

School Culture and the Internalization of Virtue in Free Nutritious Eating Programs (MBG): A Phenomenological Study of the Development of Civilized Behavior Among Students

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ABSTRACT

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) not only serves to meet students' nutritional needs but also plays a strategic role in shaping school culture and internalizing the values of virtue. This research aims to examine the role of school culture in supporting the internalization of virtue values through the implementation of the MBG Program, as well as understanding the development of civilized behavior among students. The research uses a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods to explore the experiences and meanings of education actors, including principals, teachers, program managers, school committees, and students at the elementary, junior high, and high school levels in West Java Province. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation studies, then validated through triangulation of sources and techniques. Data analysis employs a phenomenological approach with stages of data reduction, theme encoding, grouping essential meanings, data presentation, and interpretation of participants' experiences. The results of the study show that the MBG Program contributes to the formation of civilized behavior through habituation, example, and strengthening of social norms that are integrated in school culture. Developed virtue values include discipline, responsibility, gratitude, social care, cleanliness, politeness, and respect for food and the environment. Practices such as praying before and after meals, queuing in an orderly manner, eating food according to portions, maintaining a clean dining area, managing waste responsibly, and teacher examples have been proven to strengthen the internalization of these values. The MBG program also encourages the development of students' cognitive, affective, psychomotor, and spiritual aspects in an integrated manner. These findings confirm that the MBG Program has the potential to be an effective means of character education through strengthening school culture and habituating virtue values in students' daily lives.

Keywords: *Character Education, Civilized Behavior, Free Nutritious Meals, Internalization Of Virtue, School Culture.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Free Nutritious Eating (MBG) policy rolled out by the Indonesian government since the end of 2024 was born out of anxiety over the high rate of malnutrition among school-age children. Data from the 2024 Indonesian Nutrition Status Survey (SSGI) shows that the national stunting prevalence is still at 19.8 percent, although it has decreased from 21.5 percent in the previous year (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025). International evidence also confirms that school feeding programs in low- and middle-income countries contribute significantly to improving the educational attainment and health of school-age children (Wang, Shinde, Young, & Fawzi, 2021). However, beyond this nutritional dimension, the eating activities that take place every day in the school environment open up space for the formation of a new school culture, namely a series of habits, interactions, and shared values that slowly form civilized behavior in students.

Schools are not only a space for the transmission of academic knowledge, but also a social system that shapes the character and moral values of students as a whole. Effective guidance requires interventions that touch all dimensions of human development simultaneously, namely the cognitive, affective, psychomotor, social, and spiritual domains, because behavioral change cannot occur if only one dimension is touched (Fitriyanti, F., Puspita, M., Septiana, Y., Zuhdiyah, Z., & Karolina, A. 2026). Character education that is consistently applied in school daily life is seen as an urgent need, because its success depends heavily on the extent to which these values are practiced in real terms, not simply taught theoretically (Watts, P., Fullard, M., & Peterson, A, 2021).

Observations of the implementation of MBG in various schools show that character education can emerge organically through the daily routine of this program. This process is effective when teachers consistently exemplify expected behaviors, such as taking adequate portions of food and disposing of garbage in their place, so that students gradually imitate and internalize these behaviors through direct experience (learning by doing), rather than through verbal instruction alone. School culture built through this kind of habit has also been proven to strengthen the character of discipline and student responsibility in a sustainable manner (Andriani, Rahayu, Hidayat, & Ghufon, 2024).

In addition to acting as moral agents, schools also function as social laboratories where students learn to respect others through orderly queues, cooperation in maintaining cleanliness, and concern for peers. From the perspective of Islamic education, this process is in line with three main concepts, namely *tarbiyah* as gradual nurturing through repeated experience, *ta'lim* as knowledge transfer, and *irsyad* as guidance towards correct behavior (Jaya, 2020). Schools that succeed in instilling religious culture in their daily routines tend to be more effective in fostering virtue and manners in students in a sustainable manner (Lestari, Sunarsih, & Nurpratiwiningsih, 2023), as is also found in the practice of character education in Indonesian secondary schools which, despite facing various technical obstacles, still show positive results when integrated consistently into daily school activities (Qoyyimah, U. 2016).

The affective dimension in the MBG experience is seen when students are invited to appreciate food as something to be grateful for, not wasted. Brief reflection activities in the form of writing things to be grateful for before meals are in line with the findings that journal writing

techniques have been shown to be effective in increasing gratitude in adolescents, which in turn fosters affective awareness and social empathy (Ratnasari & Sulistiana, 2020). The cognitive dimension develops through learning about nutritional content and its impact on health, which is strengthened through a peer education approach, where students who understand nutrition better guide their peers. This kind of peer tutoring approach has been proven to be effective in changing students' nutritional behavior at school (Raharjeng, Nuriannisa, Kardina, Putri, & Awwalya, 2023), including in the context of stunting prevention through balanced nutrition training for adolescents as peer educators (Romadhon, W. A., Wulandari, N. A., & Mahmudah, N. A., 2025).

The psychomotor dimension is reflected in concrete practices such as meal portion arrangements, orderly queuing, and maintaining the cleanliness of the dining room, which is in line with the learning evaluation framework that views the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor realms as a complementary unit in the formation of learning outcomes (Zeng, F, 2024). The process of *irsyad* that is realized through supervision, feedback, and personal reflection of students is in line with the principle of self-regulation in education, where students are gradually trained to manage and direct their own behavior towards healthier and more responsible decisions (Suliyono, S., Rosyadi, I., & Arifin, M. Z., 2025)

Given that the development of civilized behavior that is to be observed is subjective, gradual, and full of personal meaning for students, teachers, and school leaders, a quantitative approach alone is considered inadequate to capture the depth of the phenomenon. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the participants' life experiences in depth, including how they interpret and experience the process of internalizing virtues experienced daily in schools (Hasanah, U. 2025). Based on this argument, this research is directed to explore phenomenologically how the school culture formed through the Free Nutritious Meal Program plays a role in internalizing virtue values, as well as how this process is manifested in the development of civilized behavior among students.

METHODS

This study uses a phenomenological approach to understand the subjective experiences of students, teachers, and school staff in the Free Nutritious Eating Program (MBG), especially related to the formation of proper and spiritually oriented eating habits. The selection of this approach is based on the research focus on the meaning of participants' life experiences, rather than just the quantitative measurement of frequency or behavioral adherence. Phenomenology emphasizes understanding the meaning of human experience from the perspective of the perpetrator himself, so that it is in line with efforts to trace the process of internalizing civilized-religious values that takes place through contextual experiences and daily practices (Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D., 2017).

The research was conducted in six schools in West Java, representing the primary and secondary education levels, namely one elementary school, one junior high school, and one high school, with the criteria of having actively implemented the MBG Program for at least one year. The selection of these six schools used purposive sampling techniques with the following criteria: (1) the school has a regular and documented MBG program; (2) there are teachers or staff who specifically play a role as a driver of nutrition education and exemplary eating behavior; and (3) there are students who show active participation in healthy and regular eating practices at school. The schools that meet the research criteria are SD Sinarjaya 1 Garut, SD IT Mahajati Bandung, SMP N 9 Cimahi, MA Ma'arif Garut, MA Baitulrahman Garut, and SMA Handayani Bandung.

Based on these guidelines, the research participants consisted of: five students per school (a total of 15 students from six schools) who were selected purposively based on the teacher's recommendations related to activeness and openness in sharing experiences; one teacher per school who is assigned as a driving force/role model of eating behavior (total of 3 teachers); and two members of the school management or MBG committee per school who are responsible for managing the program (6 people in total). Thus, the total number of study participants was 24 people from 3 schools. The identification of key informants in the MBG management group/committee is carried out through the snowball sampling technique, where the initial informant (principal or MBG coordinator) is asked to recommend other parties who are considered to have involvement and relevant information in the management of the program.

As a phenomenological research, the instruments used are non-quantitative, reflective, and participatory, including: (1) in-depth interviews to explore the subjective experiences of students, teachers, and school staff; (2) participatory observation to directly observe student behavior, focusing on meal portion control, meal queue and discipline, peer food sharing practices, table cleanliness and garbage sorting, as well as social interaction and expression of religious values such as prayer and expressions of gratitude; (3) field notes to document additional observations, researcher reflections, and non-verbal interactions that are difficult to capture through interviews alone, such as facial expressions, enthusiasm, or empathetic attitudes between students; and (4) documentation in the form of photos, canteen layout diagrams, and recordings of MBG activities used for data triangulation purposes.

The research procedure is carried out through several stages. The first stage is field orientation, where the researcher familiarizes himself with the school environment, teachers, and students, as well as conducting initial observations to understand the context of the implementation of MBG in each school. The second stage is data collection, which is carried out through in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and MBG school/committee management, accompanied by participatory observation, as well as parallel field recording and supporting documentation.

The third stage is data analysis, which is carried out by following the stages of phenomenological analysis, namely epoche or cleaning the researcher's initial assumptions about the phenomenon being studied, horizontalization or identification of meaningful statements from the results of interviews and observations, grouping these statements into themes (clustering of meaning), to the preparation of textural and structural descriptions that describe the essence of the participant's experience as a whole (Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. 2017).

The fourth stage is testing the validity of the data, carried out through source triangulation (comparing data from students, teachers, and school management), method triangulation (comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation), and member checking, which is reconfirming the researcher's interpretation to participants to ensure the compatibility between the findings and the actual perceived experience.

The last stage is the ethical consideration of the research, which includes requests for informed consent from the school, teachers, and parents/guardians of students, considering that some participants are minors, ensuring the confidentiality of participants' identities through the use of pseudonyms in data reporting, and voluntary participation that allows participants to withdraw at any time without any consequences for their status at school.

Table 1. Research Instruments

Instruments	Purpose	Statement
In-Depth Interviews	Exploring the subjective experiences of students and teachers	The students became more disciplined in managing their portion sizes after seeing their teacher lead by example
Participatory Observation	Observe students' direct behavior during mealtimes	The students queue in an orderly manner and sort their garbage into the correct bins
Field Notes	Documenting the researcher's nonverbal interactions and reflections	Show empathy when friends share food
Documentation	Reinforce evidence through photos, posters, and food displays	Nutrition education poster and canteen hygiene chart

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

This study involved 24 participants from six schools in West Java, who, to maintain identity confidentiality, were coded Elementary School (A), Junior High School (B), and High School (C). Participants consisted of 15 students (code S1-S15, five students per school), 3 MBG driving teachers (code G1-G3, one per school), and 6 members of the school management/MBG committee (code M1-M6, two per school). All names that appear in the following quotation are pseudonyms according to the established research ethics procedures.

Promoting Ethical Dietary Habits

Observations in the classroom show that MBG encourages students to take responsibility for their own eating habits. Previously, students often relied on the teacher's instructions to set their portions or clean the dining table. After implementing MBG for several months, students' behavior has undergone a significant transformation. The pupil instinctively adopts the habit of taking food according to his needs. Students begin to adjust their portion sizes to their physical capacity, avoiding excess. For example, at a high school in Bandung, a student refused to take a second aid even though it was available, because they knew the appropriate portion size. This phenomenon shows the internalization of the principles of balanced nutrition and self-awareness.

In addition, commendable traits such as finishing food are also unconsciously instilled. Observations show that students strive to finish the food they consume without wasting it. An elementary school teacher in Garut commented, "Children now appreciate food more. They adjust their portions and finish the food on their plates." This practice also corresponds to accustoming students to clean up after meals, which not only improves psychomotor skills but also fosters a sense of personal responsibility and concern for the environment. Students consistently exhibit independent behavior without teacher guidance, which serves as evidence of the success of comprehensive education.

Students reported that the habit of queuing and taking enough portions of food did not appear on its own, but through daily repetition that initially felt forced. One of the students (S4, School A) described, "At first I liked to fight first, but now if I don't stand in line, it becomes weird on my own." Teachers in School B (G2) added that this change was most noticeable in the

third month of MBG, when students began to remind their own friends to queue without being asked by the teacher.

The results of the interviews reinforce these findings. A high school student in Cimahi stated, "Now I don't need to be reminded to throw garbage in the trash. I do it because I want to keep it clean and respect food." This statement shows that students have internalized the values of food ethics, making them part of their personal identity.

Fostering Civilized and Religious Students

In addition to fostering independence, MBG also fosters students who are well-mannered and religious, whose mealtime behavior becomes a moral and spiritual practice. Students not only adhere to social norms but also understand the religious values that underlie those behaviors. Students are encouraged to pray before eating. The practice of praying before meals has become a consistent routine, reflecting the integration of the spiritual dimension into daily life. Observations show that this prayer is not just a formality, but a means of reflection for students to appreciate the blessings of food and their responsibilities to themselves and others.

Expressing gratitude and not criticizing food is evident in students' behavior while eating. They are taught to express gratitude for the food they receive. In interviews, some students stated that expressing gratitude helps them appreciate food, friends, and the surrounding environment. The teacher emphasized the importance of appreciating each type of food as a trust and blessing. This phenomenon is evident because students no longer throw away or mock certain foods. This fosters the values of tolerance, patience, and appreciation for the diversity of the menu. From a teacher's perspective, this civilized behavior becomes even more evident when students are given the responsibility of leading a queue or distributing food to their peers. Teachers reported that these experiences fostered respect, social awareness, and religious awareness in students.

School Culture and Stakeholder Engagement

The school culture that supports MBG is shaped by several key, interrelated, and sustainable components. The application of Healthy Menu and Portion Control as a principle of nutritional balance, with a daily menu that includes carbohydrates, proteins, vegetables, and fruits. Students learn to choose portions that meet their nutritional needs. Observations show that students begin to identify healthy foods and avoid waste. The practice of portion control becomes a psychomotor and cognitive learning activity, as students must calculate portions that are in accordance with their body capacity and nutritional needs. The school implements a waste sorting system (organic and non-organic) and a regular cleaning schedule. Observations show that students actively dispose of garbage according to categories, clean tables, and maintain the cleanliness of the canteen floor. This fosters social behaviors, such as cooperation among peers and collective responsibility, while also increasing ecological awareness. Through the exemplary behavior of the teacher who acts as a role model, students imitate their teacher in daily practice, even when the teacher is not directly supervising. Role modeling has proven to be the most effective method for internalizing the values of eating etiquette (Li, S. 2015).

School culture in the MBG environment does not occur spontaneously, but through collaboration between various parties. School Management establishes MBG policies, monitors implementation, and provides canteen facilities that support the practice of eating etiquette. Teachers provide nutrition education, exemplify civilized behavior, and consistently guide students. The school committee oversees the implementation of the program and conducts regular evaluations. MBG SPPG: Provides implementation guidelines, menu standards, and nutrition-

based character education modules. External parties (Puskesmas, Health Office, and so on) provide health education support, teacher training, and student nutrition assessment. Field observations show that this collaboration strengthens the sustainability of the MBG program. Students receive consistent messages from various parties, so that ethical eating values and practices become part of the school's daily routine and identity. The activity of writing down what they are grateful for before eating is interpreted by students in various ways: Teacher participants consistently interpret their role not just as a supervisor, but as a model of behavior that students imitate. G1 (School A) stated, "I deliberately take a small portion in front of the children, so that they see for themselves how not to overdo it." The student also confirmed this; some spontaneously mentioned that they "followed the way Mrs. Guru ate" without ever being given explicit instructions.

Based on data analysis collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, documentation, and field notes, five main phenomenological themes were identified that describe the experiences of students, teachers, and school staff in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Food Program (MBG). These themes show that MBG not only functions as a program to meet nutritional needs but also as a means to shape behavior, internalize values, strengthen school culture, and develop student character holistically. A summary of the main themes of the research findings is presented in the following table:

Table 2. Key Findings and Themes

Main results	Description	Indicator
Student Autonomy in Eating Etiquette	MBG encourages students to manage their eating habits without relying on the guidance of teachers	Serving yourself, finishing your meals, and cleaning the dining room
Internalization of Civilized and Religious Values	Civilized and religious eating habits are part of the student's identity	Pray before eating, be grateful, and don't mock food
School Culture Development	The practice of MBG shapes collective norms and customs in the school environment	Healthy food, a clean environment, and teachers set a good example
School Organization Collaboration	The success of this program is supported by collaboration between various parties	Teachers, principals, school committees, kitchen staff, parents
Holistic Transformation of Students	MBG brings multidimensional change to students	Affective, cognitive, psychomotor, social, and spiritual

DISCUSSION

The research findings suggest that the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in schools has the potential to be a comprehensive educational platform that integrates character education into daily activities. From an Islamic perspective, comprehensive civilized-religious education combines three main principles, namely da'wah, tarbiyah, and ta'lim, so that the learning process is not only cognitive but also touches the affective and psychomotor realms at the same time (Jaya, 2020). This multidimensional framework is in line with the principles of educational evaluation, which views the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains as a unit that cannot be separated in the formation of learning outcomes and student character (Noushad, P. P, 2024).

Observations in elementary, junior high, and high schools in West Java show that students actively imitate the behavior of teachers and school staff in healthy eating practices, such as portion control, orderly queuing, and canteen cleanliness, not solely because of instructions, but through repeated observation experiences. These findings reinforce the evidence that the internalization of character values is optimal when teachers consistently provide real examples, not just verbal instruction (Mustain, M., & Bakar, M. Y. A. 2025), and are in line with the findings that school culture built through daily habits is effective in fostering students' character of discipline and responsibility in a sustainable manner (Andriani, Rahayu, Hidayat, & Ghufon, 2024). In addition, the integration of the affective dimension is also seen in the practice of gratitude before and after meals, which is consistent with the finding that written reflection techniques are effective in fostering gratitude in adolescence (Ratnasari & Sulistiana, 2020). Thus, MBG not only functions as a nutritional intervention but also as a space for character formation that instills civilized and religious values at the same time.

The MBG program that is carried out comprehensively also increases social awareness and student health. In-depth interviews and observations showed that students began to understand the relationship between healthy eating habits and academic performance, in line with the findings that the peer education approach in nutrition education effectively deepens students' understanding while fostering social responsibility and solidarity, both in the context of obesity prevention (Raharjeng, Nuriannisa, Kardina, Putri, & Awwalya, 2023) and stunting prevention through adolescents as nutrition peer educators balanced (Romadhon, W. A., Wulandari, N. A., & Mahmudah, N. A., 2025) Social phenomena such as sharing food and helping friends manage portions also foster the value of solidarity and empathy, while the activities of sorting waste and maintaining the cleanliness of the eating environment strengthen students' ecological awareness and social responsibility.

This pattern of development is in line with Thomas Lickona's theory of character education, which emphasizes the integration of moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action as three interrelated components in character formation (Lickona, 2022). In the context of MBG, moral knowing appears when students understand the principles of nutrition and the impact of eating habits on health; moral feeling is reflected when students develop gratitude, empathy, and social concern. Meanwhile, moral action is manifested through concrete actions such as portion control, orderly queues, and waste sorting. The pattern of integration of these three components is also confirmed in a recent study that applied the moral knowing-feeling-action framework to junior high school students, where the three aspects were found to reinforce each other in reflecting students' moral development holistically (Purwati, Japar, Qomariyah, & Tentama, 2024).

The results of the study confirm that MBG functions as a holistic learning laboratory, where students not only gain cognitive knowledge about nutrition but also develop psychomotor skills, affective values, social interaction, and spiritual values simultaneously. These findings support the evidence that learning through practical experience and daily habituation is more effective than theoretical learning alone in fostering the internalization of moral and religious values (Sholikhah, K. N. F., Wijayanti, R. K., Miftahudin, M., Darsinah, D., & Wulandari, M. D. 2025), as well as consistent with the principle of self-regulation which shows that students can gradually direct their own behavior towards healthier decisions without strict supervision, as found in the context of self-regulated learning in students (Oppong, E., Shore, B. M., & Muis, K. R. 2019).

Teacher role modeling has proven to be one of the key components of MBG's success, where teachers demonstrate regular eating habits, food distribution as needed, and dining table cleanliness, so that students imitate these behaviors without the need for strict supervision. This

is in line with the findings that the implementation of character education in Indonesian schools shows more consistent results when integrated into routine school activities and supported by a school culture that instills value in a sustainable manner (Ihsanudin, N. M., Setiawan, E., & Sulistiani, I. R., 2026). The sustainability of the MBG program is also supported by the collaboration of school management with the school committee, the MBG Student Council, as well as external parties such as the health center, as it was found that cross-sector collaboration between schools and public health services plays an important role in the success of school health programs through regular coordination, clear division of roles, and shared resource support (Sella, Febriawati, & Afriyanto, 2023).

Thus, the findings of this study confirm that comprehensive, civilized, and religious guidance in the MBG Program successfully fosters student independence in eating ethics, forms civilized behavior as part of student identity, internalizes social, moral, and spiritual values through daily practice, and builds a sustainable school culture through a combination of teacher example, stakeholder collaboration, and reflective habituation. MBG can thus be understood as a holistic character education model based on practical applications, integrating the cognitive, affective, psychomotor, social, and spiritual dimensions of students in a unified manner.

CONCLUSION

Based on phenomenological research in elementary, junior high, and high schools in West Java, the Nutritious Food Program (MBG) has been proven to be successful in fostering students' independence in table manners, including the ability to take portions as needed, finish meals, and clean their own tableware. More than just social behavior, MBG also instills spiritual and religious values through prayer before meals, gratitude, and appreciation for food, which is in line with the principles of da'wah, tarbiyah, and irsyad from an Islamic perspective. This success is underpinned by a school culture that consists of three main components: healthy menus and portion control, waste management and environmental cleanliness, and teachers set a good example as the most effective method to internalize values, with collaborative support from school management, committees, MBG Parent-Teacher Associations, local health centers, and health departments. MBG produces a holistic impact across five dimensions of student learning: affective (empathy, gratitude, responsibility), cognitive (understanding nutrition and its relationship to health and academic achievement), psychomotor (skills in portion control, queuing, and maintaining cleanliness), social (sharing, cooperation, respect for peers), and spiritual (prayer, gratitude, Islamic moral principles). Thus, MBG is not just a nutrition education, but a laboratory of holistic character education and a concrete example of comprehensive, civilized, and religious health education. The program effectively combines cognitive, affective, psychomotor, social, and spiritual approaches through daily practice and exemplary teacher behavior, thereby fostering independent, civilized, and religious students while building a sustainable school culture that supports healthy eating ethics.

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