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Ensuring the Continuation of School Feeding Programmes during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case of “New Normal” Management

Abstract

The issue of school feeding is placed at the top of global agenda currently more than ever before. Challenges imposed by COVID-19 have created an opportunity to broaden and deepen debates focusing around the significance of school feeding programmes internationally. Throughout the duration of the lockdown period, billions of learners worldwide were no longer receiving school meals regularly, thus negatively impacting their health and wellbeing. The aims of this paper were to highlight: challenges that school leaders were faced with, in ensuring that learners were fed during the pandemic and the type of management that would enable them to continue feeding learners even during the crisis. The “new normal” management emerged as three modalities that were introduced by the Department of Basic Education and were implemented to ensure continuity of school feeding. The adaptive and situational leadership approach seemed to be more suitable, as the traditional way of managing was no longer adequate in meeting the demands of feeding learners in a crisis situation.

Keywords: school meals, school leadership, adaptive leadership, situational leadership

Introduction

The suspension of classes in March 2020 as a preventative measure to curb the spread of COVID-19, negatively affected the majority of learners globally in various ways. Borkowski et al. (2021) report that school closures due to COVID-19 disrupted the normal distribution channels through which school meal programmes operate, leaving many children without this vital source of nourishment. When schools are open learners are guaranteed at least one meal per day. For some children, attending school is not just an opportunity to learn, but their only chance of getting a meal. There are millions of learners in South Africa that depend on the meal/s they receive from their schools. The numbers keep increasing as more learners are added to the programme every year. Many scholars believe that school feeding programmes have a positive impact on education access and outcomes, leading to higher attendance rate, attentiveness in class and better academic performance (Devereux et al., 2018). Borkowski et al. (2021) argue that school feeding programmes may be a critical part of encouraging children back to school and keeping them enrolled after the crisis. However, other researchers have noted the effect on food security and nutrition resulting in reduced rates of child malnutrition (Labadarios et al., 2011). School feeding provides a crucial, widespread safety net that supports vulnerable children and their families. During lockdown caused by COVID-19 crisis learners could not benefit from the programme in any

form, due to school closures. The assumption was that learners will benefit from the food parcels that were distributed by non-governmental organisations to the deserving members of communities. The school feeding programmes are not unique to South Africa. The developing countries feed millions of learners in schools yearly.

As a result of lockdown children spent their time more at home, rather than at school as is the case when schools are open. More food was needed; children in the school feeding programme eat less at home as (the) other meal/s is/are provided at schools. This became a challenge for many families who live in poverty, as they could not offer their children a meal. Even before COVID-19, many South African households faced a total lack of income, reduced income, or uncertainty around retrenchments and unemployment. Unemployment rate increased to 32.5% in the 4th quarter of 2020 compared to 30.8% during the 4th quarter of 2019 (Statistics South Africa, 2020). In addition, the national estimate of child multidimensional poverty for all children (aged 0–17) according to Statistics South Africa (2020) was 62.1%. These children were located in income-poor families. As these figures are alarming, the outcry for the Department of Basic Education to devise means for poor learners to have access to the school nutrition programme could be justified, if food insecurity was to be curbed.

It has always been the responsibility of school leaders to manage the provision of the feeding programme in their schools. Precisely, school principals have to manage the National School Nutrition Programme and appoint nutrition coordinators to assist them (Department of Basic Education, 2014). School leaders in this research refer to principals, their deputies and school nutrition programme coordinators. The management of this programme includes: budgeting, managing allocated funds, and the sourcing, buying, transporting and storing of food (Mawela & van den Berg, 2020). School leaders had a huge responsibility in ensuring that the management of this programme is effective even under difficult situations caused by the COVID-19 crisis. The focus of this paper therefore is on the new challenges that school leaders are faced with in ensuring that learners are fed and the type of management they provided. The section below elaborates on the developments that led to schools providing meals during lockdown.

Background

School feeding is one of the activities that are part of school health promotion. The school nutrition programme caters for more than 9.6 million of South Africa’s most vulnerable school children across South Africa (Chaskalson, 2020) every day. The programme operates in all schools residing in poor communities in the country, providing one or two meals depending on the location of the school. It is worth noting that the management of the implementation of the school feeding programme had challenges even before the lockdown. However, lockdown exacerbated these problems. The existing challenges were: late delivery of meals; inadequate resources; a breakdown in communication between caterers and teachers; poor management strategies and the lack of monitoring mechanisms (Munje & Jita, 2019). When the COVID-19 came about, schools were still struggling with these encounters and the new trials commenced as indicated in the section below.

The closing of schools due to COVID-19 crisis and interruptions in the provision of school feeding are not unique to South Africa. For instance, at least 310 million school children were missing school meals in 162 countries (World Food Programme, 2020). The massive impact of school closures highlighted the importance of school feeding programmes. Consequently, many countries and international organizations have adapted their school feeding programmes. However, the process of modifying the provision of school feeding, aligning it with the newly changed school procedures was not easy. The Equal Education Law Centre (EELC) and SECTION 27 took the Department of Basic Education to court forcing it to offer food to all learners, even while they were still at home (Broughton, 2020). On 16 July, the court declared that the Minister of Basic Education had a constitutional and statutory duty to ensure that the feeding programme provides a daily meal to all qualifying learners. Plans and programmes were to be submitted to the court regarding how they will reinstate the programme (Pikoli, 2020). The court order necessitated different provinces to make their own arrangements of ensuring that learners get their meals. Subsequently, the school managers were instructed to ensure that all learners get their meals during lockdown. As not all grades attended classes during lockdown (Spaull, 2020) strategies were to be put in place to feed learners that were learning from home. The new challenges that the school leaders were faced with in ensuring provision of meals are discussed below.

Challenges in providing leadership for feeding during a crisis

The feeding modalities that all schools had to adhere to consisted of three options: to serve food to learners at school; learners to collect food; deliver school feeding as food parcels. Schools were familiar with the first option. Serving food to learners at school was what they had been doing ever since the start of the programme. They had measures in place to safeguard the smooth implementation of the programme. The effectiveness of the first option was dependent on learners' ability to come to school. Learners could not turn up to collect food in one of the provinces. It emerged that out of the expected 1.6 million pupils only 38,594 went to schools to collect food (Govender, 2020). This was confirmed by Damons (2020) who mentioned rotating timetables as one of the reasons why meals were not reaching learners on the days they were at home (Damons, 2020). Food was prepared as per the number of learners that were fed in each school. The non-arrival of learners to collect the food meant that the school leaders had to take a decision on what to do with the food that was already prepared. In addition, other contingency measures had to be developed by school leaders. They had to think on their feet in adopting innovative approaches to provide meals, while practicing appropriate social distancing.

In order to reach out to learners, schools in the Gauteng Province decided that those who used transport and who were not yet back at school, be picked up at 10am at their various pick-up points to collect their food from school (Mabuza, 2020). In order for this arrangement to materialise, school leaders were to communicate with parents and ensure that the information reached all learners. Moreover, the logistics with regards to the transport for such learners was the responsibility of the school leaders. This had financial implications. Apparently, non-provision of scholar

transport for learners that were not phased in to access these meals, led to the failure of this approach (Mabuza, 2020).

Two provinces were reported to be using a hybrid model. Learners who were not part of those who started attending school on 8 June, were either coming to school to get food, or collecting pre-packed meals, or given food parcels to take home to cook (Pikoli, 2020). The two provinces are mostly rural, learners live far away from the school so the option of giving them food hampers was more feasible. The strategy of the food parcels was more appropriate for the rural context. The food kits can be offered weekly or monthly, this reduces the amount of travel required for learners. However, the food kits have to be packed and the contents should be shelf-stable, in order for the food not to expire before the next date of collection. Moreover, this model, as well as those that have been discussed above cannot be effective if the food supply is disrupted.

In some instances during lockdown, the teachers were at their homes due to social distancing. It was then the responsibility of the principal, together with the coordinator for school feeding to provide food to learners. This would be done with the help of those food handlers who would be willing to avail themselves. This would mean fewer numbers of people that were to cater for learners.

“New normal” management of school feeding

The “new normal” brought about these three modalities that demanded for messy, trial and error leadership, leading to the emergence of the “new normal management”. In the old normal the management of the implementation of school feeding was mainly administrative, including among others; appointing a coordinator and food handlers, allocating a room for preparation of food, providing kitchen appliances, ordering food supplies and making sure the supplies arrive on time. Specifically, administration has to do with, arrangement of the human and material resources and carefully using them systematically for the achievement of the goals of school feeding. School managers had been responsible for these activities for years, allowing them to adapt to the day-to-day activities of managing the programme and affording them time to deal with the challenges. Moreover, there had been a training series provided for principals, coordinators and food handlers over the years. The challenges that they had in the past would seem easily achievable, compared with what they are faced with at present. They have to make sense of the modalities that have been presented to them by the Department of Basic Education, determine the feasibility of each, based on the context of their schools and decide on the best method of feeding provision for learners in their schools. This is new ground for school leaders. The “new normal” management of school feeding means a shift from the traditional way of managing the programme, into something that is more adaptive to changes that are dictated from elsewhere. For school leaders to be effective in their role, they have to be willing to adapt to the new ways of providing food to learners, so as to continue their commitment.

In order for school leaders to adjust to the new ways of food provision, they have to be aware of these situations of change, so as to assist their followers to adapt to them. The “new normal” management of the feeding scheme necessitates adaptive leadership among school leaders. In this paper adaptive leadership refers to a focus on contingencies as they develop and the changing of decisions and actions, aligning

them with the problems encountered in the provision of school feeding in a crisis situation. As adaptive leadership focuses on process, not a person, the model employs the knowledge of all who have a vested interest (Randall & Coakley, 2007) in implementing solutions to the challenges they face. Moreover, as the COVID-19 crisis is so far-reaching and has developed so suddenly and unexpectedly, it becomes very difficult even for the Department of Education to make predictions that are realistic.

When the “new normal” started to surface it transposed ways and processes that school leaders previously held. There are two distinct aspects that are new in the “new normal” of managing the feeding of learners. The first aspect pertains to feeding learners that are learning remotely. School leaders have to find ways to get meals to the learners where they stay. The management of this method includes communication with parents and learners regarding pick-up points, packaging the food and having food handlers handing out the food to learners that attend the pick-up points. The second aspect refers to issuing food parcels to learners. Food parcels would last for longer periods than daily food packs. The additional logistics to the ones indicated above, include changing the whole system of ordering food. For instance, in the past food was ordered in larger packages to last for the whole month, whilst now the order has to be for each learner. The situations under which each modality will be applicable, differ. Understanding the situation has always been regarded as imperative when dealing with a crisis state. In considering the suitable mode of feeding contextual factors have to be taken into consideration.

Conclusion

The need for provision of meals for learners has increased during COVID-19 due to school closures and is exacerbated by high rate of unemployment and retrenchments. However, this paper highlighted challenges that school leaders are faced with in managing the implementation of feeding of learners during COVID-19. In addition, new ways of feeding learners had to be developed in order to respond to the changes caused by the crisis. As strategies were formulated, it became apparent that the traditional way of providing meals will not meet the demands of feeding learners during a crisis. A “new normal management” started to emerge.

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