

Perceptions of Educator-coordinators about the Administration of the National School Nutrition Program (NSNP) in South African Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT This paper investigates the perceptions of educator-coordinators in the administration of National School Nutrition Program (NSNP) in South African primary schools. The study adopted the Distributed Leadership Model based on the view that it recognizes that people have the potential to lead and that there should be reciprocal congruence between vertical and horizontal leadership positions. This paper has adopted a qualitative approach that is interpretive in orientation. The semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to collect data from three educator-coordinators purposely selected from three South African primary schools. Thematic analysis was used in analyzing the collected data. The results indicated that educator-coordinators experienced challenges when it comes to the administration of NSNP in schools. The study recommends that to ensure effective administration of NSNP, educator-coordinators should be actively involved as they work directly with the learners and food handlers at school.

INTRODUCTION

Importance of School Nutrition

Various studies acknowledge that school nutrition that is made available to learners has benefits that are both dietary and educational. Hence it has been indicated that there is a causal correlation between diet and academic performance (Hoyland et al. 2009). In addition to that, if learners are getting a nutritious and well composed breakfast their cognitive gains are enhanced, as a result their memory sharpens and they are always more enthusiastic to learn in school. Observations have been made that due to the introduction of nutrition program in schools, learner attendance has increased and as a result various countries have adopted these good practices to benefit their learners. For example, in Brazil, the School Nutrition and Food Security Program (SNFS) was introduced and this program has benefitted a majority of learners in the country (Public Service Commission (PSC) 2008). Through the Brazilian program the

learners were also enthused to attend school and this eliminated the number of learners dropping out of school at a younger age. Secondly, India also launched their School Nutrition Program and this program has been effective in mitigating the challenges of out of school youth, as the program also encouraged learners to attend school as the Brazilian program did (School Feeding Program in India (SFP) 2011). Lastly, in Kenya the nutrition program was introduced in order to encourage young people to remain in schools and reduce the high number of drop-outs (World Food Program (WFP) 2011). In South Africa, the nutrition program was introduced with the aim of lessening poverty. Moreover, the program has established the linkages between school nutrition activities and improving quality of education (PSC 2008). There is further evidence that most learners especially those from poor socioeconomic backgrounds often go to school more as a result of the nutrition program that is available in school (Steyn et al. 2009). Moreover, educators have also attested that learners were more attentive and actively participating in class after they have been served with a meal (Castle and Brialobrzieszka 2009). This is in line with what was said earlier about the positive influence that the school nutrition has on the learners' cognitive development and eliminating the dropout rate.

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Administration of School Nutrition

The administration of school nutrition is very significant in the efficacious implementation of the program in schools. In schools there are various stakeholders that are perceived to have an important role in administering the nutrition program. This led to the introduction of tools used for observing and assessing the administration of school nutrition program in South Africa (PSC 2008). These tools were basically aimed at ensuring that what is being done in schools regarding the administration of school nutrition program is in line with what is stipulated in the school nutrition guideline documents. This is further supported by Bound et al. (2009) who indicated that for effective and successful administration of nutrition programs there are various factors that need to be taken into consideration. For example, stakeholders are to be supported through regular visits by Districts with the aim of monitoring the administration of school nutrition (Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM) (2010). Furthermore, the school principal as an accounting officer has to ensure that for proper administration of nutrition program in school, a committee that oversees all the matters relating to school nutrition is established (Implementation, Monitoring and Reporting Manual of the NSNP (IMRM) (2004). The established school nutrition committee has its terms of references as stated in the Implementation Guidelines for Schools (2011-2012). For example, making sure that what is procured adheres to the departmental requirements, timely payment of food handlers, and keeping a register for food handlers, compiling departmental monthly reports as required and ensuring that learners are fed on a daily basis. Though, the committee constituted of various members, like, School Management Team (SMT) members, School Governing Body (SGB) members, food handlers, educators (school coordinator) and learners, for the purpose of this paper the educators who are school nutrition coordinators were the focus of the study.

Challenges in Administration of School Nutrition

Although needy children have benefited from the program, Davids et al. (2006) noted that the administration of school nutrition has been

facing numerous challenges. For example, the food was irregularly distributed, was stale, there were no food varieties, there were reports on corrupt activities by staff and government officials, and there was no proper monitoring. All the noted challenges were an indication on non-adherence to the Food Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDG) aimed at promoting provision of variety in foods (Annual Report 2009-2010). In some schools, there were instances, where learners did not get food for some days and this had negative repercussions based on the assumption that most of the learners attended school because of the nutrition program resulting in the acceleration of school dropouts (Davids et al. 2006).

Lack of managerial skills among educators that were identified as coordinators was also a challenge affecting the administration of nutrition program (PSC 2008). There is further evidence from the various studies conducted that lack of training and unavailability of food gardens in schools are among the challenges facing the administration of the program (Department of Education (DoE) (2007). Another challenge handicapping the administration of school nutrition program is lack of training. Moreover, the PSAM (2010) also revealed that as of 1996 since the inception of the school nutrition program, school coordinators never received any training. Educators who are responsible for nutrition programs were not aware of what necessitated these programs to be vibrant because the provincial government was almost responsible for everything without inviting the necessary responsible personnel that deal with nutrition programs on a daily basis at school level. Steyn and Labadios (2007) argue that educator-coordinators are not well-versed with their responsibilities when it comes to the administration of the nutrition program, reason being at times the correspondence goes through the principal implying that educator-coordinators do not get communication timeously or the leadership in these respective schools is not distributive. The successful implementation of the program relies on educators and if they did not receive the training preparing them for the administration of school nutrition, the anticipated goals of the program are likely to be compromised (PSC 2008).

Theoretical Framework

The distributed model of leadership guided this study. In this model, leadership needs to be distributed among all stakeholders involved (Gunter 2005; Spillane 2006; Grant 2010). Hence, Spillane (2006) and Harris (2007) suggest that the tenet of the model mainly concentrates on the collaborations between people who are in management either formally or informally. Moreover, the distributed model of leadership also acknowledges that leadership activities have to be shared between and within organizations (Harris 2007). Subsequently, this enables the prospects to surface and it facilitates opinions, tenets, principles, evidence and assumptions through uninterrupted dialogues (Lambert 2003). This might bring about problems among the involved stakeholder, hence it is encouraged that patience should be practiced because acceptance of such a novelty by members could prove difficult (Harris 2007). When one adheres to the distributed model of leadership, successful implementation and administration of the NSNP is achieved. Furthermore, this might bring about healthy working interactions wherein goals and intentions are shared and established by all stakeholders. Looking at the educator-coordinators' perception in the administration of school nutrition program the distributive leadership model focuses on how all people can become key role players in administrating NSNP. The involvement might increase and enhance the effective administration of the program, and further enabling and augmenting the learners' cognitive gains as a result of school nutrition (Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) 2010).

Objectives

This paper is aimed at exploring the perceptions of primary school educator-coordinators about the administration of National School Nutrition Program.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

This study adopted an interpretive paradigm, which is more constructive in nature in an attempt to explore the perceptions of primary school coordinators in the administration of

NSNP. Through interpretive paradigm, people's ability of constructing meaning is often emphasized and people often construct reality in a manner that is more sensible to them (Mack 2010; Hennink et al. 2011).

Research Approach

As the study is interpretive in nature, the qualitative approach was found to be relevant. Qualitative approach further aims at collecting rich data and provides opportunities for people to understand their world by creating meaningful experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Hence, Hancock et al. (2009) state that through qualitative approach explanations of social phenomena are developed. As stated in Johnson and Christensen (2011), qualitative researchers cannot generalize the produced knowledge to other settings as only few people are being included as research respondents in the study.

Research Design

A case study design was adopted to explore the research objectives, details and meanings of experiences (Stake 2005) relating to the studied phenomenon. Yin (2009) further asserts that case study design is suitable for an extensive and in-depth description of some social phenomenon. This is because it provides practical knowledge where the researcher studies the participants in their natural settings (Flyvbjerg 2006). The researcher found a case study to be the appropriate design in exploring the perceptions of primary school coordinators about how NSNP is administered.

Population and Sampling

Babbie and Mouton (2005) declare that the population is an ideally identified combination of study essentials where the sample to be studied is drawn. For this paper, the population was NSNP primary school educator-coordinators. The researcher used purposive sampling where three educator-coordinators from three selected primary schools were selected. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to identify the information rich participants that are well versed about the phenomenon being studied (McMillan and Schumacher 2006). These schools were selected because they implement NSNP. Educator-coordinators were chosen based on their roles in the NSNP administration.

Data Collection Tools and Credibility

The data was collected from the purposively selected school coordinators through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Through analysis of documents any material in print that has relevant information about the studied phenomenon is explored (de Vos et al. 2011). Documents like minutes of the meetings held regarding NSNP were analyzed. For credibility and trustworthiness, multiple data collection tools like semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used. Moreover, the researcher allowed the respondents to access transcribed data collected and give feedback before the final write-up (de Vos et al. 2011).

Data Analysis

When analyzing data the researcher arranges the interview transcripts and other documents to bring forth the findings of the study (Remler and Ryzin 2011). In qualitative approach, data was broken down into manageable segments for easy coding and searching for common themes (Bogdan and Bilken 2007). Furthermore, data analysis also helps in reducing, arranging, and giving meaning to the collected data regarding the studied phenomenon (Hancock et al. 2009). Systematic coding of data according to the specific themes was employed in addressing the research objective. This process was employed by outlining thoughts, constructing transcriptions, and reducing codes into patterns or themes (Creswell 2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the paper aimed at exploring the perceptions of primary school coordinators about the administration of school nutrition in schools, the data was collected through the semi-structured interviews and document analysis. From the collected data, the following were the themes that emerged, that is, benefits of school nutrition and involvement of school coordinators in the nutrition program. The section below further discusses the emerged themes in detail.

Theme 1: Benefits of School Nutrition

The studied participants unanimously agreed that the introduction of nutrition pro-

gram in schools has brought positive repercussions in teaching particularly for the learners coming from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, they indicated that the nutrition program has enhanced learners' school attendance, which resulted in an augmented enthusiasm and more vigilance to learn. This notion is further echoed by Bound et al. (2009) when declaring that educators and parents reported on decreasing levels of learners' disciplinary problems because learners are always ready to participate in classroom. In addition to that, school nutrition is seen as a vehicle that promotes learners' readiness to learn and further encourages healthy eating habits (Steyn et al. 2009). Subsequently, the learners are always in school and this in turn decreases the rate of youth dropouts. Hence, O'Toole et al. (2007) perceive nutritious diet and the healthy wellbeing as the prominent elements when it comes to learner's education and achievement at school. In addition, Huang and Shanklin (2006) attest that should there be improved health of school children, learner school performance may be enhanced. For example the enhanced performance might be evident through improvement in classroom performance, school attendance, participation in school activities, and learner attitudes towards schoolwork.

Theme 2: Involvement of School Coordinators in the NSNP

All the respondents indicated that they have never been involved in the decisions about the NSNP by the Department of Education (DoE). The department only communicates through the meetings held with the principals.

The researcher found that all of the respondents interviewed were of the opinion that at the school level there is nothing that involves them in the NSNP administration. The following were the comments from the respondent in one school:

"As far as the decision-making is concerned in the NSNP at district, provincial and national level, we are not involved at all. What has to be done is only communicated to us through school principals."

The respondents showed frustration and despair because of their non-involvement in the administration of NSNP. Bound et al. (2009) assert that involving the stakeholders is very important in the successful administration and

implementation of the nutrition program in schools. Moreover, this means that all stakeholders involved in the nutrition program should be working collaboratively in establishing and maintaining positive working relations about the program. Subsequently, full participation of stakeholders in the administration of school nutrition enables them to own the decisions made and adopt an “all sink or all swim” approach whereby successes and failures will be acknowledged without blaming one another.

From the responses of the respondents it emerged that they are only involved in NSNP at school level where they are supposed to purchase food on funds allocated, otherwise they are not even part of the budget allocation. Despite their non-involvement in the budget allocation, they indicated that they are expected to be submitting monthly reports on how the funds have been utilized. Another school coordinator said,

“Having to prepare a report for something that you are not aware of is not easy; more especially if you are not aware of what should the report entail”.

The educators indicated that there were no preparatory workshops organized for them to be able to understand even the format and the requirements of the report to be submitted monthly. The other school coordinator from another school had the same sentiments with what was already said by one educator and said,

“It is really frustrating and puts us in a dilemma because when things get tough, tempers flare and we blame each other should things not go right”.

The educators’ concerns are supported with what is stated by Thurlow (2003), when indicating that once educators who are school nutrition coordinators are involved in the administration in school nutrition they will feel confident and capacitated in executing their responsibilities effectively. This might further contribute to school improvement because as stated in Gronn (2002) when leadership is distributed there is likelihood that stakeholders might have the school’s interest at heart, and this aligns with the theoretical framework adopted for this study, which highlights that between organizations activities have to be shared among the stakeholders.

For the successful administration and implementation of NSNP, the school environment

must cultivate partnership among stakeholders (Huang and Shanklin 2006). The stakeholders should have knowledge of the operations and logistics as entailed in the nutrition program. For example, they should be committed in ensuring that meals are always ready for the learners to be served quickly and efficiently. This will ensure that there are no delays that might affect the daily school programs and ensure that classroom activities are not disrupted (Bound et al. 2009). This therefore means that all stakeholders need to be involved in the administration of the nutrition program, as they all have different roles that they have to execute for its effective administration (PSC 2008).

For people to feel engaged and involved they need to participate in setting goals, making decisions, and solving problems. Harris (2004) is of the view that when employees’ (in this case educator-coordinators) basic needs go unsatisfied in terms of executing their work, their productivity suffers. Whereas, if they are involved, their participation gives them pride in what is taking place leading to the development of sense of ownership even when things do not go as planned. It is evident in this study that educator-coordinators were not involved in any decision-making processes within the NSNP implementation at the district level. They relied solely on information conveyed through school principals who are the only people invited to the district meetings. Although at school level they are not directly involved in the operation of NSNP. The educator-coordinators were disgruntled because they feel that they are being sidelined in the administration of NSNP in schools while they are the people who actually work directly in the nutrition program. The top-down approach, which is followed when administering NSNP, made educator-coordinators to feel unworthy in this program. This non-involvement made them lack proper knowledge of how things should be done at their schools, as they are also expected to compile reports. From what the educator-coordinators have said, having reviewed the documents it was evident that the educators were never involved in the NSNP meetings. The school principals were the only representatives from the schools that were part of these meetings. There was no evidence of proper training in preparing them for what to include in the learners’ nutrition, like food choices. The money budgeted per learner does not cater much for food

variety and this negatively impacted the choice of food provided to the learners.

CONCLUSION

The study called for a more collective notion of leadership where the people will be involved. However, this does not imply that the district coordinators will have less power but this means involving more relevant people who are more hands-on at the school level. This will instill a sense of responsibility and accountability as the challenges they face at the grass root level will be used as the solid foundation of improving the administration of the program. From the data, it is evident that educator-coordinators feel undermined and this contributes to the level of commitment in the NSNP administration. Their non-involvement and lack of capacity influence their level of taking decisions in the administration of the program. Such situations can fuel chaos and blame game that might lead to delays in the school program, as no one is accountable. The successes of the program like intellectual advances, reduced dropout rate and absenteeism, augmented attendance, health status and learning abilities will be delayed should things continue unresolved. The study believes that strengthening of relevant stakeholder participation and involvement in all decision-making processes of NSNP is of great value and importance to the operational, maintainable and smooth running of the program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that the Department of Education must ensure that all necessary stakeholders particularly educator-coordinators in schools are involved in the administration of NSNP. This involvement might be further escalated through organizing training in order to capacitate the relevant stakeholders about their roles and responsibilities in the administration of NSNP. In addition to this, a clear directing manual pertaining to financial management of the school needs to be in place. Training on procurement of school items might also be useful in the administration of NSNP.

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