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Pedagogical transformation of nutrition programs: how free meal initiatives shape student independence in islamic educational contexts

Alis Asikin, Nasirudin Nasirudin, Yusron Nur Hadi

Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Ilmu Keguruan, Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia

Article Info

Article history:

Received Aug 31th, 2026

Revised Sept 05^h, 2026

Accepted Sept 12th, 2026

Keyword:

Free nutritious meal,
Program character education,
Islamic independence in
Southern Thailand

ABSTRACT

This study aims to critically analyze the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Islamic schools in Southern Thailand from the perspective of self-reliance character education, by examining the implementation process, supporting factors, and challenges that affect the formation of students' character. The research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to understand in depth how nutrition-oriented programs translate into educational practices in the context of Islamic schools. Data were obtained through observation and interviews with parties involved in the implementation of the program, then analyzed thematically to identify practice patterns, supporting conditions, and tensions that arise in the implementation process. The findings of the study show that free nutritious eating transforms from a nutrition fulfillment program into a pedagogical space for the formation of independent character through the habit of taking food, queuing, eating orderly, maintaining cleanliness, and being responsible for one's own needs. The process is supported by the commitment of principals and teachers, a consistent routine of activities, an Islamic school culture, parental involvement, and institutional and facility support. However, the dependence of some students on teachers, limited facilities and time, the number of students, and the orientation of food distribution efficiency can limit the space for students to develop independence. This research contributes conceptually by showing that the impact of character education from school food programs is not automatic, but depends on the ability of institutions to transform nutrition fulfillment practices into pedagogical experiences that allow students to develop agency, responsibility, self-regulation, and independent habits. These findings expand the discussion on faith-based education and character education by positioning school welfare programs as potential arenas for character formation through daily practice.



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Corresponding Author:

Alis Asikin,

alis.asikin@walisongo.ac.id

Introduction

The school food program is no longer understood solely as a nutrition fulfillment policy, but is also related to the equitable distribution of education, child welfare, school participation, and student capacity development. (Sihombing, 2022). However, this approach still leaves the question of what happens when feeding programs are placed in educational institutions that explicitly aim to shape character, responsibility, discipline, and personality based on religious values (Rojak & Khayru, 2022; Aulia 2026). In the context of Islamic education, feeding is not only concerned with what students receive, but also with how they take,

manage, use, and take responsibility for the facilities provided. This suggests that the Free Nutritious Meal Program can be understood not only as a well-being intervention, but also as part of daily educational practices that have the potential to shape the habits and character of learners (Sirirassamee & Hunchangsith, 2016).

The main problem of this study lies in the tension between the logic of welfare and the logic of character formation. The implementation of programs that emphasize order, efficiency, supervision, and compliance is indeed necessary to ensure orderly food distribution. However, the formation of self-reliance requires space for students to make decisions, self-regulate, exercise responsibility, and use initiative (Purttiponthanee et. Al, 2016). These tensions are becoming increasingly important in Islamic education in Southern Thailand, which takes place in a social and cultural environment that brings together religious values, local identity, and the demands of modern education (Patchee, 2012; Al-Arif et.al, 2026). In such a situation, the success of the Free Nutritious Meal Program is not enough to be judged based on the ability to meet the food needs of students, but also needs to be seen from how the institutional practices around the program shape the relationship between authority, responsibility, and student agency.

Conceptually, this research brings together three areas that have tended to be discussed separately, namely school food programs, character education, and Islamic education. School food programs are generally understood based on nutritional and educational benefits, while character education emphasizes the formation of responsibility, discipline, and self-control through habituation. Meanwhile, Islamic education places the formation of personality within the framework of religious values and the social life of the community. This research connects the three through the perspective of habitus, by viewing independence not as just an individual ability, but as a disposition formed through repetitive social practices (Costa, Burke, & Murphy, 2019). Routines such as picking up food, queuing, managing portions, maintaining cleanliness, and completing personal needs can become experiences that slowly form responsibility and self-management. However, the process is highly dependent on how the institution organizes student participation spaces and balances adult control with opportunities for students to act independently (Brubaker, 1993).

Based on these problems, this study examines the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program at the Roudhotul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Yala, Southern Thailand, with a focus on its contribution to the formation of students' independent character with case study approach and interpretivist and constructivist paradigms. The research is directed at three main aspects: how the program is implemented in daily educational practice, what institutional and social factors support its implementation, and what challenges affect its ability to form student independence (Sulisno & Abdullah, 2019). The Roudhotul Ulum Islamic Boarding School was chosen because it represents an Islamic educational context that brings together religious values, local socio-cultural conditions, and the demands of contemporary education (Kusol & Kaewpawong, 2025). In this study, the Free Nutritious Meal Program is not treated as a neutral nutritional intervention, but as a pedagogical space where welfare, character building, institutional governance, and student agency interact with each other. The novelty of the research lies in shifting the focus from the question of whether food programs provide nutritional benefits to the question of how feeding practices can be converted into mechanisms for the formation of self-reliance and responsibility through the daily institutional routine of Islamic education.

Method

This study uses a qualitative case study approach with interpretivist and constructivist paradigms to understand the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) and its relationship with the formation of students' independent character in the context of Islamic education in Southern Thailand. The research focuses on how principals, teachers, and students interpret the implementation of MBG in relation to responsibility, discipline, self-management, and independence (Baskarada, 2014). The case study was purposively selected at the Roudhotul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Jaha, Yala, Southern Thailand, because the institution provides a relevant context to examine the relationship between feeding programs, Islamic educational practices, nurturing, and student character building.

Participants were selected purposively based on their involvement and knowledge of the implementation of MBG. A total of seven informants were involved, consisting of one principal, four teachers, and two students. Data were collected through unstructured in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation (Polkinghorne, 2005). The interview lasted about 2 hours and 10 minutes and was conducted using the Malay language commonly used in the interaction of the Muslim community of Southern Thailand. The interview data is then transcribed, transliterated into Thai as per the needs of data management, and

translated into English for analysis and publication. Observations were used to compare informants' narratives with actual practices, while documentation was used to supplement information on procedures, rules, and implementation of MBG.

Table 1. Informant Profile

Initials	Remarks	Location
KS1	Principal	Diniyah Roudotul Ulum, Yala, Thailand
GK1	Teacher	Diniyah Roudotul Ulum, Yala, Thailand
GK2	Teacher	Diniyah Roudotul Ulum, Yala, Thailand
GK3	Teacher	Diniyah Roudotul Ulum, Yala, Thailand
GK4	Teacher	Diniyah Roudotul Ulum, Yala, Thailand
ST1	Students	Diniyah Roudotul Ulum, Yala, Thailand
ST2	Students	Diniyah Roudotul Ulum, Yala, Thailand

Data analysis is carried out iteratively and interpretively through several stages. Initial data were coded to identify MBG implementation practices, student involvement, supervision, responsibility, discipline, dependence, and independence (Permana, Sudarsyah, & Rahyasih, 2023). The codes were then compared and grouped into categories, before being developed into themes that explained the relationship between MBG implementation and the formation of student self-reliance character. The analysis is not only oriented to description, but also to interpretation of how MBG practices can strengthen or limit students' experiences of independence.

The validity of the data was strengthened through triangulation of sources and techniques by comparing interview, observation, and documentation data. Researchers also apply reflexivity by considering positions, assumptions, and potential biases during data collection, translation, and interpretation (Rahman, 2025). The analysis process is documented through coding traces and theme development to maintain consistency of interpretation. The research was carried out by paying attention to the ethical principles of research, including informant consent, voluntary participation, the right to resign, anonymity, and data confidentiality.

Results and Discussions

Implementation of the free nutritious meal program in shaping the character of independence

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Eating Program (MBG) in Islamic schools in Southern Thailand shows that the program to meet nutritional needs is not only positioned as an intervention in the health and welfare of students, but also as a pedagogical space to form the character of independence. Based on the results of observations and interviews, the implementation of the program involves a series of activities that encourage students to actively participate in the eating process, starting from taking food as needed, maintaining the regularity of the queue, consuming food independently, to cleaning the equipment and dining area after completion. The teacher does not completely take over the activity, but provides direction and supervision so that students are gradually able to manage their own needs.

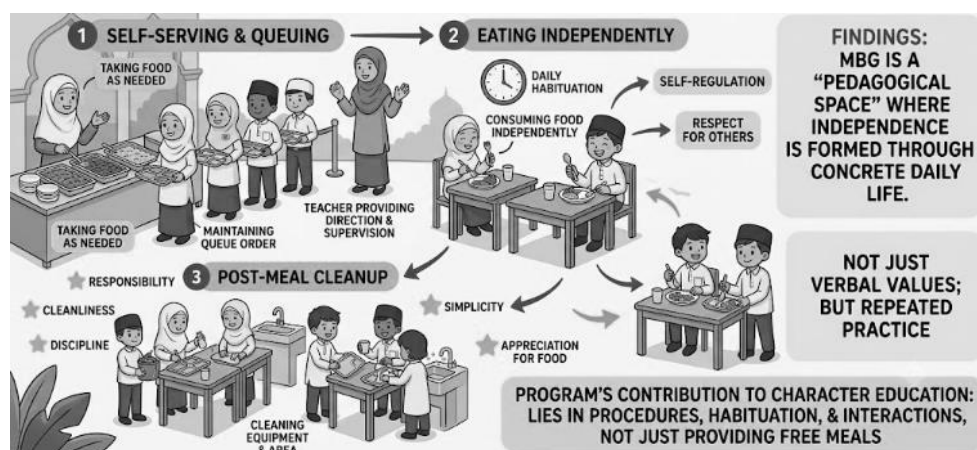


Figure 1. Implementation of the free nutritious meal program in Thailand

This practice shows that independence is formed through concrete habituation in daily life, not just through verbal delivery of values. In some schools, eating activities are also associated with Islamic values such as responsibility, discipline, cleanliness, simplicity, and appreciation for food. Students are directed not to depend on teachers in meeting their food needs and maintaining the cleanliness of the environment. Interaction between students during the program also strengthens their ability to self-regulate and respect the needs of others. Thus, MBG functions as an everyday pedagogical space that allows the value of independence to be practiced repeatedly. These findings suggest that the program's contribution to character education does not primarily lie in the provision of free meals, but rather in how the procedures, habituation, and interactions that accompany the program are designed and utilized as educational experiences.

Meal activities are organized through stages that allow students to pick up food, queue, eat orderly, manage personal needs, and clean the area after eating. Teachers carry out more of the function of direction and supervision rather than taking over all student activities. The pattern shows that independence is built through concrete and repetitive experiences in daily school life.

The results of the first observation showed that before the food was distributed, students were directed to form a queue and take turns taking food. Most students carry out the process without direct help from the teacher. After obtaining the food, students take the food to the designated place, eat together, and return or tidy up the supplies when they are done. The teacher is seen watching from a certain distance and giving reprimands when there are students who are disorderly. This interaction pattern shows that there is space for students to carry out personal responsibilities directly.

A school principal explained that the eating activities were not entirely carried out with the help of teachers because the school wanted to make the activity part of character habituation. He emphasized that students need to learn to take care of their own simple needs and understand that obtaining food also comes with the responsibility to maintain order and cleanliness. According to him, the habit is carried out repeatedly so that independence is not only understood as advice, but also becomes a behavior that is formed in daily life:

"We don't want children to just receive food and then finish. They have to learn to take as needed, queue, eat orderly, then clean the place. Teachers continue to supervise, but not all must be helped. It is from this simple habit that we try to instill responsibility and independence in children." (KS1, August 7, 2026).

The findings indicate that MBG functions as an everyday pedagogical space, which is an educational space that emerges from routine practice outside of formal learning. Independence is not primarily constructed through normative instruction about character, but through the distribution of responsibilities in concrete activities. In the perspective of character education, routines that are done consistently allow the values of responsibility, discipline, cleanliness, and self-regulation to be part of the student experience. Thus, the pedagogical significance of MBG lies in the way the school organizes eating activities so that students not only become beneficiaries, but also active actors in the whole process.



Figure 2. The children get their own food from the school kitchen.

Teachers also emphasized the importance of giving students the opportunity to do activities independently before getting help. In practice, the teacher does not directly help when the student has difficulty picking up food or arranging the equipment, but first gives verbal directions. The approach is intended to reduce students' dependence on adults. One teacher explained:

"We usually don't help right away when the child can't do something yet. We give them directions first and let them try. If you really need help, then the teacher will intervene. In this way, children learn that they have responsibility to themselves. Eating activities are an opportunity to train courage, order, and the ability to take care of personal needs." (GK1, August 8, 2026).

This information is reinforced by the experience of other teachers who see that changes in student behavior take place gradually through routine. In the early stages, some students are still waiting for instructions or help from teachers, especially in arranging food and cleaning supplies. However, once the activities are done consistently, students begin to understand the sequence of activities and execute them with fewer interventions. Teachers see that the repetition of procedures has an important function in building habits:

"At first, there are students who are still waiting for the teacher, especially when picking up food or cleaning the place. But after doing it constantly, they begin to know what to do. We see the change not because they are given advice, but because every day they get the opportunity to do it themselves. So, habituation is an important part of the character education process." (GK2, August 8, 2026).

The second observation showed that after the meal activity was over, most of the students began to carry out cleaning activities independently. Students bring or return cutlery, clean up leftovers, and tidy up the places used. The teacher does not give continuous instruction to every student, but conducts general supervision and provides reinforcement when there is appropriate behavior. Some students were also seen reminding each other when there were friends who left leftovers or had not tidied up their place. These interactions show that responsibility begins to move from teacher control to self-control and supervision between peers.

The student's perspective shows that the activity is understood not only as an obligation to follow the school's rules, but also as part of personal responsibility. One of the students explained that he began to understand that after obtaining food, he had an obligation to maintain cleanliness and did not always wait for the teacher's help. He also attributes the habit to life outside of school:

"Now I'm used to taking my own food and cleaning the place after eating. Teachers don't always remind like before. If I leave the place dirty, I feel that it is my responsibility. In our school we were taught that cleanliness and responsibility should be done on our own. Therefore, I try to do the same habit when I am at home." (ST1, August 9, 2026).

Overall, the series of interviews and observations showed that MBG's contribution to the formation of independence character mainly occurred through the transformation of consumption activities into educational practices. Programs do not automatically result in self-sufficiency simply because students obtain meals for free; The pedagogical effect depends on how the school regulates the role of teachers, provides space for *student agency*, and makes eating activities a routine that contains responsibility. These findings also show a tension between the need to maintain program efficiency and the need to provide opportunities for students to learn independently. When teachers are too quick to take over, the space for self-reliance training narrows; on the contrary, when assistance is provided proportionately, MBG becomes a medium for the formation of *self-regulation*, responsibility, discipline, and independent habits.

Factors that support the implementation of MBG in strengthening the character of independence

Strengthening the character of independence through the Free Nutritious Eating Program is supported by a number of factors that work simultaneously at the institutional, pedagogical, and social levels. The first factor is the commitment of the principal and teachers in making the program not just an activity to meet food needs, but part of the formation of students' character. Teachers play the role of directors as well as role models who provide opportunities for students to carry out activities independently before providing assistance. The second factor is the existence of relatively consistent routines and procedures. An orderly meal schedule, queuing mechanism, food distribution, hygiene rules, and the obligation to tidy up the dining area create a structure that allows students to understand their responsibilities gradually. The third factor is the Islamic school culture which provides a normative foundation for the formation of independence through the values of responsibility, discipline, cleanliness, simplicity, and concern for others. These values make eating activities gain a broader educational meaning.

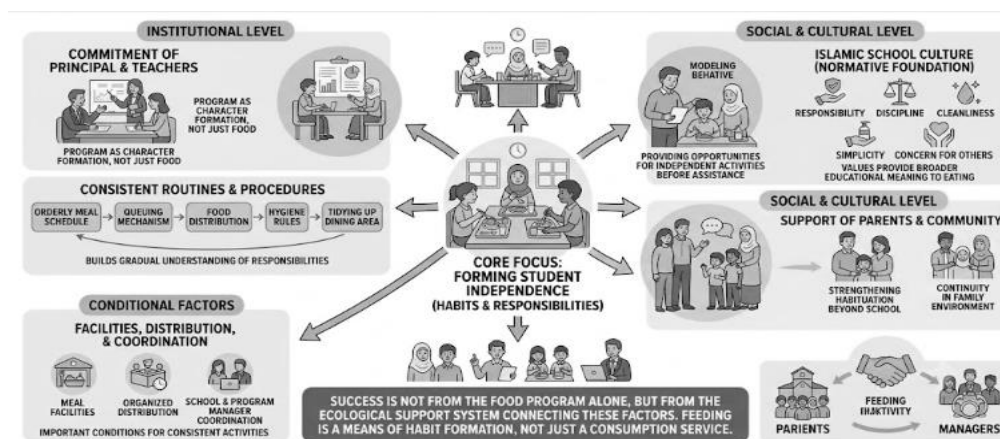


Figure 3. Factors that support the implementation of programme

In addition, the support of parents and the school community also strengthens the continuity of habituation because independent behavior introduced in schools can be strengthened in the family environment. The availability of meal facilities, organized food distribution, and coordination between the school and program managers are also important conditions that allow activities to run consistently. The findings show that MBG's success in supporting character education is not determined by the food program itself, but by *an ecological support system* that connects school policies, pedagogical practices, institutional culture, family involvement, and student participation. Thus, the program becomes more effective when all actors understand that feeding is a means of forming habits and responsibilities, not just a consumption service.

Principals and teachers have a strategic position in translating MBG from food needs fulfillment activities into character education practices. At the same time, a consistent routine provides structure for learners to understand and carry out responsibilities gradually. Thus, the main supporting factor is not standing alone, but working simultaneously in forming an environment that allows independence to be practiced repeatedly.

The results of the first observation show that the implementation of MBG takes place through a relatively regular procedure. Before the food was distributed, students were directed to line up, wait for their turn, take the food according to the provisions, then go to the food that had been provided. The teacher does not accompany each student individually, but conducts general supervision while providing direction in case of irregularities. After eating, students were directed to return equipment and tidy up the dining area. This pattern shows that the regularity of the program not only serves to facilitate the distribution of food, but also creates a behavioral structure that allows students to learn discipline, be responsible, and manage their activities more independently.

The principal emphasized that institutional commitment is an important factor in making MBG part of character education. He explained that the school strives to ensure that eating activities are not understood as mere food service, but as an opportunity to build student responsibility.

"We have seen from the beginning that this food program is not just about giving food to children. We want this activity to also be part of education. Therefore, teachers are directed to get students used to taking their own food, following the rules, maintaining cleanliness, and completing their responsibilities after eating. If schools and teachers are consistent, children slowly understand that they need to be able to take care of themselves." (KS1, August 7, 2026).

The statement shows that school leadership functions as a mechanism that changes the orientation of the program from *food provision* to *character-oriented practice*. Institutional commitment gives teachers legitimacy to incorporate elements of habituation into eating activities without making them an additional activity outside the program. In this context, school policies, principals' directions, and teachers' practices reinforce each other so that the values of responsibility and independence gain a legitimate position in the MBG routine. These findings show that institutional factors work not only through the provision of rules, but through the ability of institutions to build a common understanding of the pedagogical objectives of the program among the implementers.

The teacher then emphasized that routine consistency is an important factor in shaping student behavior. According to him, change does not happen only because teachers give advice on independence, but because students get the same opportunity to repeat these behaviors in daily activities.

"Children need to be accustomed to the same rules every day. They queued, took food, ate orderly, then tidied up their respective places. If every day the teacher gives them the opportunity to do it on their own, over time they will no longer wait for orders. They begin to know what to do without always having to be directed. So, in my opinion, consistency of activities really helps to build independence." (GK1, August 8, 2026)).

Other teachers put emphasis on the relationship between Islamic school culture and character formation through MBG. He explained that eating activities are associated with values that have become part of school life, especially cleanliness, simplicity, responsibility, and concern for others. "We do not separate eating activities from the values taught in school. Children are always reminded about cleanliness, not overdoing it, appreciating food, and thinking about other friends. We habitualize these values in our daily activities. So, they not only know that independence is important, but learn to practice it in simple activities like eating and cleaning the place when they're done." (GK2, August 8, 2026).

The results of the second observation showed that the support of school culture was seen in the way teachers provided reinforcement to student behavior. When there are students who finish eating without tidying up the place, the teacher does not immediately do the work, but first reminds the students to complete it themselves. On several occasions, other students were also seen reminding each other to maintain cleanliness and not to take food excessively. The practice shows that responsibility is not fully placed as a vertical relationship between teacher and student, but begins to develop into a shared norm among learners. Thus, school culture functions as a social environment that strengthens the habit of independence through supervision, example, and reinforcement between friends.

One student revealed that the regularity of MBG's activities made him better understand personal responsibility. He feels that teachers no longer always help as before because students already know the procedures that must be done.

"Now we know what to do when the food comes. We take it ourselves, then eat and clean the place. Teachers usually only remind them if something is disorderly. I feel more used to doing it myself because this activity is carried out continuously. At home I also try to clean the dining area after finishing. I think the habits at school make me more responsible for myself." (ST1, August 9, 2026).



Figure 4. Students feel bored with the menu, which is sometimes repetitive.

Overall, interview and observation data show that the supporting factors of MBG in strengthening the character of independence form an institutional ecosystem, not just a collection of factors that stand alone. The principal's commitment provides direction and legitimacy, teachers translate it through pedagogical practices, routines form behavioral consistency, Islamic school culture provides a value framework, while interaction between students and family support has the potential to expand habituation outside of school. These findings show that the success of MBG as an instrument of character education depends on the capacity of institutions to connect policies, practices, values, and student participation. In other words, food is a

medium, while the institutional ecosystem is a mechanism that allows the medium to produce habituation of independence.

Challenges of implementing MBG and its influence on the character of independence

Although the Free Nutritious Meal Program has the potential to strengthen the character of independence, its implementation in Southern Thai Islamic schools faces a number of challenges that can affect the consistency of the character-building process. One of the main challenges has to do with the tendency of some students to remain dependent on teachers or officers when carrying out activities that can actually be done independently. These dependencies can arise due to previous habits, family parenting patterns, or differences in students' developmental levels and abilities. Other challenges related to limited facilities, food distribution management, relatively large number of students, and limited time during meal activities.

Under certain conditions, efficiency demands can cause teachers or officers to take over student activities so that the process runs faster. Although these actions are practical, interventions that are too dominant have the potential to reduce students' opportunities to learn to manage their own needs. In addition, differences in food preferences and students' eating habits can also raise problems in building discipline and responsibility for the food provided. These challenges show a tension between the orientation of program efficiency and the pedagogical goal of establishing independence (Humaeraot et.al, 2025). When programs are too oriented to food distribution, the character education dimension risks becoming secondary. Conversely, when teachers provide enough space for participation, simple activities such as taking food, organizing portions, eating orderly, and cleaning the dining area can be a character learning experience. Therefore, the challenge of implementing MBG is not solely a technical issue, but also determines the extent to which the program can be transformed from a nutrition fulfillment policy to a sustainable character education practice.

The findings of the study show that the main challenge in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is not solely related to the technical problem of food distribution, but lies in the tension between the demands of program efficiency and the pedagogical need to provide space for students to learn independently. The dependence of some students on teachers, limited time and facilities, the number of students, and differences in eating habits make the process of forming independence not take place uniformly. In certain situations, teachers must choose between giving students the opportunity to complete activities on their own or taking over work to make food distribution faster. This condition shows that the success of MBG as a character education instrument is highly dependent on the school's ability to balance administrative demands with the needs of *student agency development*.

The results of the first observation show that time constraints are one of the conditions that affect the interaction pattern between teachers and students. When the number of students participating in meal activities is large, the process of taking and distributing food requires a quick arrangement. Some students were seen still waiting for the teacher's help when picking up food or arranging eating utensils. In some situations, the teacher then helps directly so that the queue is not too long and the activity can be resumed immediately. These observations show that teacher intervention is not always caused by the desire to control students, but also by the demands of the efficiency of program implementation. However, these actions can indirectly reduce students' opportunities to practice managing their own needs.

The principal explained that schools face a dilemma when they have to maintain the regularity of the program while providing opportunities for students to be independent.

"We do want the children to do it themselves, but when there are many students and meal times are limited, teachers sometimes have to help so that the activities are not too long. If everything is left alone, the queue can be long and the other children will have to wait. So teachers have to look at the situation. We try to continue to provide opportunities to students, but in certain conditions the speed of service must also be considered so that all children get good food." (KS1, August 7, 2026).

This statement shows that there is an *unresolved tension* between the logic of service and the logic of education. From an administrative perspective, teacher intervention can be understood as a strategy to maintain efficiency, order, and equal distribution of services. However, from a character education perspective, too quick help can reduce students' experience in making decisions and completing tasks independently. Thus, a student's dependency cannot be fully understood as an individual weakness, since some of these behaviors can be produced or reinforced by institutional conditions. The challenges of MBG are thus pedagogical as well as structural: the design of program implementation determines how much space is available for students to develop *self-regulation* and responsibility.

A teacher revealed that some students' dependency is also influenced by habits that have been formed before participating in the program.

"There are some children who, if they have a little difficulty, immediately call the teacher. They are used to being helped when doing something, so at first they are not confident to try on their own. We usually don't help right away, but ask them to try it first. The problem is, when time is limited, teachers sometimes have to help immediately so that the activity runs. So, the challenge is how to give children the opportunity to learn independently without making eating activities too long." (GK3, August 8, 2026).



Figure 5. Students wash their own dirty plates.

Other teachers highlighted the problem of facilities and student characteristics that are not always the same.

"The condition of children is different. Some are used to eating and taking care of their own needs, but there are also those who still need direction. Facilities also do not always support large numbers of activities. When space is limited or supplies have to be used interchangeably, teachers need to arrange more. In such conditions, the focus sometimes changes to how fast food is distributed and activities are completed immediately, when in fact we also want children to learn to be responsible for the process." (GK4, August 8, 2026).

The results of the second observation showed that the difference in students' abilities and habits was seen when eating activities took place. Some students can pick up food, set up a meal area, and clean up the equipment without assistance, while others are still waiting for instructions or help from teachers. The difference is also seen in the way students determine the amount of food taken; Some are able to adjust portions to their needs, while others take too much or leave food behind. The teacher then gave instructions on the intake of adequate food and the importance of appreciating food. These conditions show that the formation of independence takes place not uniformly and requires a different pedagogical approach.

One student described that the teacher's help sometimes made it easier for him to complete activities, but at the same time he realized that he needed to learn to do some activities on his own.

"Sometimes I still ask the teacher for help if it is difficult to get food or when the dining room is full. If the teacher is busy, I try to wait or do it myself. The teacher often said that we should try before asking for help. Now I'm getting used to taking my own food and cleaning the place after eating. But if the time is fast, usually the teacher helps so that we don't have to wait too long." (ST2, August 9, 2026).

Overall, the data show that the challenges of implementing MBG reveal a pedagogical paradox: the stronger the demands on distribution efficiency, the more likely it is that the space for student self-reliance training is narrowed. Limited time, facilities, number of students, differences in habits, and student dependency make schools have to continue to negotiate between service needs and character education goals. Therefore, the challenge of MBG should not be understood only as an operational obstacle, but as a pedagogical and institutional design issue. Programs are more likely to be self-reliant if teachers are given space and strategies to use *scaffolded assistance*, students have the opportunity to complete activities on their own, and distribution procedures are designed to remain efficient without eliminating *student agency*. These findings confirm that

MBG's transformation from a nutrition fulfillment program to a character education practice depends on the institution's ability to manage the tension between efficiency, control, and independence

The main findings of the study show that the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Islamic schools in Southern Thailand has the potential to function not only as a nutrition fulfillment program, but also as a pedagogical space to shape the character of students' independence through the habit of taking food, queuing, eating orderly, maintaining cleanliness, and being responsible for one's own needs. School meal programs have been linked to improved dietary quality, participation, and various educational outcomes, while character education emphasizes the importance of the school environment and daily practices in shaping responsible behavior (Wall et al., 2022). In this context, the commitment of principals and teachers, consistent routines, school culture, family involvement, and institutional support can be understood as part of an educational environment that allows character formation to take place repeatedly. However, some students' dependence on teachers, limited facilities and time, the number of students, and the orientation of distribution efficiency can reduce students' opportunities to practice independently (Cohen et al., 2021). Thus, the most important finding of this study is that the character education impact of the Free Nutritious Eating Program does not arise automatically from the feeding, but depends on how the program is organized as an educational practice that provides space for learners to make decisions, exercise responsibility, self-regulate, and build independent habits in daily life (Durlak et al., 2011).

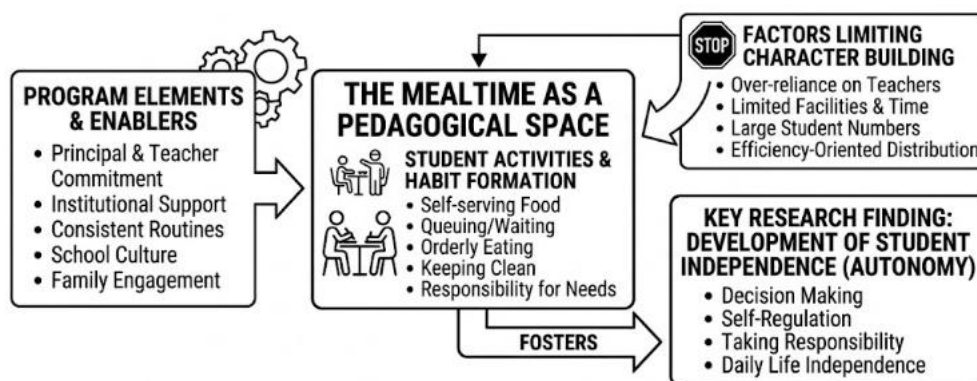


Figure 6. The study's most important findings

Previous studies have shown that school meal programs can provide benefits for dietary quality, attendance, participation, and a number of educational outcomes, but the educational experiences that emerge from the program are strongly influenced by how the program is implemented in school life (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). In the context of Southern Thai Islamic schools, the educational value of the Free Nutritious Meal Program lies not only in *what students receive*, but also in *how students participate in receiving it*. Activities such as queuing, picking up food, determining needs, eating in an orderly manner, and cleaning the dining area can be understood as repetitive practices that have the potential to form dispositions (Idris et al, 2023). In Bourdieu's perspective, practices that take place repeatedly in a social environment contribute to the formation of *habitus*, which are dispositions that affect the way individuals act and respond to situations (Cohen et al., 2021). This suggests that self-reliance can develop not only through explicit moral instruction, but through repeated experiences that link responsibility to daily actions. The character education perspective also places habituation, school environment, and social practices as an important part of the character formation process (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007).

However, the transformation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program into a pedagogical space contains contradictions that need to be considered. On the one hand, the program requires order, efficiency, supervision, and coordination so that all students get the right food; on the other hand, the formation of independence requires the opportunity for students to perform, choose, organize, and take responsibility for their own actions (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). When teachers or officers take over too many student activities in order to speed up distribution, *the space for student agency* can narrow (Bourdieu, 1977). The *student agency* framework places learners as actors who need to have the opportunity to direct actions and make decisions responsibly, while research on social-emotional learning shows that the development of self-regulation is influenced by the quality of implementation and the educational environment (Al-Jawaldeh, 2023). From Bourdieu's perspective, these conditions show that the institution of the school not only provides rules, but also determines which dispositions are strengthened through daily practice. Therefore, normatively valued independence can be

simultaneously weakened if institutional practices place too much emphasis on control and compliance (OECD, 2019; Durlak et al., 2011).

At the theoretical level, this study expands the use of Bourdieu's perspective by showing that *cultural capital* in Islamic schools is not always in the form of academic knowledge or formal credentials, but can also be present through practical dispositions such as discipline, self-control, cleanliness, responsibility, and the ability to manage personal needs (Radhi et.al, 2026). In Bourdieu's perspective, cultural capital is concerned with the resources and competencies that acquire value in a *field*, while *habitus* describes how dispositions are formed through social experiences that take place repeatedly (Bourdieu, 1977; Rahmaddani, 2025). In the context of Southern Thai Islamic education (Halimic, 2017), the process also needs to be understood in relation to the culture and religious identity that is an important part of the educational life of the local Muslim community. Islamic education in the Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat regions took place in a process of negotiation between the maintenance of religious identity and the demands of modern education. Therefore, schools can be a space where the values of responsibility and independence are given legitimacy through religious norms as well as translated into daily educational practices. Thus, the habitus of independence can be understood as the result of an interaction between public policy, school authorities, religious norms, and students' experiences (Bourdieu, 1986; Eissa & Khalid, 2019).

Findings regarding the support of principals, teachers, parents, school culture, and facilities show that the transformation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program cannot be explained through individual interventions alone. School meal programs are part of an ecosystem that involves schools, families, communities, policies, resources, and the social environment. Teachers have an important position as mediators between policy and student experiences because they determine how those activities translate into daily practice. Research on character education also shows the importance of school leadership and the involvement of various actors in creating an environment that supports character formation (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). In the context of Southern Thai Islamic education, the process becomes more complex because educational practices are in a social space that brings together religious identity, local culture, and the demands of modern education (Liow, 2008). Therefore, the Free Nutritious Meal Program can be understood as a *hybrid educational practice* that brings together *welfare provision*, character education, and school governance, with its success greatly influenced by the institution's ability to turn resources and policies into meaningful practices for students (WFP, 2022; OECD, 2019).

The implications of this study go beyond the Free Nutritious Eating Program itself. The findings show that educational welfare programs can be an instrument of transformation if the implementation design recognizes students as actors, not just beneficiaries (Rasyid, 2026). Contemporary educational perspectives increasingly place *student agency*, self-regulation, social competence, and responsibility as important parts of educational goals, while research on school meal programs suggests that food interventions can provide benefits that go beyond nutritional aspects when placed within the broader educational ecosystem. However, this study does not support the reduction of independence to mere *employability skills* (Durlak et al., 2011). In Islamic schools, independence acquires a broader meaning because it relates to moral responsibility, discipline, cleanliness, and social life. Thus, the conceptual contribution of this research lies in the understanding of the Free Nutritious Meal Program as a welfare pedagogy, which is a practice that can turn activities to meet basic needs into opportunities to build habitus, self-regulation, responsibility, and agency. The success of this transformation depends on the ability of institutions to balance the logic of welfare, the logic of education, and the moral-religious logic (Wall et al., 2022; Kejora et.al, 2025).

Conclusions

The study's key findings suggest that the Free Nutritious Eating Program not only serves as a nutrition fulfillment intervention, but can also be a pedagogical practice that shapes student independence. Independence develops through simple routines such as picking up food, queuing, arranging yourself, eating orderly, maintaining cleanliness, and being responsible for personal needs. Thus, character formation does not primarily take place through explicit teaching, but through habituation in daily activities. However, the study also found a paradox: efforts to improve order and control in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program can limit the space for student agency that is actually needed to develop independence. Therefore, the character education impact of the Free Nutritious Meal Program does not arise automatically from the feeding, but depends on how the practice is organized and integrated with the Islamic educational culture, the role of teachers, and the student experience. This study is limited to the context of Islamic schools in Southern Thailand so the findings cannot be generalized to different schools, regions, or education

systems. In addition, research has not been able to ensure the sustainability of the independence character formed through the Free Nutritious Meal Program in the long term and its influence on student behavior outside of school. Further research needs to use longitudinal and multi-site designs by involving students, teachers, parents, program managers, and policy makers. A comparative study between Islamic schools and non-religious schools is also needed to understand the influence of institutional culture on the formation of independence. Future research focus needs to be directed not only on nutritional fulfillment, but also on how the institutional design and pedagogical practices of the Free Nutritious Eating Program can result in sustainable character building.

Acknowledgments

Acknowledge anyone who has helped you with the study, including Researchers who supplied materials, reagents, or computer programs; anyone who helped with the writing or English, or offered critical comments about the content, or anyone who provided technical help. State why people have been acknowledged and ask their permission. Acknowledge sources of funding, including any grant or reference numbers. Please avoid apologize for doing a poor job of presenting the manuscript.

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