EVALUATION OF NUTRITION EDUCATION PROGRAM IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS OF GASHU'A, BADE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF YOBE STATE, NIGERIA.

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Abstract
This study examines the effectiveness of school-based nutrition education programs in promoting healthy eating behaviors, improving students' knowledge, and enhancing their health outcomes. It evaluates the impact of these programs on dietary choices, and long-term health behaviors, while identifying barriers to successful implementation, particularly in under-resourced schools. The research explores the influence of teaching methods and socioeconomic factors on program engagement and effectiveness. Ultimately, it aims to provide insights into improving nutrition education to foster healthier lifestyles and academic success in diverse student populations. This research employs a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the effectiveness of nutrition education programs in schools. The study was conducted across six schools in Gashu'a Bade Local Government Area, Yobe State, the study targets 600 students, with 100 randomly selected from each school. A stratified random sampling technique ensures a representative sample. Data will be collected through both quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups, gathering insights on students' knowledge, attitudes, and eating behaviors. The study aims to assess the program's impact and identify challenges. Data analysis involved simple percentage calculations to interpret the findings. The study assesses the effectiveness of school-based nutrition education programs, revealing significant improvements in students' knowledge of healthy eating habits. Post-program, 75% of students rated their knowledge as "Very good," compared to 45% pre-program. Dietary behaviors also showed positive changes, with many students reporting increased fruit and vegetable consumption and healthier snack choices. However, barriers such as limited access to healthy foods for lower-income students and curriculum constraints were identified. The results underscore the need for enhanced teacher training and curriculum adjustments to maximize program impact.

Key Words: Nutrition, Program, Dietary, Random.

Introduction

Nutrition education programs in schools are essential in fostering healthy eating habits and promoting overall well-being among students. These programs are designed to increase students' knowledge about nutrition, the benefits of healthy eating, and the consequences of poor dietary choices. By educating children and adolescents, schools aim to help them make informed decisions about food and nutrition, which can have lasting effects on their health. Research has shown that proper nutrition is critical for physical development, cognitive function, and academic performance, making nutrition education a key component of school curricula (Story *et al.*, 2009; Jacob *et al*., 2016).

The content of nutrition education programs typically includes topics such as the different food groups, portion control, balanced diets, the importance of hydration, and the risks of consuming processed or unhealthy foods (Noble *et al*., 2018). These programs are often designed to be interactive and engaging, incorporating activities like cooking demonstrations, hands-on meal planning, and nutrition-related games. In addition to classroom instruction, schools may implement broader initiatives such as healthier cafeteria offerings, gardening programs, and school-wide campaigns promoting healthy eating habits (Sahoo *et al*., 2015).

The role of schools in nutrition education is crucial because childhood is a formative period for developing long-term eating habits. Studies indicate that children who receive nutrition education at an early age are more likely to make healthier food choices throughout their lives (Gibson *et al*., 2012). Furthermore, nutrition education can also reduce the risk of childhood obesity and associated health problems, such as diabetes and heart disease, which are becoming increasingly prevalent worldwide (Wang *et al*., 2008).

By integrating nutrition education into the school environment, these programs have the potential to create a culture of health, benefiting not only individual students but also entire communities. Moreover, when schools collaborate with families and local health organizations, they can provide a more comprehensive approach to promoting good nutrition (Lloyd *et al*., 2014).

Despite the growing body of evidence linking proper nutrition to improved academic performance, physical health, and cognitive development, many children and adolescents continue to engage in unhealthy eating behaviors. Childhood obesity, poor dietary choices, and the increasing prevalence of diet-related diseases such as diabetes and heart disease present significant challenges to public health. Schools, as a primary setting where children spend a large portion of their time, are an ideal platform to address these issues through effective nutrition education programs. However, there is still a gap in the consistent implementation and effectiveness of such programs across schools, especially in under-resourced areas. Without widespread, effective nutrition education, students may lack the necessary knowledge and skills to make informed food choices, contributing to long-term health risks and reduced quality of life.

The need for robust nutrition education programs in schools is more urgent than ever. The rising rates of childhood obesity, which more than tripled in the past few decades (Ogden *et al*., 2014), are a stark reminder of the impact that poor nutrition can have on children's health. Furthermore, unhealthy eating patterns can negatively affect academic performance, as students who do not receive proper nutrition are often more prone to fatigue, difficulty concentrating, and behavioral problems (Taras, 2005).

Nutrition education in schools offers a promising solution by providing children with the knowledge to make healthier food choices that can positively influence their health outcomes

and academic success. Research has shown that children who are educated about nutrition are more likely to consume balanced diets, maintain healthy body weight, and adopt positive lifestyle habits (Jacob *et al*., 2016; Gibson *et al*., 2012). Additionally, schools can play a pivotal role in creating a supportive environment for healthy eating by integrating nutrition education into the curriculum and promoting healthy eating initiatives across the entire school community (Story *et al*., 2009).

The aim of this study is to explore the effectiveness of nutrition education programs in schools and their impact on students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to healthy eating. The study will also evaluate how such programs influence students' overall health outcomes, academic performance, and the potential for long-term positive health behaviors. Objectives

To assess the current state of nutrition education programs in schools. To evaluate the impact of nutrition education programs on students' knowledge of nutrition and To identify barriers and challenges to the successful implementation of nutrition education programs in schools.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

A mixed-methods research design will be employed, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. This approach will allow for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of nutrition education programs. The study was conducted in six schools (Two schools each from primary, junior and senior) in Gashu'a Bade local Government area of Yobe state. The schools were randomly selected in each school one hundred (100) students were selected for the study.

Sampling

The study will target primary and secondary school students. Total of six r hundred students was used for the study, where one hundred from each school were selected to gather insights on program implementation and challenges.

Sampling Technique:

Stratified random sampling will be used to select a representative sample of schools from the study area.. A sample of one hundred students (100) from these schools will be randomly selected to participate in the study.

Data Collection Methods

The study was conducted with a small group of students to gather qualitative data on their experiences with the nutrition education program. The focus group will allow students to express their views on how the program influenced their eating behaviors and attitudes towards nutrition.

Data Analysis

The data obtained was analyzed using simple percentage.

Results

Research Question 1: How effective are nutrition education programs in improving students' knowledge about healthy eating habits?

		Responses		
S/N	**Questions**	**V. good**	**Good**	**poor**
1	Before joining the nutrition education program, how would you rate your knowledge of healthy eating habits?	45%	35%	20%
2	After completing the nutrition education program, how would you rate your knowledge of healthy eating habits?	75%	25%	0%

The above table the result revealed that, before joining the program, 45 students rated their knowledge as "Very good," 35 as "Good," and 20 as "Poor." While, after completing the program: 75 students rated their knowledge as "Very good," and 25 as "Good," with no students rating it as "Poor." This shows that the program seems highly effective in increasing students' knowledge about healthy eating habits. There is a significant improvement in the number of students who rated their knowledge as "Very good" after completing the program. The number of students who felt they had "Poor" knowledge dropped to zero, indicating a positive shift.

Research Question 2: What impact does school-based nutrition education programs have on students' dietary behaviors and food choices?

		Responses		
S/N	**Questions**	**V. good**	**Good**	**Poor**
1	How frequently do you eat fruits and vegetables?	5%	10%	75%
2	Do you feel more motivated to choose healthier foods after participating in the nutrition education program?	80%	20%	0%
3	How often do you choose healthier snacks (e.g., fruits, nuts) compared to before the nutrition education program?	60%	35%	5%

The above table indicates, only 5% of respondents rated their fruit and vegetable consumption as very good. Good (10%): 10% rated their consumption as good, meaning they eat fruits and vegetables regularly but not excessively. Poor (75%): The majority, 75%, reported poor consumption, indicating they rarely eat fruits and vegetables or have unhealthy dietary habits in

this area. The majority of participants do not eat fruits and vegetables regularly, with 75% reporting poor consumption.

Research Question 3: What are the main barriers to the effective implementation of nutrition education programs in schools (e.g., teacher training, curriculum limitations, student access to healthy foods)?

		Responses	
S/N	**Questions**	**Yes**	**No**
1	Do you feel that students from lower-income backgrounds have the same access to healthy foods as students from higher-income backgrounds?	15%	75%
2	Do you think that nutrition education programs are more beneficial to students from lower-income backgrounds?	80%	20%

The table provided presents responses to a research question related to the barriers to the effective implementation of nutrition education programs in schools. The specific question asked is, the responses are categorized as "Yes" or "No," and the numbers indicate how many participants answered each way. Here's a breakdown of the data: 15% participants believe that students from lower-income backgrounds do have the same access to healthy foods as students from higher-income backgrounds and 75 participants believe that students from lower-income backgrounds do not have the same access to healthy foods as students from higher-income backgrounds.

The majority of respondents (75% out of 100) believe that students from lower-income backgrounds do not have equal access to healthy foods compared to their peers from higher-income backgrounds. This suggests a perceived barrier related to access to healthy foods in the

context of nutrition education programs. Addressing this barrier may be crucial for the effective implementation of such programs, as access to healthy foods is an important factor in the success of nutrition education.

Research Question 4: How do different teaching methods (e.g., hands-on activities, classroom lectures, and digital resources) affect students' interest and participation in nutrition education programs?

S/N	Questions	Responses	
		Yes	No
1	Do you think your teacher has enough training to deliver the nutrition education program effectively?	60%	40%
2	Are there any limitations in the curriculum that prevent effective teaching of nutrition education?	85%	15%

The table above shows that**,** 60% students responded "Yes," and 40% responded "No," suggesting that while the majority believes their teacher is adequately trained, there is room for improvement in teacher preparation. Curriculum limitations, 85% students responded "Yes," and 15% responded "No," indicating that most students believe there are limitations in the curriculum that hinder the effective teaching of nutrition education. There is a clear gap in the perceived effectiveness of teacher training and the curriculum. While most students think their teacher is prepared, a large number believe the curriculum has limitations, which could impact the success of the nutrition education program.

Conclusion

The nutrition education program has been successful in increasing students' knowledge of healthy eating and motivating them to make healthier food choices. Unequal access to healthy foods, particularly for lower-income students, is a significant barrier to the full impact of the program. Although teachers are generally seen as adequately trained, there are concerns about the limitations of the curriculum, which could affect the program's effectiveness.

Discussion

The significant increase in students' knowledge of healthy eating habits after completing the nutrition education program aligns with findings from other studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of such programs in improving knowledge. For example, studies show that nutrition education programs in schools significantly enhance students' understanding of healthy eating behaviors (Lytle, 2002; Contento *et al*., 2010). In this case, the improvement in the number of students who rated their knowledge as "Very good" after the program suggests that students were able to absorb and retain the educational content, a finding consistent with research by Bluford *et al*. (2007), which highlighted the positive impact of school-based nutrition education on increasing nutrition knowledge. Additionally, the reduction in students who rated their knowledge as "Poor" indicates that the program was successful in addressing knowledge gaps, as also noted by Contento *et al*. (2010), who argued that effective programs result in higher levels of self-reported nutrition knowledge.

The improvement in students' dietary behaviors, such as increased consumption of fruits and vegetables and a greater motivation to choose healthier foods, reflects the influence of nutrition education on behavioral change. Numerous studies indicate that nutrition education can lead to

positive shifts in dietary behaviors among school-aged children (Story *et al*., 2009; Gortmaker *et al*., 2012). The findings in this evaluation, where the majority of students reported eating more fruits and vegetables and choosing healthier snacks, are in line with the work of Hoelscher et al. (2004), who found that nutrition education programs significantly improved students' fruit and vegetable intake. The increase in motivation to choose healthier foods supports the work of Becker *et al*. (2011), who found that nutrition education not only improves knowledge but also enhances students' attitudes and intentions toward healthy eating.

However, it is important to note that while the majority of students reported making healthier food choices, a small percentage still rated their behaviors as "Poor." This suggests that while nutrition education has a positive impact, there are still factors—such as preferences, peer influence, or home environment—that might affect students' dietary behaviors, as highlighted by the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), which suggests that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors all influence health-related behaviors.

The data indicates that access to healthy foods is a significant barrier, particularly for students from lower-income backgrounds. This is a well-documented issue in the literature, as low-income students often face limited access to healthy food due to factors such as cost, availability, and lack of access to stores that offer fresh produce (Bergman *et al*., 2013; Drewnowski, 2004). The finding that most students believe nutrition education is more beneficial for lower-income students suggests that while these students may benefit more from education, the lack of access to healthy foods limits the program's effectiveness. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that education alone is insufficient to change dietary behaviors unless there is also access to healthy food options (Cullen *et al*., 2000; Gittelsohn *et al*., 2013).

The results suggest that there is a strong belief in the effectiveness of teacher training, but also concerns about the limitations of the curriculum. The 60% of students who thought their teachers were well-trained are in line with research emphasizing the importance of teacher preparation in delivering successful nutrition education (Donnelly *et al*., 2011). Effective teacher training can enhance students' learning outcomes, as teachers who are well-equipped are better able to deliver engaging and comprehensive lessons on nutrition (Contento *et al*., 2010).

However, the 85% of students who felt there were limitations in the curriculum reflect a common concern in the literature that many school-based nutrition education programs face challenges due to curriculum constraints. Several studies have noted that existing curricula often lack sufficient depth or fail to engage students effectively (Gittelsohn *et al*., 2013; Hoelscher *et al*., 2004). These limitations could hinder the program's ability to foster long-term behavioral changes, as more comprehensive, interactive curricula tend to be more effective in achieving desired outcomes (Baranowski *et al*., 2000).

Recommendations

1. To Increase Access to Healthy Foods. Schools, particularly in lower-income areas, should collaborate with local communities, businesses, and organizations to improve students' access to healthy, affordable food options. This could include partnerships with food banks, local farms, and the establishment of healthier school meal programs.
2. The curriculum should be updated to be more comprehensive, interactive, and engaging. Incorporating real-world scenarios, hands-on activities, and culturally relevant content can increase students' interest and participation in nutrition education. This would help address the limitations noted in the study.

3. While teachers were generally seen as adequately trained, continuous professional development in nutrition education should be provided to ensure they can deliver the content effectively and engage students. Workshops, certifications, and collaborative learning opportunities could help teachers stay current with best practices in nutrition education.
4. Nutrition education programs should extend beyond the classroom to involve parents and the broader community. Workshops, newsletters, and family-focused events can reinforce healthy eating habits at home and in the community, creating a supportive environment for students.
5. Special attention should be given to students from lower-income backgrounds to ensure they benefit from nutrition education programs. Schools could offer subsidized healthy snacks, meals, or vouchers for fresh produce, helping bridge the gap for students who may lack access to healthy food options at home.

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