

2nd Renaissans International Conference on SDGs



Entita: Jurnal Pendidikan Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial dan Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial

Special Edition, May 2026

ISSN: 2715-7555 (Print), ISSN: 2716-1226 (Online)

DOI: [10.19105/ejpis.v2i.24412](https://doi.org/10.19105/ejpis.v2i.24412)

The Dialectics of Student Well-being in the Free Nutritious Meals Program Policy: The Intersection of Economics and Psychology

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Article Info

Article History :

Received 04 26, 2026

Revised 05 11, 2026

Accepted 05 15, 2026

Keywords:

Free Nutritious Meals;
Student Well-being;
Economics; Psychology.

Abstract

Student well-being is a crucial aspect of education as it influences physical and psychological health, as well as academic achievement. This study analyses the impact of the Free Nutritious Meals Programme (MBG) on student well-being from economic and psychological perspectives. A phenomenological qualitative approach was used to explore the experiences of children and parents from lower-middle-income families through in-depth interviews and observation. The results indicate that the MBG has not yet had a significant economic impact on reducing household expenditure burdens, as there has been no change in consumption patterns or family financial allocation. From a psychological perspective, students' low acceptance of the food has led to discomfort, rejection, and a tendency towards negative self-perception. These findings underscore that student well-being is dialectical, necessitating a more comprehensive policy evaluation to ensure alignment with students' needs and experiences.

[Kesejahteraan siswa menjadi aspek penting dalam pendidikan karena memengaruhi kondisi fisik, psikologis, dan keberhasilan belajar. Penelitian ini menganalisis dampak Program Makanan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) terhadap kesejahteraan siswa dari perspektif ekonomi dan psikologis. Pendekatan kualitatif fenomenologis digunakan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman anak-anak dan orang tua dari keluarga menengah ke bawah melalui wawancara mendalam dan observasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa MBG belum memberikan dampak ekonomi yang signifikan terhadap pengurangan beban pengeluaran rumah tangga karena tidak terjadi perubahan pola konsumsi maupun alokasi keuangan keluarga. Dari sisi psikologis, rendahnya penerimaan siswa terhadap makanan memunculkan ketidaknyamanan, penolakan, dan kecenderungan persepsi diri negatif. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa kesejahteraan siswa bersifat dialektis sehingga evaluasi kebijakan yang lebih komprehensif agar selaras dengan kebutuhan serta pengalaman siswa]. © The Authors.

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1. Introduction

Quality education depends not only on teaching methods and curriculum but also on external factors influencing pupils' cognitive development and health. Pupils' well-being is a fundamental determinant of educational success, as those with good physical and mental health tend to concentrate better, participate actively, show higher motivation, and achieve improved academic outcomes. As noted by Siregar, high-quality human resources require not only competence but also strong physical and mental health to optimise learning and future productivity [1]. This can be supported through adequate nutrition, which plays a crucial role in enhancing cognitive ability, stamina, and learning resilience. Balanced nutritional intake enables pupils to focus and comprehend learning materials more effectively. Conversely, inadequate nutrition can reduce physical endurance, concentration, and motivation, while hindering intellectual development. According to UNICEF, poor nutrition limits cognitive growth, lowers learning enthusiasm, and reduces academic performance. Nutrients such as carbohydrates (energy source), proteins (growth and repair), and vitamins and minerals (regulators) are essential for maintaining stable health. Proper nutritional fulfilment helps prevent illnesses that can disrupt growth and development, ultimately supporting pupils' intellectual potential [2].

The correlation between nutrition and education is a strategic issue in improving national education quality. In Indonesia, government attention to pupils' nutritional needs is reflected in regulations such as Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which emphasises optimising pupils' potential. Within this framework, the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) programme can be seen as a policy intervention to enhance well-being through nutritional fulfilment, addressing economic inequality in access to nutritious food and preventing issues such as stunting and poor health among school-age children [3]. Normatively, the programme is grounded in the intention to create healthier, more focused, and more productive learners. However, its implementation reveals complex dynamics and controversies. While MBG aims to improve access to nutrition and potentially reduce household expenditure, field realities show that pupils' well-being cannot be achieved through material fulfilment alone. Psychological dimensions such as food acceptance, comfort within social and family environments, and potential stigma or shifts in self-perception also play a crucial role. These conditions highlight the dialectical nature of the programme, where intended benefits interact with varied lived experiences in practice.

Previous research on student well-being remains fragmented and lacks integration across dimensions. Studies on child-friendly schools tend to emphasise environmental comfort and external pressures without linking these to material need fulfilment [4] [5]. Conversely, research on the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) programme focuses largely on macro-level aspects such as socio-political dynamics, learning productivity, health outcomes, and educational sustainability [6] [7]. This separation reveals a conceptual gap, where economic and psychological dimensions are not examined within a unified framework. In reality, student well-being is multidimensional, shaped by the interaction between material conditions and individual psychological experiences, highlighting the need for more integrative approaches in educational policy analysis.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to analyse the dialectics of student well-being in the implementation of the MBG programme by examining the intersection of economic and psychological aspects. It seeks to understand how the fulfilment of material needs interacts with students' subjective experiences in shaping holistic well-being. The proposed hypothesis is that, while MBG contributes to improved well-being economically through nutritional support, it also generates ambivalent psychological dynamics which, depending on conditions, may either strengthen or weaken students' overall well-being.

The issue discussed in this study is highly relevant to the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly United Nations SDG 2 *Zero Hunger* and SDG 4 *Quality Education*. The Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) programme reflects efforts to ensure children's access to adequate nutrition as a foundation for healthy growth and cognitive development, which directly supports SDG 2 in ending malnutrition among school-age children. At the same time, the programme is closely connected to SDG 4, as pupils' physical and psychological well-being significantly influence concentration, learning participation, motivation, and academic achievement. Within the broader framework of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), educational quality is not solely measured by curriculum achievement but also by the ability of educational systems to create inclusive, healthy, and supportive learning environments that promote holistic student well-being. Therefore, the MBG programme can be understood as part of a sustainable educational strategy aimed at developing healthier, more resilient, and productive future generations. However, this study also highlights that achieving sustainable education requires not only material support through nutritional fulfilment but also careful attention to students' psychological experiences, emotional

comfort, and social acceptance, as these dimensions collectively determine the sustainability and effectiveness of educational interventions.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological perspective to explore parents' subjective experiences regarding the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Programme (MBG) and its relation to pupils' well-being. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of lived experiences from both economic and psychological viewpoints. The research was conducted in several junior and senior secondary schools implementing the MBG programme in Madura, Indonesia. The participants consisted of 12 parents from lower-middle-income families and 12 children aged 10-16 years who were registered as MBG recipients. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in and experience with the programme, particularly families whose children routinely received MBG assistance at school. The number of participants was determined flexibly until data saturation was reached, indicated by the absence of new significant information emerging from the interviews.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews to capture participants' experiences, perceptions, and responses regarding the economic and psychological impacts of the programme [8]. The interview process used an interview guide containing indicators related to household expenditure, children's food acceptance, learning motivation, emotional responses, and perceptions of well-being. In addition, limited observations were conducted within the school environment to understand pupils' responses toward the meals provided and the context of programme implementation. Field notes and audio recordings were also utilised as supporting instruments to strengthen data documentation and interpretation.

Data analysis was conducted descriptively using a phenomenological framework involving data reduction, categorisation, coding, and the extraction of essential meanings from participants' lived experiences. The analysis focused on identifying key themes related to the economic and psychological dimensions of student well-being in the implementation of MBG. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, data validity was maintained through source and method triangulation, prolonged engagement during interviews and observations, and member checking with several participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations and conclusions.

3. Results

Table 1. Research Findings

No	Aspect	Findings	Implications
1	Child consumption	Children's meal expenditure did not decrease after the implementation of the MBG program	No household expense savings occurred
2	Economic effectiveness	There was no significant change in the family's financial burden	The program has not provided a direct economic impact on families
3	Consumption pattern	Children still buy food outside of school despite receiving MBG	MBG does not replace existing consumption patterns
4	Household savings	No reduction in daily household expenses was identified	No additional financial allocation is available for other needs
5	Financial allocation	There was no change in household spending allocation	The family's expenditure structure remains the same
6	Educational needs	There was no increased capacity to meet children's educational needs	Fulfillment of educational needs did not improve
7	Family economic condition	Families still perceive their economic condition as difficult	Household economic resilience has not improved
8	Food acceptance	Children's acceptance of MBG meals tends to be low	Program utilization by students is limited
9	Program utilization	MBG food is not always consumed by students	The distribution of program benefits is not optimal
10	Psychological comfort	Children show discomfort toward the provided food	Student participation in the program is low
11	Food preference	The menu does not match children's preferences	A tendency to reject MBG meals emerges
12	Consumption behavior	No change in children's eating habits	Existing consumption patterns are maintained

13	Self-perception	There is a tendency for children to feel less confident or different	Potential feelings of discomfort emerge in children
14	Emotional response	Children show rejection or lack of interest in the food	Emotional engagement with the program is low
15	Learning motivation	No significant change in children's learning motivation	No visible impact on the learning process
16	Sense of fulfillment	Children do not feel their nutritional needs are optimally met	The goal of fulfilling basic needs has not been fully achieved
17	Social interaction	No observable changes in children's social interactions related to the program	The program does not affect students' social dynamics

The findings indicate that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis—MBG) has not yet generated significant economic, behavioral, psychological, or educational impacts on beneficiary households and students. From an economic perspective, children's meal expenditures did not decrease after the implementation of the program, suggesting that MBG has not produced meaningful household cost savings. Families reported no substantial changes in their financial burden, daily expenses, or spending allocation, indicating that the program has not strengthened household economic resilience nor increased the capacity to meet other essential needs, including educational expenditures.

Regarding consumption behavior, the results reveal that students continue to purchase food outside school despite receiving MBG meals. Consequently, the program has not replaced existing consumption patterns or altered children's eating habits. This finding suggests that MBG functions as an additional food provision rather than a substitute for students' regular food consumption. The persistence of previous consumption practices also explains why no significant household savings were observed.

The study further identifies challenges related to food acceptance and program utilization. Many students demonstrated low acceptance of the meals provided, often perceiving the menu as inconsistent with their preferences. As a result, MBG meals were not always consumed, limiting the effectiveness of the program and reducing the optimal distribution of its intended benefits. The mismatch between menu offerings and children's food preferences appears to contribute to meal rejection and lower participation rates.

Psychological findings indicate that some students experienced discomfort when receiving the meals, while others expressed a lack of interest in consuming them. There was also evidence suggesting that several children felt different from their peers, potentially affecting their self-confidence and emotional well-being. These responses reflect relatively low emotional engagement with the program and highlight the importance of considering students' subjective experiences in policy implementation.

Finally, the educational and social impacts of the program were found to be limited. No significant changes were observed in students' learning motivation, perceived fulfillment of nutritional needs, or social interactions. Although MBG was designed to improve children's well-being and support educational outcomes, the findings suggest that these objectives have not yet been fully achieved. Overall, the results indicate that the effectiveness of the MBG program is constrained by limited food acceptance, unchanged consumption patterns, and the absence of measurable economic and educational benefits. These findings underscore the need for more context-sensitive menu planning, greater student involvement in program design, and continuous evaluation to enhance the program's effectiveness and sustainability.

4. Discussion

4.1 Rationale for the Free Nutritious Meals Programme within the Framework of Pupils' Well-being

The Free Nutritious Meals programme, introduced by the administration of Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka, aims to address malnutrition and improve the quality of human resources in Indonesia. It originated from President Prabowo's concerns in July 2006 regarding high stunting rates, when data showed that 30% of children under five were affected by malnutrition, while national data in 2024 recorded a 14% stunting rate [6]. These figures led to the implementation of free meals for schoolchildren, later known as the MBG programme. Conceptually, MBG reflects a commitment to ensuring adequate nutrition, supporting child development, and advancing future human resources, grounded in social justice and support for the underprivileged. However, beyond good intentions, effective public policy requires precise planning, sufficient funding, accountable implementation, accurate targeting, and measurable real-world impact [9].

In the Guidelines for the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Programme issued by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, based on Article 5 of Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024 on the National Nutrition Agency, the programme targets pupils across early childhood, primary, and secondary education covering general, vocational, religious, special education, and Islamic boarding schools as well as children under five, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers. Its main objectives are to improve health and nutritional intake. Mental and physical health play a crucial role in children's learning processes, as good health enhances concentration, consistent with Rizkiawati's findings that physiological factors influence learning focus [10].

Proper dietary patterns through nutritious food consumption are essential to support concentration and prevent stunting. Research by Ramadanti highlights the interconnection between body and mind, where poor physical health affects brain function and vice versa. This is reinforced by Apriadi in *Good Mood Food*, explaining that amino acids such as tryptophan and tyrosine contribute to the formation of neurotransmitters serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine that influence mood and behaviour [11]. Serotonin levels can be supported through carbohydrate-rich foods such as rice, potatoes, and leafy vegetables, promoting calmness, while tyrosine from protein-rich foods like fish, eggs, meat, and legumes enhances energy and alertness. This nutritional balance underpins the MBG programme in supporting pupils' health and sustainable learning. Additionally, MBG fosters early awareness of healthy eating habits, with studies by Herniawati and Widiyarsari showing improved knowledge and participation. Within a broader framework, the programme functions as part of integrated education and social policy, supporting learning through improved physical conditions. Research by Herningtyas further indicates positive impacts on pupils' concentration, motivation, and classroom engagement [12].

This aligns with findings by Rofita that MBG positively influences pupils' concentration and learning motivation, though not uniformly. As noted by Dwitami, providing free nutritious meals also functions as social and environmental support that encourages active engagement in school, while learning motivation itself drives creativity, critical thinking, attendance, and lower dropout rates [13]. However, implementation has generated both support and criticism. Concerns have emerged over food quality, hygiene, and cases of food poisoning. Reports from Sumenep highlight meals that did not meet expectations, including expired items and suspected contaminated milk, while coverage by BBC News Indonesia documented symptoms such as dizziness, nausea, and stomach pain. A lawyer from Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia also suggested the programme could face legal action.

According to Metro TV News, the Head of Badan Gizi Nasional reported that between January and September 2025, more than 6,457 people were affected by food poisoning linked to MBG, across Sumatra, Java, and Eastern Indonesia. This highlights the urgent need for evaluation, as inadequate supervision risks turning a health programme into a public health threat. Nutritional standards must align with expert recommendations and age-based needs, as focusing solely on quantity undermines programme objectives. In response to ongoing concerns, comprehensive evaluations and consistent audits are essential to ensure proper implementation. As noted by Basuki, this reflects a policy paradox between intended goals and weak quality control in practice. Overall, MBG governance remains insufficiently robust, integrated, and transparent, placing responsibility on the Badan Gizi Nasional to strengthen oversight and ensure safety, so that efforts to reduce stunting and improve child health do not instead create new risks [14].

4.2. Budget Reallocation and the Ambivalence of Its Impact on Household Economic Resilience

The Free Nutritious Meals Programme (MBG) can be viewed not only as a social policy for schoolchildren's welfare but also as an economic policy with significant fiscal implications [15], affecting budget structures and resource allocation in both the short and long term. The programme was initiated following the inauguration of Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka, with phased implementation beginning in January 2026 according to Badan Gizi Nasional. Its implementation involves multiple stakeholders, particularly the Badan Gizi Nasional, which collaborates with regional partners to establish MBG kitchens [16]. Each kitchen serves around 3,000–4,000 beneficiaries within a 6-kilometre radius, with an initial rollout of 190 kitchens across 36 provinces. Data from Institute for Development of Economics and Finance 2024 shows the programme targets 82 million people, including 44 million schoolchildren, 4 million boarding school students, 30 million infants, and 4 million pregnant women, spanning 439,000 educational institutions and requiring 48,000 kitchens. Annual projections estimate the need for 1.9 million tonnes of rice, 5.6 million tonnes of animal protein, 1.8 million tonnes of vegetables, and 3.3 million tonnes of fruit

[17]. This large-scale logistical demand highlights the necessity of a coordinated national distribution system to maintain quality, food safety, and adaptability to Indonesia's diverse geography [18].

Substantively, the MBG programme is a strategic intervention to address low nutritional adequacy among Indonesian children, though it requires substantial funding. The government allocated 71 trillion in 2025, increasing to 335 trillion in 2026, sourced from the State Budget (APBN). According to Badan Gizi Nasional, around 80% of the 71 trillion budget is directed to Nutrition Provision Service Units (SPPG) or MBG kitchens, with funds disbursed via the State Treasury Service Office (KPPN) through special virtual accounts upon request by foundations and kitchen managers [19]. As APBN funding originates from taxes, non-tax revenue (PNBP), and grants, MBG financing ultimately derives from public funds. In practice, the programme's large scale necessitates significant budget reallocation, requiring the government to shift funds from other sectors [20]. This reflects a policy priority toward human resource development through improved nutrition. However, controversy has arisen due to indications that part of the funding is drawn from the education budget, which ideally should focus on teacher development, learning quality, and infrastructure, rather than short-term consumption need [21] [22].

Based on the approved State Budget (APBN), the education allocation for 2026 amounts to Rp 796.1 trillion as stipulated in Law No. 17 of 2025, reflecting a 6.8% increase from 2025 and fulfilling the constitutional mandate of at least 20% of total expenditure. However, allocation dynamics indicate that around Rp 223.5 trillion (nearly 29% according to GoodStats) is linked to the MBG programme, with additional support from the health sector (Rp 24.7 trillion) and the economic sector (Rp 19.7 trillion). Although Badan Gizi Nasional states that MBG funding does not directly come from the education budget but from an efficiency scheme under Presidential Instruction No. 1 of 2025 through reductions in non-priority spending such as meeting facilities, overseas benchmarking, office stationery, ceremonial activities, and printing—administratively the programme remains recorded within the education function of the APBN prepared by the Ministry of Finance and approved with the DPR, meaning it still counts toward the 20% education allocation [23]. This is reinforced by Said Abdullah, Chair of the DPR's Budget Committee, as reported by Tribunnews, who stated that MBG funding for 2025–2026 is included in the education budget line; while this reflects a commitment to improving human resource quality through nutrition, it also raises concerns about shifting priorities away from teacher quality, research and innovation, and equitable infrastructure development.

At the macro level, MBG is expected to stimulate economic activity by increasing demand for food, distribution, and labour. With projected needs of 1.9 million tonnes of rice, 5.6 million tonnes of animal protein, 1.8 million tonnes of vegetables, and 3.3 million tonnes of fruit, it creates opportunities for farmers, suppliers, and SMEs, strengthens supply chains, and generates employment, as noted by Dadan Hindayana from Badan Gizi Nasional. However, its large budget may increase fiscal pressure; without sufficient revenue, it risks widening deficits or reducing allocations to other sectors, reflecting a fiscal trade-off [11] that can limit future fiscal space. At the micro level, MBG is expected to ease household finances by reducing spending on children's food and allowing reallocation to other needs, particularly for low-income families. Yet, field findings show these benefits are not fully realised. Parents report that the food often does not match children's preferences or is considered unfit, leading to refusal, waste, or continued spending on snacks. Consequently, household spending remains unchanged, indicating that MBG's micro-level effectiveness is still constrained by implementation issues, especially food quality and student acceptance, and has not yet reduced broader household economic pressures [24] [25].

These findings align with research by Centre for Economic and Law Studies, based on a survey of 1,868 respondents across rural, suburban, and urban areas. The results show that only 18.13% considered MBG very helpful in reducing household expenditure, while 37.67% found it somewhat helpful, particularly for school meal costs. Meanwhile, 32.14% reported no significant impact, and 12.06% felt the programme lacked broader influence on their lives indicating that over 30% of beneficiary families have not experienced meaningful financial relief. These outcomes highlight the need for more comprehensive improvements. Priority should be given to ensuring food quality and safety through strict supervision of production, distribution, and serving processes. Menu variety must better reflect children's preferences without compromising nutrition to increase acceptance. In addition, education for pupils and parents on the importance of nutritious diets is essential, alongside stronger evaluation mechanisms that involve schools and families in continuous feedback. Through these efforts, MBG can move beyond administrative implementation toward delivering tangible benefits for pupils' well-being and household economic resilience.

4.3. The Impact of the Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Programme on Pupils' Psychological Well-being

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) programme has significantly influenced pupils' lifestyles, particularly in meeting physiological needs, while also shaping psychological dynamics and the learning process. Introduced during the administration of Prabowo Subianto, the programme serves as a foundation for optimal learning, in line with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where physiological fulfilment precedes self-actualisation [26]. Adequate nutrition supports concentration and cognitive performance by maintaining stable blood glucose levels, while deficiencies may cause fatigue, reduced focus, memory impairment, and increased cortisol levels that hinder learning. Neuroscience research further confirms the link between nutrition and cognitive optimisation, indicating that nutritional fulfilment enhances both brain function and psychological stability. When basic needs are unmet, individuals are more prone to emotional distress such as anxiety, irritability, and low intrinsic motivation. Hunger, for instance, disrupts emotional regulation, aligning with Ed Diener's concept of Subjective Well-Being, which emphasises positive emotions and low distress, as well as Maslow's view that unmet physiological needs hinder higher-level development. Thus, MBG has strong potential to improve pupils' readiness and well-being.

Furthermore, through the lens of Self-Determination Theory by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, adequate nutrition supports motivation and engagement by fulfilling needs for competence, autonomy, and social connection. Pupils in stable physical and emotional conditions tend to be more confident, engaged, and socially active ultimately enhancing learning quality and sustaining psychological well-being [27]. However, empirically, the implementation of the free nutritious meals programme has not fully met expectations [28]. In practice, the fulfilment of pupils' physiological needs often falls short in terms of quality, nutritional adequacy, and consistency, as reflected in school complaints. This limits its impact on psychological well-being and self-actualisation. As emphasised by Abraham Maslow, physiological needs must be fulfilled consistently before higher-level development can occur, partial fulfilment therefore hinders this process. More concerning are cases of food unfit for consumption leading to food poisoning, turning a programme intended to improve nutrition into a health risk.

The impacts extend beyond physical harm to psychological effects such as fear, anxiety, rejection of meals, and over time, trauma, avoidance behaviour, and loss of trust. This reveals a paradox: a programme designed to enhance well-being may instead undermine it if poorly implemented. This condition can be explained through the trauma perspective of Judith Herman, which highlights that sudden and uncontrollable painful experiences can leave lasting psychological scars, especially in children. These effects reduce learning motivation and hinder self-actualisation, with trauma responses potentially developing into recurring anxiety, hypervigilance, or even Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder if unaddressed [29]. This concern is reinforced by Komisi Nasional Perlindungan Anak and Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia, which note that food poisoning can trigger prolonged trauma. Furthermore, MBG does not automatically improve motivation, as in some contexts it is seen merely as a supplementary activity with limited integration into learning. In certain cases, pupils' attendance shifts from intrinsic learning motives to access to meals, reflecting the view of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan that excessive external incentives may weaken intrinsic motivation if not balanced with core psychological needs [30].

Learning motivation, which ideally stems from internal awareness, can shift when students become more oriented toward external incentives. This shift reduces engagement and affects psychological well-being, as weakened intrinsic motivation leads to unmet needs for competence and autonomy. When learning is viewed merely as a means to obtain rewards, students may lose a sense of ownership, resulting in boredom, low satisfaction, and reduced emotional involvement. Over time, this can lead to helplessness, low self-esteem, and increased psychological pressure, ultimately destabilising overall well-being. The implementation of the free nutritious meals programme thus reflects complex dynamics: while fulfilling physiological needs provides a foundation for development as explained by Abraham Maslow [31] its outcomes depend on implementation quality, consistency of nutritional standards, and students' subjective experiences. Under optimal conditions, it enhances learning comfort and engagement; however, limitations may produce less supportive psychological outcomes. This interaction shows that psychological well-being is not solely determined by material fulfilment but also by how learning experiences are interpreted. From the Self-Determination perspective of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, the fulfilment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is central to well-being. In this context, the programme can function as a supportive factor only if its implementation aligns with pupils' psychological needs and is meaningfully integrated into the educational experience.

4.4. The Psychosocial Dynamics of Children's Families in Responding to the Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Programme

The Free Nutritious Meals Programme (MBG) represents a policy intervention that targets the fulfilment of children's basic needs while also influencing family psychosocial dynamics as the closest social unit. Its implementation can reshape family relationships, parental perceptions of responsibility for children's nutrition, and levels of involvement in caregiving and education [32]. These changes show that interventions addressing physiological needs extend beyond individuals and affect family-level dynamics. This aligns with the ecological development perspective of Urie Bronfenbrenner, which positions the family within the microsystem as a key actor in interpreting and shaping the impact of policies on children. In this context, families become indirect participants in the implementation of MBG. However, the programme does not replace the family's primary role in meeting children's nutritional needs, as food provision is limited in frequency while nutritional needs are continuous. Families remain central in ensuring sustainable nutrition linked to children's psychological well-being. Yet, in lower-middle-income contexts, the programme may create new dynamics, including emerging dependence as an adaptive response. In some cases, this reflects a "displacement of responsibility," where aspects of parental responsibility for fulfilling basic needs shift toward programme providers indicating a transformation rather than elimination of the family's role [33].

A family's limited economic capacity can foster dependency on the MBG programme as the primary means of meeting children's nutritional needs. This reflects a shift in the family's role from complementary to substitutive, which may weaken parenting responsibilities, reduce parental involvement, and alter parent-child relationship patterns. In some cases, issues related to meal distribution have also created tension in family communication, especially under economic pressure. From a psychosocial perspective, Erik Erikson emphasises that role fulfilment and social interaction within the family are crucial for development, thus, shifts in parental roles may hinder the internalisation of responsibility and independence in children, affecting overall psychosocial growth. From a microeconomic perspective, the MBG programme has the potential to reduce household expenditure, particularly on children's food consumption. This relief can enable families especially those with lower-middle incomes to reallocate resources to other essential needs, contributing to improved financial balance and potential long-term household economic stability [34].

This relative improvement in economic stability is closely tied to family psychosocial dynamics. Greater resource availability reduces financial pressure often a major source of stress thereby fostering more supportive and adaptive interactions. The Family Stress Model by Rand Conger explains that economic pressure triggers parental stress, which can lead to less responsive parenting and increased family conflict [35]. In this context, reducing economic burdens through free nutritious meal programmes can help ease stress and support more stable family relationships. From a family guidance perspective, the Satir Model developed by Virginia Satir highlights the importance of open communication, positive self-esteem, and healthy interaction patterns as foundations of psychological well-being. Improved economic stability creates a more conducive emotional environment, enabling parents to engage in more empathetic and supportive parenting, which in turn positively and sustainably influences children's mental health and emotional development.

Real-world evidence indicates that in some contexts the programme has not reduced household expenditure on children's needs. This stems from mismatches between the food provided and children's daily consumption patterns, as well as preferences that still require additional purchases. Consequently, spending levels remain similar to those before implementation, meaning expected economic benefits are not fully internalised. From the Family Resource Management perspective of Deacon and Firebaugh, outcomes depend on how well resources align with actual needs [36]. When this alignment is weak, the programme has limited impact on economic stability, and family emotional well-being remains affected. These limitations extend to psychosocial dynamics, where unmet expectations of financial relief can generate emotional tension, reduce communication quality, and weaken parent child interactions. As explained by Murray Bowen, the family functions as an interconnected emotional system in which pressure in one area affects the whole [37]. Thus, responses to the programme are shaped not only by its presence but by how it is interpreted within the family's social and emotional context.

Furthermore, the expectation that MBG would reduce household expenditure does not always materialise and may even create more complex implications. The large-scale use of public funds has the potential to affect resource distribution across other sectors, such as education and social services that also support family well-being [22]. Indirectly, this can influence household economic stability, particularly when policy adjustments alter access to income or support systems. These dynamics also affect family psychosocial relationships, making them more vulnerable to external pressures. From the perspective of Urie Bronfenbrenner, changes at the macrosystem level such as public policy and economic distribution shape conditions within the family as the microsystem

[38]. Structural instability may increase psychological pressure, reflected in rising conflict, emotional uncertainty, and declining interaction quality [39]. In some cases, this has led to strained communication and resistance to the programme, demonstrating that policy impacts evolve not only directly but also indirectly through broader structural influences on family psychosocial balance [40].

5. Conclusion

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Programme (MBG) as an effort to improve pupils' welfare has not yet produced optimal economic outcomes. The programme has not significantly reduced household expenditure, as consumption patterns and financial allocations remain largely unchanged, with children still purchasing food outside the programme. This suggests that food-based assistance has not been fully effective in creating household-level economic efficiency. From a psychological perspective, MBG also presents complex dynamics. Low acceptance of the provided meals leads to discomfort, rejection, and less positive self-perception among pupils. This indicates that well-being is not solely determined by material fulfilment but is also shaped by subjective experiences and psychological conditions. As such, well-being within the MBG context is dialectical in nature, highlighting the need for more comprehensive policy evaluation to ensure its objectives are achieved more effectively.

The author expresses their deepest gratitude to all parties who have contributed to the implementation of this research, especially to the informants who were willing to take the time and provide information openly, thereby enriching the data and analysis of the research. Additionally, the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Programme (MBG) requires stronger supervision of food quality, hygiene, and nutritional standards to ensure the programme effectively supports students' well-being. Schools and programme implementers should also involve students and families in evaluating menu suitability and programme implementation to increase acceptance and psychological comfort. Future research is recommended to explore the long-term economic, psychological, and educational impacts of MBG across broader regions and socio-economic backgrounds to provide more comprehensive insights for policy improvement.

AI Acknowledgment

The author acknowledges the use of DeepL as a tool to assist in the translation process, to ensure linguistic fluency in the writing. This use does not replace the process of drafting the substance of the article, but merely assists with linguistic aspects. The entire content of the article, from the formulation of ideas, the development of the conceptual framework, data analysis, to the drawing of conclusions, has been drafted, developed, and reviewed independently by the author. Therefore, the author remains the sole party fully responsible for the entire content of this article in accordance with COPE recommendations.

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