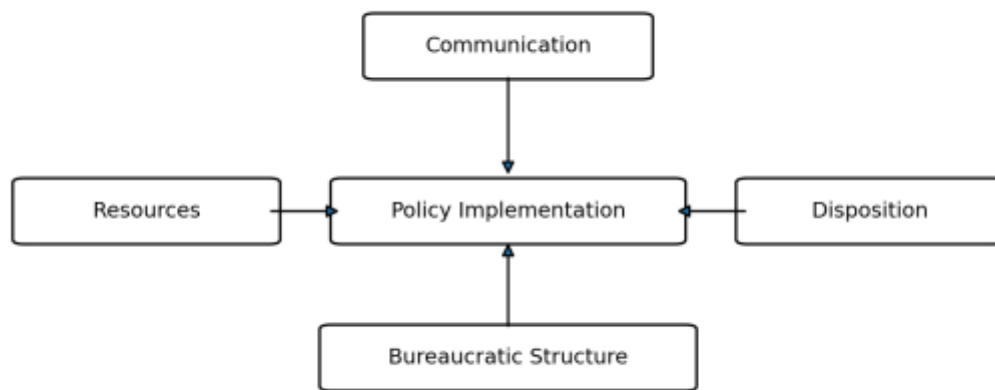


Figure 1. Edward III Policy Implementation Model

School-Age Child Nutritional Resilience: Early adolescents are in a growth-spurt period. Macronutrients (carbohydrates, proteins, and fats) and micronutrients (iron, zinc, and B-complex vitamins) directly affect cognitive function. A lack of nutritional intake can trigger hunger-induced distraction (hypoglycemia), which reduces attention span. The MBG Program serves as a provider of stable energy that supports attendance and concentration during teaching and learning activities (Alderman et al., 2021; Pradhan et al., 2019).

School and Parent Relationship (School-Family Partnership)

Joyce Epstein's Partnership Theory: Through the Overlapping Spheres of Influence model, Epstein maps six types of parental involvement: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making, and Collaborating with Community. The MBG Program intensively brings together the three spheres of school, family, and community (Epstein, 2018).

Shift in the Sphere of Physical Welfare: Boundary blurring occurs when responsibility for nutritional provision, which was previously the private or domestic domain of the family, shifts into the public or school domain. This requires synchronization of nutrition education and transparent communication to prevent conflicts of authority (Wiyani, 2021).

Phenomenological Approach

Philosophical Roots: Husserl versus Heidegger. Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology emphasizes the search for pure essence (eidos) through epoche or bracketing, which suspends initial assumptions. In contrast, Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes Dasein (being in the world), meaning that human experience is always bound to its historical, social, and cultural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2022).

Application in the MBG Study: The researcher applied bracketing to suspend initial assumptions, explored the lived experiences of teachers and parents, and conducted a hermeneutic interpretation of the reality of Bekasi City's urban community (Moustakas, 1994).



Method (منهج)

Approach and Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to understand the essence of the meanings constructed by educational actors (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Research Location and Time

The study was conducted at SMPN 10 Bekasi City from July to August, during the odd semester of the 2026/2027 academic year.

Data Sources / Informants

Informants were selected through purposive sampling and consisted of five teachers (the principal, homeroom teachers, and duty teachers) and eight students' parents (School Committee members and representatives from diverse economic backgrounds).

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation during food distribution and meal periods, and document study, including menus, attendance records, and evaluations.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Moustakas/Colaizzi phenomenological analysis model through the stages of transcription, horizontalization, clustering of themes, and the preparation of textual and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2022).



Result (نتائج)

Teacher Perceptions: Between Additional Duties and Improved Student Focus

Workload versus Academic Success

The teachers' accounts revealed a dual experience of the MBG Program. On the one hand, teachers perceived that the provision of meals could support students' physical readiness and learning endurance, particularly during afternoon lessons. This perception was especially associated with students who previously experienced difficulties in accessing breakfast or adequate meals before coming to school. From the teachers' perspective, the availability of a regular meal reduced students' immediate hunger-related difficulties and created more favorable conditions for participation in classroom activities.

However, these perceived benefits were accompanied by an expansion of teachers' responsibilities beyond their primary pedagogical roles. Teachers were not only involved in

monitoring students' learning but also became involved in several operational activities related to the meal program. These activities included managing queues during food distribution, supervising students while eating, encouraging students who were reluctant to consume certain foods, maintaining classroom cleanliness, and managing waste after meals. Consequently, the implementation of the MBG Program introduced an additional layer of responsibility into teachers' daily routines.

One teacher described the situation in a relatively moderate manner, emphasizing that the program did not necessarily produce substantial changes in learning outcomes but was beneficial for students who had difficulty obtaining breakfast (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Suryani & Rahmawati, 2022).:

"There has been no significant change in learning and other matters, but children who are unable to have breakfast are helped by this MBG program...." (Grade VIII Homeroom Teacher)

This statement illustrates an important distinction in teachers' experiences. The perceived value of the program was not necessarily framed in terms of direct academic achievement. Rather, its benefit was understood through students' immediate physical condition and readiness to participate in learning. At the same time, teachers' involvement in distribution, supervision, and post-meal activities demonstrates how the implementation of a nutrition policy can extend into teachers' everyday pedagogical routines.

The findings therefore suggest an ambivalent pattern: the program was perceived as providing a supportive nutritional intervention for students while simultaneously creating additional non-pedagogical demands for teachers. The expansion of these responsibilities reflects the broader issue of role overload, in which teachers are required to accommodate administrative and operational tasks alongside their core instructional responsibilities (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Suryani & Rahmawati, 2022).

Changes in Student Behavior

Teachers also reported observable changes in several aspects of students' daily behavior following the implementation of the program. One notable change was a perceived decline in students' tendency to purchase snacks outside the school gate. The availability of meals at school appeared to reduce, at least from the teachers' observations, the immediate need for students to seek additional food outside the school environment.

Teachers also reported fewer minor health-related complaints, including dizziness and nausea, among students visiting the School Health Unit (UKS). These observations were interpreted by teachers as an indication that the availability of regular meals could help address some immediate food-related needs during the school day.

However, these observations should be understood as participants' perceptions and observations rather than clinically verified health outcomes. The qualitative evidence indicates that teachers associated the MBG Program with changes in students' daily behavior and physical condition, but the study did not independently measure changes in students' nutritional or health status.

Parent Perceptions: Economic Efficiency and Existential Anxiety

Economic Response

Parents described the MBG Program not only as a school-based nutrition intervention but also as a policy with direct implications for household expenditure. For parents from lower-middle-income backgrounds, the provision of meals at school was perceived as reducing some

daily expenses associated with children's food needs. In particular, parents reported potential savings related to pocket money and the preparation or purchase of packed meals.

From the parents' perspective, this economic dimension was important because the program shifted part of the responsibility for providing food during school hours from the household to the school. The perceived reduction in daily expenditure contributed to a positive evaluation of the program, particularly when the meals provided were considered sufficient and acceptable to children.

The economic benefit, therefore, extended beyond the immediate provision of food. It was experienced as a form of household expenditure relief that could reduce the financial pressure associated with meeting children's daily nutritional needs during school hours. This finding illustrates that the meaning of MBG for parents was shaped not only by nutritional considerations but also by the economic circumstances of individual households.

Hygiene Concerns and the Picky Eater Phenomenon

In contrast, upper-middle-income groups show a more critical attitude toward catering-vendor hygiene standards, protein adequacy, and menu freshness. The clash between standardized school menus and children's eating habits triggers the picky eater phenomenon, reflecting parental ambivalence in supervising school-age children's nutritional fulfillment (Handayani & Fitriani, 2024).

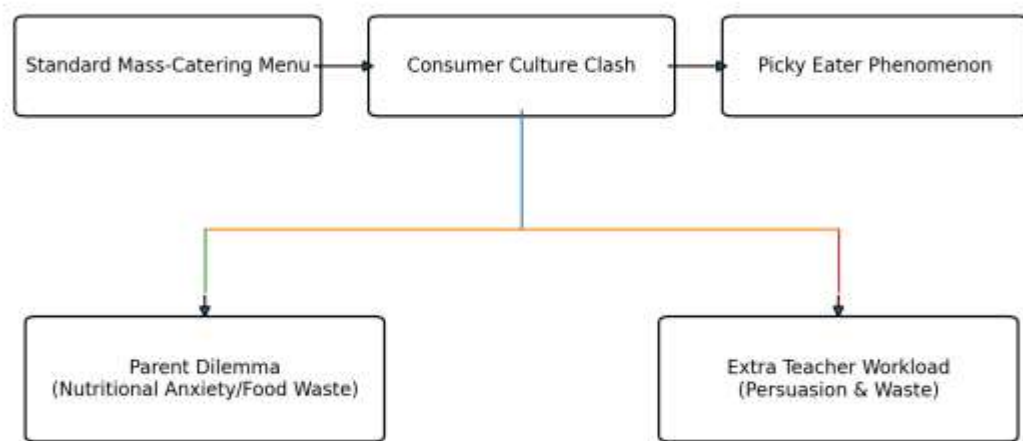


Figure 2. Dynamics of the MBG Consumption Culture Clash

"My child said the meal is complete, with vegetables, protein, and fruit, but there are still some things my child does not like...." (Parent of a Grade VII Student)

This statement illustrates the distinction between nutritional completeness and actual consumption. From the parents' perspective, providing a nutritionally balanced meal does not automatically guarantee that children will consume all components of the meal. The issue of selective eating therefore became part of parents' evaluation of the program.

The findings further indicate that parental perceptions were shaped by their position and expectations regarding children's nutritional fulfillment. Parents were required to negotiate between appreciation for the economic and nutritional benefits of the program and concerns about whether the meals were hygienic, sufficiently varied, nutritionally adequate, and acceptable to their children. This tension reflects the ambivalence surrounding the transfer of part of the family's food-provision role to the school environment (Handayani & Fitriani, 2024).



Discussion (مناقشة)

Implementation Barrier Analysis: Time Synchronization

Compression of Break Time

One of the most prominent operational barriers identified in the implementation of the MBG Program at SMPN 10 Bekasi City was the difficulty of synchronizing meal-service activities with the existing school timetable. The provision of meals was not a single activity but involved several sequential stages, including food distribution, student consumption, and post-meal sanitation. Based on observations of the implementation process, the entire sequence required approximately 35–40 minutes (Hadinata, 2026; Nagaring et al., 2026; Soma & Uchiyama, 2026).

The distribution stage required approximately 7–10 minutes, depending on the organization of students and the process of delivering meals to each class. This was followed by a 15–20-minute consumption period during which students were expected to eat the meals provided. The final stage involved approximately 5–7 minutes for cleaning the classroom and managing food-related waste. When these stages were considered as a single operational process, the total time required exceeded the conventional 15–20-minute break period (Melani et al., 2026; Wibowo & Yuliani, 2026).

This temporal mismatch created a structural tension between the nutritional objectives of the program and the existing organization of instructional time. The school schedule had originally been designed around relatively short break periods, whereas the MBG Program introduced an activity requiring substantially more time. Consequently, the implementation of the program could not simply be accommodated within the existing break without affecting other components of the school schedule (Lubis et al., 2025; Wahyuniar & Iman Pustakasari, 2025).

The compression of break time also created practical pressure for teachers and students. Teachers had to ensure that students received their meals, consumed them appropriately, and returned the classroom to an acceptable condition before the next lesson began. Students, meanwhile, had to complete the eating process within a limited period while also participating in the associated cleaning activities. Thus, the meal period functioned not merely as a conventional break but as an additional organized school activity requiring coordination among multiple actors (Spill et al., 2024).

Implications of Delays in Teaching and Learning Activities

The temporal pressure generated by MBG operations had direct implications for the transition between the meal period and the subsequent instructional session. The cleaning and waste-management stage frequently extended beyond the designated break period. As a result, the opening of the following lesson could be delayed by approximately 5–10 minutes (Liguori, 2024; Matela et al., 2024).

Although a delay of several minutes may appear relatively small in isolation, its repeated occurrence can reduce the effective amount of instructional time available during the school day. Teachers were required to accommodate the transition from meal distribution and classroom cleaning back to academic activities, creating an additional adjustment in their teaching routines (Locke et al., 2025).

The time issue also had an affective dimension for teachers. The transition from managing food distribution and classroom cleanliness to resuming instructional responsibilities required teachers to shift rapidly between operational and pedagogical roles. This contributed to feelings of fatigue, particularly when the transition was not completed within the planned break period (Raveenthiranathan et al., 2024).

The findings therefore indicate that the implementation challenge was not primarily the availability of food or students' access to meals, but the temporal integration of the MBG Program into the existing instructional structure. The program introduced a new time-consuming activity into a school schedule that had not initially been structured around such an intervention. Time synchronization consequently emerged as an important implementation issue alongside human-resource and logistical considerations (Doroshenko, 2024).

Tactical Solutions by School Management

In response to these operational constraints, the management of SMPN 10 Bekasi City adopted several tactical adjustments to accommodate the MBG Program. One of the principal adaptations was the restructuring of the daily schedule. The school shortened individual early lesson periods by approximately 2–5 minutes and accumulated the resulting time savings to extend the midday break to approximately 45 minutes (Simbeye et al., 2026).

This adjustment represented an attempt to create a more realistic temporal space for the complete MBG process. Rather than expecting food distribution, consumption, and sanitation to fit within the conventional break period, the school modified the schedule to provide a longer dedicated period. The 45-minute allocation allowed the three operational stages to be accommodated with greater flexibility and reduced the likelihood that meal-related activities would directly overlap with the following lesson (Abbotts-Holmes et al., 2026).

The school also involved students in supporting the logistical process by empowering class officers and the Student Council (OSIS) as a Student Logistics Team. This arrangement distributed some operational responsibilities beyond teachers and enabled students to participate in organizing the meal process and maintaining the school environment.

From an implementation perspective, these adaptations demonstrate that the effectiveness of a school-based nutrition program depends not only on the availability of meals but also on the capacity of schools to reorganize routines, allocate sufficient time, and distribute operational responsibilities among relevant actors. The experience of SMPN 10 Bekasi City suggests that schedule restructuring and shared logistical responsibility can function as practical mechanisms for reducing disruption to instructional activities while maintaining the operational requirements of the MBG Program.



Conclusion (خاتمة)

Conclusion

The MBG Program at SMPN 10 Bekasi City was perceived by teachers and parents as providing nutritional and economic benefits while also creating practical challenges. Teachers reported improved student readiness and reduced food-related difficulties, but also experienced additional non-pedagogical responsibilities. Parents appreciated the reduction in household food expenditure but expressed concerns about food hygiene, menu variety, nutritional adequacy, and children's food preferences. The main implementation challenge was the limited time available for meal distribution, consumption, and sanitation, which compressed break periods and occasionally delayed subsequent lessons. Overall, the findings suggest that effective MBG implementation requires adequate logistical support, clearer division of responsibilities, effective school-parent communication, and sufficient time allocation without compromising instructional activities.

Recommendations

1. Bekasi City Education Office: Develop strict standard operating procedures for catering vendors, provide a digital application for daily nutritional transparency, and allocate funding for dedicated cleaning/logistics personnel.

2. SMPN 10 Bekasi City: Officially reorganize the daily schedule by providing a dedicated 45-minute break period and establish a student-based Healthy Eating Task Force.
3. Parents and School Committee: Build a constructive communication forum with the school and continue education on healthy eating patterns at home (Wiyani, 2021).

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