

New Social Relations at the School Dining Table: An Ethnographic Study of the Free Nutritious Meal Program and Student Social Interaction Dynamics at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School

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Article Information

Keywords:

Social Relations, Ethnography, MBG Program, Social Interaction, Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore and analyze in depth the formation of new social relations and the dynamics of social interaction among students through the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School. This policy not only affects the fulfillment of students' nutritional needs and physical health but also functions as a new social space (commensality policy) that alters the landscape of daily interactions within the school environment. This study used a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach. Data were collected through participant observation during school lunch hours, in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and program managers, and documentation. The data were analyzed sociologically using domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and cultural theme analysis to map shifts in emerging patterns of social relations. The findings indicate that the school dining table became a fluid and inclusive arena for social negotiation. First, the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) successfully reduced socioeconomic divides (social stratification) among students through uniform consumption. Second, interactions at the dining table prompted the emergence of "new social relations," characterized by strengthened organic solidarity, the growth of a sharing culture, and a decrease in the intensity of bullying as informal communication increased among previously exclusive peer groups or cliques. Third, Islamic and Muhammadiyah values, such as dining etiquette and togetherness, were naturally internalized through this new habituation. This study concludes that communal school meal programs are not merely instruments for fulfilling nutritional needs but also strategic cultural spaces that effectively foster social cohesion and inclusive character among students in faith-based educational institutions.

Article Information

Kata Kunci:

Social Relations, Relasi Sosial, Etnografi, Program MBG, Interaksi Sosial, SMP Muhammadiyah Limbung

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dan menganalisis secara mendalam pembentukan relasi sosial baru dan dinamika interaksi antarpeserta didik melalui implementasi Program Makan Bergizi Gratis di SMP Muhammadiyah Limbung. Kebijakan ini tidak hanya berdampak pada aspek pemenuhan nutrisi dan kesehatan fisik siswa, melainkan juga berfungsi sebagai ruang sosial baru (*commensality*) yang mengubah lanskap interaksi sehari-hari di lingkungan sekolah. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan etnografis. Data dikumpulkan melalui pengamatan berpartisipasi (*participant observation*) selama jam makan siang sekolah, wawancara mendalam (*in-depth interview*) dengan peserta didik, guru, dan pengelola program, serta dokumentasi. Analisis data dilakukan secara sosiologis dengan teknik analisis domain, taksonomi, dan tema budaya guna memetakan pergeseran pola relasi sosial yang terjadi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meja makan sekolah bertransformasi menjadi arena negosiasi sosial yang cair dan inklusif. Pertama, Program Makan Bergizi Gratis berhasil mengikis sekat-sekat sosial ekonomi (*stratifikasi sosial*) di kalangan siswa karena adanya keseragaman konsumsi. Kedua, interaksi di meja makan memicu lahirnya "relasi sosial baru" yang ditandai dengan menguatnya solidaritas organik, tumbuhnya budaya berbagi (*sharing culture*), serta penurunan intensitas perundungan (*bullying*) karena meningkatnya frekuensi komunikasi informal antargeng atau kelompok bermain yang sebelumnya eksklusif. Ketiga, nilai-nilai keislaman dan kemuhammadiyah (seperti adab makan dan kebersamaan) terinternalisasi secara natural melalui habituasi baru ini. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa program makan bersama di sekolah bukan sekadar instrumen pemenuhan gizi, melainkan sebuah ruang kultural strategis yang efektif dalam membangun kohesi sosial dan karakter inklusif peserta didik di institusi pendidikan berbasis agama.

Article History

Received : 03/08/2026

Revised : 10/08/2026

Accepted : 21/08/2026

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1. Introduction

Education is one of the main pillars of building an advanced and competitive nation. However, educational quality is determined not only by classroom teaching and learning processes but also by students' physical condition and health. One factor that is often overlooked is students' nutritional intake during schooling (Pramono, S. E., 2026). Through a national policy, the Indonesian government launched the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at the beginning of President Prabowo Subianto's term of office. This program aims to improve students' nutritional quality and encourage their enthusiasm for learning (Sanga, L. D., & Wangdra, Y., 2023).

The Free Nutritious Meal Program is one of the policy programs of the Prabowo-Gibran presidential and vice-presidential ticket in the 2024 election. This policy provides free lunches in schools and Islamic boarding schools throughout Indonesia, with the program focusing on improving children's nutritional standards. It is intended to develop a generation that is intelligent, healthy, and highly competitive. In practice, free lunch programs have been implemented in developed countries, including the United States, Japan, and China, with the aim of improving living standards and public welfare (Ariska et al., 2025; Sibarani et al., 2025).

Thus, it can be concluded that the Free Nutritious Meal Program aims to address malnutrition and improve the quality of Indonesia's human resources (HR). The primary targets of the Free Nutritious Meal Program are children and students, applying the principle of justice embodied in the fifth principle of Pancasila regardless of socioeconomic background. Every student has an equal right to enjoy nutritious food, reflecting equitable social justice because all students are treated equally and fairly in pursuit of shared welfare (Widyasari et al.,

2025). In a sociological context, food often serves as a marker of class, for example, through the distinction between luxurious and simple packed meals. With MBG, feelings of inferiority or marginalization among students from underprivileged families can be minimized because all students consume the same meals at the same table (Kaylla et al., 2026).

Furthermore, the Free Nutritious Meal Program in schools can strengthen students' new social relations in various ways. In addition to providing health benefits, this program can foster a sense of togetherness among students, reduce social disparities, and promote healthy eating patterns. For example, during shared meals, students have opportunities to interact, joke, and share stories (Sujud, 2026). This can strengthen relationships among students, particularly those who may rarely interact outside mealtimes. It can also reduce feelings of inferiority or exclusion among students from low-income families because the provision of meals places everyone on an equal footing (Rofiqi et al., 2025).

From a sociological perspective, school dining tables should not be viewed merely as places for fulfilling biological needs but rather as dynamic "new social spaces." The MBG program at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School creates an opportunity for students from diverse economic backgrounds to come together at the same table. Symbolically, food often serves as a marker of social class; however, through the standardization of menus under this program, the distinction between "luxurious packed meals" and "simple packed meals" no longer exists, thereby minimizing feelings of marginalization among students from low-income families because all students are treated equally and fairly in pursuit of shared welfare (Sumilat, 2025; Kiftiyah et al., 2025).

The social interaction that occurs during shared meals creates opportunities for students to interact, joke, and share stories that may not arise in formal classroom settings. This can directly strengthen relationships among students and foster a sense of togetherness. However, the implementation of this program also faces complex challenges in practice, ranging from accommodating students' preferences to economic impacts on small vendors around the school, who have complained of reduced income. These dynamics indicate that the MBG program affects not only physical health but also broad aspects of social relations, both within and outside the school (Wanudyastuti et al., 2025).

Schools function not only as institutions for the transfer of knowledge but also as arenas for the formation of students' social relations, identities, and interactional structures. One social space that often escapes academic attention is the **school dining table**. In the context of the **School Free Meal Program**, the dining table is no longer merely a place for fulfilling biological needs but has become a new social space in which social interaction, the negotiation of meaning, and the reproduction and transformation of social relations among students take place (Goffman, 1959; Arpianti et al., 2023).

The government-implemented Free Nutritious Meal Program aims to improve students' nutrition, health, and participation in learning. However, the implementation of public policy in school settings often produces social consequences that are not entirely anticipated, including changes in interaction patterns, the formation of new social groups, and the potential for social exclusion or inclusion (Ball, S. J. 2012). In the junior high school context, students are at a crucial stage of socioemotional development; therefore, changes in daily routines, such as eating together, may significantly affect the dynamics of their social

relations (Santrock, J. W. 2018; Asrianti et al, 2024).

To date, studies of school meal programs in Indonesia and other countries have focused primarily on nutrition, health, and academic achievement (Bundy et al, 2018). Research specifically examining **the social and cultural effects of free meal programs on student interaction remains very** limited, particularly studies employing in-depth qualitative approaches such as ethnography (Erikson, E. H. 1968). Without a comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics involved, however, education policy risks overlooking the relational dimensions that determine program success in practice.

The Free Nutritious Meal Program at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School is implemented regularly from Monday through Friday, with varied meal menus intended to maintain nutritional balance and prevent student boredom. In addition, the program has direct effects on students and the surrounding school environment; for example, many students are more enthusiastic about participating in the learning process because their basic needs are met. Nevertheless, implementation of the program is not without challenges, including students' food preferences, unfinished meals, and complaints from many vendors about reduced income.

Preliminary observations from the ethnographic study of the Free Nutritious Meal Program and the dynamics of student social interaction at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School indicated that the provision of free meals fostered positive social relations by enhancing a sense of togetherness and strengthening relationships among students, teachers, and parents. It also reduced social disparities between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students. In addition, this nutritious meal program may foster

habituation to healthy eating, which can increase motivation to learn. Thus, the program affects not only students' health but also their social and academic development. As a faith-based educational institution grounded in Islamic and Muhammadiyah values, social interaction in this setting is influenced by moral ethics. This study examines not only the physical effects of nutrition but also how the values of togetherness (solidarity) embedded in this program adapt to the existing school culture. This is important for assessing whether this national program can adapt to the school culture at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School in Gowa Regency.

2. Methods

1. Research Design and Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach using educational ethnography. Ethnography was selected because it enables an in-depth examination of students' social practices, meanings, and everyday interactions within the natural context of school life (Creswell, 2014). This approach was relevant for examining the dynamics of social relations arising from the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program, particularly in informal spaces such as school dining tables, which are rich in symbolic interaction. Educational ethnography enabled the researcher to position students as active social actors rather than merely as objects of policy, thereby allowing social relations, negotiations of meaning, and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion to be understood contextually and reflectively (Spradley, 2016).

1. Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School for the following reasons: (a) the school had implemented the Free

Nutritious Meal Program, (b) it had distinctive institutional characteristics and a religious culture, and (c) it permitted intensive observation of students' shared dining practices. The study participants included (a) students in Grades VII–IX, purposively selected; (b) teachers and homeroom teachers; and (c) school meal program administrators.

2. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using the following main techniques: (a) **participant observation**, in which the researcher participated directly in everyday school activities to observe interaction patterns, group formation, body language, and power dynamics at school dining tables (Goffman, 1963); (b) **in-depth interviews**, in which semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings that students and school personnel attached to shared dining practices (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015); and (c) **documentation**, including field notes, photographs of activities in accordance with research ethics, and school policy documents, which was used to enrich the data and support triangulation.

3. Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed thematically through the following stages: (a) data transcription, (b) open coding, (c) theme categorization, and (d) interpretation of social meanings. Analysis was conducted iteratively from data collection through the writing stage, in accordance with ethnographic principles emphasizing the relationship between data and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data trustworthiness was maintained through triangulation of techniques, sources, and time.

4. Research Flowchart



2. Results and Discussion

A. Research Findings

1. Forms of Social Relations in the Free Nutritious Meal Program at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School

Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted during the Free Nutritious Meal Program at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School, several transformations in social relations were identified. Before the program, students tended to eat in the cafeteria, in classroom corners, or bring their own packed meals. As AF, an eighth-grade student, stated during the interview:

"Previously, I often bought snacks indiscriminately in the cafeteria or outside the school, and the food was sometimes unhealthy. Sometimes, when my allowance was limited, I chose not to eat lunch. Since the MBG was introduced, my meals have become more regular because there are fruit, milk, and vegetables." (interview, April 2, 2026)

A similar opinion was expressed by FP, a seventh-grade student:

"I usually buy snacks in front of the school or sometimes do not eat lunch when my allowance is limited or when I leave my packed meal at home." (interview, April 1, 2026)

MM, a ninth-grade student, similarly stated: *"I often used to buy snacks indiscriminately or even skip lunch because I was reluctant to queue in the crowded cafeteria, and then I would eat a large meal after returning home from school in the afternoon." (interview, April 4, 2026)*

Based on these interview findings, it can be concluded that the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) has significantly improved students' dietary patterns, shifting them from the low-nutrient habit of "buying snacks indiscriminately" to regular, nutritionally balanced meals consisting of carbohydrates, vegetables, fruit, and milk. The program has created a new public space in which all students, regardless of social status, consume the same menu at the same time.

The provision of free nutritious meals has standardized consumption, such that barriers differentiating students no longer exist; senior and junior students all receive the same meal menu. As ZM, a ninth-grade student, stated:

"Of course. This is a form of social justice at school. There is no longer any display of luxurious food or feelings of inferiority due to not having money. Everyone sits at the same table with plates containing the same food, and this fosters a sense of equality." (interview, April 4, 2026) A similar opinion was expressed by MH, an eighth-grade student:

"Yes, I feel more comfortable because there are no longer differences in status. All students eat the same menu, so no one feels inferior for bringing a simple packed meal or not having money to buy expensive food." (interview, April 2, 2026)

TR, a seventh-grade student, similarly stated:

"I feel very comfortable because there are no longer feelings of inferiority. Now everyone has the same status; there is no difference between students who are well-off and those who are less well-off because everyone eats the same menu." (interview, April 1, 2026)
Ms. S, the eighth-grade homeroom teacher, stated:

"The impact is very noticeable. Before MBG, the difference between students who brought complete packed meals and those who did not eat because of limited allowances was clearly visible. Now, everyone consumes the same menu—rice, vegetables, side dishes, fruit, and milk. This equality is highly beneficial for building the self-confidence of students from low-income economic backgrounds." (interview, April 9, 2020)
Mr. M, the principal, also added:

"This is the most positive change. Now, those barriers seem to have disappeared. At the dining table or in the cafeteria, wealthier students and those of ordinary means sit together because their food is exactly the same, with no differences. Their interactions have become more natural, and no students feel inferior because they cannot buy expensive snacks."

Based on these interviews, it can be concluded that this program has transformed patterns of social relations among students. By consuming standardized menus at the same time and place, socioeconomic barriers that had previously been evident in differences in the types of packed meals or the ability to purchase snacks in the cafeteria have diminished. This has created an equal public space within the school. Before the program, differences in students' economic backgrounds were clearly evident in the types of packed meals they brought or their ability to buy snacks in the cafeteria. This prompted feelings of inferiority and social grouping among students. However, by standardizing the menu (all students receive the same rice, vegetables, side dishes, fruit, and milk), the program has successfully created equality and fostered the self-confidence of students from economically disadvantaged families.

The provision of free nutritious meals has standardized meal consumption, such that barriers no longer exist between "the rich" with luxurious packed meals and "the poor" with simple packed meals. This has reduced comparisons and social class distinctions among students, as they meet and interact more frequently. As MA, a ninth-grade student, stated:

"We interact very frequently because this daily activity involves the entire school community at the same time." (interview, April 4, 2026)
A similar view was expressed by FP and S, seventh-grade students:

"Every school day, from preparation for distribution until after eating."

"Very frequently, every day from Monday to Friday. From queuing to receive the food until finishing the meal, there is always interaction"

with friends and teachers.” (interview, April 1, 2026)

Mr. F, the seventh-grade homeroom teacher, similarly stated:

“The classroom atmosphere during mealtimes became very lively and warm. Whereas recess usually led students to disperse to different areas, eating together in the classroom created a sense of togetherness. More relaxed dialogue occurred among students, helping to ease tensions after several hours of formal lessons.” (interview, April 8, 2026) DS, the canteen attendant, also stated:

“There has been a change toward greater orderliness. Because this program teaches them to queue and tidy up their eating areas, their selfishness has decreased. They have also become more patient when queuing in the canteen. I often see them sharing with one another; for example, students who do not like the oranges in their portions immediately give them to friends who want them. Their sense of togetherness has become more apparent.” (interview, May 2, 2026)

Based on these statements, it can be concluded that the MBG program was implemented routinely on every school day (Monday–Saturday), creating interaction among all members of the school community, both among students and between students and teachers, and fostering togetherness. Unlike regular recess periods, which tended to separate students into different groups, shared meals brought them together at the same time and in the same space, from queuing through the completion of the meal. The presence of teachers during these moments enabled effective communication.

Social interaction occurred not only among students but also between students and supervising teachers. Eating together created an informal atmosphere that reduced formality. Teachers often incorporated life advice during meals, which students found easier to accept than when delivered at the front of the classroom. As Ms. H, the ninth-grade homeroom teacher, stated:

“I often use this time to sit among them.

Here, teachers no longer serve as instructors but rather as companions. I can informally ask about their families or hobbies. This is very effective for building emotional bonds.” (interview, April 10, 2026) S, a ninth-grade student, also stated: *“Teachers care deeply about us; they often sit and chat casually with us. The interaction feels more relaxed and less tense than it does in the classroom, so we feel closer to our teachers.” (interview, April 4, 2026)*

Similar views were expressed by TR, a seventh-grade student, and S, a ninth-grade student:

“Teachers have become closer to us. We often confide in them about our anxiety regarding the national examination or personal problems while eating. The interaction is much warmer and more relaxed; there is no distance between them and us [students].”

“Teachers talk casually with us more often about matters outside of lessons. The interaction has become more intimate because, at the dining table, teachers not only assign tasks but also listen to our stories.” (interview, April 7, 2026)

Based on these statements, it can be concluded that at the dining table, teachers’ roles shifted from those of formal “instructors” at the classroom

board to those of “companions” and attentive listeners. This reduced the distance between teachers and students. Warm, familiar interactions outside academic matters made students feel more cared for and valued. Because the atmosphere was not tense, students became more open to communicating and sharing stories, as they perceived teachers not merely as task-givers but as supportive conversational partners. Another form of relationship that emerged was solidarity among students; this activity strengthened peer relationships through intensive daily interaction. Eating together at the same time and in the **same** place reduced the separation of students into groups during recess, thereby creating a sense of unity and solidarity. Teachers sat with students as companions.

1. The Impact of Social Relations in the Free Nutritious Meal Program at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School

Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted during the Free Nutritious Meal Program, the program not only provided health benefits but also enhanced the sense of togetherness at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School. The following positive impacts were identified based on interviews with several students and teachers. NI, a Grade IX student, stated:

“I felt very happy and surprised because I usually had to bring more pocket money or go through the trouble of bringing food from home. I felt more motivated to go to school because basic needs such as meals were provided free of charge.” (interview, April 9, 2026)

A similar opinion was expressed by FP, a Grade VII student:

“I feel helped because I no longer need to think about pocket money specifically for

lunch. At first, I was curious whether the menu would become boring, but it turned out to be quite varied.” (interview, April 1, 2026)

A similar view was also expressed by MM, a Grade IX student:

“As a Grade IX student with a busy schedule of examination preparation and additional tutoring, I feel greatly helped. This eases my concerns about lunch, allowing me to focus more on graduation preparation.” (interview, April 9, 2026) DS, the canteen attendant, also stated:

“I have noticed that students’ pocket money now lasts longer. Previously, it was already spent on food during the first period. Now that lunch is guaranteed by the school, they save their money. Some students have told me that they can now save their pocket money to buy school supplies or purchase snacks outside school after they go home.” (interview, May 2, 2026)

Based on these interviews, it can be concluded that the program assists parents and students because they no longer need to prepare additional spending money or bring packed meals from home. Meeting the basic need for a free lunch also makes students more enthusiastic about attending school. For ninth-grade students, the program greatly helps reduce their mental burden amid demanding examination-preparation and tutoring schedules, enabling them to focus more on graduation. In addition, the program has psychological benefits in the form of happiness and enthusiasm. The free provision of a basic need (lunch) makes students more eager to attend school because they feel cared for and their daily burden is reduced, alleviating economic pressures

and eliminating the inconvenience of bringing packed meals from home. Moreover, the program offers varied menus to prevent students from becoming bored. As MH, a ninth-grade student, stated:

"In my opinion, it adequately meets balanced nutritional standards. The variety of menu options is good for preventing boredom, and the portions are appropriate for adolescents our age, who are highly active. The food also tastes quite good, like home-cooked meals. (interview, April 4, 2026)"

A similar view was expressed by S, an eighth-grade student, who stated:

"The menu is quite varied, with rice, side dishes, and vegetables that change every day. Overall, it tastes good, although some menu items occasionally do not suit my preferences; nevertheless, the portions are sufficiently filling." (interview, April 2, 2026)

DK, the canteen attendant, also stated:

"There has been a change toward greater orderliness. Because this program teaches them to queue and clean up their eating areas, their selfishness has diminished. In the canteen, they have also become more patient while waiting in line. I often see them sharing with one another; for example, students who do not like the oranges in their portions immediately give them to friends who want them. Their sense of togetherness has become more evident." (interview, May 2, 2026)

Based on these interviews, it can be concluded that the meals were considered to meet sound nutritional criteria, with a complete composition of rice, side dishes, and vegetables. This indicates that the program focuses not only on quantity but also on the quality of nutrition

students need. Changing the menu daily is an effective strategy for preventing boredom, although occasional variations in taste depend on each student's personal preferences. The program also fostered new, more orderly habits, such as training students to wait patiently in line, take responsibility for cleaning up their eating areas afterward, and share with fellow students (for example, by sharing fruit portions), thereby strengthening their sense of togetherness.

In addition, the program has had negative effects, as MA, a ninth-grade student, stated:

"I try to finish it so that it does not become food waste. If I really do not like something, I usually give the part I do not like to a friend who wants it so that it does not go to waste. However, some friends are already full or do not like the menu provided, so they end up throwing away the vegetables and eating only the side dishes."

Similar statements were also made by students S and A:

"If I cannot finish it, I usually ask the friend beside me whether they want additional side dishes. I try not to throw it away because I know it is unfortunate for it to become food waste."

"If there are vegetables that I do not particularly like, I do not eat them; I just keep them in the meal container, and if a friend wants them, I give them away." (interview, April 4, 2026)

Based on these statements, it can be concluded that some leftover food was discarded. This occurred because the portions were too large for some students or because certain menu items, particularly vegetables, were disliked and therefore ended up in the trash. Differences in taste preferences constituted the main constraint. Some students chose to consume only the side

dishes and discard the vegetables, resulting in unbalanced nutritional intake that was inconsistent with the program's original objectives. As a form of moral responsibility, a social initiative emerged in which students shared or offered leftover side dishes or vegetables to friends who were still willing to eat them.

This was done to reduce the amount of food wasted. Students felt guilty or reluctant to leave food unfinished because they were aware of food waste and the social conditions of people beyond their immediate surroundings; however, they remained constrained by fullness or dislike of certain menu items. In addition to these positive aspects, which constituted beneficial habituation for students, dining etiquette was routinely practiced before meals each day, as stated by the principal:

"We emphasize Islamic dining etiquette: beginning with handwashing, praying together (led in rotation), eating with the right hand, and refraining from criticizing food. We also teach gratitude for the sustenance provided through the Muhammadiyah association."

A similar view was expressed by Zahran Muwaffaq and Muh. Muflihul:

"It is very positive. A culture of mutual assistance has emerged, such as helping distribute trays to friends who are ill or reminding one another to pray."

"Thus far, the interactions have been very positive. We help one another carry food trays and treat each other kindly while eating together."

Based on these statements, it can be concluded that this program serves as a means for students to practice Islamic dining etiquette, encompassing hygiene (handwashing), leadership

and spirituality (taking turns leading collective prayers), physical etiquette (using the right hand), and respect for food (the prohibition against criticizing food). After eating, students automatically share responsibilities. One team collects the containers, another sweeps up food remnants, and another ensures that the tables are clean again. This represents a tangible form of mutual cooperation that emerges without extensive instruction from teachers.

Moreover, this government-initiated program also affected the school canteen. On the one hand, the program greatly supported students' nutritional needs and reduced their expenses; on the other hand, microbusiness operators in the school canteen faced considerable economic challenges. DK, a canteen attendant, stated:

"Before this program existed, the canteen was the center of activity for students during recess. My food items, such as meatball soup and fried rice, always sold out. I was often overwhelmed because students formed long lines. My daily income was very stable and could be relied upon to support household needs." (interview, May 4, 2026)

Similarly, DS, a canteen attendant, stated:

"Before the Free Nutritious Meal Program, thank God, it was very busy, Sir. During recess, students crowded in front of my stall. They usually bought filling foods such as yellow rice, fried noodles, or fried snacks. Money circulated quickly, and by the first or second recess, my products were almost sold out." (interview, May 4, 2026)

Based on these interviews, it can be concluded that the introduction of the Free Nutritious Meal Program brought significant changes to canteen vendors' turnover. Previously, they had enjoyed stable incomes and a large number of customers

because the canteen was the only source of food for students during recess. Before the program was introduced, the canteen functioned as the primary provider of student meals, which was highly profitable for vendors. However, this also indicates that the new program may shift students' snacking habits and affect the daily income of small business operators at the school. As DB, a canteen attendant, stated:

"The decline has been very noticeable, Sir. The number of students buying filling meals decreased dramatically because they had all been given free lunches through the program. To be honest, my daily turnover has fallen by around 40% to 50%, especially for filling foods. Therefore, I began thinking about selling beverages such as juice and various cold drinks, and thank God, this has helped somewhat, although the income is not yet stable." (interview, May 12, 2026) DS, a canteen attendant, then added: "To be honest, Sir, the impact was very noticeable during the early stages of the program. The canteen immediately became quiet because students were already receiving filling meal portions from the school. The number of customers buying my meatball soup declined drastically, leaving only a few portions sold each day. My daily turnover fell by more than half." (interview, May 12, 2026)

Based on the interview findings, it can be concluded that the introduction of the Free Nutritious Meal Program significantly reduced the canteen's daily income. The decline in turnover was primarily caused by a reduction in customers purchasing main dishes or filling foods. This occurred because students' lunch needs were fully met by the government program. In response to this situation, canteen attendants began to shift to or add menu items not provided by the school program, such as cold beverages and fruit juices. Although the

strategy of shifting to beverage sales has helped prevent the canteen business from losing all customers, the income currently generated is reportedly still unstable compared with the period before the program was implemented.

B. Discussion

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) was introduced by the Indonesian government in 2025 to address nutritional issues among children, reduce stunting rates, and improve the quality of education. This study aims to identify the forms of social relations and the impacts of the Free Nutritious Meal Program.

1. Forms of Social Relations in the Free Nutritious Meal Program at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School

Social relations are reciprocal relationships among individuals or groups that influence one another and are based on an awareness of mutual assistance. In sociology, these relations are formed through repeated social interaction. In the context of the Free Nutritious Meal Program, however, the social relations that emerge are not merely mechanical in nature (i.e., food distribution) but develop into strong emotional and symbolic relationships. The findings indicate that the social relations occurring at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School following the introduction of the Free Nutritious Meal Program can be divided into two types: associative social relations and dissociative social relations.

This study employed Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism as an analytical framework to examine social relations at school. This theory is summarized in three concepts: mind, self, and society (dalam Judistira 2015: 74). The school dining table is not merely a physical facility but also a site of symbolic contestation. Drawing on George

Herbert Mead's thought, the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) activates students' minds in interpreting food and *equality*. This shared-meal process becomes an arena for the formation of the self through the negotiation of roles *with* peers, ultimately creating a miniature new society within the school environment. Through the *symbols* of words, language, and treatment at the dining table, the dynamics of students' social relations may be formed.

The school dining table is not merely a place for meeting biological needs but also a social stage rich in meaning. In this setting, free meals and the dining table itself become symbolic objects representing equality, the dismantling of social-class boundaries, and an inclusive space for students. Santoso (2014:93) writes that the fundamental characteristic of symbolic interactionism theory is the naturally occurring relationship between individuals in society and between society and individuals. Interactions among individuals develop through the symbols they create. These symbols include consciously performed bodily movements, such as sounds or vocalizations, physical movements, bodily expressions, and body language.

Based on this statement, it can be concluded that schools are not merely places of learning but spaces for negotiating meaning, in which every bodily movement and utterance becomes an important symbol in shaping the social reality of students and teachers. In the context of MBG, the standardized food menu becomes a powerful symbol indicating that there are no differences in socioeconomic status at school. Social relations at school are divided into two categories:

a) Associative Relations

Associative social relations are forms of social interaction that lead to unity, cohesion, or

cooperation among individuals or groups. They are positive in nature because they aim to strengthen social relationships (Bahri,2025:25). Based on the research findings, the associative process was the most dominant form of social relations. Social relations are related to the Free Nutritious Meal Program because the implementation of MBG relies heavily on these various forms of associative relations. The four main pillars of associative relations are:

- 1) Cooperation: Joint efforts among individuals or groups to achieve shared goals.
- 2) Accommodation: **Efforts** to alleviate disagreement or conflict in order to achieve stability.
- 3) Assimilation: **The** merging of two or more cultures into a new culture (usually to reduce differences).
- 4) Acculturation: **The** blending of two cultures in which elements of the original culture remain.

Based on the research findings, the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is not merely a food distribution initiative but a social space that fosters associative social relations. The forms of associative social relations generated by the Free Nutritious Meal Program at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School are as follows:

- 1) The program created social equality by successfully eliminating economic status boundaries. The program demonstrates that equality is not merely a theory but a concrete action beginning at the dining table. Students felt more comfortable because they no longer felt inferior due to differences in the lunches they brought from home or their ability to purchase snacks. At the dining table, all students had the same status as beneficiaries of equivalent meals because they consumed the same menu; feelings of inferiority resulting

from differences in economic status (between those who could bring luxurious lunches and those who could not afford to buy snacks) disappeared. By standardizing the menu, the program successfully dismantled economic status boundaries, eliminated social envy, and fostered a sense of shared fate and mutual responsibility.

- 2) Cooperation and collective responsibility were reflected in a new culture of gotong royong, such as collaboratively tidying tables and properly disposing of trash after meals, as well as helping carry food trays or meal containers for friends in need. This demonstrates social coordination to maintain collective comfort. This constitutes a concrete form of organic solidarity (Durkheim, dalam Iskandar 2021:40), in which modern society remains strongly bound through collective consciousness manifested in small actions, such as tidying tables and helping carry trays. These actions are concrete forms of social solidarity that transform public spaces into shared, inclusive, and humane spaces.
- 3) Humanistic teacher-student relations reflected a shift in the style of interaction between teachers and students. At the dining table, interactions became more relaxed, warm, and less formal than in the classroom. Teachers served as companions who listened to students' stories and personal concerns. Teachers sat and conversed with students and even ate with them, which students interpreted as a form of genuine care.

b) Dissociative Relations

Dissociative social relations are relations that lead to division or minor conflict that is successfully mitigated. Although most relations were positive, there were minor and controlled dissociative

dynamics. Based on the research findings, the following dissociative relations were identified:

- 1) Competition in the queue. Attempts to cut in line sometimes occurred because of hunger. However, this was promptly addressed through mechanisms of social control, including teacher reprimands and guidance from senior students.
- 2) Social competition. Students competed to obtain larger portions; when a student was absent, other students competed for the food intended for the absent student.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School is not merely a nutritional provision program but has become a sociological instrument that shapes a new social reality within the school environment. According to Saputra (2025:2), the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) serves as an integrative strategy intended not only to meet children's nutritional needs but also to support academic achievement and character development. This study strengthens the argument that academic achievement depends not only on the quality of instruction but also on students' physiological and psychological readiness. The program was designed to provide students with balanced, nutritious meals regularly at school to support academic achievement through nutrition.

However, from a sociological perspective, this program integrates values, norms, equality, and social bonds into students' cognitive frameworks to support character development. School dining tables have shifted from being merely places to eat to

becoming miniature societies in which social inclusion is practiced daily. This is consistent with Nurhidayah (2024), who stated that shared meals at school create an atmosphere of togetherness and strengthen solidarity among students. This program can serve as a means of teaching social values such as sharing, appreciating food, and time discipline. On the other hand, parental involvement in implementing MBG also strengthens school-family relationships, creating a more collaborative and supportive learning environment.

Through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism Theory, uniform meal menus become powerful symbols that dismantle socioeconomic status distinctions. The school becomes a space for negotiating meaning, where interactions among individuals, including teachers and students, develop naturally through warmer and more open forms of communication. Furthermore, this program significantly promotes the development of positive relationships through social equality, fostering a culture of mutual cooperation and shared discipline in maintaining cleanliness and order during meals. It transforms teacher-student relationships from formal classroom relationships into more empathetic and familiar ones. Although minor negative dynamics exist, such as competition in queues or disputes over larger portions, these can be managed through teacher supervision.

2. Impacts of the Free Nutritious Meal Program at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School

Based on interviews with students, the Free Nutritious Meal Program at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School had significant impacts across various dimensions, ranging from physical health to changes in social behavior. The impacts of the Free Nutritious Meal Program at Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School are as follows:

a) Health and Academic Impacts

This program directly improved students' physical readiness to participate in teaching and learning activities through

- 1) improved concentration, as students found it easier to concentrate on teachers' explanations because they had eaten nutritious meals and were no longer hungry.
- 2) energy stability, as students felt more energetic, less easily fatigued, and able to remain focused, particularly during critical afternoon hours.
- 3) improved dietary patterns, as the program shifted students away from previous habits of frequently purchasing unhealthy snacks or even skipping lunch because of financial constraints.
- 4) physical fitness, as students felt physically fitter because their nutritional intake was more controlled than when they consumed only instant noodles or fried foods.

This is consistent with the findings of Wardoyo (2021), who found that free nutritious meal programs positively affect students' interest in and concentration on learning, and Saputra (2025), who also stated that fulfilling nutritional needs through MBG contributes to students' physical and mental readiness, enabling the

learning process to proceed more optimally, particularly after the lunch break. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) significantly improves physical readiness and that nutritional adequacy is directly proportional to students' mental readiness in the learning process. When nutritional needs are met, learning barriers such as hunger, fatigue, and difficulty concentrating, particularly in the afternoon, can be addressed, thereby enabling learning to proceed more optimally.

b) Psychological and Economic Impacts

This program reassured families and alleviated their financial burdens because

- 1) It alleviated students' concerns, particularly among Grade 9 students with demanding schedules, who felt supported because they no longer needed to worry about spending money or the inconvenience of bringing meals from home.
- 2) It increased motivation, as the assurance that basic needs, such as food, would be met made students more enthusiastic about attending school.
- 3) It eliminated feelings of inferiority, as all students ate the same menu regardless of economic status, thereby preventing feelings of low self-esteem or displays of luxurious food.

Consistent with the findings of Merlinda and Yusmar (2025), this program reduces daily household expenditures and helps students focus on learning without concerns about limited pocket money. Hana Afifah (2025) similarly reported savings in time and mental energy because students do not need to prepare packed meals amid busy

examination preparation schedules. Based on these studies, it can be concluded that, psychologically, this alleviation of financial burdens reduces tensions at home that students often bring to school, such as concerns about not having pocket money. Students' learning motivation increases because their basic physiological needs are consistently met, and the labeling of "rich food" or "poor food" no longer occurs, ultimately enhancing students' collective self-confidence at school.

c) Environmental Impacts

This program also raises concerns about food waste: Minimizing Food Waste: Students try to finish their meals or share them with friends when they dislike a menu item so that the food is not wasted. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that when menu items do not suit children's preferences, the risk of food waste becomes very high.

Hana Afifah's (2025) findings indicate that taste preferences constitute the main obstacle; when the food served does not match children's preferences, the risk of food waste increases significantly. Saputra (2026) also reported that overly bland menus, child-unfriendly food textures (e.g., vegetables that are too hard), and unfamiliar side-dish combinations result in substantial food waste. Based on these studies, it can be concluded that the MBG program continues to face major challenges in menu standardization. Taste and preferences, particularly when food menus are perceived as unfamiliar or unsuitable for children's preferences, trigger the waste of considerable amounts of nutritious food.

d) Impacts on School Canteens

The provision of free meals has changed purchasing patterns at school canteens. Canteen vendors adapted by shifting their merchandise from main meals to light snacks and beverages, allowing school canteens to continue operating with a different product orientation.

Rahmawati and Wijaya (2024) reported a decline in sales of main meals; however, vendors remained in business by shifting to beverages and light snacks not provided through MBG. Similarly, Suryono (2024) found that the free meal policy shifted canteen product orientation from main meals to the provision of snack foods. The policy did not eliminate canteen businesses but instead prompted a shift in the products sold. Based on these statements, it can be concluded that school canteen vendors face considerable economic challenges, including declining turnover and customer numbers, as well as changes in students' consumption patterns.

This occurred because main menu items such as fried rice and meatball soup became less marketable, as they were directly substituted by MBG. Consequently, canteens now sell more cold beverages, iced drinks, and light snacks that are not included in MBG meal packages. This phenomenon serves as an important reminder that when the government provides free goods that were previously sold, microbusiness operators lose their primary market and are compelled to find ways to survive.

3. Conclusion

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology of the Republic of

Indonesia for funding support through the Master's Thesis Research (PTM) scheme, which enabled the successful conduct of this study. This funding made a meaningful contribution to every stage of the study, from preparation and data collection to analysis and the preparation of the research report.

The authors also express their gratitude to the Graduate Program of Universitas Megarezky for the academic support, guidance, and facilities provided throughout the research process. The authors further extend their appreciation to the Head of the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) of Universitas Megarezky and all its staff for providing mentoring, coordination, and administrative support, thereby enabling this study to proceed in accordance with applicable provisions.

The authors also express their appreciation to the Principal of Muhammadiyah Limbung Junior High School, Gowa Regency, as well as to the teachers, educational staff, students, and all members of the school community who granted permission, welcomed the authors, and actively participated throughout the research data collection process. The cooperation and openness of all parties were important factors in the successful completion of this study.

Finally, the authors thank all parties who provided assistance, support, motivation, and contributions, both directly and indirectly, enabling the successful completion of this study. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to the development of knowledge, particularly in the field of sociology of education, and serve as a

reference for the development of educational policies and practices in Indonesia.

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