

MEAL PATTERNS OF GHANAIAN SCHOOL CHILDREN FROM DIFFERENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND



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SUMMARY

This study was undertaken to look at the meal patterns in general and breakfast pattern in particular of school children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The study revealed that many factors play a role in the total well being of a child and not only the meals taken in although the type of food consumed is very important. The chief constraining factor is poverty, which is worsened by the impact of poor health and nutritional status and high fertility. Child labour also plays a very important role in the lives of most children in the primary school especially those in the public schools, where there are exploitative aspects relating to the use of children as maid servants, hawkers and cart pullers. Some of the children in this study are found to go through suffering, deprivation or hardships mainly due to poverty, food insecurity and the rapidly growing population. Some of the children go to bed late because of trading activities and many parents do not prepare food at home for their children. Although most of the children do not take breakfast before going to school they consume some food during break time and this is able to maintain the functions of the body. Although the private schools were not perfect, they had negligible problems, compared to the public schools.

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1-0 INTRODUCTION

Ghana is a country that consists of a large number of ethnic groups with varying customs including food habits. The greatest variations in food differences in availability of basic food items. Generally, three meals are consumed each day with the evening meal being the most important since most family members would be present to partake. A study by Lokko in 1984 and observations have shown that most people eat three meals a day. Most people are quite comfortable with three meals a day. This study was initiated when it was observed from an earlier study on Ghanaian children (Lokko, 1984) that many children do not attend school regularly. Some have dropped out of school. It was also observed that the shift system of schooling in Ghanaian children causes to be out of school at particular times of the day. It is therefore very important to know how these children perform at school. However, good health and nutrition are needed for attention, regular school attendance and optimum school performance. Good health and nutrition among school children can be affected by child labour forces, poverty and their social backgrounds.

Hunger lessens the work capacity of man, stunts growth in children and increases susceptibility to infections. Therefore it is important to feed growing children very well. In the US, breakfast programmes were developed to meet the needs of children who were unable to study because

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Ghana is a country that consists of a large number of ethnic groups with varying customs including food habits. The greatest variations in food habits are based on differences in availability of basic food items. Generally, three meals are consumed each day with the evening meal being the most important since most family members would be present to partake of it. A study by Lokko in 1984 and observations have shown that not everybody takes three meals a day. Most people are quite comfortable with two heavy meals a day.

This study was initiated when it was observed from an earlier study on Street Children (Lokko, 1988) that many children do not attend school regularly because of child labour activities. Some have dropped out of school entirely. It was also observed that the shift system of schooling gave some children excuse to be out of school at particular times of the day. It is therefore very important to know how these children perform at school. However, good health and nutrition are needed for attention, regular school attendance and optimum school performance. Good health and nutrition among school children can be eroded by child labour forces, poverty and their social backgrounds.

Hunger lessens the work capacity of man, stunts growth in children and increases susceptibility to infections. Therefore it is important to feed growing children very well. In the US, breakfast programmes were developed to meet the needs of children who were unable to study because

of hunger (Gordon, 1976). No such work has been done in this country but it is hoped that the study will throw light on the meal patterns of children from different socio-economic backgrounds and how this affects their performance at school .

2.0 SUBJECTS, MATERIALS AND METHOD

Six schools within Accra were selected for the study. Three of them were public schools and the other three, private. These schools were all 10 kilometres of each other. The public schools were running the shift system while the private schools did one session.

Private Preparatory Schools were RCS, MSS and SDE. The public schools were MNPS1, MNPS2 and MM1PS

A total of 1,000 boys and girls were used for the study. A questionnaire used for the study, consisted of 2 parts. In part 1, the children were questioned about themselves, their dietary habits and their families. Part two requested the teachers to comment on the performance of the children at school and their behaviour.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are presented below. Two categories of children and their meal patterns are observed. The first groups are children from the private preparatory schools and the second groups are from the public schools.

Table 1: Breakfast Pattern

Breakfast Foods	Prep. Sch. Boys	Prep. Sch. Girls	Total	Public Sch. Boys	Public Sch. Girls	Total
Beverage	115	113	228	51	55	106
Bread	136	157	293	67	74	141
Breakfast Cereal	44	49	93	23	31	54
Rice/beans/stew/soup	23	21	44	80	99	179
Banku/kenkey + fish/ soup/ stew	3	2	5	53	44	97
Gari/yam/plantain + soup, stew	2	4	5	23	22	45
Fufu + soup	-	-	-	1	1	2
Eggs/ham cheese/bacon sausage	17	27	44	-	1	1

From the Table 1, it can be seen that beverage and bread are very popular for pupils from the preparatory schools; twice as many as in the public schools. The same trend is maintained with breakfast cereals. However, four times more pupils from the public school took rice/beans/stew than those from the private schools. It was also observed that parents or guardians of children from the public schools could not afford food items such as eggs, cheese, bacon and sausages for their children.

Table 2: Lunch Pattern

Foods	Prep. Sch. Boys	Prep. Sch. Girls	Total	Public Sch. Boys	Public Sch. Girls	Total
Rice and stew	95	117	212	63	93	156
Kenkey/banku + fish/soup/stew	40	23	63	119	109	228
Yam/plantain/potatoes + stew/soup	30	33	63	5	12	17
Gari + beans/stew/soup	10	17	27	37	22	59
Fufu + soup	7	9	16	18	11	29
Others (pizza, abolo, spaghetti, chickens, eggs, sausages)	11	11	22	11	10	21
Total			403			510

From the Table 2, it can be seen that all the children prefer cooked foods for lunch. The preparatory school children prefer rice base dishes while the public school children purchase maize base dishes. The public school children also prefer gari to other foods prepared from root crops like yams, plantain, etc. Fufu and soup is not eaten much during lunch time.

Table 3: Snack foods

Foods	Prep. Sch. Boys	Prep. Sch. Girls	Total	Public Sch. Boys	Public Sch. Girls	Total
Soft drinks	99	124	223	20	21	41
Cakes/biscuits/pastries	81	118	199	31	41	72
Bread	44	52	96	15	14	29
Sweets	10	5	15	7	10	17
Fruits	9	18	27	97	74	171
Ice Cream	2	8	10	22	26	48
Others	7	8	15	2	4	9
Total			583			387

The snack pattern gave interesting results. The children from the public schools consumed a lot of fruits as snacks while the preparatory school children preferred sugar based drinks, pastries and the like. Bread is also popular. For the public school children, after consuming a heavy breakfast, there is no need to eat anything else apart from fruits; It could also be that they have just enough money for fruits.

From the above results it can be concluded that for the same age group, the meal patterns of children from the private schools and children from the public schools are different.

Table 4: Dinner Pattern

Foods	Prep. Sch. Boys	Prep. Sch. Girls	Total	Public Sch. Boys	Public Sch. Girls	Total
Rice and stew	58	57	115	55	52	106
Bread + beverage	7	21	28	3	5	8
Gari + beans	5	2	7	3	6	9
Banku/Kenkey + fish/soup/ stew	30	44	74	89	95	108
Boiled yam/plantain + stew/ soup	43	45	88	10	20	30
Fufu + soup	40	35	75	71	80	151
Others	11	-	-	-	-	-
Total			387			485

The pattern for supper is slightly different from that of the lunch. Fufu, soup, rice and stew are popular evening meals for both groups of children. It is interesting to note that bread and beverage appeared in the evening meals. It was however more popular with girls than with boys.

Table 5: Transport to School

How Do You Get To School?	Prep. Sch. Boys	Prep. Sch. Girls	Total	Public Sch. Boys	Public Sch. Girls	Total
Walk	37	52	89	215	135	450
Car (private)	127	133	260	22	19	41
Public transport	10	110	140	3	4	7
Trotro	26	11	37	17	26	43
Bicycle	-	2	2	-	1	1
Total			426			542

Majority of children from the public schools walk to school while the majority from the private schools go by vehicles as shown in table 5.

It was also realised that many children were given money to take to school either to purchase snacks or their main meals. Table 6 below shows the amount of money the children take to school.

Table. 6 Amount of money taken to school

Cedis	Prep. Sch. Boys	Prep. Sch. Girls	Total	Public Sch. Boys	Public Sch. Girls	Total
None	96	117	213	59	54	113
20-40	16	19	35	83	89	172
50-90	52	54	106	102	118	220
100-190	29	22	51	3	1	4
200-500	7	-	7	2	3	5
Total			412			514

Majority of children from the private schools did not take money to school.

Those who did were given between 20-90 cedis.

Table 7: What Children Do After School

Activity	Prep. Sch. Boys	Prep. Sch. Girls	Total	Public Sch. Boys	Public Sch. Girls	Total
Home Work	75	97	172	23	17	4
Read	25	28	53	3	10	13
Sell/trade	3	2	5	54	63	117
Help in the House	35	74	109	130	199	249
Studies/Extra classes	80	50	130	32	56	88
Play	67	28	95	108	51	159
Others	9	9	18	14	-	14
Total	294	288	583	354	396	644

What the children did after school was another question asked. It can be seen from the table 7 that most of them helped in the house, especially the girls. A sizeable number of children from the public schools engaged in trade. Although those who play after school is not significant it can be seen that more boys enjoyed play than girls. The private school children are more occupied with academic work than their counterparts in the public schools.

From the foregoing account, it can be seen that even with a large sample in the same urban area of Accra, there are differences between the dietary intake of private school children and public school children.

In a study conducted by Kordylas and Asibey-Berko, (1982), on Ghanaian School Children, between the ages of 9-12, most of them were found to be grossly underweight. In addition to inadequate protein intake by over 50% of the group studies, the nutritional status of the children with respect to thiamine and riboflavin was found to be highly inadequate.

3.1 PARENTS OCCUPATION

The children were asked about the occupation of their parents to see if a relationship can be drawn between the parents' occupation and the diet of the child because one of the main causes of malnutrition is poverty and ignorance.

Table 8: Occupation of Parents

Occupation	public School M & F		Private School M & F	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
Civil and Public Service	62	274	87	92
The Forces	2	27	3	2
Businessmen	7	49	42	134
Professionals	9	26	9	110
Artisans & Self Employed	56	191	70	22
Traders	430	27	60	9
Housewives	43	-	49	-

From table 8 the occupation of parents, especially the fathers, of children from the public schools are either in the public or civil service, artisans or self employed. The mothers are mostly traders. A few are either housewives or self employed.

Parents of children from the private school - are mostly businessmen and professionals. A few are public servants.

Teachers in the public schools made comments about their pupils and suggested ways and means to improve upon the public school system. Their comments are presented below.

3.2 PUBLIC SCHOOL CLASS TEACHERS' OBSERVATIONS

1. *What would you say affects academic performance of the children in your class? (eg. Absenteeism, Hunger, Lateness)*
 - a) Some of the children are maidservants and are not given attention as their counterparts. Some even come to school very late and on empty stomachs.
 - b) Irregular attendance can be added to the others above as some of the children live far away from school and others fend for themselves due to lack of parental care, broken homes and financial difficulties. Truancy, inadequate facilities and books also affect academic performance. Inattentiveness in class and not studying after school also affect their academic performance.

- c) Children are not given extra classes in the house.
- d) Some of the things that affect academic performances are laziness, lack of textbooks and poor furniture situation.
- e) Shyness is also a contributory factor because they feel that when they answer to a question wrongly, they will be laughed at by the other students.
- f) They also don't speak up boldly because they are not self confident.
- g) Children who trade in my class come late or they don't come at all.
- h) The children are not medically sound because the quality of food taken in is poor thus, giving a low resistance and making them inactive and virtually they drop out of school for days
- i) The children are not helped at home to learn. Lack of parent's interest in their wards education.
- j) Tiredness from the house also affects good academic performance.

- k) They can't speak English properly and therefore they need to improve upon their English to raise their academic performance.
- l) Most of the children live at places where video films are shown, so instead of concentrating on their books, they are always out watching films so their academic performance is poor.
- m) Financial difficulties which often give rise to psychological effects on the children is also a contributory factor.

2. *Some children are known to be so involved with trading that they are often absent from school. Can you comment on this state of affairs?*

- a) There was a case of a student who asked to be given 2 days off every week in order to trade and obtain money to pay her Form IV examination fees. In this student's case, it will be very difficult to say no because we all know the country's economic situation.
- b) Most of the children stay with caretakers who use them as servants who sell for them. Apart from this, most of the house chores are done by them so either they come late or they don't come at all.
- c) Parents and guardians depend much on the income the children make from trading to survive, hence the urge for schooling has become a secondary matter.

- d) Some of the parents of the children are traders who instill in their children, the "get rich-quick-attitude", so some of these children choose to absent themselves from school at times to trade.
- e) Our normal school time is from 80 a.m- 12 .30 p.m. They do not absent themselves very often. If they sell after school, that much I do not know.
- f) Those who do the trading don't absent themselves from school. They come to school regularly, instead they do it in their own time.
- g) Only few girls in the class help their mothers to sell their items but they are not habitual absentees. Those who absent themselves are those who lack proper parental care.
- h) Trading affects children academically. They become money conscious and cannot concentrate on their school work. I suggest if possible, the school children should not be allowed to trade.
- i) Some of the children are only fed when they go out to sell so as much they are forced to trade in order to also buy their basic needs.

3. *Can you comment on attendance in class? Is it good or bad? Is it related to some events like sports, rainy season, Fishing season, etc?*

- a) Attendance in class is quite good unless we have a heavy rain or there are sports activities being held.
- b) Attendance in class has been good since the children are dropped by their parents in cars and their attendance is not affected by the rain in anyway.
- c) Attendance is average apart from those who sell and serve as maids who come late.
- d) During sporting activities or rainy seasons, the attendance falls but on the whole it is quite good.
- e) Due to the bad conditions of the school building during the rainy season, they don't come but apart from this it is on the average.
- f) If a child decides to absent him/herself a note is sent by the parent to explain why.
- g) Good at all time except when the children are sick, but permission is asked for him or her.

- h) On the average, attendance is good. The children are regular except very few who occasionally play truancy due to bad company.
- i) Attendance is good but few children try to be absent when we are in the afternoon shift.
- j) Attendance is not encouraging. Some stay away for unknown reasons. Others give reasons such as taking care of his/her junior brothers/sisters due to one of the parents being sick or travelling. Once a while children stay away to celebrate festivals such as Homowo and Muslim festivals.
- k) Attendance is encouraging. Activities are organized to encourage children to come to school. Such activities are games, quiz, singing and story telling; also habitual absentees are punished so every child is always eager to come to school.
- l) Attendance is poor. Due to constant rains, most kids prefer to stay at home than come to school. Farming and fishing flourishes during this time and most of the kids tend to help their parents who are mostly traders, farmers and fishermen or fishmongers.

m) The attendance is poor due to economic situations in the country. Children cannot get their basic needs from their parents so some have to pull trucks for money or sell coconuts.

4. *What other problems do you have with the children?
Can you suggest ways of solving those problems?*

a) The state of our school block (building) is a threat to the children and most of them runaway when it is about to rain. The city council should come to our aid by repairing our damaged roof.

b) There is a problem with the children and that's discipline. I believe that if children cultivate the habit of reading during their leisure hours and stop the talking in between lessons, indiscipline will cease.

c) The parents of the children don't help their children to study and so they come to school saying that there was nobody to help them do their homework. I suggest that pupils should be given some help in the house.

d) Parents fail to cooperate with teachers through the PTA. It is through this avenue they can communicate with parents about the welfare of their children. So if the parents attend PTA meetings as expected I hope things will run smoothly in the school.

- e) Parents fail to supply their wards with things that will enhance learning eg.
- Materials for science and other associate lessons. This retards progress in the output of children's work.
 - Most children appear very untidy to school and some even come in torn uniforms and when they are sick, they do not take much care of them. They are underfed. And this can be made known to the parents only if they attend PTA meetings.
- f) Majority of the children are unable to read and this may be attributed to lack of books by the children. Each child must be encouraged to get the required text books for use at home. Some of the children fail to buy exercise books for all subjects.
- g) Some children sleep during classes and I think this happens because they do too much work and as such they sleep late. I think the parents should be advised on how to use the child in the house and also to allows them to sleep early.
- h) Some of the students send their exercise books home and do not bring them back to school. These are the weaker ones . They must be grouped together in one classroom so that special attention is paid to them and if possible they should be repeated.

- i) The children in the classes talk too much because of their number. They talk even when there is an exercise for them to do. I personally think that this problem can only be solved if the number of children are reduced in each class and for that matter the whole school.
- j) Some of the problems are poor handwriting, shyness, timidity, laziness, quarrelling, etc. and ways of solving these problems are:
- To engage them always
 - To give individuals chance to talk boldly in the presence of the class
 - To introduce cordial relationships among them eg. Through group work
 - Poor vocabulary can be corrected by reading a lot, story telling and written exercises.
- k) Pupils are weak in reading due to lack of textbooks. I am suggesting that Government supplies enough textbooks and supplementary readers. Parents should encourage their wards to visit local libraries. Parent must be educated through the mass media to have more interest in their wards.
- l) The inability to read, communicate in English language. Intensive work should be done in the Primary schools by way of encouraging children to read more books.

- m) Discipline, both at home and school have fallen considerably. Their attitude to work is just a matter of concern. They are not serious in class. I suggest the children should be disciplined right from the house as the old saying goes "Charity begins at home".
- n) Most of the children are dirty and have unkempt hair and torn dresses because their parents leave home at dawn and don't have time for them. Most of them too are disobedient and refuse to listen to suggestions given to them by their teachers, this often creates problems or tension between the teachers and his or her pupils.
- o) Salaries and wages of parents should be increased because most parents find it difficult to feed their children.
- p) Teachers and children need a cafeteria where food and snacks can be bought at low and reasonable prices.
- q) There should be enough drugs and medicine.
- r) The children misbehave and buy things on credit bases, and use different uniforms to school. I suggest that every parent should check their wards bags every time they come back home to find out how he or she gets some new things found in the bag. Parents should see that their daughters don't carry any other uniform to school. They use these uniforms to disguise themselves from wrongdoing.

s) Attendance to class is very poor so I suggest the introduction of an attendance report card to the system which will be endorsed or signed by the class teacher daily before and after school for the child to send home and where a child absents him/herself from school for five days, a note should be sent to the parents to come and explain why. It will help monitor them well for the school authorities to know if it is the children themselves who like to absent or it is the guardian who help them do so.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The study has revealed that there are so many factors which contribute to the total well being of a child and not only the meals taken in, although the type of food consumed is very important.

The precarious lives of some children described in the study and the teachers' observations reflect to a degree the low levels of awareness of beneficial health, hygiene and nutritional practices. The chief constraining factor is poverty, which is worsened by the impact of poor health and nutritional status and high fertility. This leads to very inadequate and insufficient food intake. Child labour plays a very important part in the lives of most children in the primary schools, especially, those in the public schools.

On a wider scale, child labour in its various manifestation is still common in Ghana. While this is partly due to unavoidable economic pressure and the demands of the socialisation process, there is little doubt that there are exploitative aspects relating for example to the use of children as maidservants, hawkers and cart pushers. Moreover, working children may be susceptible to drug abuse and act of delinquency (Lokko, 1989).

Inadequate nutrition can result in lowered intelligent poor mental health, abnormal behaviour, damage to nerve and brain tissue and poor physical fitness. The children used in this study had no such problems. There were also no report of hungry children by the teachers of the public schools but there were suffering, deprivation and hardships, mainly due to poverty, food insecurity and rapidly growing population.

Some of the children go to bed late because of trading activities and many parents do not prepare food at home for the children.

The study also showed that, although most children do not take breakfast before leaving for school, they consume some food during school break time. Since the body's metabolic machinery adapts to any habitual pattern of meal intake, they are able to cope with a flood of nutrients anytime and maintain function of the body anytime in the interval. Therefore, the children looked and acted perfectly normal.

Although the private schools were not perfect they had negligible problems compared to children from the public schools.

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