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Bridging the Gap in School Attendance between Riverine and Non-Riverine Areas: The Home-Grown School Feeding

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ABSTRACT: The research is on bridging the gap in school attendance between riverine and non-riverine areas: the home-grown school feeding. This survey-based study used an ex-pose-facto research approach to collect data from primary/elementary school teachers in the Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West senatorial zones of Delta State. The respondents were 489 primary 1–3 teachers spread across two LGAs. A questionnaire titled "School Attendance in Riverine and Non-Riverine (SARNA) was the instrument used to collect data. The instrument's reliability was tested using the test re-test method on 20 teachers from other local government areas. Pearson r coefficient of .80 was obtained, thereby making the instrument reliable. Descriptive statistics were employed to address the research questions, while a t-test was utilised to test the hypotheses at a 0.5 significant level. The findings showed that school attendance improved with the school feeding programme. Therefore, the study recommended that the programme be continued through government funding, publicised, and improved feeding quality. It is also recommended that parents be encouraged to send their children to public primary schools so that they can benefit from the school feeding programme.

KEY WORDS: Bridging the Gap in School Attendance, Primary School, Riverine and Non-riverine, Home-Grown School Feeding Programme

INTRODUCTION

Education is the right of every Nigerian child irrespective of where they live or economic status; hence, Akporehe and Uviovo (2021) asserted that education is an inalienable right of every citizen. In Delta State, riverine communities have been neglected and will remain so unless governments and other stakeholders take action to address their information needs through public libraries and information services (Ejedafiru, 2016, Obro, 2022). This gap between riverine and non-riverine areas needs to be filled in terms of education provision.

This is but one need of riverine communities. School attendance is an essential prerequisite for a child to benefit from education. School attendance determines educational attainment as learning can only occur when pupils are in school. School attendance is a child's physical/bodily presence to learn in the classroom and participate in school activities. Developing countries are beginning to wake up to ensure that pupils benefit from education by implementing policies that encourage pupils to attend school regularly (Ogheneakoke & Obro, 2018), and a school feeding programme is one such example. WFP (2013) hinted that over 368 million children in 169 countries receive school meals.

President Buhari launched the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP) in 2017 as a political campaign fulfilment to provide one meal in a school day to primary school children. The meal contains what children require for healthy growth. The HGSFP is a social safety net intervention providing educational and health benefits to children of low income in developing countries. It is a programme for every Nigerian child, irrespective of their location. Due to the water environment, you can only get to the riverine area by canoe, engine, boat or ferry. Non-riverine areas are places in dry land where vehicles can quickly get to. There is already a disparity between urban and rural school attendance, according to the 2015 Nigeria Education Data Survey (NEDS). In urban areas, 74% of children of primary school age attend school, compared to 57% in rural areas. Many riverine areas are rural and have many schooling needs, and attendance is also challenging. This gap has to be met, and it is believed that school feeding can be a panacea for bridging the school attendance gap between riverine and non-riverine areas for primary school children.

Primary education is the first level of the educational system in Nigeria that is provided for children aged 6 to 12 years Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) 2004; and is a component or constituent of the Universal Basic Education (UBE), which was declared free and compulsory for every Nigerian child and for whom the HGSFP is meant to cater for. The UBE ACT Universal Basic Education Commission (2004) stated that education shall be provided for migrant fishermen, children and nomadic farmers as given to any other child, irrespective of where they live. By implication, children in riverine areas must also be a part of the HGSFP. The importance of that meal to the children cannot be overlooked. It is no news that the poverty rate in Nigeria is very high (Obro, 2020). Many parents cannot give their children quality meals, especially those living on less than a dollar daily. According to data from the National Bureau for Statistics (2019), 40% of the nation's over 83 million residents make less than 137,430 naira

($381.75) annually. As of 2019, (UN, 2019) statistics showed that about 10.5 million Nigerian children aged 5-14 years are out of school, with only 61 percent of 6-11 years regularly attending primary school and only 35.6 percent of children aged.

Therefore, The HGSFP could encourage pupils to attend school and improve the health status of the learners considering disease occurrence in riverine areas, such as schistosomiasis (Nwabueze & Opara, 2007). Akporehe and Egoh (2023) found from their survey study on primary school teachers that primary school attendance improved in the HGSFP in Delta State. Their study, however, did not separate riverine and non–riverine areas. Yendaw and Dayour (2015) found pupils' enrolment, attendance and retention in Nyoglo of the Savelugu-Nantong Municipality, Ghana, as low as 22% throughout the week, while 36.7% attended school three times in a week before the implementation of the programme; but improved to 65.4% in the school feeding programme. Research by Onah & Onah (2021) discovered that HGSFP had increased enrolment in numerous schools, but not without underfunding and low quantity and quality of meals arising from N70.00 for a meal as stipulated by the programme.

The following are the HGSFP's objectives:

1. To increase primary school enrolment in Nigeria and lower the projected 30% primary school dropout rate already in place.
2. To address the low health and nutritional state of many children brought on by poverty, which has impacted the children's academic performance.
3. To increase farmers' incomes and promote local agricultural output by establishing a ready and viable market through the school feeding program
4. To generate employment along the value chain and contribute to economic development and prosperity by creating a multiplier impact

The study of Mkanyika (2014) in flood-prone areas/regions of Garsen Division, Tana Delta District, Kenya, found that, to a large extent, the pupils' enrolment improved because of the free school meals. Alabade et al. (2020), who studied the impact of school feeding on pupils' attendance in Lagos state using a local government area, found that the programme impacts attendance. Also, the studies of Obi and Igboh **(**2023), Okolo-Obasi and Uduji (2022) and others have confirmed the influence of the HGSFP programme on attendance. However, to ensure that all citizens have equitable access to school, the issue of educational provision in riverine is starting to take centre stage. Research has indicated that the availability of educational opportunities and facilities varies between riverine locations and those that are not. Ejedafiru (2016) observed that riverine communities are best described as theatres of misery, neglect, poverty, frustration, and backwardness in Delta State compared with their urban counterparts. The riverine communities lack access to land and roads, which could make it difficult for them to reach them easily except by boat. The river transportation is not well harnessed Adegbenle, Olatunji and Olomo (2018). As observed by Mulade (2017), most of the children in riverine host communities do not go to school; they are into fishing and farming with their peasant parents, and this is not good enough; let us entice them to school by extending the Federal Government HGSFP to them.

Ukuli (2022) asserted that the lack of proper attention to education in the riverine area, particularly in Kokodiagbene, a coastal area in Gbaramatu Kingdom under the Warri South-West in Delta state, has been a sore spot. Abai (2018) bemoaned the fact that some communities in Nigeria, particularly those situated in the Niger Delta region's creeks, still lack access to basic and reasonably priced education, depriving them of this benefit. However, the HGSFP is available to all Nigerian students, regardless of where they live, so the study was conducted to compare school attendance in Delta State's riverine and non-riverine districts.

Other Factors of School Attendance

School attendance is an important factor in promoting effective learning in pupils. The hallmark of the HGSFP is to make pupils stay healthy, concentrate, and learn well, thereby encouraging pupils to attend school. Many factors apart from the HGSFP can also affect school attendance. These include factors such as distance to school, availability of school facilities like toilets and water, distance of school from pupils' homes, transportation facilities, availability of teachers and others. Pezzulo, Alegana, Christensen, Bakari and Tatem (2022) and Akporehe (2023) attested to the impact of school distance on practical learning. In the aspect of transportation, Adegbenle, Olatunji and Olomo (2018) lamented the poor transportation in the Estuarine part of the Niger Delta. This will invariably affect pupils' movement to distant schools in riverine areas of Delta state. Since it is through school attendance that pupils can partake in the HGSFP and since the programme could influence school attendance, policymakers and stakeholders must plan ways of sustaining the programme. To this end, the study looked at planning strategies for sustaining the HGSFP.

Conceptual Frame Work

Nigeria's Home Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP) is a ploy to make pupils attend school and stay healthy. It is known that there are many families whose socio-economic status cannot allow their children to enrol and attend school. They can hardly have a meal daily and talk less about having a balanced one. The riverine areas are the worst hit because of their peculiar nature: a lack of motorable roads, poor water transportation, and poverty. Therefore, the HGSFP motivates parents to send their children to school continuously. Bearing that food will be provided in school, parents are encouraged not to engage their children in child labour to fend for them. Food is readily available in school if only they attend. The HGSFP can help parents save money

they would have spent on feeding their children and preparing meals. Moreover, food and shelter are among man's foremost psychological needs (Abraham Maslow 1943, Obro, 2020). If food is provided in school, pupils will be ready to attend school, and parents will encourage their children to do so. Nationally, 58 per cent of children from the poorest households in Nigeria are out of school (UNICEF, 2022). Therefore, continuous provision of food to pupils is an antidote to absence from school, encouraging attendance. It will help break social barriers as the children of people experiencing poverty will be able to attend school, especially riverine and non-riverine schools.

Research Questions

1. What was the rating of teachers on pupils' school attendance before the HGSFP in public primary schools in Riverine areas and non-Riverine areas in Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West LGA of Delta State?
2. What was teachers' rating on the HGSFP's influence on pupils' attendance in public primary schools in Riverine and non-riverine areas in Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West LGAs of Delta State?
3. What are teachers' ratings on the various planning strategies for managing the feeding programme in public primary schools in Riverine and non-rivine areas in Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West LGA in Delta State?

METHODS

The study employed an ex-post-facto survey method. The study sample consists of all 488 primary 1-3 teachers in riverine and non-riverine areas in Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West LGAs in Delta State. Primary 1-3 teachers were the respondents because only these classes benefitted from the programme. School Attendance in Riverine and Non-riverine Areas (SARNA) questionnaire was used to solicit teachers' data. The questionnaire consists of four parts with a total of 34 items. Part A is the demographic data of the respondents; Part B consists of 12 questionnaire items: the teachers' rating of school attendance before the feeding programme; and Part C, which consists of 12 questionnaire items, is the rating of primary school attendance of pupils having the free meal in schools. Part D consists of 8 planning strategies to ensure the programme is sustained. The instrument's reliability was established using the test re-test method and Pearson r statistics was utilised to determine the reliability index. A reliability coefficient of 0.76 was obtained. The instrument was rated on 4 point scale items of strongly agree 4, agree 3, disagree 2, and agree 1. The researcher and four research assistants administered the instrument. The data collected were analysed with descriptive statistics of mean, standard deviation and percentages for the research questions, while a t-test was used to test the hypothesis. The decision to accept or reject any item on the questionnaire is based on a benchmark of 2.50 above for acceptance and 2.49 below for rejection.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What was the rating of teachers on pupils' school attendance before the HGSFP in public primary schools in Riverine areas and non-Riverine areas in Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West LGA of Delta State?

Table 1: Teachers' rating of pupils' school attendance before the HGSFP in riverine and non-riverine areas in Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West LGAs of Delta State.

SN	Item statement	Riverine				Non-Riverine			
		No of Responses	Mean	SD	Decision	No of schools	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Pupils do not come late to school.	170	1.700	.72037	untrue	318	2.864	.70863	True
2	Pupils do not leave class at will.	170	1.7765	.83385	Untrue	318	2.7642	.55972	True
3	Pupils do not play truancy.	170	1.9588	.80204	untrue	318	2.6887	.70639	True
4	Pupils do not close from school at break time.	170	1.5941	.69228	Untrue	318	2.7830	.41284	True "
`5	Pupils do not beg other pupils for food.	170	1.4647	.56677	untrue	318	3.0126	.72788	True
6	Pupils come to school on market days as they help their parents in the market.	170	1.8000	.63990	Untrue	318	3.1164	.61704	True

7	Pupils pay attention in class.	170	1.9588	.68246	Untrue	318	3.0000	.00000	True
8	Pupils do not sleep in class.	170	1.8059	.71582	untrue	318	2.2642	.44866	Untrue
	Pupils attend morning assembly.	170	1.9765	.71296	Untrue	318	2.9874	.72788	True
10	Pupils always come to school very early.	170	1,9294	.57127	Untrue	318	2.5503	.72949	True
11	Pupils always leave school because of ill health.	170	1.7118	.53778	untrue	318	2.3868	.48778	untrue
12	Many parents check on their wards during school hours.	170	1.5176	.53541	Untrue	318	3.2044	.84007	True
	Grand mean total		**21.13**				**33.57**		
	Average mean rating		**1.76**				**2.79**		

The ratings were below the criterion mean rating of 2.50 on average for schools in the riverine areas. The average mean rating was 1.76. This means that pupils' school attendance was low before the HGSFP. This indicates that lack of food can cause low school attendance in riverine areas. On the other hand, non-riverine areas had an average mean rating of 2.79. This was above the criterion mean of 2.5, implying that all indices of school attendance were higher than those of the riverine areas.

Research Question 2: What was teachers' rating on the HGSFP's influence on pupils' attendance in public primary schools in riverine and non-riverine areas in Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West LGAs of Delta State?

Table 2: Rating of teachers on the influence of the HGSFP **on pupils' school**

SN	**Item statement**	**Riverine**				**Non-Riverine**			
		No of Responses	**Mean**	**SD**	**Decision**	**No of schools**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Decision**
1	Pupils do not come late to school.	170	2.7588	.61110	True	318	3.6792	.49376	True
2	Pupils do not leave class at will.	170	3.0000	.00000	True	318	3.6604	.50649	True
3	Pupils do not play truancy.	170	3.3059	.46214	True	318	3.5126	.56011	True
4	Pupils do not close from school at break time.	170	3.0588	.23599	True "	318	3.3504	.52534	True "
5	Pupils do not beg other pupils for food.	170	3.3647	.48277	True	318	3.4980	.53866	True
6	Pupils come to school on market days as they help their parents in the market.	170	3.6941	.46214	True	318	3.6701	.49489	True
7	Pupils pay attention in class	170	3.3647	.48277	True	318	3.4939	.52159	True
8	Pupils do sleep in class	170	3.0000	.00000	True	318	3.3156	.52514	True
9	Pupils attend morning assembly	170	3.0588	.23599	True	318	3.1988	.45351	True
10	Pupils always come to school very Early.	170	3.0000	.00000	True	318	3.3996	.49421	True
11	Pupils do not always leave school because of ill health	170	3.0000	.00000	True	318	3.1311	40157	True "
12	Many parents check on their wards during school hours	170	3.3059	.46214	True	318	3.4139	.60816	True
	Grand mean total		**37.86**				**41.44**		
	Average mean rating		3.15				3.45		

In Table 2, all the respondents in riverine and non-riverine locations rated pupils' school attendance to be high in the HGSFP. The criterion rating of 2.50 was far exceeded when the pupils participated in the HGSFP. The respondents' average school attendance ratings were 3.15 and 3.45 in riverine and non-riverine areas. This revealed the role of school feeding in pupils' schooling.

Research Question 3: What are teachers' ratings on the various planning strategies for managing the HGSFP in public primary schools in riverine and non-riverine areas in Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West LGA in Delta State?

Table 3: Teachers' rating on the various planning strategies to manage the HGSFP in public primary schools in riverine and non-riverine areas

SN	Item statement	SA FREQ (%)	A FREQ (%)	D FREQ (%)	SD
1	Giving incentives to parents who send their children to school.	-	488 (100)	-	-
2	Translating the programme to local languages for parents to be fully aware of it	486(99.6)	2(0.4)	-	-
3	Ensuring that the food vendors bring hot meals for the child by keeping to the schedule.	2(0.4)	486(99.6	-	-
4	Establishing schools close to pupils' homes to avoid problems of transporting to school.	488 (100)	-	-	-
5	Encouraging villagers to produce food items needed in the programme by way of patronising them	486 (99.6)	2 (0.4)	-	-
6	Extending the feeding programme to the teachers of those classes.	-	488 (100)	-	-
7	Increasing the quantity of food	488 (100)	-	-	-
8	Varying the food items cooked	-	-	486 (99.6)	2 (0.4
9	Introducing sanctions on parents who do not send their children to school	-	150 (36)	338 (64)	-
10	Extending the programme to upper primary school	488 (100)	-	-	-

Table 3 revealed that all teachers agreed on items 4, 7 and 10 as planning strategies: providing good transport for pupils to go to school, increasing the quantity of food and extending the programme to upper primary classes strongly agree). Items 1, 2, 5, 10 and 6 were rated agreed, while items 8 and 9 were rejected as they were rated disagreed. The reasons could be that their parents are ready to accept any food being free and would not agree to be sanctioned if their children do not go to school as the children could help their parents with household labour.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of teachers in riverine and non-riverine areas on public school attendance before the HGSFP in Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West LGAs of Delta state.

Table 4: Independent sample t-test statistics comparing the mean ratings of teachers in riverine and non-riverine areas on public school attendance before the HGSFP in Delta State.

Location	N	Mean	Mean Diff.	SD	df	tcal.	Sig. (2-tailed)
Riverine	170	21.19	12.46	1.70	486	67.46	0.00
Non-Riverine	318	33.62		2.05			

Table four shows a significant difference between riverine and non–riverine in school attendance with all the indices before the HGSFP. The mean ratings of attendance is significant since the calculated sig value of 0.00 is less than the alpha value of 0.05. Therefore, the hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of teachers in riverine and non-riverine areas on public school attendance before the HGSFP in Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West LGAs of Delta State is rejected. This implies that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of teachers in riverine and non-riverine areas on public school attendance before the HGSFP in Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West LGAs of Delta State.

Hypothesis two: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of teachers in riverine and non-riverine areas on public school attendance in the HGSFP in Delta state.

Table 5: Independent sample t-test statistics comparing the mean ratings of teachers in riverine and non-riverine areas on public school attendance in the HGSFP in Delta state

Location	N	Mean	Mean Diff.	SD	df	tcal.	Sig. (2-tailed)
Riverine	170	69.78	3.87	3.64			
Non-Riverine	318	73.65		4.04	486	66.64	0.00

Table five shows a significant difference between riverine and non–rivine in school attendance with all the indices before the HGSFP. The mean attendance ratings is significant since the calculated sig value of 0.00 is less than the alpha value of 0.05. Therefore, the hypothesis of no significant difference between the mean ratings of teachers in riverine and non-riverine areas on public school attendance in the HGSFP in Delta State is rejected. This implies a significant difference between the mean ratings of teachers in riverine and non-riverine areas on public school attendance in the HGSFP in Delta State.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The result of hypothesis one shows a significant difference between riverine and non-rivine in school attendance with all the indices before the HGSFP. This is consistent with the findings of Yendaw and Dayour (2015), who discovered that student enrolment, attendance, and retention were poor before the HGSFP. That school attendance increased with the HGSFP is also in tandem with Yendaw and Dayour (2015), Alabade et al. (2020) study in Lagos state, the studies of Obi and Igboh **(** 2023), Akporehe and Egoh (2023) and Okolo-Obasi and Uduji (2022) who equally affirmed that the HGSFP increased school attendance. This also corroborates Mulade (2017), who asserted that most children in riverine host communities do not go to school; they are into fishing and farming with their peasant parents. This perhaps explains why Ejedafiru (2016), Ukuli (2022) and Abai (2018) decried the state of learning in the Riverine areas in Delta State.

The result of hypothesis two shows that there is also a significant difference between riverine and non-riverine areas in school attendance in the HGSFP. The significance may have arisen as a result of the difference in number of respondents. However, from the mean in Table five, it can be observed that there was no marked difference in the means, with 69.78 and 73.65 in riverine and non-riverine, respectively. This shows that the gap in schooling between riverine and non-riverine areas can be bridged with programmes such as the HGSFP.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that there was a difference in the influence of the HGSFP on primary school attendance in the riverine and non-riverine areas of Ethipoe-West and Warri-South local government areas.

Implication of the study

The study's findings have implications for implementing the HGSFP in riverine and non-riverine areas of Ethipoe-West and Warri-South-West local government areas in Delta State. The study's findings imply monitoring and ensuring that HGSFP in riverine areas is executed as it is done in non-riverine areas. Conditions should be made conducive in riverine areas so that pupils can access school and benefit from the school feeding programme.

Recommendations

1. The government should sustain the HGSFP in the Ethiope-West and Warri-South-West LGAs and, by implication, Delta State.
2. Special attention should be paid to the Riverine area implementation of the HGSFP.
3. More publicity should be made to sensitise parents on the HGSFP so that they can send their children to school.

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