



# Impact of the provision of school lunch on attendance in remote rural Jamaican primary schools



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 28 January 2013

Received in revised form 20 April 2015

Accepted 29 September 2015

### Keywords:

School feeding programmes

Jamaica

Remote rural

Attendance

Poverty

## ABSTRACT

This study examined the attendance patterns by region of schools which participated in School Feeding Programmes (SFPs) in poor, remote rural areas of Jamaica and determined whether there was a significant difference in attendance over a 10 year period between children who took different lunch types. The study revealed peaks and troughs in the average annual attendance by region, but found no significant difference in attendance by lunch type. Variations in poverty levels and the effect of a conditional cash grant to poor parents are offered as possible explanations for the peaks and troughs in attendance.

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## 1. Introduction

As will be evident from the relevant literature explored in this paper, breakfast is the School Feeding Programme investigated in most research particularly with regard to its nutrient intake (Hanes et al., 1984) and in some instances to its impact on attendance (Hoyland et al., 2009). This includes research in rural primary schools in Jamaica (Simeon, 1998; Powell et al., 1998). Research on the impact of lunch programmes on attendance in primary schools in Jamaica comes from household surveys (PIOJ and STATIN, 2007) and while this research underscores that irregularity of attendance is most acute in remote rural primary schools, no study so far has investigated the problem of attendance in these particular schools. The study reported in this paper seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the impact of three different types of lunch programmes on attendance in remote rural primary schools with low annual attendance rates and in different geographical regions in Jamaica. Furthermore it seeks to ascertain the views of principals of these schools and of parents and teachers on the school lunch programme including whether the supply of one type of lunch has improved since its inadequacy was reported by Walker et al. (1998).

### 1.1. Review of relevant literature

An inference from the work of Maslow (1954) on motivation is that a child's physiological needs (e.g. hunger and thirst) should be attended to as a precondition for learning to take place. That a hungry child cannot learn, in a nutshell, is one of the assumptions that underpin School Feeding Programmes (SFPs). These programmes are justified on several grounds: that they alleviate short term hunger in malnourished children; that they address nutritional deficiencies in the children; that they motivate parents to send their undernourished children to school. All of these encourage improved attendance and increased attention on the part of the children and these in turn result in improved cognition and school performance (Dell Rosso, 1999). Hanes et al. (1984) examined the dietary analysis component of the National Evaluation of School Nutrition Programmes in the United States of America. They sought to ascertain whether participants and non-participants in the school lunch and breakfast programmes have different calorie and nutrient intakes for 24 h, breakfast, and/or lunch. They also wanted to find out if there were differences in the nutritional quality or total quantity of food consumed. They found that the intake of almost all nutrients was greater for students who participated in the school lunch programme than for the non-participants, both at lunch and during 24 h. The superior lunch and 24-h intakes of lunch programme participants were due to the higher nutritional quality of the school lunch compared with lunches taken by the non-participants. The most important impact of the school breakfast was that when the

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.09.006>

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programme was available, it increased the likelihood that children would have breakfast, and these children had significantly higher intakes of nutrients than children who skipped breakfast. Research by [Bhattacharya et al. \(2006\)](#) also suggests that the School Feeding Programmes improved the nutritional outcomes of the students they studied.

[Powell et al. \(1998\)](#) investigated the effect of providing a school breakfast on several variables including attendance of primary school children in Jamaica. They found that the school attendance of adequately nourished children was significantly better than that of undernourished children. [Simeon \(1998\)](#) reported on two studies related to the evaluation of the SFP in Jamaica. One study found that the provision of breakfast to children in grade 7 for one semester resulted in improved school attendance. [Powell et al. \(1998\)](#) reported that Jamaican children who received school breakfast had significantly better attendance. Those children whose attendance was better before the breakfast programme was introduced continued to have better attendance for the rest of the school year. From a review of 45 studies on the effects of breakfast on the cognitive performance of children, [Hoyland et al. \(2009\)](#) conclude that breakfast consumption has generally positive effects on cognitive performance in comparison with breakfast omission and that the apparent beneficial effects of school breakfast programmes may be linked to 'increased attendance and reduced absenteeism' (p. 240). An evaluation of an SFP in Burkina Faso found that a consequence of schools having canteens was an increase in regular attendance ([Moore, 1994](#)). An evaluation of a small pilot SFP in Malawi revealed up to 36% improvement in attendance over a 3 month period, when compared with control schools over the same period ([World Food Programme, 1996](#)) and in Niger which has very low school enrolment, particularly in areas with nomadic populations, the SFP has to be available as an incentive for the children to attend school ([World Food Programme 1996](#)).

[Powell et al. \(1998\)](#) reported that children from wealthier households attended school more regularly than those from poorer homes. This coheres with the finding by [PIOJ/STATIN \(2007\)](#) in Jamaica that there is a direct relationship between consumption status and attendance with 58.0% of the poorest attending school compared with 84.7% of children from the wealthier homes. Children from poorer homes are likely to be undernourished. Studies of the effects of missing breakfast in Jamaica and Peru suggest that undernourished children may benefit more from SFPs than those who are adequately nourished ([Simeon and Grantham-McGregor, 1989](#); [Pollitt et al., 1996](#)). What this suggests is that SFPs should target the children who are most in need. However, targeting is not a policy that many governments are likely to adopt because, as [Walker et al. \(1998\)](#) argue, it requires additional screening and logistics to identify those children who should be included in the programme.

### 1.2. The Jamaican context

The Ministry of Education and Youth (MOEY) in Jamaica computes annual attendance rates on the basis of the frequency with which children are sent to school over 190 school days in the academic year. The MOEY has set 90% annual school attendance as its target at the primary level. Irregularity of attendance, however, has for long been a problem at this level. The Jamaica Five Year Development Plan (1990–1995) highlighted the fact that attendance rate at the primary level was 72% and noted that this figure obscured the fact that 'in some deep rural areas, the attendance rate was as low as 50%. Attempts to enforce compulsory attendance... have not resulted in an improvement in attendance rates' ([Task Force on Educational Reform, 2004, 19](#)). The [Five Year Education Plan \(1995–2000\)](#) also underscored irregular attendance at the primary level

with the problem being most acute in rural areas. The Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions 2006 ([PIOJ and STATIN, 2007](#)) reports an overall decline in the full attendance rate at the primary level moving from 75.8% in 2004 to 71.9% in 2006. The average daily attendance rate was 72.1%.

The School Feeding Programme (SFP) in Jamaica is funded from the national budget. For the 2007/2008 school year this was less than one million American dollars ([Ministry of Education, 2008](#)). The SFP is provided by the Jamaican government primarily to bolster school attendance and compensate for nutritional deficits among school age children ([PIOJ and STATIN, 2007](#)). Jamaica has two main types of SFPs. The first is cooked meals for which the MOEY provides schools with supplies such as flour, rice, oil, corned beef and tinned mackerel and the school prepares the meals in their canteen. Not all schools have canteens so cooked meals are not available to all children in primary schools. At the same time, the absence of a canteen does not prevent schools from preparing cooked meals. In the conduct of the research reported in this paper, the writer visited a primary school where lunch was cooked in the school yard on a coal fire. The second type of SFP available to all schools is the Nutribun programme wherein children are provided with bun and milk or a soda. For this children pay less than an American quarter but it is free to those who cannot afford this. The Nutribuns are produced by factories strategically located throughout the island to enable distribution and supply to all schools. Children who opt for neither the cooked lunch nor the Nutribun may purchase food from school vendors. These vendors serve from handcarts outside the school gates.

Based on an analysis by consumption groups, [PIOJ and STATIN \(2007\)](#) reported that mainly children from wealthier households (63.6%) utilized the cooked lunch compared to 36% of children from the poorer households. The latter were five times more likely to access the Nutribun and milk than children from wealthier households. Participation in the SFP was similar across all regions in Jamaica. These findings underscore the fact that the situation was similar to that found in earlier research by [Walker et al. \(1998\)](#). They reported that poorer children tended to have the Nutribun while those with more money purchased the cooked lunch. The writers surmised that the cost of the cooked meal might be preventing the children most in need from benefiting from them. From their study of the food consumption in schools of rural children who participated in the cooked meal and Nutribun programmes, [Walker et al. \(1998\)](#) found that only about 10% of the children in schools which had the Nutribun programme consumed the Nutribun for lunch, even though it was much cheaper than the sweet snacks that they purchased from vendors.

In order to ensure that those most in need were not put at a disadvantage, in 2002 the Government of Jamaica introduced the Programme of Advancement through Health and Education (PATH) which seeks to help the poorest in society to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. It provides cash grants to needy and vulnerable families in the society on the condition that they meet the requirement of their children maintaining an attendance rate of 85% or above for the number of days schools are in session. This essentially means sending their children to school for at least 3 days per week. Most schools offered cooked lunches for 3 days per week when funds from PATH were available. An impact evaluation showed that PATH was successful in encouraging households to send their children to school with greater regularity and in fact increased school attendance by approximately 0.5 days per month – an increase that was statistically significant ([Levy and Ohls, 2007](#)). The SFP in Jamaica is self-targeting because the Ministry of Education believes that the children most in need will take advantage of the programme anyway. [Walker et al. \(1998\)](#) advocate that the SFPs should target undernourished children or those from poorer homes in Jamaica. This is on the basis of their

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